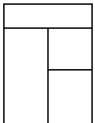


مُمتَلَكات

MUMTALAKAT



ABOUT MUMTALAKAT

Meaning “belongings” in Arabic, the word *mumtalakat* is derived from the Arabic root to own, to govern. Thus, *Mumtalakat* has to do not only with the materiality of objects, but also with a phenomenology of dominance, of power. As a title, it considers the ways in which objects shape interaction, inviting reflection on their ability to hold multiple meanings and perform personal and cultural functions. It also engages various understandings of objects as conceptual entities that carry affective memories of the migration experience.

With an emphasis on process, each iteration of this multi-part oral history project functions as a site of encounter where new discourses can be articulated. The project as a whole considers the complexities of collaborative processes, questioning conventions of the researcher/educator as main author, prioritizing participants’ perspectives, and investigating how to negotiate these relations and viewpoints through an exhibition and public events.

This installment in the Gallery’s vestibule features personal objects belonging to five Arabic-speaking immigrants: an icon, teddy bear, identity cards, rescue tools, diaries, sewing notebooks, house key, rosary, book, Keffiyeh, school note, postcard, and travel souvenirs. As remnants of remote oversea experiences, these objects open a space in the here and now for looking and reflecting on notions of home, identity and belonging.

By placing personal objects and narratives under the category of the aesthetic, *Mumtalakat* considers visibility and its constraints. Prompting encounters between the public and the private, it questions how different forms and strategies of representation test the limits of the personal and how these approaches can extend the interpretive potential of oral narratives and embed objects in their larger cultural contexts.

Participants: Malaka Ackaoui, Alexandre Ackaoui Asselin, Wissam Assouad, M.B., Maher Kouraytem, Farah Mustafa

Interview with Malaka Ackaoui

Interviewer: Emma Haraké

Date of Interview: March 21, 2019

Length of Interview: 37 min. 50 sec.

Place of interview: Interviewee's home

Language of interview: Arabic (Egyptian Dialect)

Objects: Notebooks with sewing patterns, sewing certificates

Transcription in Arabic: Emma Haraké

Translation into French: Chirine Chamsine

Translation into English: Emma Haraké

Comments

The *italic* text indicates when the interviewer or interviewee communicated in English or French during the interview. Text in square brackets [] is used to identify non-verbal communication or add context.

Biographical details

Malaka Ackaoui was born in 1953 in Alexandria, Egypt. Malaka was seventeen years old when her parents moved to Montreal with her two younger siblings. She has a bachelor's degree in Landscape Architecture from the Université de Montréal and a master's degree in Urban Planning from McGill University. She ran her own company in Montreal. She married a Québécois man and has three children and four grandchildren.

Name?

My name is Malaka Ackaoui.

Age?

65 years old.

Where are you from originally?

From Cairo, Egypt.

How long have you been in Montreal?

Since 1970.

Did you come on your own or with the family?

Yes, with the family; my father, mom and siblings. I have a sister and a brother.

And what do you do? Or what did you do in Montreal?

In Montreal, I initially went *cégep* and studied *science pure* and then I went university and studied one-year mathematics, *mathématique* and then I switched to *architecture de paysage* and four years later did *architecture de paysage*. Afterwards, I worked and finished my master's in *Urban Planning* at *McGill* [University]. Next, I worked and ran my own company.

Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about your life in Montreal?

My life in Montreal? Initially, it was very difficult because we are used to the sun and the warm weather.

How old were you when you moved here?

I was seventeen years old.

OK.

But I'm adjusted now. My husband is Quebecois and I have three children; I say children, but they are adults now. The eldest is 36 years old and the youngest is 30. Besides, I have four grandchildren and a fifth one on the way. What else? I worked, I mean I worked in *urban design* and in *landscape architecture, architecture de paysage* but I've loved arts my entire life; fine arts and sewing. Since my mom sewed a lot, I

used to sew as well and I kept on doing it even after her death, I continued sewing. I'd sew for my children just like she used to sew for us. What else? What more can I tell you? [laughter]

[2:34]

You mentioned that the belongings you'd like to talk about are your mother's sewing certificates and notebooks?

Exactly. Following her [my mother's] death, I discovered...she died here in my home and afterwards I discovered her certificates and notebooks. Naturally, I kept the notebooks in my library and then took the certificates to an *encadreur* who framed them and I hung them in my *atelier* since nowadays I occasionally—I sew of course—but I also paint, I went back to the fine arts. [I decided to go back to] my initial hobby of the fine arts so I do *peinture* and *bijoux* and the like. I put all of these together. Later, I mean after I pursued what my mother used to do, I'm talking about sewing, my daughter decided to go and learn leather sewing after finishing her *hotel management* studies, so consider how the same...

Generations...

Generation, from one to the other. Afterwards, following her [my daughter's] studies, she used to make very beautiful things. Hence, I bought this [sewing] machine, the leather sewing machine in the *atelier*. In the beginning, she sewed on it but nowadays she's busy; she has a kid and she works, so she doesn't have much time. However, she might start sewing again.

Was she used to see you sewing at home?

Yes, I taught all my children to use the [sewing] machine, even the boys. I have two boys and one daughter; I let the boys use the machine as well, yes.

Did your mother allow you to use the machine when you were a kid or...?

No, she on the other hand, she left me her mother's machine, but I was forbidden from touching hers. Yet, she left me her mother's machine; the old *Singer* machines, and I used to sew on it.

So, it's four generations then? The machine of your grandmother, mother, yourself and your daughter?

Yes, true, true. When you frame it like that, it runs in the family then...

Can we bring the [sewing] notebooks out?

Yes, that's possible. [brings the notebooks]

I noticed that the certificates in the *atelier* are from two schools. Do these notebooks come from the two schools where your mother studied?

Yes, because in the year, ... Check out these notebooks, they are dated from 1946 to 1974. She used to study at an institute named *Profili* with an Italian tailor working in Egypt.

[6:12]

In Cairo as well?

In Cairo and afterwards, she learned many things at *Profili* and she used to sew our clothes. One year later... so these are the notebooks... [points to notebooks] there are two notebooks. Which years was this?

[Reads from the notebook cover] 1947.

In '47, then in year 1986 my mother wanted to update her information, so she enrolled in a second school called *Zamer, Madame Zamer*, to keep up with fashion and so on... [leafs through the notebook]

It's all written in English with some parts in Arabic...

And guess what? I... which year was that? I believe in [19]85, I went to Concordia [University] and took a course in *fashion design, pattern making* but I didn't complete. I mean I didn't take a certificate or anything but I finished the *pattern-making course* and I had a notebook just like this. However, I got rid of it [laughter]. I kept my mom's and discarded mine... so look!

Do you leaf through them from time to time or do you keep them in the cupboard [library]?

I keep them on the shelf because nowadays I don't have time to make *pattern[s]*. So, if I feel like sewing occasionally, I buy a *pattern* and adjust it. It's easier this way.

Did she [your mother] use to sew regularly or [just] during the holidays?

Always. She used to sew all of our clothes, everything, yes. And initially I used to sew everything for my children when they were little, but I used to buy [clothes] too. I made many dresses for my daughter, and I even made her dress when she graduated from high school here. We bought the fabric together; I did a trial and I cut [the pattern] on

a cheap fabric, then I transferred it to the expensive one. We all love sewing and the arts.

What do you remember the most when you look at the notebooks?

I remember when my mom used to sew and use pins to take dress measurements [laughter]. Sometimes she'd prick me with pins! Her machine was—my grandmother's machine was operated by foot—hers was manual, by hand like this [imitates hand movement], she'd turn the *manivelle* [crank]. And [the one operated] by foot was easier, because by foot...

You're able to use...

By foot, your hands are free, but she preferred this machine. Later on, when we moved here to Montreal, she bought a new machine and used it to sew. We then gave it to my niece, who lost it afterwards. It was in a house which got sold so...

It was gone.

Gone.

But now you have two machines in the *atelier*?

Yes, I have [another] one I bought when I was pregnant with my second child.

OK.

So, one in [19]85 and another one, the *overlock*, I don't know why I bought the *overlock*, it's very difficult to operate an *overlock* but I said once to myself that I should buy one and try it. So, I use it occasionally.

[10:21]

I can read that the teacher's or institute's name was Italian. Egypt was once a *cosmopolitan*...

Cosmopolitan, yes, Egypt, yes. All of Egypt, especially Cairo and Alexandria. Alexandria in particular, had Italians and Greek. We are originally, I mean even our family is originally from the Levantine, Phoenicians, because my family name is Ackaoui—Ackaoui meaning we hail from Akka [Acre] but I never visited Lebanon or Palestine although I know that we originate from there.

Has your daughter seen these notebooks?

I don't think she has. I must show them to her.

But she probably saw the certificates?

She saw the certificates, yes, she saw the certificates, but she specialized in leather though. I had a leather bag made by her during her *course* and I still keep a bag full of leather she used for sewing.

You said that when you look at them, you remember your mother sewing and taking measurements...

True, exactly. Yes.

Is there a special dress you remember the most? The one you were most happy with?

Yes, guess what? She made my wedding dress. She made my wedding dress, and this is probably why I remember it. She also made her wedding dress and I have her photograph here in her wedding dress.

Yes.

But my wedding dress was more *modern*, I mean it wasn't long and white—it was a modern dress. Her dress, on the other hand, was white and long.

And you mentioned that you were seventeen when your [parents] moved to Montreal and that your mother bought a [sewing] machine here...

She bought it here, she didn't bring the machine with here, she bought one here instead.

Was the [move] from Cairo easy for her?

Relocation is always difficult, always difficult. There is no easy relocation. Then, initially, they obviously had to work hard to be able to raise their children. All of this is difficult; living is not easy at the beginning. Education was their priority; they wanted us to succeed in school, university and so on. This was extremely important to them. My father always said, "I am not leaving you money, I am leaving you education."

They moved for their children's future...

Yes.

Do you visit Egypt?

I [usually visit] Egypt, I was there last year in September... 2017? We went to Egypt and visited Jordan because I haven't been to Jordan before. Every few years, I return to Egypt because my heart is there.

Do you still have family over there?

Honestly, my family has gotten a lot smaller. There aren't many family members left in Egypt, but I love Egypt. I feel at ease when I visit Egypt, I am in love with Egypt's sun, Egypt's ambience, and even Egypt's noise and *pollution*, it doesn't matter! When I go Egypt... although my husband is Canadian and doesn't speak Arabic, but he is almost Egyptian, he loves Egypt. We walk in the old neighbourhoods and each time we discover... we discover a new neighbourhood or a new building, ruins—our roots are there. Though, not really. My siblings, for example, don't share the same sentiment. I am the eldest, but I am attached to Egypt. Not my siblings though, they don't go. My sister hasn't returned to Egypt since we came here but she was much younger than me, four years younger. She was thirteen years old when we left Egypt. My brother is slightly younger than me, only one year and a half, and he visited, he may have visited twice. I, on the other hand, I return all the time. I love to visit Egypt and I have friends there.

Do your children visit as well?

We took my children twice when they were teenagers.

Did they like it?

Yes, very much! My children would leave us and take a stroll on their own, even when they don't speak the language. They made friends and used to go... If we wanted to visit a museum, they would say, "No, we don't want to go to the museum." They would walk elsewhere. Yes, my children loved Egypt a lot.

[16:08]

Do you still listen to Oum Kalthoum or...?

Music?

I don't know, music or food or...?

The food! In all honesty, I dislike cooking, but my husband learned to cook so he is the one who makes very delicious kunefe, baklava, the best baklava in all of ... [laughter]

Baklava is difficult to prepare...

He learned it from my mom; he learned all the recipes from my mom. He rolls vine leaves and stuffed [dishes], he cooks all of our dishes. Molokhia, we love Molokhia and all of my children love Molokhia. Long ago in Egypt, it was a difficult [dish]. My mom would buy fresh Molokhia [jute] and all of us had to sit and select [prepare] the Molokhia; it was labour intensive process and little boring as well! Nowadays, I buy frozen Molokhia and this is very easy [to prepare]. Otherwise, what can I tell you? I love arts besides sewing. For example, I took a *cours calligraphie* so I started drawing a tree using *calligraphie* and...

The one hung inside [the studio]?

Hung, but I'll show you another one that I made for my sister, and I also made one for my brother. I still haven't finished mine though. I even made one for my Yoga teacher, she asked, "Can you draw one for me?" so I drew her a tree. It resembles a tree but illustrated using letters. I'll show it for you. Because, I am attached to all what draws me closer to our culture and arts; although I use them in a different way. What can I tell you next?

[18:35]

Do you remember, or you weren't born then yet [signals to the year on Profili's notebooks]?

No, I wasn't. I was born in 1953. I was born in '53.

And when [you mother] was in this school [Madame Zamer]?

Yes, [I was born then]. I was sixteen or maybe fifteen years old.

Do you remember when she used to go to school?

Yes, yes. She was very happy to learn new lessons and new techniques. She was happy. There is big difference between the years here and there, almost twenty years... This actually shows us how despite growing older, she still said, "I should learn again, I must learn." I believe this also had an impact on me. We have a saying: The teacher dies while he is still learning. This is why I learn something new on a daily basis. [leafs through the notebook] Look, this is the sixties fashion.

Many styles are making a comeback now...

Yes, exactly. There are the *vintage* dresses and the...

French is used on both notebooks, even the Italian one...

You see, many people speak French in Egypt. We all speak Arabic, communicate in Arabic at home, but we learned French from the time we were young. I went to a German school, so we spoke Arabic, the native language there, plus German, the school language, and then French and English. My brother went to a French school, the *Frère*. What else? I don't know... I have lots of fabric. Whenever I see fabric, I buy it. But not anymore, I stopped buying until I use the ones I have. I even made some things for my children. Hang on... I am not sure if I still have them. I have *bavettes* [bibs]. [looks for them] You know, one of them has my daughter's name. I made this one in... I made these in... what year? My daughter was born in [19]89, so [I made these] around 1989, 1990 and now my grandchildren use the bibs.

Ok.

I have another one with my daughter's name. [Holds one in hand] I created a special *design* for this one because my eldest son used to remove the bib as soon as you put it [around his neck]. So, I said "OK" and I came up with this technique [demonstrates how she fastens the bib]. I thought that if I fasten it like this, he won't be able to remove it no matter how hard he pulls. And then, afterwards, I made two of them for my nieces, for all my relatives' babies. My daughter once sent me a photograph of my grandson wearing this bib and she said, "Look at how we can still use it after all these years". You see when we say *sustainable development* and environment and so on, instead of throwing all of this, I preserve and use them. There are numerous things. I kept an umbrella, a good umbrella that my daughter used as a child, when she was around 10 years old. When it rains nowadays, her young small son uses it; he walks around under it. I have his picture posing with his mother's umbrella.

Wow!

[laughter]

Re-use, up-cycle.

All the *terminology* used nowadays...

Yes. My mom never threw a thing away. Even if the zippers, if she could change them, she did. She used to keep the buttons and zippers in case anything is damaged. I do the same; I have zippers [laughter]... I used an old pair of jeans, for example, to make a bag for *walking sticks* used for *hiking*. I used jeans because they are long and can fit the *walking sticks*. I kept one and made one for a friend. You inherit all these things from your family as well... I mean we brought physical objects, but we also brought... what are they called? The... in French they say *patrimoine matériel* and *patrimoine immatériel*. The *immatériel* is...

[24:36]

Even the *matérielles* reminds you of what matters, I'm not talking about the monetary cost, the *values*, these things that are transmitted from one generation to the other...

Yes, this is why I watch movies about the cost of clothing and all this. We used to make our own clothes, so we don't just toss them away.

Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about?

About sewing, no. What else? Is there anything I want to tell you? I'm thinking... My mother also left me... Do you know that lace? I have a huge bag filled with lace and I don't know what to do with it, because I don't use lace, so I still have it and I have no idea what to do with it. I want to give it to someone who would use it. Additionally, there is one more thing, when I wanted to buy... the first sewing machine I bought was old. I didn't have a machine; we saw ads in the newspaper and went to meet a man whose wife recently died. It was her machine; a very beautiful machine that resembles a *Singer* [machine] but which operates by electricity. So, I worked on it, such a beautiful machine, although it didn't do the *zigzag* [stitch] and stuff like that, so I stopped using it, but I still have it. When he sold it to me, [the man] said, "I'll sell it, but you must promise to take care of this machine." So obviously I can't discard it thoughtlessly. I don't know, I should find someone, it needs repair to function; the electric wires disintegrated with time but it's a very beautiful machine. I may be able to find someone to fix it and use it because it is durable. I can use it to sew jeans, even leather—such a beauty! I even thought to donate it to the *McCord* [Museum] if they are interested. I don't know if Concordia [University] would...[Malaka's cat Aicha turns up from the outside]

Aicha is here.

Let me get the door. Come in. [Malaka returns to her seat] What else? My mother lived with us; she lived with us during the last two years of her life. After my father passed away, they were living in *St Laurence*, she sold the house in *St Laurent* and bought another one in *Laval* since my sister lived close by in *Laval*. However, she started to get afraid [living] on her own. She had a dog but later my mother grew older. The dog was running, and she fell and broke her bones. She felt that she couldn't stay on her own and asked me if she could move with us, so of course. This was her room.

The atelier?

Yes, and she died in this room, she died in this room in the house. So even the house here, we've been living here since the eighties and my three children grew up here. Currently, my daughter lives upstairs so her son sees me all the time, he sees his *teta*

[grandmother in Arabic] every day. Hence my grandson eats the Arab, Levantine dishes nowadays and he is absolutely in love with *zaatar* [thyme] and olives! My children spent a lot of time with my mom because I would be at work and she would be home when they returned from school. They naturally heard us speaking Arabic, so they'd pick up few words but not anymore. They were the ones who didn't wish to learn and it's very difficult because my husband is Canadian, so we spoke French in the house. It would have been easier [for them to learn] had we spoken Arabic together, but we used French in the house, so it wasn't easy. And when my oldest son went to *McGill* University he said, "I will take an Arabic language course for a year and learn Arabic," but he forgot everything he learned. It's been a while since his graduation from McGill and he learned how to write, he made a *PowerPoint* presentation in Arabic, but his accent just didn't work! Sometimes he'll call and say, "Mom, what does this word mean?" and when I reply that I don't understand, he gets annoyed and says, "You are the one who refuses to understand." "It's because you're not pronouncing it right, my son." [laughter] It's no use! I used to say, "Write it down, because I can't understand your pronunciation, it's not working." When you mispronounce a word, we can't understand.

True.

Yet, he met his wife in the Arabic language *cours*, she is also Canadian, but she used to take this Arabic *cours* and they studied together. He is my eldest.

[30:59]

Was it your youngest or the middle [child] who learned sewing?

The youngest, my daughter. I told her that I recognized her talent. When she said that she wanted to study *hotel management*, I replied, "Do you want to study *hotel management* because you love *management* or is it because you liked the hotels that we visited in...". She said, "No, I want to study *hotel management*." And she did study *hotel management* and succeeded with distinction. Afterwards she told me, "No, I want to learn design and sewing." So I said, "See? I knew it." Subsequently, she went to *Québec* [city] and took classes on how to use a [sewing] machine for a year. She learned to work with leather and quit the *hotel management* business and started working at *Harricana* who, I'm not sure whether they still exist, but they work with *recycled fur* and *upcycling fur*. She worked there then she moved to *Rudsak*. You see, she preferred fashion, but her *management* background was useful because she uses *management* in fashion. Everything you learn in one domain is useful in another. What I learned from *landscape architecture*, for example, was useful in my life as well, useful for my health; it helped me a lot. So, you accumulate all this information; nothing goes to waste. I don't know whether there is some else to say, I'm not sure... if you want, I can show you the exhibition [I'm taking part in] at the hospital?

Yes.

They change it every six months. I started exhibiting with them in 2017. The initial theme was *hope* and after *hope*... what was it? *Peace*, because they ask you to always do something *that represents hope, peace* so I experimented all the time.

Do you consider using fabrics or sewing later in...?

I don't know, I'm thinking. Nowadays, I'm working with *mixed media*, so I tried... the one I just finished is about *resilience*. For *resilience* I made a tree, but its roots are tearing apart a mountain, so I used *craft paper* for the mountain. This is something I learned from my mom. This was a method I learned from my mother during the holidays. She would give us paintbrushes and craft paper, similar to these brown ones, and say, "Splash just like this, on the paper." Then, she would take it, make it *wrinkled* and then use the paper to create the Nativity scene. So, when I wanted to work with mixed media, I thought to experiment using my mother's method. Besides, I also did this with my children, you see. When they were young, we made this paper to create the manger and then, we used this paper for a few years before it disintegrated. I want to do the same with my grandchildren now. All these details... Even if my grandchildren are Canadians and don't speak the language, but there are things they can learn. It is very important for me that they call me "teta" and not *mamie* or *grand-maman*. I am Teta, all of them call me Teta. My children used to call mom Teta as well, even though when my son found out that her name was Farida, he asked "Isn't Teta her name?!" *Teta* means *grand-maman*, it's not her name. Her name was Farida.
[laughter]

[36:19]

[Points to her mother's name on the notebook] Here, [her family name is Ackaoui] because she was married to my father, Ackaoui. Her maiden name was Awad, my grandfather Awad. This is why when I had my children they [Québec] told us that we could use both names. My husband's name is Asslan and mine is Ackaoui, therefore we used Ackaoui and Asslan so they remember where their mother came from. Later, [my kids] and their children changed [their last names]. My eldest son however, his daughter's family name is Ackaoui-Asslan. He has one daughter and he gave her the Ackaoui-Asslan name. What can I tell more? I am not sure, I'm thinking...

If that's it, maybe we can see the photograph of your mother's wedding dress?

Yes, I'll show you the photographs.

Is there anything else you'd like to add?

I believe I spoke too much.

[37:50]

Translation to English: Emma Haraké

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