Infidelities

Aya Musmar, Nishat Awan & Menna Agha

"Infidelities" emerged as a response to a series of simple questions.

> What does it mean to be loyal? To a discipline, to its institutions, to a practice, to yourself…?

We came together for this call when we realized that each of us was grappling with these questions independently. As architectural educators and researchers descending from multiple geographies, while subscribing to what persists as predominantly white academia, we have been exhausted by the demands enforced on us to always perform what we do not embody. "Infidelities" as concept and mode of being encapsulates our transgressive transpositions across many divides, of which the Western/ Muslim divide has been the main inspiration behind this call.[1] At a time when the East/West divide has been supplanted, for many good reasons, by the North/South divide, we insist on a different dichotomy that has defined our collective lived experience. While Muslims are often associated with the geographies of the South, the Western/Muslim binary transgresses the North/ South divide; it begs the question of a history that although entangled with questions of coloniality and modernity also exceeds such discussions. "Infidelities," thus, is an attempt to account epistemically for what falls beyond our postcolonial and postmodern recognition. It is grounded in the irreconcilable epistemological tensions between secular and religious modes of thinking.[2] In the chapter "Affective Witnessing" we unpacked this divide by registering our own testimony to the political economies of architectural higher education, and how within questions of displacement and refuge, a racialized understanding of Muslims pervades.[3] Starting with the Western/Muslim divide, then, is a way for us to not only think through forms of knowledge and knowing that have been left aside or labeled as 'exceptional,' 'local,' or 'Indigenous,' but to also account for those knowledges that have been understood as being unsuitable arenas for critique.[4]

The process of editing this issue has been marked by the Israeli state's indiscriminate bombing of Gaza and the intensification of settler-colonial violence in the West Bank. In the wake of this second and currently ongoing *Nakba*, the *Catastrophe*, many of our original impulses and thinking behind the concept of infidelities have been questioned. What started as a complete disbelief in the silence and complicity of the West, and the force of a realization that some of us will never be included within definitions of what counts as human, has now been replaced by other feelings, ancient emotions, ideas, and loyalties that we had forgotten but that now give us solace. It felt as if we were touching the surface of our skin, to find out that our old scars have never healed; as if they were waiting for the strain induced by genocide to open up again. In *The Black Shoals*, Tiffany Lethabo King describes experiencing a similar awakening after listening to an Anishinaabe woman's story of genocide. She writes: "It unmoored and disassembled me in ways that I and others did not expect."[5] For us this unmooring has been related to the multiple belongings of ourselves that we indicated in the call for this issue. We wrote:

> As Muslim people of color working at the margins of architecture, art and social practice, we have always felt like infidels since we are not loyal to the discipline and its institutions, but neither are we loyal to the multiple belongings of ourselves. Yet, infidelity is neither refusal, criticality nor counter politics. It is a fertile ground that emerges through a certain discomfort with institutional power, social and moral codes, and rules that attempt to regulate

> behaviors. It has the potential to create transversal relations across difference. *If you feel such discomfort, we are looking to build affirmative agencies with you, wherever you may be*.

This call to think through discomfort in order to build alliances across difference has been tempered by the genocide that we are witnessing, and the many ways in which it questions our sense of agency and ability to do such work. Unmooring, or being caught adrift, means that we can no longer navigate across the divides that have long exhausted us. In *The Black Shoals*, King describes the transition enabled by being unmoored; "When I say unmoored, I mean that I could not continue life as I knew it."[6] Our humanity, as Muslim people, has long been a subject of doubt and skepticism.[7] And being caught adrift is emancipating in a sense; it has lifted the burden of having to apologize for who we are and to prove that we deserve to be treated as humans. It has also reconciled us to the disappointments we felt at those with whom we thought we could build affirmative agencies when in reality we could not.

It is at the heart of our infidelities where we know, we are believers, too. As architects, it is in these times of catastrophic destruction that we need to be reminded that *Allah* built the earth in six days only. "We created the heavens and the earth and everything in between in six Days, and We were not ˹even˺ touched with fatigue."[8] For Quran scholars, the duration of the day in the divine calculations is ambiguous; it remains a subject of different interpretations. For architects, it could signal the need to think through different temporalities of repair and rebuilding, since the work to rebuild ourselves may take much longer than that of rebuilding material structures. Having learnt the lesson of the (easy) dispensability of a discourse on humanity to which we are inferior, our trespass across the threshold of belief has enabled a stronger hope for epistemic and methodological liberation. In this issue we want to testify to our collective hope—a hope that is encapsulated in the interview with Palestinian architect Yara Sharif, who asserts the need to rethink the relation between permanence and ephemerality in the context of the rebuilding of Gaza. According to Sharif, calculated time is a colonial tool that is used by Israel against Palestinians on all fronts. With the uncertainty that Palestinians live with, it is hard to predict the conventional measure of time needed to rebuild Gaza. Instead she invites a different way of thinking space and time "because our relationship to it is unconventional." We are reminded here of a recent issue of the *Funambulist* magazine entitled "They Have Clocks, We Have Time," that across a series of articles describes the colonial standardization of time but also points to the emancipatory potential of thinking time otherwise that Sharif is alluding to.[9]

Decolonizing our concepts, vocabularies and methodologies is an underlying thread across all essays featured in this issue. In "Free to Roam," Janet McGaw, Alasdair Vance, Uncle Herb Patten, and Saran Kim discuss roaming as a methodology for decolonizing disciplinary conventions, including those of architecture and Western healthcare. One of the most powerful moments in the text is the authors' description of how young Indigenous people, whose mental health has been failed by the settler-colonial healthcare system, engage with an Elder-led cultural therapy program: "Expectant of a revelation they engage attentively with all senses and the *yarn* about what is revealed." We feel the use of the language of revelation is not an accident. It points again to those parts of ourselves that are not allowed entry into rationalized and secular thinking. While some forms of Indigenous thinking are now being accepted into academic conversations, it is telling that these are included through an Indigenous paradigm of "a world of many worlds," that is, through the notion of pluriversality.[10] While acknowledging the existence of many overlapping, parallel, and irreconcilable worlds is incredibly important, we also wonder whether it is an easier proposition than including those modes of thought that

directly oppose a certain modality of Western academic thought. The question for architectural theory remains: why are Sufi cosmologies not allowed space next to Deleuzian virtualities?

In “Infidelities,” we defy the modern understanding of the environment as a silent background which has long accompanied colonialist mindsets (and equally environmentalist discourse). Beyond understanding the environment as a medium that affords the means necessary for surveillance, killing, and control, we speculate on it as an active cosmological realm that is a host to our prayers at times of despair, as well as to our infidelities at times of anger. In his essay “Umm Kamel’s Affair,” Mohamad Nahleh performs such a speculation by telling the story of the eponymous character’s two lives: as a famed matriarch on earth and as a ghost who roams the night skies.[11] The story sits in the mountainous landscape of South Lebanon which has been a site of Israeli colonial expansionist plans and aggression since the 1950s. Threads of grief, hope, liberation, and magic animate the story of Umm Kamel marking the spectacularity of her existence to the people of the mountain, and hinting towards the inevitability of her transformation “from a figure to a constellation.” Nahleh invites a “reflection on the possibility (and responsibility) of confronting the sky we have inherited together rather than lamenting the one we have lost.” We ask if it is possible to think of our environment as an inherited artifact, through which the memories of one generation are passed to the other. And what role do such memories play in shaping the agencies of newer generations?

“Infidelities” queers the possibilities for an architectural thinking that challenges our understanding of materiality and trespasses similar thresholds (earth/sky, figure/constellation, prayer/infidelity). How do we learn and design so as to account for the environment as a host for such cosmological transitions? In the photo essay, “Ecstatic Ecopedagogies,” the group Karachi LaJamia recover together the ecological relations erased by development and militarisation at the outskirts of the Pakistani megacity of Karachi. Re-enchanting the landscape with stories and relations that have been set aside by western modes of relating to the environment trespasses across the thresholds listed above. They are modes of being with and of the environment rather than being located in it. It is a relation the group describes as “ecstatic”, referring also to the long lineage of literature and poetry from this part of the world that is deeply entangled with the environment and ecology. In the essay “Prologue for the Weak,” Patricio Ortega and Claudio Araneda attend to the ephemeral qualities of the mist to reimagine the Biobío River delta as a frontier. Their architectural methodology is aided by the use of artificial intelligence to produce alternative imaginaries that would have been a present reality had the river not been colonized. An artistic methodology that attends to the back-and-forth movement between the present and the past produces what Christina Sharpe refers to as an “orthography of the wake”;[12] it acknowledges the continuing unfolding colonization that is constitutive of our contemporary world and its aesthetics. While Ortega and Araneda work with the mist as an ephemeral entity that questions such aesthetics, Nic Coetzer in his essay “SEA and the Painted Shadow” thinks with the shadow as a place for uncovering the material and temporal qualities that are often flattened by the rough surfaces of architecture. Valuing the soft and thick surfaces of the planet over the neat and shiny surfaces of architecture understood as built environment means uncovering the lost histories of those (most often women) whose work has remained unvalued in the dominant discourse. Similarly, working against architecture’s traditions, Jess Meyers strays away from the limitations of what she calls “architecture’s long-honored monogamy with visual communication.” Instead, the essay asks us to listen and pay attention to what Kodwo Eshun refers to as “audiosocial space.”[13] In doing so, Myers critiques architecture’s limited relationship to sound, which is kept within the bounds of the acoustic— that is, to an understanding based solely on measurable criteria. The author argues that engaging with the full potential of sound can allow architects to gain a deeper appreciation of both silence and noise and how they are regulated.

The uneasy and often instrumental relationship between architecture and technology has been a recurring theme across many contributions. We include here an image that was initially rejected by the design submissions panel of *JAE*, but which spoke to us in such powerful ways that we decided to include it in our introduction. Mustafa Faruki's drawing *Audre Lorde and The Allama on the Way* was first submitted as a black and white line drawing whose ghostly quality was suggestive of the fragile relations we sometimes manage to make across difference, despite the divide and rule politics and atomization that are the hallmarks of coloniality. The two poets situated across cultural, temporal, and geographical divides allude to a similar existential pain of those who, in Lorde's words, "were never meant to survive."[14] The drawing also signaled something about the types of relations those of us rendered as 'backward' or 'uncivilized' have with technology. While a good relationship with the technological in architecture is often characterized by notions of accuracy, thinking through infidel modes might signal a way of working with imprecision found through, for example, lower resolutions. Suzanne Lettieri's essay in this issue deals with the many possibilities of chromakey, a post-production mode of layering two images together. In the glitches and messiness of a technology not completely packaged for user friendliness and consumer demand, we see the openings for a different engagement. Lettieri's use of the term "placeholder" signals a space of possibilities that some of her students mobilized to question the entanglements of race, surveillance, and technology, by using image compositing techniques to evade camera recognition.

Ghazal Jafari's essay on water politics in Iran is another reminder of the violence of certain forms of technology and the hydrological bankruptcy of colonial structures. The essay accumulates evidence on the inseparable links between the violence of infrastructural inequality and violence against women in the study of dam building in the Khuzestan province of Iran. Her call for the "rematriation of rivers" is based on the intricate relations rural women had with their ecologies, and the way those modes of being have been expunged from the patriarchal logic of the Iranian regime. It is not only women's bodies but their modes of living that have been rendered infidel. The consideration of bodies as potent sites of infidelity is echoed in Georgia Traganou's essay where she employs a poetic vehicle to explore embodied infrastructures as a prefigurative practice that envisions a different political future. Like Jafari's piece, she also proclaims women's bodies—and bodies of social resistance—as infrastructures of the otherwise place within the heart of colonial power and, therefore, a site of infidelities. This piece names and honors the people's mic initiative of the Occupy movement, a women's chain, and the invisibilized women builders of Chandigarh, all of which blur the boundaries between individuals and collectives, users and designers, and private and public realms.

We end this section of "Infidelities" with a conversation between Olivier Marboef and Menna Agha, where they discuss meaning and meaning-making from the infidel position of Caribbean epistemologies. They also discuss art and curatorial practices as tools for cognitive extraction, and cinema as a practice beyond mere filmmaking. Marboef speaks of death and destruction, pointing out that colonialism in the region is a radicalization of capitalism, while racial capitalism is central to the Caribbean experience. But he also speaks of the "necessity for some kind of recomposition" of humanity and tells us that "Caribbean epistemology is based on a desire of becoming human."

Finally, we would like to end with a special note of thanks to Ozayr Saloojee and Nora Wendl, both of whom have helped us bring together this difficult issue. We are immensely grateful for all of their work and support.

Notes

[1] We take the concept of transpositions from Rosi Braidotti who defines it as a theoretical and epistemological approach towards intersubjective relationality. The need to live a concept is something that we share with Sara Ahmed. Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2006); Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2017).

[2] Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, Saba Mahmood, and the authors, *Is Critique Secular?: Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

[3] Nishat Awan and Aya Musmar, "Affective Witnessing: [Trans]Posing the Western/Muslim Divide to Document Refugee Spaces," in *Architectural Affects after Deleuze and Guattari*, ed. Marko Jobst and Hélène Frichot (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 163–74.

[4] Asad et al., *Is Critique Secular?*

[5] Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), ix.

[6] King, *The Black Shoals*.

[7] In the early days of the Israeli war on Gaza, the Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant described Palestinians in Gaza as "human animals." This statement was used to strip Palestinians of their humanity, justifying the genocide that would follow. In other places, "human animals" was not exclusively used to strip Palestinians of their humanity, but Muslim people in general—especially those of color.

[8] The Quran 50:38

[9] Léopold Lambert, ed., *The Funambulist* 36 https://thefunambulist.net/magazine/they-have-clocks-we-have-time.

[10] Marisol de la Cadena and Mario Blaser, eds., *A World of Many Worlds* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2018); Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2018).

[11] *Umm Kamel* translates to "Mother of Kamel." In Arabic-speaking Mediterranean culture *Umm* is used as a nickname.

[12] Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness And Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

[13] Kodwo Eshun, "Operating System for the Redesign of Sonic Reality," in *The Sound Studies Reader,* ed. Jonathan Sterne (New York: R outledge, 2012), 452.

[14] Audre Lorde, "A Litany for Survival, 1978, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/147275/a-litany-for-survival

Aya Musmar is a transdisciplinary scholar, pedagogue, and writer of architecture. She is interested in rethinking the concepts and artistic methods by which architecture bears testimony to spatial and material manifestations of injustice. Her research looks beyond the materiality given in a space and textualises the meticulous cosmic, environmental, and social intimacies of everyday life residing within minor spaces to address complex power structures. Working across the realms of teaching and research, her scholarship explores how an understanding of forced displacement indexes architecture with new subversive vocabularies that transgress the disciplinary definitions of the aesthetic. Musmar co-led several international research projects that addressed mobility, conflict, climate change, and heritage among displaced populations in Jordan. In 2022, she was a visiting fellow in the Urban Lab at University College London (UCL) and the Story Lab at Anglia Ruskin University (ARU). In 2023, Musmar was named a JAE Fellow. She is an Assistant Professor of Architecture and Feminism at the University of Petra in Amman. She publishes her work in both Arabic and English.

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Menna Agha is an architect and researcher, who is currently an Assistant Professor of Design and Spatial Justice at Carleton University. She is a third-generation displaced Fadicha Nubian, a legacy that infuses her research interests in race, gender, space, and territory. Agha holds a Ph.D. in Architecture from the University of Antwerp and a Master of Arts in Gender and Design from Köln International School of Design. In 2019/2020, she was a Spatial Justice Fellow and a visiting Assistant Professor at the University of Oregon. Among her publications are: “Nubia Still Exists, The Utility of the Nostalgic Space”; “The Non-work of the Unimportant: The Shadow Economy of Nubian Women in Displacement Villages”; and “Emotional Capital And Other Ontologies of the Architect.”