WAITING FOR GPS SIGNAL

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Abstract

Waiting for GPS signal is a metaphor that opened new possibilities to explore issues of dual-identity in which I am cast as an outsider from my birthplace and family ties to Saudi Arabia and from my education home in the United States. The emotional quest led to producing artwork that highlights issues of positionality, culture, gender, globalization, and double coding. I discuss these art works raising concerns of racial stereotypes. GPS, in this exploration, references: (G) for gender global positioning, (P) for my positionality, and (S) for socio-cultural systems and signals. Aiming to deconstruct globally social norms and replace them using my position as a previously isolated Middle Eastern female being bombarded with Western culture.

Keywords: gender, global, generation, self representation, culture, system, politics, dual- identities

Where am I??

Waiting for GPS signal.

What if this signal is gone?

How can I utilize the device without a signal?

What is the alternative?

What is the power and privilege of the GPS signal?

A GPS device is a metaphor that I use in this essay for the *global position signal* that gives authority for people with a strong signal within their cultural context to judge others based on the strength and location of their *signal*.

Prior to coming to the USA at the age of 25 from my birth home of Saudi Arabia, I never thought about being isolated or being seen as an outsider. However, with my move to the United States for university studies, I experienced being perceived as an outsider not only in the United States, but, also, by Saudis both at home and abroad. With no program or possibility for new media literacy for women in Saudi Arabia in 2005,[1] I enrolled in a Master of Fine Arts program in the USA and attended for two year. I learned a lot about art, and the way that it intersects with social issues. At first, I struggled with the definition of art, in part, because of my background as an educator. Eventually, I learned how to produce art that was not didactic, although I still create art with pedagogical goals of critical self-awareness. After experiencing life in the different cultures of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and the United States of America (USA), I became passionate about producing artwork that dealt with the issues of culture, language, stereotype, and identity. Through my art, discussed in this essay, I draw attention to social issues globally affecting those marginalized as outsiders of dominant cultural contexts.

1. In 2017, media literacy course is available for women as an elective course in some of the universities.

GPS Device

Some people, I have met, purchased outdated GPS devices, which are branded by race and religion. These older devices are embedded with a xenophobic feature, rendering these devices unable to adopt to any other new changes to their environment and would much rather ignore than embrace them. Their reasons for not updating their devices are because they fear people who are different from them and how such difference will change their familiar bubble. Others, who I have met, purchased fancy devices with many new and advanced features, yet they do not possess the knowledge or the passion to learn how to utilize their valuable device to its maximum. My GPS device had endless routes and paths. I used to save every single journey that I made with this device in a memory card, not just to remember, but, also, to update the maps every few months. Since the world is ever-changing, will recording of previous paths designating my *Points of Interests* gain more value to me in the future as memory of where I have been, or can they lose value because the place no longer exists, or I am no longer interested in the place, or the place is no longer interested in me?

I was proud of my GPS device; it was full of *Points of Interests* (POI), in addition, it represented the community that used the same device, which is my home community in Saudi Arabia. Unfortunately, at the end of 2010, my device crashed. The system went down and, since I am passionate about electronics, I tried some home remedies such as *stereotype-share* corrections that worked with some brands of GPS devices. After continuous failed attempts in trying to fix it myself, I decided to ship it back to the factory to be fixed. The device was *diagnosed with cultural issues*.

Living in a place that lacks the same type of GPS brand was tough for a while for my device. I kept that secret and tried my best to follow the *course of medication* that was prescribed to my valuable device. The following is an autoethnographic journey with my GPS device in which I address my loss of a signal, that is, a sense of loss of identity, and my vulnerable positionality in relation to oppressive stereotypes.

GPS Crossings

Through visual art, poetry, and narrative co-mingled in this essay, *Waiting for GPS Signal*, I focus on my experience as an individual crossing over to another culture and returning home again. My crossings explored in my art, and described in this essay, grapple with issues such as patriarchy, feminism, cultural belonging, and globalization with social media and other digital mobile technologies. The first crossing is through a video mash-up of patriarchy by feminism.

I created a video mash-up that intersperses a song by Judy Collins (2002), titled, *Who Knows Where the Time Goes?* With a video clip of King Abdullah Bin Abdul-Aziz performing the Saudi Arabian traditional dance. It is almost impossible to see the Saudi national dance in any country outside of the Gulf countries, and specifically unlikely to be performed in the USA. The video clip of Judy Collins was from a 2002 concert in Virginia that has not been and is unlikely to be performed in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). Both are familiar in one context and unfamiliar in another. Surrounding the video mashup (Figure 1) are four *QR-codes* (Figure 2), which are linked to four destinations. The first is Facebook, which allows participants to share their stories as foreigners. The second destination goes to Twitter as a place to react by tweeting using only 107 characters out of 140. The 33 other characters have been used to write the sentence "You have reached your destination." The third destination is Google maps to pin the participant location in relation to the world. The fourth destination is a blog with a story that I wrote about GPS devices as having cultural agency. The video mashup surrounded by printed QR codes that link to sites inviting interaction convey how perspectives change with extended time in two different cultures. From living in two different countries, I became aware of the positives and negatives of both cultures. For others, viewing the video mash-up, particularly those from the KSA and the USA, I offer an experience in which the familiar becomes unfamiliar. It is only through disrupting the familiar that critical awareness of the familiar is known.

Figure 1. *Positionality* video art by Nouf Alhamdan (2014).

Figure 2. *Positionality* by Nouf Alhamdan (2014, New Media, 30 x 30").

In the following, I examine my crossings from positions that each of the letters in the GPS acronym suggest to me. I begin with G for gender global positioning signals, then P for positionality, and S for systems and signals. While each is explored through specific artworks, as I reflect on my body of work in this GPS project, I gain insights that are greater than my individual crossings in hopes readers will raise critical questions about the global positioning system in which they are immersed.

G. Gender Global Positioning Signals

Gender global positioning signals are conveyed in social practices of communication, as I discovered in patterns that emerged in a study for the documentary film, *Gender and Communication: Male-Female Differences in Language and Nonverbal Behavior*, which was distributed by Berkeley Media LLC in 2001. The film included interviews with 42 people from India, Syria, Pakistan, and Japan, who discussed cultural images of men and women, and their perceptions of male-female differences in movement and kinesics. The interviewees ranged in age from 20 to 70 years old, with almost 15 identified as men, around 25 identified as women, and 2 identified as transgendered. One of the questions asked was: Would you ask a friend to put sunscreen on you? The feedback differed between males who responded they would never ask another to put sunscreen on them and a female that said she would not hesitate to ask one of her girlfriends for help. The questions were asked and edited in a way that gives the viewer the chance either to read the question on the screen with the video of the interviewee responses or to watch professors theoretically discussing the questions followed by the interviewee responses. The interviewees provocative responses explored issues such as interruptions in conversations, in which most of the men, women, and transgendered people in the study considered interruptions an acceptable male practice in communicating with men or women but impolite if women interrupt men or women who are speaking. The interviewees also noted what I refer to as "gender bias" in imagery, vocabulary, and language such as the saying "you throw like a girl" when performing sports involving movements such as throwing a baseball. Another example was shown in the movement and posture of women in advertisements; their gestures show that they are meant to be decorative objects, while men are seldom shown in media in this way.

G. Gender Codes: M39Y

Language and translation are prevalent in my work through the use of double and triple coding, which means that the privilege of understanding the message depends on the audience's knowledge; if they are tri- or bilingual, or not; and, if not, that will add a level of ambiguity to the work. For example, in 2014, I created a multimedia artwork, M39Y, in which I employ double-codes about notions of enforced masculine and feminine positionalities in Saudi Arabia. Specifically, this work seeks to portray the body in moments that are trapped between enforced and ascribed, individualistic and societal, chosen and forced positionalities. M39Y is meant to be interpreted by the audience in multiple ways based on their positionality, while some will feel the pleasure of being socially approved by the society, others will feel the pain of being censored and sometimes abandoned based on cultural legislation. I sought to compound imagery that references Saudi women and their enforced positionality in different political parties or subcultures, in order to show where the eclipses appear when society starts judging women by the way they look. To do so, I took photos of myself in two positionalities, one of them is enforced (left part of the photo) while the other one is the ascribed (right part of the photo), with an overlaying of the term *M39Y*.

Understanding *M39Y* depends on how much access the viewer has to interpreting Arabic language and culture in relation to the English words and the imagery. Some of the concepts in the work will be lost in translation, suggesting that the viewer needs to expend considerable effort to try and decipher the codes of the work. No matter how much effort I put into articulating the cultural perspectives embedded in my art, viewers not familiar with Saudi concepts of masculine and feminine will only glimpse the surface meanings of M39Y (Figure 3).

Figure 3. *M39Y* by Nouf Alhamdan (2014, New Media, 60 x 54").

G. Global Positioning: Kherfan

The video piece "Kherfan" (Figure 4) is inspired by an Arabic poem titled, *Three Sheep*, which was written by the Egyptian poet Hisham Gakh (2011). I use juxtaposition in my art to guide viewers to think about themselves, their habits, and thoughts about others. I juxtaposed Arabic calligraphy to critique the Egyptian revolution, while focusing on the role of the Muslim Brotherhood and their violent acts done under the name of religion. This work uses the term sheep written in Arabic letters in red and black to refer to people who do not express their own perspectives. Instead they embrace ideas and actions of others. I translated a New York Times article (Kirkpatrick & El Sheikh, 2014) about President Mohammed Morsi's prison into binary code and overlaid it with the Arabic calligraphy sheep term as a way to double-code the work and be protected from being a target of a powerful socio-political system. Some issues are risky and might lead to dire consequences from society or political authorities. I double-code in my artwork to critique taboo and dangerous issues without polishing or flattening the issues.

Figure 4. *Kherfan* by Nouf Alhamdan (2014, video art).

P. Positionality

As a female foreigner in the West, I felt lost and isolated. As a graduate student, I read texts on feminist theory, critical race theory, postcolonialism, and many other positions in an effort to try and understand ideas that conflicted with my existing thoughts and beliefs. From my discussions with graduate students and professors regarding how the theories manifest in social practices, I developed a series of work about language and culture. I believe that miscommunication results in misunderstanding; and is the main reason that many conflicts occur, both individual and global.

I wrote "*My Story*" with the metaphor of GPS during one of the most emotional moments in my life where I recalled significant memories. I thoughtfully decided what to include and what should remain private. Although the story was short and simple, it had a huge impact on me. Having the privilege to unclutter my thoughts by writing helped me overcome several communication issues, not only with people in United States but with friends and family back home in Saudi Arabia as well.

With an artwork titled, *My Story* (Figure 5), I present my self-portrait as a text that describes my journey of crossing between Saudi Arabia and the United States and how that affected my identity and my life. Although this new media art addresses an individual experience, it also resembles the experiences of many other people, who feel they are outsiders. A sense of not belonging, being on the outside of a shared culture, could happen to almost anyone regardless of race, gender, religion, or age when one crosses into an unfamiliar context.

Figure 5. *My Story*, New Media, 30 x 48". 2014. Nouf Alhamdan

S. System

Within any social system, there are signals that convey how to behave, what to believe, and who and what is valued. The signals can be so strong that it is difficult to be aware of the system, let alone to change the system. The social experiment conducted on monkeys who were beaten by other monkeys when attempting to climb a ladder in order to reach bananas, is a revealing example of the way a society sticks to a system just because they are familiar with it despite the ruin of society (Stephenson, 1967). The social demise could be through government policies, educational systems, stereotypes that privilege some groups and oppress others, among other political, economic, and social systems.

Some systems have ultimate social power in controlling individuals' opinions. I experienced this in my life in KSA; the system was built by the society in standardizing the acceptable actions from the individuals based on their age, sex, and tribe among other characteristics not related to the Islamic religion. I thought that the USA would be totally different. However, after living as a foreigner in the USA, I realized that although the system of what to believe, how to act, and what to value differs from KSA, the system that is built by the dominant community has the power, and not everyone has the bravery to swim against the tide.

There are conditions in which messages can be direct and art can be the means for direct communication such as with posters. The text-based art created in 2014 with "Hitler was 220" was designed in bold letters printed in both Arabic and English words on plain backgrounds, with the use of white, black and red colors. The work concerns systemic racism in Saudi Arabia affecting gender, tribes, faith, and foreigners. With the *Hitler220* artwork (Figure 6), I highlight the concept of race including tribes, skin color, and nationalities. I had a direct intention of offending people. In Saudi Arabia, there is a societal tribal system in which tribes are classified based on their ancestral purity. Those categories are coded, 110 and 220 (based on the electricity voltage available to the area each tribe is located). The concept, 220, refers to people who consider themselves to be the purest of the pure, while 110 refers to people who are considered less pure than human. Therefore, when I compare the 220 tribes to Hitler, I am showing how similar in extremity the acts of Hitler to the doings of those tribes, with the only difference being that they are not as violently racist, but are racist in their everyday life, in that they completely ignore anyone who is outside their tribes, in marriage, for example.

Figure 6. Hitler Posters, New Media, 60 x 52". 2014. Nouf Alhamdan

Changing Signals

I wrote an English poem titled *Donate Silence* (Figure 7), which was inspired by a feminism course that discusses masculinity and cultural hierarchy based on beliefs of men's superiority that is manifested as social, economic, and political practices that privilege men and disadvantage women. The poem embedded subtexts, which highlight the power of women to rise against gender hierarchies. The poem was printed on a *thob*, the traditional men's dress in Saudi

Arabia. Using triple coding (English, Arabic, and binary code) in this artwork, I translated the poem into binary code to make it impossible to read for anyone other than those with computer coding knowledge. I printed the binary coded version of the poem on a *shumagh*, the traditional men's scarf in Saudi Arabia. The third translation was into Arabic language, using Google Translate. A lot of the original poem's meaning was lost in the Arabic version. It was printed on an *abaya*, the women's traditional dress in Saudi Arabia. This installation art was a way to question the authority of a culture, and its effect on women's roles and rights, not only in Saudi Arabia, but all over the world. What follows is the original English version of the poem prior to it becoming a triple-coded visual art installation.

From time to time

Culture becomes

Cheap as a dime

Changing a lot

Changing the pot

And building again

New rules and knots

Follow the rules

Just be a part

Follow the rules

Or you are out

No matter what

You need to change

To change a lot

To please the king

Just be a ring

In his holy hand

You are the one

That should obey

You are a woman

That should be common

Whatever happens

You don't decay

Donate silence

Figure 7. *Donate silence* by Nouf Alhamdan (2014, installation art).

Still Waiting for GPS Signal

Since my birth in 1986, I have been waiting for different events to happen such as waiting for my mother to come back from work or waiting for her approval to extend the time I could spend watching movies. Also, I was waiting to have magical powers just like the girl in the movie *Matilda* (DeVito, 1996), waiting to use the computer just like my older siblings and waiting to see the horrifying skeleton that will appear from the bedroom window if I stayed awake until midnight as the nursemaid at our home said would happen. As I got older, I started waiting for other types of things like owning my very own laptop, my own tools such as screwdrivers, and my own room to start working with computers and hardware. I waited to convince my family that this is *not a male hobby* and I finally won the argument and was able to practice my passion. I realized later that waiting is a passive act that could continue until death, unless I take action.

After thinking of how waiting has been part of my life experience, I asked a random group of 48 people, via an online survey posted on Facebook the following question: What are you waiting for? I received different responses ranging from stability, peacefulness, and summer to particular desires such as pursuing the dream of starting a film production company. Each response reflected a specific need and a different positionality that is based on individual experiences. What was crystal clear from conducting this survey is that everyone is always waiting for something to happen no matter age, race, or gender.

Hourglass

Inspired by the performance of a poem titled "Waiting" by Faith Wilding (1971), I had an idea to produce a video art piece that focuses on the concept of *waiting*, by using the title, *Hourglass* (Figure 8), as a metaphor of life and death, and how the time that is in between those two stages could convey the concept of waiting. Based on peoples' responses to the question "what are you waiting for?" the piece shows the continuous action of waiting depending on the positionality of every participant: whether enforced, ascribed, or selected positions within specific socio-cultural contexts.
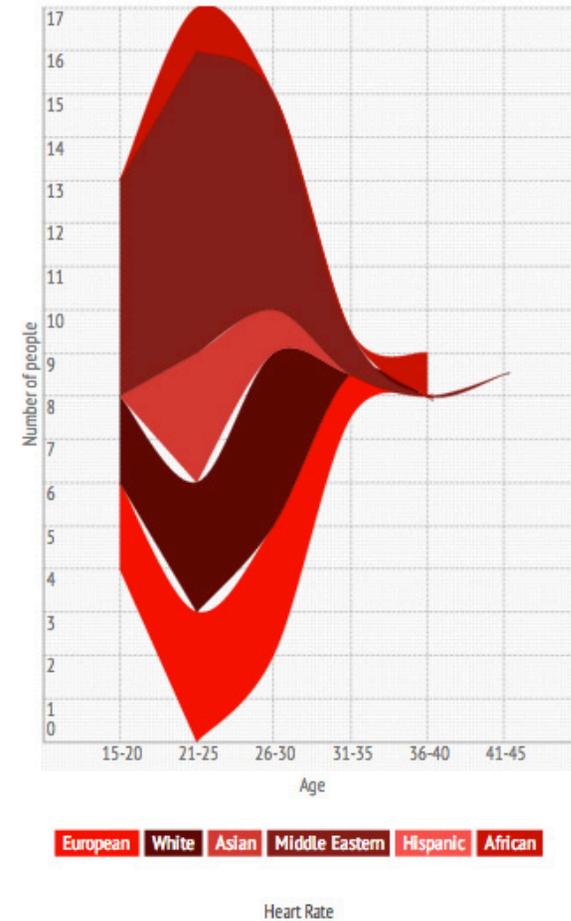

Figure 8. Hourglass Survey Analysis by Nouf Alhamdan (2014).

The GPS story is a metaphor that opened up new ways of talking about issues that I am interested in such as identity and culture, and how those topics unfold other specific issues including, but not limited to, race and stereotyping. I started with questioning a sentence that I have read for the few past years, that is, *Waiting for GPS signal*. What if this signal is gone? How can I utilize the device without a signal? What is the alternative?

I thought about myself in relation to waiting for a GPS signal, and the power within myself to find the lost signal. I am still waiting for a strategy

to generate a peaceful substantial signal that shows that I am alive. The GPS metaphor is serving as my ship captain in everyday life, as I seek to generate rather than wait for a signal. I encourage others: *Do not wait for the signal, generate it*.

You Have Reached Your Destination

In a final artwork, *You Have Reached Your Destination* (Figure 9), presented in this essay, I address one of my experiences as an outsider, presented in a way to encourage multiple interpretations. By publishing the GPS application on Google Play, the privilege is given to whomever wants their voice to reach out to the world by sharing stories as an outsiders through the use of social media as means of power in spreading the word and building virtual and physical communities. The GPS application has the potential to be utilized as a journal for outsiders' stories, in addition to being a connecting point to build micro communities for whomever shares similar views on being an outsider. The installation, *You Have Reached Your Destination*, was a combination of using wood and pushpins as an icon of the individual's location, while the mobile with the application installed was set in the wooden pushpin. The idea behind this combination is to illustrate the real world and materiality represented by wood combined with the cyberspace represented in the mobile application, and how they mold together to help reshape outsiders' positionalities.
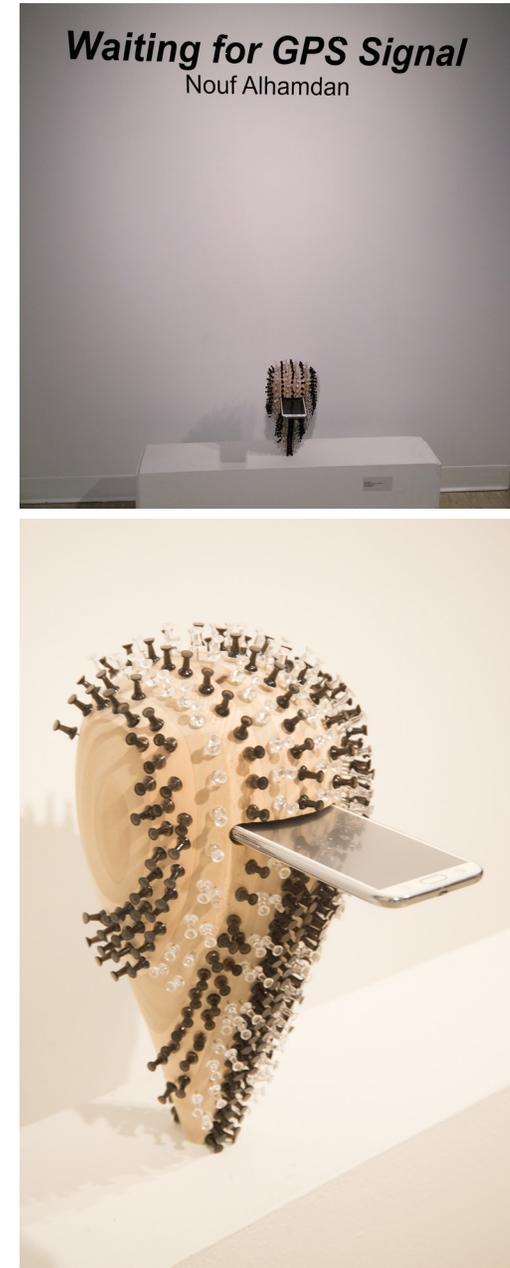

Figure 9. You Have Reached Your Destination by Nouf Alhamdan (2014, Mixed Media).

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