

“Every Slight Movement of the People . . . Is Everything”: Sondra Hale and Sudanese Art¹

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Abstract

This essay traces the intertwined topics of collaboration and multi-sited ethnography in the writings of anthropologist Sondra Hale on Sudanese artists and art. Hale’s trajectories and movements in and out of Sudan traverse parallel, sometimes overlapping tracks with the artists she studied, championed, and curated. Studying Sudan and its artists may have begun in Khartoum during Hale’s first three-year period there from 1961 to 1964; however, this essay analyzes Hale’s subsequent writings based on the places where she encountered artists, residing abroad and in exile, in Cairo, Asmara, Addis Ababa, Oxford, the Hales’ Los Angeles home, as well as in American venues for meetings of the Sudan Studies Association.

Sondra Hale’s various careers point to her pursuit of a multitude of research and activist trajectories; she is a feminist political activist, photographer, poet, and performer. A brief summary of her achievements in Sudan and Los Angeles begins with a stint as a high school English teacher and tennis coach in Sudan responsible for forming and coaching Khartoum’s first all-women’s tennis team (see Figure 1). An additional specialized talent has been her professional practice as a ventriloquist. Accompanied by the requisite sidekick dummy, a male figure named Willie (sometimes she called him Dean), Hale (1991, 2) explains her performances during a panel devoted to the topic of beauty convened in 1990 by the Southern California Women’s Caucus for Art:

I figured out the ultimate in disembodiment. I became a teenage ventriloquist. My dummy was a man. He was all the men I had ever known, and I had complete control over him. He was an extension of me. He was not a part of me. He was the disembodied me. I had him tell sexist one-line jokes, a vehicle for my internalized sexism. My body was the brunt of his/my jokes.

I practiced and practiced talking without moving my mouth. I became very practiced at holding my face rigid, expressionless, neutral—not beautiful. These are the lines of practice, not perfect.

Notwithstanding Hale's abilities to ventriloquize the dialectical dimensions of gender, she is best known to this journal's readership as an anthropologist of the Middle East and Africa and a scholar of gender studies. Her varied careers and theoretical approaches are traced in relation to her chosen discipline of anthropology expressed through auto-ethnography, multi-sited research, collaborative projects, and the discourses of "radical Africanism" and "art and dialectics," to borrow Hale's (1981) apt phrases. As Hale moved continuously between the intellectual and artistic circles of Khartoum and Los Angeles, the paths of her research with Sudanese artists during the decades of the 1960s, 1970s, and into the 1980s are thematized through her writings supplemented by our conversations and e-mail correspondence between 2011 and 2013. Those were formative and mutually enriching times and places to be an anthropologist of art deeply engaged with Sudanese art abroad while at the same time at home deeply invested in the Los Angeles Woman's Building, a pioneering feminist center of art-making founded in 1973 (Hale and Wolverton 2011).



Figure 1. Sondra Hale, tennis player, Sudan, 1963. Photographer: Gerry Hale



Figure 2. Sondra Hale, Wadi Halfa, Sudan, 1963. Photographer: Nabila Farid Toubia.

Trajectories

Sondra Hale first arrived in Khartoum in 1961 to teach English for three years at Madrasat al-Ittihad, a high school for girls. This first Sudan trip heralded another voyage, doing double duty as her second honeymoon with husband and lifetime partner Gerry Hale, University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) geographer and fellow researcher on the Sudan. Having recently gained independence in 1956 from British occupation, Sudan was an exciting destination for the newly married couple, a place where to be young and starting a new life seemed inseparable from their shared hopes to contribute to the country's postcolonial research and education projects (see Figures 2 and 3). Filmmaker Hussein Shariffe, with whom Sondra would later collaborate, was part of the heady artistic and intellectual atmosphere of Khartoum during the first two decades of independence:

To Shariffe, the 60s & 70s were a time of intense exploration and socialization. His home was a comfortable venue to colleagues, and to those interested in the arts to meet and hold discussions on subjects of interest, and in it he and his wife Shama were hosts to people who remain friends to this day. Shariffe exhibited a passion that was enchanting and his home was always beautifully welcoming and filled with a somewhat 'modern Sudanese hospitality.'²

This era was also characterized by specific historical aspirations and cultural politics, as noted by anthropologist Jessica Winegar, who points to the importance of national culture industries in Egypt no less than for other newly independent African countries. She writes that:



Figure 3. Sondra and Gerry Hale in their house in Hai el-Matar, Khartoum, Sudan, 1961. Photographer: unknown.

the internationalization of socialism and Bandung Third Worldism—during which leftist artists and intellectuals in Egypt had a clearer basis for political and artistic action, imagination, and engagement with the world, and during which there was still hope that the concepts of “progress” and development”

could be wrested from the West's monopoly, and Egyptians could become equal participants in the community of nations. (Winegar 2006, 10)

In Khartoum during the first decade of independence, overlapping artistic and intellectual circles converged at the University of Khartoum. In 1962, a section on social sciences, followed by an anthropology department, was formed as a result of an early act of Sudan's new parliament to award university status to Khartoum University College, an institution established in 1908 under British colonial rule. Hale served as an English-language "Tutor" (in the American academy the equivalent rank is instructor) in the Faculty of Economics, which was bureaucratically attached to social sciences. In 1972 she began teaching a class in urban anthropology for the department until instruction was terminated prematurely due to a university strike. In addition to moving within Khartoum's artistic circles, Hale found the university's Anthropology Department to be an exciting locus of intellectual ferment during the 1960s and 1970s at a time when it hosted the presence of renowned scholars from the international world of academic anthropology, including C. G. Seligman, Siegfried Frederick Nadel, Godfrey Lienhardt, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Ian Cunnison, Talal Asad, Fredrik Barth, and, in archaeology, William Y. Adams. Other scholars present during the 1970s were Ahmed Al-Shahi, Wendy James, Gunnar Haaland, Leif Manger, Martin Doornbos, Gunnar Sorbo, Charles Jedrej, and Sharif Harir. Hale recalls the impressive list of researchers that continued into the 1990s:

The Sudanese who were graduate students during the times I was at the University of Khartoum or around doing research were Abdel Ghaffar M. Ahmed, Samia El-Nagar, Balghis Badri (I met her as a senior in Ahfad secondary school in 1961; she eventually studied at the [university] and was on the faculty for a brief time), Idris Salem el-Hassan, Fahima Zahir, Taj el-Sir el-Anbia, Manzoul Assal, Paul Wani, and Amal Fadlalla.³

Hale's interactions with the University of Khartoum's Anthropology Department during the 1960s and 1970s inspired her to continue her studies at UCLA because, despite English as the mode of instruction in Khartoum, Arabic was also a requirement,

and Hale's knowledge of the language deepened later. Gerry and Sondra Hale's initial 1961-64 sojourn led to many return visits including her graduate fieldwork in sociocultural anthropology while under the direction of UCLA's famed Africanist anthropologist/sociologist couple, Hilda and Leo Kuper (Hale and Hale 1975). During her post-graduate M.A. years in UCLA's African Studies program, Hale was one of the founding members of the Africanist Activist Association (AAA) in 1970, the same year that the association launched its flagship publication, *Ufahamu*, an African studies journal that has since evolved into the longest running, continuously published graduate student journal in the United States. She was one of seven founding editors to constitute the first 1970 board. As of this writing in 2013, both the AAA organization and Sondra Hale are productive and flourishing at UCLA after some forty years framed by her four UCLA degrees: B.A. in English (1958-61), two M.A.s, one in African Studies (1964-67) and a second in Anthropology in 1972. After advancing to candidacy by 1972, she completed her Ph.D. in Anthropology in 1979. In our conversations in 2011 she noted: "I took my time and enrolled in graduate classes in about seven departments and I was a campus activist, which also slowed me down. Also I went to Sudan three times while in graduate school in 1966, 1971-72; 1973-75."⁴

To this day Hale's movements in and out of Sudan traverse overlapping, sometimes parallel, trajectories with the artists she studied, championed, and curated. Beginning in the late 1970s, Sudanese artists were forced to flee the consequences of their own dissidence or the country's civil wars, successive coups d'état, military rule, and autocratic regimes by seeking political asylum elsewhere in Egypt, the Arabian peninsula, Eritrea, Europe, and the United States. Over decades, Hale, the anthropologist, along with several generations of artists she profiled so eloquently have acknowledged and transformed their respective recourses to the romantic, nostalgic Sudan of their youth, a place and time from the 1960s currently recalled in exile and evoked from abroad always at several removes. As Hale recounts, her studies of the lives and works of Sudanese artists may have begun in Khartoum during her first three-year residency from 1961 to 1964, but she pursued follow-up studies whenever and wherever she could encounter artists residing abroad and in exile: Cairo, Asmara, Addis Ababa,

Oxford, the Hales' Los Angeles home as well as American venues for meetings of the Sudan Studies Association:

Here are the Sudan dates: 1961-64; 1966 (six months); 1971-72; 1973-75; 1981 (three months); 1988 (three months); and then scattered weeks in 2004, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, and 2011. The most intense time I spent interviewing several Sudanese artists was 1972. I interviewed three Sudanese artists in Cairo (Hussein Shariffe, Hasaan Ahmed, and Seif ol-Islam) in the early 2000's—two trips; and interviewed [Mohamed Omer] Bushara in Asmara twice in 1994 and 1996 (he came from Saudi Arabia to spend three months with me each time), as well as other Sudanese artists. Tahir Bushra Murad lived with us in the early 2000's for nine months and I dialogued with him daily. I also studied his work (but did not interview him) in Asmara and Addis (he was in exile). Khalid Kodi I interviewed during two trips to the east coast (Boston) and Midwest for the Sudan Studies Associations meetings and/or [the Middle East Studies Association]. Bushara and Ibrahim el-Salahi, I interviewed in Oxford in the late 1990s and early 2000s.⁵

Political exile and plural diasporic existences for Sudanese artists meant that Hale from the 1970s practiced what anthropology would later acknowledge as “multi-sited ethnography,” in that she followed Sudanese artists and exhibitions across time and space whenever and wherever they alighted (Marcus 1995, Marcus and Myers 1995, 1 – 54). Moreover, she would go beyond ethnographic fieldwork to embrace self-created, combined forms of research and presentation that include writing, curating, and poesis. Writing poetry is exemplified by Hale's many decades of friendship and collaboration with Shariffe that began in Khartoum and ended with his death in Cairo in 2005. Her elegy of July 10, 2005, entitled “The Man in the Painting” was dedicated to Shariffe, “For Hussein, one last time. . .”:

Yellows to set off the black of the funeral procession!
 Bright splashes of orange, pea greens and reds.
 He sat in the middle, wearing the damur dervish
 clothing he liked to wear on casual occasions,
 laughing at himself, or with himself,
 or at my own clumsy attempts to paint a portrait
 of him, a portrait of the artist as a young rebel,

an old sage, a frisky poet in love with art,
 a tragic exile mourning his imprisoned homeland,
 savouring his jagged life, longing to experience
 his tale of three cities: London, Cairo, Khartoum.
 I could not capture him; he had moved from the middle.
 The painting was off-centered, the way he liked it.
 The canvas was asymmetrical and he laughed.
 He pranced on the margins of the canvas,
 laughing, dancing, hearing jazz all along:
 “Play Lee Wiley again, Sondra.”
 And then the subject/object disappeared.
 What remained was a splash of colour,
 many colours holding their own in a love fest,
 forming a mesmerizing circle that was not a circle.
 (Hale 2005)⁶

“What remained was a splash of colour,” Hale’s poem sadly concludes. In fact, much more remained because of her own prolific output as a poet, art critic, and curator of Sudanese art. Hale’s studies of Sudanese artists sent her to new venues and collaborative projects requiring fresh approaches and multi-directional methodologies, even as her poem acknowledges that little can be captured and merely with results that she deems “off-center” and “clumsy.” This is because the topic of what Hale labeled Sudan’s “exiled modernists” cannot escape the complexities of attempting to keep track of visual artists in motion—some trained in the West, others products of Khartoum’s once-flourishing, post-independence art schools, who were available at different times inside Sudan or galvanized into resistance and rebellion by exile (Hale 2000, 8 – 9).

Long before the concept of multi-sited ethnography became current, as early as 1970 Hale articulated crucial influences in *Ufahamu’s* inaugural issue. While still a graduate student, Hale co-authored a call for Africanist academics “to become more responsive to the pressing social and political issues facing Africa and Africans. . . and to act as a pressure group with regard to the sociopolitical problems relating to Africa” (Hale et al. 1970, 1).⁷ Two years later in the 1972 issue of *Ufahamu*, and still writing as a graduate student, Hale refined the concept of “radical Africanism”:

Radicalism in methodology is more than a “fresh” approach to various subjects. It is a recognition of the non-existence of

“value-free” social science. It is a commitment to a value system. It is an approach based upon the realization that most of our (i.e. western) empirical generalizations, heuristic devices, theoretical constructs are value-laden, basically conservative, and based upon outmoded ideal types. Many of the conventional approaches have been unable to handle change, and as an inadvertent (or perhaps advertent) consequence, have militated against change. Radical Africanism militates against the complacent acceptance of these western models and calls for new paradigms for a new time—a new place—the “Third World” (Hale 1972, 13).

Hale’s powerful formulation on behalf of a creative Third World region in the throes of abandoning its imitations and mimics of Europe finds its most famous and radical affirmation, one adapted and adopted by Hale, in Frantz Fanon’s (1963) *The Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon famously articulated a stirring appeal to the *tiers-monde* to envision new models, directions, examples, and schemas:

Come, then, comrades, the European game has finally ended; we must find something different. We today can do everything, so long as we do not imitate Europe, so long as we are not obsessed by the desire to catch up with Europe. . . . Yet it is very true that we need a model, and that we want blueprints and examples. For many among us the European model is the most inspiring. We have seen to what mortifying setbacks such an imitation has led us. European achievements, European techniques, and the European style ought no longer to tempt us and to throw us off our balance. . . . Let us decide not to imitate Europe; let us combine our muscles and our brains in a new direction (312).

Fanon devoted himself to cultural and political struggles, notably Algerian independence from France, not immediately on behalf of his own people. Out of his commitment emerged a web of willed cultural affiliations similar to Hale’s attachments to the people and cultural politics of Sudan. Such powerful connectivities do not come from any birthright, but were alignments of lived solidarity by Fanon, the West Indian psychiatrist in Algeria, and also found in the encounter with Sudan by Hale, the Midwestern working-class, white academic woman.

The 1970s: *The Dislocation of Amber* and the Los Angeles Woman's Building

Only faint traces of its [Suakin] ancient affluence are apparent today. . . a dimmed reflection in a cracked mirror; empty eyes with the stars in a different house, laughter in another room. (*Hussein Shariffe*, 1974)⁸

One remarkable new direction in remaking First World visual hegemonies occurred in 1974 in Sudan, where Hale participated in the production of *The Dislocation of Amber*, a film directed by Shariffe, then a leading intellectual and artistic figure of Sudan. This film is best described on the web site dedicated to his works:

The “Dislocation of Amber” was filmed in the city of Suakin, a formerly flourishing port in Sudan. All those who have previously written on Suakin admitted to the complexity of the town as a subject. So intriguing is Suakin that not even the origin of its name is agreed upon. Its history is one of famine & opulence, devastation and progress, rich trade and damage, involving colonialism. What makes Suakin so abidingly memorable is its resilience, built through war and conquests, the historical town is a product of determination and competitiveness. Today the city lies in ruins, a shadow of its former self. Shariffe used symbols—scorpions, seashells, and camel caravans—to accentuate a sense of utter desertion. Suakin’s vacant coral buildings, a naked man crucified, slaves by the sea crouching on the beach, all lend signs to the film. Starting from his selection of the title of the film “Dislocation of Amber” which is self explanatory, no amber can be dislocated, it is too difficult to do that, but the name provides a metaphorical likeness to disassociating beauty from ugliness and life from none. The poems in the film were sung by the late Sudanese singer Abdel-Aziz Dawoud providing background music.⁹

Shariffe was in the middle of studies at London’s National Film School film and directing program when he returned in 1974 to Suakin on the west coast of the Red Sea just before storms decimated the historic medieval old town. He wrote the screenplay and directed what Hale (2001, 16) labels Sudan’s first art film, a “highly abstract” and “painterly” project that serves, with hindsight, as

an important visual record of a place, the Sudanese port city of Suakin subsequently in ruins after floods, and of a time, the artistic and cultural history of 1970s in the capital Khartoum. An extraordinary group of artists, poets, and actors were assembled, among them Yousif Aydabe and Mohamed Omer Bushara, with whom Hale would go on to create more collaborations. The presence of nude scenes resulted in only two contemporary screenings in Khartoum, and another at the Sudan Studies Association 2001 meetings, for which twenty-five years later, Hale (2001, 19) penned a vivid memoir of her experiences in the *Sudan Studies Newsletter*:

[Shariffe] wanted to use the destroyed seaport and the glorious crumbling buildings as a metaphor for a society decimated by colonialism. The “plot” is a woman’s death by drowning (and a series of suicides and violence), rape, human degradation and humiliation, again metaphors for colonialism. He mixes images of Victorian ladies, British generals, with dervishes and Haden-dowa/Beja lore. The film is surreal in parts and, basically, makes no attempt at realism nor the presentation of ethnographic “fact,” as we know it (although there are ethnographic elements in it). It is very slow moving, with the camera languishing over the ruins. Hussein attempts mood invention through the slow



Figure 4. Screenshot of Hale as Victorian lady from *The Dislocation of Amber*, 1974. Director: Hussein Shariffe, Cinematographer: Abdel Moneim Adawi.

pace and the slow color. The eerie buildings of old Suakin are characters themselves. Hussein has his camera move from one symbolic motif to another, with mysterious links between them. His tactile sense follows him into film; his camera “touches” the crumbling facades of the buildings. In the background the gentle lapping of the Red Sea waves can be heard.

Hale served multiple roles in the film as an actor in the ensemble playing the role of a Victorian lady (see Figure 4) as well as serving as a body double (see Figure 5). Both her ventriloquist training and ability to swim proved useful:

I am in every group scene (yes, shrouded in black, e.g., the derwish scene); we all were. No, I am not the woman climbing the stairs. That is Mimi Hashim, the “lead.” However, you would be surprised that the person in the drowning scene, floating on the top of the water, is me. I was a double for Mimi, who was too afraid of the water to do the death scene (drowning). So, with my eyebrows plucked to a pencil line and pancake make-up piled on me to look darker, I did the scene for her. My one scene where I look like me, a Victorian lady (colonial) walking across something like a viaduct, is not in this excerpt. We were a true ensemble—everyone doing everything—make-up, costumes, and acting.¹⁰

Figure 6 is an image photographed by Sudanese artist Mohamed Omer Bushara and depicts a moment during the film shoot:

We were filming the mirror/dresser scene with Mimi Hashim (center, kneeling, with her back to us). Hussein Shariffe is on the right with his back to the camera. In the far left corner is the poet Yousif Aydabe, taking one of his many roles in the ensemble—holding a reflector for that scene. On the far left, without a shirt, is Abdel Moneim Adawi, the cinematographer.¹¹

In addition to her role as the assistant for production, costume, and make-up, Hale served as a still photographer, in effect the visual ethnographer documenting the process of film production. Figure 7, an image by Bushara, frames Hale in the film company’s rented Russian-built helicopter as she photographed aerial images:



Figure 5. Screenshot of Hale as a body double from *The Dislocation of Amber*, 1974. Director: by Hussein Shariffe, Cinematographer: Abdel Moneim Adawi.

This [photograph] was taken by Mohamed Omer Bushara on a Russian helicopter. Story behind that: The Sudanese government was trying to hide the fact that they had Russian helicopters and Russian advisors (this was 1974 and such influences were not supposed to be existent after the attempted coup by the left in 1971). We flew from Khartoum from a military airstrip and I was asked to keep my head down and not look around as we went from the car to the helicopter. All very secretive. I guess even taking an American on such a trip was controversial and few people knew about the helicopter ride to Suakin (flying over the strategic Port Sudan). As I said in the previous email, my job on the project was to serve as still photographer. This included taking aerial shots of Suakin as we approached. As we flew over Port Sudan I was trying to take some aerial shots (all the photos I took I have in slide/transparencies form and you can borrow the whole set if you want; they are not the originals, however, those were confiscated although they never admitted they gave me copies and the originals “disappeared”), but the Security agent assigned to keep us in line and especially to watch me, stopped me from taking a shot of the strategic Port Sudan. The Security agent (military man in the military government of Nimeiri) is on the left. The man in the back is *Dislocation*'s



Figure 6. Sondra Hale holding the camera during *The Dislocation of Amber* film shoot. Black and white photo, Suakin, Sudan, 1974. Photographer: Mohamed Omer Bushara.

cinematographer, Abdel Moneim Adawi. He was also indirectly connected with security, as he was the central government cinematographer, Ministry of Information.¹²

Making films is by nature a communal effort despite the ephemeral nature of a movie production group, as it was for the pioneering cohort that came together in Suakin in 1974. In the 1970s as Hale moved between graduate school at UCLA and fieldwork in Sudan, not only was she involved collaboratively with postcolonial Sudanese artists, she also included in her research contemporary and local Los Angeles understandings of the power of culture and place through her long-standing involvement in the Los Angeles Woman's Building. Founded in 1973 by feminist artists, the Woman's Building was a touchstone during its eighteen years of existence for women who searched to construct their own productive aesthetic spaces. Years later, Hale (2001, 39) apostrophizes in this moving passage about what was envisioned and realized:

It was a house large enough for everyone, all women, we claimed. It was Womanspace, *Womanhouse*, and the House of Women, "At Home," Everywoman's space, and Femme/Maison.



Figure 7. Sonda Hale on Russian helicopter accompanied by security officer while working as still photographer for *The Dislocation of Amber* film shoot. Black and white photo, somewhere over Port Sudan and Suakin, 1974. Photographer: Mohamed Omer Bushara.

It was female space, safe space, sacred space, contested space, occupied space, appropriated space, and transformed space. It was revolution and revelation. We were squatters and proprietors, renegades and healers; we dichotomized and fused. We had one commonality: we were convinced that we were transforming culture by offering alternatives, as women, not only in the arts and culture, but also in the way we used space and conducted politics in that space.

Hale's involvement with U.S.-based feminist art movements led her to serve on the Woman's Building board of directors, teach art seminars, and organize conferences. These activities culminated in her role as coeditor of one volume of a two-volume set, her volume entitled *From Site to Vision: The Woman's Building in Contemporary Culture*, published in conjunction with the October 1, 2011-January 28, 2012 exhibition, both volumes part of the massive Getty Museum-spearheaded project about art in southern California entitled, "Pacific Standard Time."¹³ As both a practitioner and an academic feminist, Hale brought critical insights from

her Sudanese fieldwork to bear on complex relationships in order to undermine (or at least give pause to) the bounded intellectual understandings about gendered space and women's psychosexual worlds articulated by so many ethnocentric American thinkers.

Although her two experiences of strongly "identitarian" artistic cultures, namely American feminist art and Sudanese modernist art, were linked in her thinking and writing, they constituted separate spheres in her feminist world in Los Angeles.¹⁴ Exceptionally however, Hale (2011, 47) evoked a nuanced analysis that drew on both worlds for the 2012 commemorative volume of essays she co-edited about the Woman's Building:

The courtyard of a Northern Sudanese house where I spent countless hours over decades, may, in material reality separate the physical spheres of men and women and epitomize the effects of the gender division of labor on the cultural landscapes and built environment. Moreover, metaphorically (in Western literature), the interior separation of male and female in the Arab house may stand for the repression of female sexuality. Nonetheless, although women can be seen as culturally alienated within their own interior space, women's culture that emerges in the seclusion of the courtyard is the transformation of that alienation. . . . The detached, isolated, single-family house (especially in North America) is more alienating of North American women than is the Arab house of Arab women. In the latter, the combination of extended family, with communal advantages, and the harem (women's quarters) allow for sisterhood and collectivity. The harem, then while suggesting to Westerners a system of sexual access for males, is also a system whereby women have living space (culture) beyond the patriarchy. This merging and alienation. . . is one of many aspects of the dialectics of interior/ exterior space, women, and culture.

For Hale, Sudanese collective filmmakers and collaborative California artists share an emphasis on process while assigning a lesser importance to product. The fruitful confluence of thinking with and belonging to two different artist communities initiated Hale's theoretical formulations about art and "dialectics" rooted in her belief about the revolutionary potential of culture to break down manifold stagnant, inherited dichotomies, whether

colonizer/colonized, teacher/student, Western/Third World, and artist/audience. In an interview, she said:

I saw the women's cultural movement at that time (I changed my mind somewhat later) as potentially the most important wing of the women's movement. That's because I argued that it was with culture that we were going to change images and representation. We were going to change things in a very profound way. We were going to use culture to mobilize. I really, really believed that culture could be used to mobilize. I was troubled that we weren't mobilized, that we weren't tending the barricades with our culture. That is, we weren't carrying out the revolution with our culture. We weren't even revolutionizing culture. (Hale 1992b, 65 – 6)

Toward an Engaged, Collaborative Ethnography of Aesthetics

Sudanese artists face a perpetual struggle for recognition and a place on the stage of both local and international art forums as do American women artists, despite vastly different material conditions and histories that Hale acknowledged and respected. Few anthropologists have engaged with contemporary artists and the art world at home or abroad although their numbers are growing, with Hale among the early, preeminent thinkers and practitioners who went beyond anthropological studies of art often subsumed under the rubric of folklore. Specifically in 1992 and 1993, Hale co-curated an exhibition with art writer and educator Joan Hugo, an event they entitled “Counterweight,” defined in their catalog as “an equivalent weight, a counterpoise, counterbalance.” Hale’s (1992, 7) catalog essay of the same title clearly articulates the novel ways that aesthetics, art and anthropology remain enmeshed in a “mutual dialectic”:

... the artist's search for identity has taken on new dimensions. Joining the artist in this quest is the ethnographer, who traditionally searched for the identity of the “Other.” And who has now tossed his/her own identity into the quagmire of the “ethnographic experience.” That the Other is inextricably fused with the viewer/ethnographer/voyeur, imploding the distinctions

between Outsider/Insider,” is a powerful statement on positionality and power.

Hale (1991, 8 – 9) argues that not only is our Western art labeled “art,” while folk art is made by everybody else, but individual non-Western artists were relegated to an “Other [that] was simply a collectible, another folk artifact, until the empire began to write/gaze back.”

Hale’s methods and engagements are articulated in her article title, “Art and Dialectics: A Sudanese/American Experience,” published in 1981 in a special issue devoted to Sudan in the journal *Africa Today*. One prominent aspect of the “dialectics” of dialectical method in Hale’s hands is a series of cross-cultural conversations and life-long collaborations between artist and ethnographer. Each participant in the dyad, namely artist and ethnographer, may express radically different approaches but somehow they co-produce a dialogue working in “constant conjunction with each other.” In one example, Hale (1981, 97) meditates on Sudanese painter Mohamed Omer Bushara, who uses the “language of graphics” to her own “language of poetry”:

We attempted to form an artistic commune, to finish each other’s lines. For many reasons there was an unlikelihood of such a collaboration, and it is here where we transcended the dialectics of our existence and, by adding experience to theory and practice, forged the beginning of a synthesis. We saw the dialectics in our different ages; in the male/female contradiction; in “black” and “white”; in “Christian” and “Muslim” cultures; in “third World” and “first world.”

We attempted to break down the dualism seemingly inherent in these ideas. And we could do that by adding experience to theory and practice. The experiences we shared were poor backgrounds and our visions of the oppressed. In order to communicate and survive, we have embraced the language of Marxism to produce within a bourgeoisie world.

Hale’s multi-faceted approach to address both anthropology and aesthetics rests on decades of discourses concerned with a personal, reflexive anthropology. Ethnography, she notes, is a Western invention. Hale (2000b, 14) uses the ideas of Edward Said (1985,

4), who equates representation to acts of committing violence against the represented subject:

The act of representing (and hence reducing) others almost always involves violence of some sort to the subject of the representation. . . . Whether you call it a spectacular image, or an exotic image, or a scholarly representation, there is always this paradoxical contrast between the surface, which seems to be in control, and the process which produces it, which inevitably involves some degree of violence, decontextualization, miniaturization, etc.

For Hale (2000, 14), consequently, “even *self*-representation needs to be confronted.” This means that anthropological reflexivity in the pursuit of understanding art aligns ethnography and esthetics because they share, in Hale’s (1992, 8) words, “the search for the subject (the ‘authentic voice’) and the simultaneous distrust (and perhaps destruction and deconstruction) of the subject.” Yet Hale discloses a countervailing caveat: “This working together does not mean speaking *for* each other— even in the absence of one of us and no matter how well-meaning. It means speaking from our own *location* in culture and history and generating/creating space for others to do otherwise” (Hale 1999). Moreover, theory and theorizing could never be antithetical to or destructive of art-making practices, whether her own or the creativity of other artists:

Increasingly I saw that my contribution to the [Woman’s] Building was as somebody who kept theory there as a visible thing, but who attempted to make it not seem like it was the enemy. I tried to demystify theory and the process of theory-making. I like to think that I made some of the theories of women’s studies relevant to the art of the Woman’s Building. (Hale 1992b, 73)

Indeed, during a 1981 public conference in San Francisco, Hale

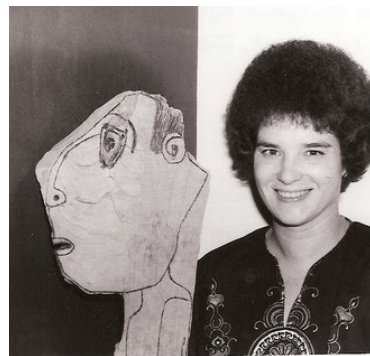


Figure 8. Wood sculpture. Self-Portrait of Mohamed Omer Bushara, with Sondra Hale, 1975. Photographer: Gerry Hale.

famously produced the first trenchant critique of one of the Woman's Building major art work successes, "The Dinner Party" by Judy Chicago. About it, she said:

The critique that I gave of "Judy Chicago's Dinner Party," some aspects of which I just mentioned, was similar to the critique that I now have of the women's cultural movement and of the Woman's Building in general. As I said, my critique was aimed at essentialism. Specifically I was concerned with the way sexual imagery was used and this is a part of the kind of essentialism we saw at the Building and in the cultural movement. The critique also addressed how white it (Chicago's piece, the Building, and the women's movement as it was usually defined) was and, as I said, the hierarchical relations of production. Sorry, I slipped in a little Marxist term there. . . . But what propels my feminist critique of cultural feminism is the idea of going back to our roots, going back to our essence, going back to our beginnings, going back to matriarchies, going back to goddesses, going back to the glorious past and not moving forward. (Hale 1992b, 69)

In contrast, Hale traced a different route to enrich the domains of artistic self-representation and anthropological reflexivity through a series of co-constructed, co-authored texts made remarkable by innovative content. Hale was involved in many such artistic and ethnographic collaborations but among the very fascinating endeavors between Hale and Sudanese artist Mohamed Omer Bushara occurred in the 1970s (see Figure 8), the decade notable for her most productive and intense involvement with the Sudanese group of Khartoum-based artists. If Hale's role in the Woman's Building collaboration was also pedagogical and conducive to theory building, her project with Bushara was the distillation of thought to its seventeen-syllable essence. Hale wrote a series of Japanese haiku poetic forms in English to "attempt to capture the mood and tempo of Sudanese social and political life in the last two decades" prior to 1977.¹⁵ The haikus were translated into Arabic by a committee of progressive Sudanese intellectuals and also into drawings by Bushara (Hale 1982). The Bushara/Hale dialectical relationship created the collaborative work of Hale's poetry and Bushara's black-and-white ink drawings to fill a 130-page artist book they entitled *Seasons of Discontent* (Hale and Bushara 1975).¹⁶ Their co-authored book

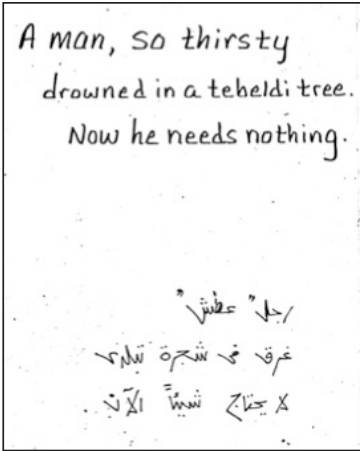


Figure 9. Poetry by Hale in her handwriting. Artist book, *Seasons of Discontent*, 1975. Arabic calligrapher: Hafiz Mohamed Fadl. Hale Collection.



Figure 10. Pen and ink drawing by Mohamed Omer Bushara for artist book, *Seasons of Discontent*, 1975. Hale Collection.

title gestures both to Shakespeare's Richard III, "*Now is the winter of our discontent, made glorious summer by this sun of York,*" as well as to Sudanese novelist Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*. The Shakespeare play heralds a new state of happiness while the Sudanese novel most famously recounts the troubled, ultimately murderous relationship between a white woman and a Sudanese man. Bushara and Hale evoked Tayib Salih in other contexts when together they interviewed well-known Nubian Sudanese artist and then diplomat, Salih Abdou Mashamoun. If collaboration could perhaps remedy the disjunctures of West versus Global South, male against female, black in opposition to white, then their shared quest makes clear that producing art was a valiant effort to stave off multiplying circles of alienation and loss that they each experienced differently when they asked, as if in one voice, these questions of Mashamoun:

Do you agree with El-Tayeb Salih that art is the outcome of loss, i.e. when we feel we are losing something, we try to express it through painting, music, poetry, etc.? Maybe a feeling of loss

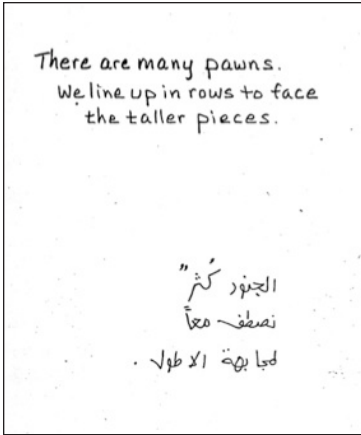


Figure 11. Poetry by Hale in her handwriting. Artist book, *Seasons of Discontent*, 1975. Arabic calligrapher: Hafiz Mohamed Fadl. Hale Collection.

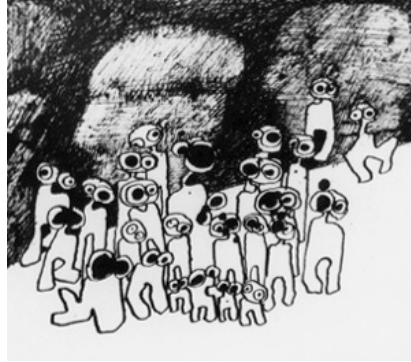


Figure 12. Pen and ink drawing by Mohamed Omer Bushara for artist book, *Seasons of Discontent*, 1975. Hale Collection.

is coming through your [Mashamoun’s] work that you are not aware of. Maybe in two years from now, perhaps ten, you will be talking about this “period” as one in which you were “alienated,” in a certain way, from your own society, even though you were expressing themes from your society much of the time. Still a kind of strangeness, an alienation may be seeping through (Hale and Bushara 1976, 90).

In *Seasons of Discontent*, Hale’s opening haiku gestures toward conflicts and attractions of a meeting between the two: “Just as we are bound in violence, we are bound in love” (Hale and Bushara 1975). Accompanying another Bushara drawing is the Hale haiku: “A man so thirsty drowned in a *tebel* tree. Now he needs nothing” (see Figures 9 and 10). Another example is: “There are many pawns, we line up in rows to face the taller pieces” (see Figures 11 and 12).

Ideas about what constitutes the Third World, radical Africanism, postcoloniality, reflexivity, feminism, memory-work, tradition, and modernity have infused Hale’s research on contemporary African art for over fifty years: Hale writes about Sudanese art in prose and rhyme, various Hale family members

are important collectors of Sudanese art, and she has collaborated artistically and curatorially with Sudanese artists inside and outside of Sudan. Her cumulative research and art work activities attest to Sudan as a significant center of contemporary art in Africa, as a country that has produced over two dozen internationally acclaimed artists despite these strictures: sociopolitical contexts of little attention and priority accorded to modern art, audiences' inability to appreciate abstract art not rooted in traditional forms such as Arabic calligraphy, lack of freedoms for the population no less than the artists themselves, a state-controlled media that precludes networks of independent reviewers and actual exhibition venues, and massive dispersion and exile of Sudanese artists and critics. As late as the year 2000, eleven years before Sudan was split into two countries, Hale was presciently haunted by questions facing Sudanese artists, who are distant from the early decades of rich cultural productions and currently find themselves, as with so many Global South artists and intellectuals, residing in a diaspora while facing the new divided Sudan. She writes:

Whether or not the exiled artists who are invaluable treasures, are able to produce an art that reflects the exile experience and is, thus, "Sudanese" while simultaneously embracing the international milieu, remains to be seen. Whether their art production will reflect only the homeland, invent a new tradition, or create an oppositional culture also remains to be seen. It is a question whether the artists can serve the oppressor (or want to) and if the new sensibilities they have accrued while in exile still coalesce into a new artistic tradition grounded in Sudanese culture—when the new Sudan emerges. How important will the new artistic developments be to the New Sudan's cultural development? Will the warriors and sectarians again rule Sudan and develop its culture, or will cultural workers take front stage? We can see the metaphor of waiting is prominent in some of the diaspora art—the suggestion of a languid, politically immobilized population waiting to be galvanized into resistance and rebellion. What role will artists play in that galvanization? (Hale 2000a: 8 – 9)

To confront enduring oppositions between a female American ethnographer and a male Sudanese artist, Hale's decades of



Figure 13. Sondra Hale on the Nile, 1975. Photographer: Gerry Hale.

research and writing include these topics and open questions: What is the role of the artist in Sudanese society? If an artist is a political dissident or in exile, how are these states of place and mind reflected in art production? Is the artist bound to any culture? How can critical approaches to Sudanese modern art escape or modulate the need to categorize and frame their complex worlds and artwork? Is it the best way to valorize Sudanese art by providing international cross-cultural contexts? How do the political contexts of loss, mourning, and memory erode a people?

In my fieldwork over many years in Sudan and Eritrea, I have been struck by the various attempts by the state to control memory and the various ways that people have either resisted, altered, redefined, or absorbed those memories and, oftentimes, presented their own. Sometimes the alteration of history and people's memory of their homes has been gradual, oftentimes, sudden. For example, removal of identity has taken many decades in Sudan's Nuba Mountains, a process that has often been referred to as "genocide by attrition" (Hale 2010). Yet, aspects of the process have been very sudden, as in the latest incursion by the government into the Nuba Mountains and the violent rounding up of Nuba. (Hale 2013a, 135)

Hale's questions are concerned with whether we can keep in mind the difficult balancing acts of "holding on and letting go"—a way of being she sees inflected in Sudanese artists Musa Khalifa and Mohamed Omer Bushara and that also constitute the wellsprings of creativity for Hale's anthropology of art (Hale 1998, 202). Therefore, one conclusion is that the creativity emanating from Hale, anthropologist of art, radiates outward and reflects back. The very words with which she describes other

artists apply also to Hale. In her own words, although originally intended for the artists she studied, the company of Hale (1998, 201) “produc[es] something akin to the flight of the dragonfly: energetic, peripatetic, beautiful” (see Figure 13).¹⁷

Notes

¹ This essay is reproduced with the permission of Susan Slyomovics and the *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*. The original essay may be found at *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* Volume 10, Number 1, Winter 2014, pp. 15-40

² Hussein Shariffe web site, see biography section: <http://www.shariffe.org/01bio.html> (accessed on July 23, 2013)

³ Sondra Hale, email message to author, August 10, 2012. A brief overview history of the department is provided in the call for papers for “Celebrating the Golden Jubilee of the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, University of Khartoum 1958-2008” with the conference topic: “Anthropology in the Sudan: Past, Present and Future” (Hale 2009: 1 – 31). See also Hale (2013b).

⁴ Sondra Hale, e-mail message to author, August 18, 2011. In addition, transcripts of oral interviews of Sondra Hale by Susan McKibben are available through the Center for Oral History Research, University of California Los Angeles: <http://oralhistory.library.ucla.edu/Browse.do?descCvPk=479193> (accessed on June 21, 2013).

⁵ Sondra Hale, e-mail message to author, August 16, 2011

⁶ This poem was written to be read at the memorial for Hussein in London.

⁷ The term “Third World,” or *tiers-monde*, attributed to French anthropologist Alfred Sauvy, is said to have appeared for the first time in his 1952 *L'Observateur* article, where he wrote “this ignored, exploited, scorned Third World, like the Third Estate, wants to become something, too” (*Economist* 2010).

⁸ Shariffe, web site, filmography section available at: <http://www.shariffe.org/04films.html#amber> (accessed July 23, 2013)

⁹ Nine minutes and twenty-five seconds of the thirty-two-minute film are available on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h3qjSnQMec> (accessed on August 15, 2013).

¹⁰ Sondra Hale, e-mail message to author, September 15, 2011

¹¹ Sondra Hale, e-mail message to author, September 15, 2011

¹² Sondra Hale, e-mail message to author, September 15, 2011

¹³ This was preceded by Hale's (1985) edited volume entitled, *The House of Women: Art and Culture in the Eighties*.

¹⁴ Sondra Hale, e-mail message to author, August 10, 2012

¹⁵ Hale's (1975) “Introduction” to *Seasons of Our Discontent*, unpublished, yellow legal-size paper, two pages.

¹⁶ The complete version of *Seasons of Discontent* was privately produced in Sudan as a single copy “artist book” in 1975, with excerpts appearing in other Hale publications.

¹⁷ The title of this essay comes from the last stanza of a poem entitled “After the Moon,” written by Hale in Cairo in 2007. The poem was part of a paper entitled “Running Out of Poems? An Auto-Ethnography—Sudan, Part I” and was Hale’s keynote talk upon receiving an award, “Honoring a Lifetime of Distinguished Scholarship: Dr. Sondra Hale,” from the Sudan Studies Association at its Annual Conference at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in May 2013.

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