On *Virtual* Becoming and Belonging:
Visualizing the Performativity of Sudanese Cultural Identity and Resistance

Aala Sharfi

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Design.

Graduate Program in Design
York University Toronto, Ontario

April 2019

Abstract

A contested history with turbulent political narratives has played a leading role in the formation of Sudanese identity. It is situated firmly in a romanticized past as it is in a troubled present. For the diaspora, social media platforms function as spaces for the continuous formation and expression of these identities. These platforms often serve as spaces to (re)produce the social and political relations that define everyday life in the homeland. This thesis explores the use of graphic design to discuss the performative articulation of these identities in virtual spaces. It follows understandings of identity from cultural studies as, always in production and never complete. By employing user-generated content found on online platforms for visual explorations, this thesis explores the ongoing dynamics between individual and collective narrations of identities; between personal reflections and public representations. The projects prepared discuss the complexities and nuances of Sudanese cultural identity online in the milieu of current political and social tensions. In the visual expression of Sudanese cultural identity, there is resistance, activism and a vision of triumph.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the many people that have contributed to helping me complete my thesis during these two years.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my committee members Professor Angela Norwood and Professor Wendy Wong for lending me their knowledge and constant support. Wendy, thank you for always keeping me focused and offering your invaluable guidance. Angela, thank you for your critical insight, for always questioning me and pushing me to dig deeper, and for being so very understanding of what an identity in-progress is. I would like to express my appreciation for the York design community, to my studio-mates and to all the professors that have shared with me their design experience.

I would also like to thank Professor Robert Gill, for his academic and moral support. Thank you for many fruitful conversations and for introducing me to the cultural theorists critical to my research.

Lastly, the completion of my thesis would not have been possible without the generous help of my friends and family. I am beyond grateful to my virtual circle of *Sudanis*, for being my home away from home. To Qutouf and Rund, thank you for patiently helping me comb through what it is to be Sudanese, for humouring my curiosities and continually reminding me of my agency. To Mehaira, thank you for keeping me company after the rest of the world has gone to sleep, and to Yasir, thank you for your endless encouragement, love and support.

This thesis would not have been possible without all of you.

Contents

List of Figures

Introduction

This thesis explores the performative articulation of identity through the production of visual artifacts. The Sudanese identity is embedded in a contested political history and lived culture, its oppression has affected the ways in which it is produced and experienced today. This body of work deploys user-generated content from online spaces to represent this collective expression of identity by the Sudanese diaspora. It investigates how graphic design can communicate the complexities of identity, creating a space for dialogue, activism and creative expression.

In what ways does posting and reposting everyday politics on social media contribute to the formation of cultural identity and collective belonging in the Sudanese diaspora? Avtar Brah (1996) describes the notion of home as a network; a site of everyday lived experience that "signifies the social and psychic geography of space" that we experience in terms of a neighbourhood or a home town (p.4). Brah also expresses that we imagine a sense of community in most part through our daily encounters. Similarly, the Sudanese online space functions as a network, where daily interactions and connections form a community and an image of home. Within this space images, videos, and texts are created and shared as a way to assert and express cultural identities, owing to the nature of the online space, these identities are in constant transformation. This paper presents these modes of online expression as a form of political performance that reflect a cultural identity which is in progress. It draws from Stuart Hall (1994) who recognizes cultural identity as a production, "one that is never complete and always in process" (p.222).

Owing to the use of user-generated content in the design investigations, this thesis has progressed concurrent to the evolution of the Sudanese political climate between September of 2018 and March 2019. In December 2018, thousands of people took to the streets in numerous cities in Sudan to demand the resignation of President Omar Al-Bashir. This uprising is a response to a 30-year rule riddled with civil war, ethnic conflict and the deterioration of the country's economy, infrastructure and social capital. It is a response to a loss of national unity and the systematic dismantling of societal structure.

The user-generated content speaks to how the act of dissent and expression is influenced by the tools and technologies available to us today. Through my contextual analysis of content taken from social media platforms (Instagram, Twitter, YouTube and Facebook), it becomes evident that design plays a significant role in the ways in which viral activism is occurring. As McQuiston (2015) states, global networking and mobile technology have defined activism today, due to the ability to capture, and disseminate information as events happen" (p.9). More importantly, user-generated content allows us to alternate between individual and collective expressions produced by the Sudanese community on social media in an attempt to articulate a common shared culture and identity. Through my design projects, I explore how these modes of online expression are a form of political performance that reflects an ever-changing cultural identity.

My personal experiences of living and interacting within the Sudanese diaspora place me in a unique position to view, analyze and react to these happenings as a Sudanese designer, and have aided in the analysis and storytelling of this topic. Through being immersed in the cultural context, I can draw interpretations and parallels between personal modes of expression and my design work. The challenge has been to explore ways in which design can act as a powerful form of expression in this politically charged climate; at a time in which Sudanese cultural identities, desires and ambitions are being reframed and recreated as events unfold on a daily basis. Through this body of work, I have discovered a particular power in intervening through graphic design in order to express the in-between; finding a way to way to communicate my culture to those around me.

Chapter one begins with a contextual background of Sudan's economic and socio-political past, as well as the changes occurring as of December of 2018. Beginning with a broad explanation of Sudan provides a much-needed understanding of the diverse and contested Sudanese identities. This background has, in turn, affected how Sudanese people navigate and negotiate identity and culture.

The second chapter offers a rationale of how this design thesis approaches the Sudanese cultural identity. In this section, I discuss the complexities of diasporic identity and belonging in cyberspaces, and address the forms of graphic design currently produced online and how they play a significant role in the articulation of cultural identity and, more recently, act as a strong form of activism.

The third chapter discusses the theories in design and anthropology which frame this thesis. It considers the role of graphic design within culture and identity, and how it allows for the production of change in contemporary Sudanese society. It explores the deployment of user-generated content in design and the oscillation between collective and individual experiences. It discusses how this influences my role as the designer and how my design projects have responded to the content generated from social media.

The fourth chapter outlines the cultural theories I used to create the visual representations in my thesis project. It discusses how my design projects explore a contested cultural identity underlined by politics, and how these visual investigations explore the ways we present and mediate cultural identity.

Finally, the paper concludes with a reflection on the practice of visualizing performative Sudanese identity. This chapter discusses the role of design as a political agent and acknowledges this thesis as a practice of empowerment in its recognition of the fluidity of Sudanese identity and the forms of revolt now occurring.

1

The Politics of Sudanese Identity

Sudanese people have a multifaceted identity that is hard to define or condense. Competing narratives of the past and contemporary forms of identity construct Sudan in multiple forms (Idris, 2005). A complicated political history has created multiple migratory scenarios — both forced and voluntary with various situational differences. Nonetheless, the Sudanese diaspora practices — and I add carefully, lives — the narration of Sudan around the globe within a shared diasporic terrain. These narratives are continuously evolving and constantly reframed due to broader socio-political issues, as well as the (re)productions of our belonging and identity on Sudanese cyberspaces. This chapter attempts to outline the relationship between Sudanese history, identity and politics — a background that is essential to understanding the important role social media and digital narratives play in articulating Sudanese diaspora identities, both visually and textually.

History and Geography

Nestled between Africa and the Middle East, Sudan not only harbours the confluence of the two Niles but is also a meeting point of the Arab and Sub-Saharan worlds (Abu Sharaf, 2002), making for a diverse geographic and historical heritage. The country features many of the complexities known to postcolonial lands: it was under Ottoman rule from 1820-1885, and then under British colonial rule from 1899-1956 as Anglo-Egyptian Sudan.

As a result, an Arabized Sudan took form, borrowing from these colonial cultures. Although there are over 70 tribal languages and dialects still spoken, Arabic and English are recognized as the official languages. There are multiple sects of Islam practiced by a large section of Sudanese population, in addition to a minority of Coptic, Greek, Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox Christian communities. This religious identity plays a significant role in the political history of the nation. Colonialism and enslavement have

also contributed to the distinction between Arab and African identities (Idris, 2013); and much of the "Sudanese crisis is a result of the racialized state that transformed these cultural identities into political ones" (Idris, 2005, p.6).

The Post-Independence *Sudani*

The twentieth century saw a rise in nationalist identity as Sudan gained independence from the British in 1956. Since then, political turmoil has been a permanent aspect of socio-political life. Sudan has experienced numerous parliamentary governments and instability due to multiple military regimes and revolutions in both 1964 and 1985. After a military coup in 1989, Omar Al-Bashir took power and has been the sitting president for the last thirty years. His ascendance to power marks the beginning of a long and ongoing period of political instability and oppression that sparked a wave of voluntary migration to the West and the Middle East in search for opportunity and a better quality of life.

Censorship of Expression

The current regime, under its supposed application of Sharia Law, has practised a limitation of individual liberties and freedom of speech and assembly (Abu Sharaf, 2002), diminishing access to free press and media. Sudan went from having dozens of daily and weekly newspapers and magazines in Arabic and English to just a handful of publications, many of which are heavily censored (AlBaih, 2015). Those that remain continue to publish government propaganda or cultural content that aims to distract and anesthetize the population from the hardships it faces.

Government censorship was also applied to the freedoms of artistic and cultural expression. Post-independence Sudan witnessed a dynamic and creative burst in all fields of cultural and artistic production — from literature, music, and theatre to visual and performing arts (ICM, 2015). This surge of creativity came at a time when the country was dealing with colonial withdrawal and struggling to establish itself as a nation-state. But throughout the late 1970s, Sudanese artists were forced to flee the oppressive Nimeiri regime, turbulent political environment and the consequences of their expressions of resistance. Many of these artists sought political asylum in neighbouring countries and the West (Slyomovics, 2015). The cultural scene gradually disintegrated; however, more recently the internet has provided Sudanese people with an unrestricted

space for creative expression; continuing the tradition of reflecting on the ongoing dilemma of Sudanese identity through a creative process. These forms of expression mirror the socio-political struggles of the Sudanese community in the past and in the present.

Conflict and the Whittling of Identity

Though this thesis does not specifically address the South Sudanese narrative, it is essential to acknowledge the role that conflict has played in Sudanese history, and how a "singular vision of history and identity has been imposed over diverse ethnic and cultural communities" (Idris, 2005, p.12). This acknowledgement also serves to make the distinction between North and South Sudanese identities, and thus the reason why this thesis only explores expression of the former.

After years of political and ethnic conflict and civil war with the central government in Khartoum that resulted in millions of refugees and displaced peoples, a referendum was held in 2011, granting South Sudan its independence and dividing Sudan into two. Following the split, much of the South Sudanese population was forced to leave the North and return to the South which, in more ways than one, felt like a loss of the country's previous diversity.

As a diasporic experience, the division of the country created a shift in what was once a commonality, one that arguably is more true to an idea of home than it is to the Sudanese migratory experience. The secession prompted a new question of identity and a loss of belonging to a unified nation. The secession was voted for by the overwhelming majority of South Sudanese people as a response to decades of civil war, severe neglect, discrimination and violence. Yet there is sometimes a denial of this new map in visual representations of Sudan, reflective of a problematic nostalgia among many North Sudanese for a unified Sudan, and one that is entirely subjective to the experience of the Sudanese individual.

With the secession of the South, North Sudan lost its hold on oil reserves – its principal resource – causing a drastic deterioration of the economy and standards of living, and birthing a national desire for migration. Sudanese people have migrated in search of education and opportunities for professional work. However, a significant part of the

Sudanese migration is also a result of the civil war in Darfur (West Sudan), which is somewhat denied by the Northern Sudanese community, both in Sudan and its diaspora. This denial is due in part to the hush-hush politics of the government surrounding the militarization and attack of the western state; however, it is important to note that the disregard is also rooted in social prejudice and ethnic discrimination directed toward western Sudanese and the affected communities. As a result, they are often completely othered from common perceptions of North Sudanese identity.

Current Articulations of North Sudanese Identity

This thesis narrows its focus onto the experiences of the North Sudanese diaspora that utilizes and produces content on social media. The political and economic context described above has given meaning to how people operate within these online realms. Social media has allowed people to create virtual identities that challenge old ones and allow for communication in ways that may not have been possible in the past (Hale and Kadoda, 2016). In this dire climate, designers and citizens alike have used online platforms as spaces for change.

Currently, Sudan is experiencing a severe economic crisis and inflation, which in December 2018 provoked countrywide protests (Amnesty International, 2018) that have swelled into a full-fledged uprising. Recognizing how social media has conceived oppositional movements in the last few years, the government has created an online defence force (AlBaih, 2015) that uses tactics that include "censorship of opposition news outlets and forums online; the deployment of a cyber jihadist unit to monitor social media websites; and the harassment and arrest of digital media activists and online journalists" (AlBaih, 2015). The government also uses 'cyber jihadists' (colloquially nicknamed cyber *'jidad'*, humorously translating to cyber chickens), whose sole purpose is to troll online activists and spread propaganda (AlBaih, 2015). In an attempt to stop the current protests, the government has taken an extra step to block access to social media platforms since December 2018; however, many people have continued to access them through Virtual Private Networks (VPNs).

These online platforms provide the space for countless Sudanese people to author national and cultural identities. For the Sudanese diaspora, it is a way to fulfill their perceived responsibility to archive and share the events that are occurring at home. Many

see their role as amplifying the voices of those in Sudan; to act in aid of those bringing the government down at home. They stand in solidarity with the uprising through the posting and reposting of images, videos and texts of the uprising, and more recently through the production and sharing of graphic activism and visual expression. This online experience is that of hearing the shouts of a protest; it channels the feeling of being immersed in the revolt and offers a way to participate in the conversation. Sudanese online spaces are filled with thoughts, conversations and concerns of the uprising. Users can "read the language through the visual dissent shown on these cyber worlds" (McQuiston, 2015, p.10). Hence, social media has become a space that reflects cultural, national and individual Sudanese aspirations in the making.

With recent developments, it has become clear how design has played a significant role in the activation of a political movement. Design can be transformational – if employed in the right way and the right context. In the Sudanese diaspora, designers have struggled to find a meaningful place in the new political environment and respond to the palpable urge to contribute. Graphic activism has allowed these online spaces on social media to acquire a set of meanings that extend beyond the ideas of connection or communication. To quote Sara Elhassan (2019), "the creative expression birthed from this movement is challenging many of the same political and societal notions being addressed on the street." Through user-generated content, this body of work explores how visual expressions on social media have been used to unite all Sudanese people in the fight against government oppression and in the reclamation and articulation of national identity. In a broader sense, graphic design has communicated, supported and created space for expression during the Sudanese revolt; a visual language has been born that reflects and engages with the signs of resistance, and this inevitably goes hand in hand with the formation of a new Sudanese identity. In speaking about the future of Sudanese design, we speak about resistance and a new idea of Sudan.

2

Expressions of Identity and Resistance in the Online Space

Social media is the "ultimate place for design" (Colomina & Wigley, 2017, p.257). Online spaces have opened up ways in which people can create, visualize and express their identities. More so, they have provided spaces in which people can contribute to a familiar narrative within a community and connect with those within it. With these spaces comes the creation of different and new forms of visual language. These spaces may be virtual; however, they manifest themselves into our realities in many ways. In *We Are Human*, Colomina and Wigley (2017) recognize the role that social media plays in design, and state that "one of the paradoxes of the age of social media and the sharing economy is the extreme cultivation of the sense of self" (p. 273). They state that this "designing self is not always an independent or collective invention, but an always fragile work in progress" (Colomina & Wigley, 2017, p. 273).

The visual investigations created during this thesis project employ user-generated data found on the Sudanese online spaces. These online spaces function as platforms for the navigation and articulation of Sudanese identity at home and the diaspora. However, what constitutes these online spaces and the user-generated content found on them? Although the use of the internet is limited to those with some digital literacy, the use of mobile phones in Sudan is incredibly widespread. It is also important to note, as Bernal has stated about Eritrea cyberspace, that this creation of online content does not exist in a vacuum, but in a "larger field of communication flows via word of mouth, telephone, and other means, and so the reach of the Internet extends to even those who may not go online themselves" (Bernal, 2006, p.165).

Due to state policies of censorship, the internet has become a space for the discovery and re-writing of Sudanese narratives. In the last few years, a large number of online pages and accounts have emerged that solely post Sudanese content to celebrate Sudanese identities. These online pages are not only a space for connection, but they also act as a historical and cultural archive of music, arts and culture. There are numerous Twitter

accounts, which share Sudanese cultural productions like art, music and literature; other accounts share news and politics reported by citizen journalists. They highlight and amplify achievements of marginalized groups such as women and girls, encourage tourism, promote cultural traditions, and organize, create and reflect solidarities and the sharing of cultural heritages (Ahmed, 2018). Through social media platforms, a generation of oppressed Sudanese story-tellers, artists, poets, comedians and journalists has found the space to create, re-author, share and edit. They have found ways to express nostalgic sensibilities about Sudan to amplify their messages and identities. For the diaspora, this act of sharing allows for the creation of an image of home that strengthens connections; an image made of "collective projections" and not individual memories (Boym, 2001, p.43). Text, videos and images generated and shared through online spaces support a sense of belonging; they give form to cultural memory and contribute to the network of historical and social references which function across Sudan and its diaspora.

What is important to recognize is how through social media the diaspora is now engaged in ways in which it was not able in the past. People within Sudan and the diaspora assert elements of their Sudanese identity through the act of posting and reposting in the midst of a world of content online. These accounts function as a powerful tool to disrupt the power of the state's media and also as a tool to assert and reaffirm Sudanese identity More recently, they are spaces of activism and political action and serve as a much welcome space for freedom of expression.

Design Activism Through Cultural Identity

This thesis project asserts that through the making and sharing of media, these spaces become sites of action. People engage with visual communication both "actively and passively, uploading as well as downloading media, authoring content as well as consuming it" (Lupton, 2011, p.7). Sudanese culture has always had an underlying political undercurrent. Previously, I called this form of cultural and memory sharing passive as it has become a regular part of interaction on Sudanese online spaces; it is not an intentional act, yet it is ultimately a form of political performance through nostalgia. In my earlier design projects, I worked to find and identify hidden or underlying messages within the content shared online. However, as the online space changed as a result of recent events, political messages have become louder and more overt.

The recently charged political climate has inspired citizens to actively visualize, illustrate and express messages and prevailing attitudes towards the revolt. There are different efforts to photograph and report on the events of the uprising. These online spaces have provided an alternative channel to verify, fact-check and cross reference news shared online. We can interpret the production of these images and texts as a form of resistance and expression that juxtapose what is circulated by government-controlled national media channels. These visual outputs have come to represent moments of the Sudanese revolt; they are fixed in people's cultural memory. They are an act of creative expression, yet they also have a role in spreading knowledge about the revolt, both in Sudan as well as outside of it. The online posts act as critical historical documents that record grass-roots resistance, chronicle the community's history and articulate its visions for the future (Wells, 2005).

Posters have long been a form through which people have celebrated "resistance and provided alternative explanations, narratives and interpretations through creativity" (Resnick, Maviyane-Davies & Baseman, 2005, p.7). Sudanese illustrators, artists and designers have produced a wide range of visuals ranging from typographic experimentations and collages expressing cultural symbols and slogans of the revolt (see Appendix for a selection of images found online during the Sudanese uprising). These posters have been effective in spreading details about protest dates and locations, while political graphics shared online have functioned as useful infographics about DIY protection from government forces such as tear gas masks and first aid for gunshot wounds. People rarely print the posters due to time and cost constraints, but through posting and sharing them online, they ensure that they reach a much larger audience in a shorter timeframe. In this way, this form of graphic sharing becomes a "visible dissent" (Resnick et al., 2005, p.7), one that is distinct in style and highly recognizable (e.g. the use of symbols and slogans). This ability to recognize visual elements has helped people differentiate between pro-revolution graphics and government propaganda spread online by the state. These resistance graphics resonate with an audience that shares them with viral speed across online platforms, gaining international attention and encouraging others in Sudan and the diaspora to become more politically active.

In the visual work that comes out of this uprising, no singular symbol is representative of the revolt, but rather the creation of many different symbols as events unfold every day. However, there are elements of Sudanese visual language that run through many of the

various designs. These elements include the colours of the current Sudanese flag (red, white, green, and black) which is also the flag that resulted from pan-Arabism in the 1960s. Alternatively, in the denial of the superiority of the Arab identity, the previous flag of post-independence before pan-Arabism (green, blue, and yellow) is also seen in some of the visual work as a symbol of the acceptance of a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic Sudan.

There are several symbols that emerged in the visual representation of the uprising. The reason that they have become symbols is owed to the repeated sharing and posting of images of that moment in the uprising. These images then become symbols owing to the plethora of work highlighting the moment that artists and designers subsequently produce; the strength is therefore in this repetitive creation and the collective body of work that emerges. Some symbols that have developed are that of a woman, Alaa Salah chanting on top of a car in the protest, she has become a figure that stands the role of women at the forefront of the revolution. Another is of a man, Mohamed Al Masri that lost his hand during the demonstrations and was seen protesting again, the visual works created replace the space with a peace sign as an icon of the bravery, strength and endurance of the people demonstrating in the streets. There are multiple visual reproductions of martyrs of the uprising, posters which visualize the different slogans and humorous cartoon reproductions of the president which also circulate frequently. All of the visuals produced around the uprising address current and future ideas around Sudanese cultural identity that are new and different from previous representations, they feature heros and symbols generated through the present practice of resistance.

The strength of social media lies in the speed at which users can produce and share content. There is an inherent immediacy in graphic design, and through online spaces, it can be progressive and reactionary in the articulation of culture. For the diaspora, the online sharing of content functions as a different form of rebellion to that of being on the ground, as it is not a directly lived reality. However, it is a reaffirmation of identity and show of support towards a land to which they feel love and belonging. These postings and re-postings are effectively a mass-mediated articulation of the past, the present and the future; making Sudanese people an active function of the socio-political, cultural and historic landscape that they inhabit and reproduce. However, social media is not merely the act of posting and sharing of things that have already occurred; rather, “the experience occurs within the environment of sharing” (Colomina & Wigley, 2017, p.262). The online environment creates a place to be within the Sudanese sphere, to participate and connect

with things as they occur. Producing and sharing texts and images in this environment contributes to an on-going performance – one that exhibits inherent joy and pride, as well as political struggle.

There have been many contributions and discussions related to how design and politics come together. Design can be a way to engage, message, influence, and provoke a broader audience. How much power and influence can design have in politics and protest? In the Sudanese context, visual dissent has played a massive role in enabling the progression of this revolt through social media.

This focus on design is not to take away from the brave efforts on the ground. There have been over 300 peaceful demonstrations in Sudan's 18 states since December 2018 (Amnesty International, 2018), as well as numerous protests held in support by the diaspora in the UK, the US and Canada. The regime's brutal methods have led to hundreds of unarmed protestors injured and over 50 killed. However, it is essential to recognize the ways in which design has contributed to the continuation of the uprising. Visual graphics have played a role in spreading information, knowledge to ensure civilian safety, in communicating with a global audience, in keeping Sudanese spirits high and creating an empowering sense of solidarity. The strength does not lie in the one graphic image, but in the collective effort of designers and artists creating visual content daily to reflect the progression of the revolt and the aspirations for a better Sudan. This collective effort is what keeps the uprising present and at the forefront of conversation. Moreover, in this way, these channels of mediascapes and design have allowed the Sudanese cultural identity to morph into something new in the last few months, one that encompasses a nostalgic past, a conflicted present and a hopeful co-, as Colomina and Wigley (2017) have stated, collective work in-progress.

3

Design, Anthropology and User-generated Content

This thesis examines the way graphic design can be used to articulate a contested identity, and is situated within a growing body of work that explores the “entanglements of culture and design from a more transformative and imaginative stance” (Otto & Smith, 2016, p. 13). My approach to design and anthropological theory demonstrates how theory and practice inform and ground each other. Design and anthropology work together to express cultural identity and, on a larger scale, to motivate political and social action. In this chapter, I discuss my role as a graphic designer working within a culture. How does that role change when I produce work using user-generated content?

In “The Cultures of Design and the Design of Cultures”, Andrew Blauvelt states that the role of cultural anthropologists is to “study the cultures of people as a way of reflecting on our own culture" (1994, p.1). Design, on the other hand, is to “conceive of an idea and plan it out, to give form, structure and function to that idea” (Otto & Smith, 2016, p.1). He goes on to state that like cultural anthropologists, “graphic designers share the dilemma of being both instrumental in the making of cultural artifacts and living in the same society in which they are distributed and shared” (Blauvelt, 1994, p.1)

Graphic designers are “often asked to remove themselves from their social positions and experiences and offer themselves as professionals, specialists in the various forms of visual communication” (Blauvelt, 1994, p.1). However, as designers, we are also members of society. In that way, I am both a member of the Sudanese diaspora and an observer of the politics in which it functions. In the words of Blauvelt (1994), as a designer I am placed "outside of (around), culture as well as being a part of (within), culture" (p.1). In this way, I can view and report on how we express Sudanese cultural identities, but I am also inevitably responding to these articulations of cultural identity. Graphic design becomes a way to engage with Sudanese identities, and the ever-changing circumstances and entanglements of people and content within online environments. For the diaspora, online representations of Sudanese cultural identity make it even more alive

and present as it is reframed and augmented. By being a part of the Sudanese diaspora, I am affected by this reality; and my engagement with user-generated content amplifies this influence.

Collective Expressions of a Cultural Identity

User-generated content adds a depth of understanding and perspective to my design investigations. It allows for the creation of a reflective conversation on the topic of Sudanese cultural identities. The influx of outside content makes this thesis project participatory, whether users are aware of their contributions or not (Armstrong & Stojmirovic, 2011). There is no singular voice speaking, but a myriad of fragmented perspectives and correlated narratives (Smith, 2016). It is important to note that although many voices have created a collective representation; I am reflecting that representation through my own voice. Blauvelt (1994) notes that "we come to know ourselves and others less often through actual contact and more usually through representations" (p.7) in society and that cultural identity is a factor of representation. Through materializing the user content on social media channels, this thesis works to contribute to the emergence of a shared creation by the Sudanese diaspora; my projects create a space for "critical reflexivity and dialogue about human experience" (Otto and Smith, 2016, p.8). User-generated content allows for the expression of a cultural narrative while exploring different viewpoints of Sudanese-ness and communicating through different languages and images. This thesis is then material representation of the performative nature of Sudanese identities as it appears in the digital space.

Entanglements of Design and Culture

In the emerging field called Design Anthropology, practitioners follow dynamic situations and social relations, and are concerned with "how people perceive, create and transform their environments through their daily activities" (Gunn et al., 2016 p. xiii).What emerges from these interdisciplinary approaches is that culture and design are not separate domains or extensions of each other, but rather "deeply entangled, complex, and often messy formations and transformations of meanings, spaces, and interactions between people, objects, and histories" (Otto & Smith, 2016, p.13).

Dori Tunstall (2016) outlines the application of seven principles of design anthropology to community activism. Amongst them, Tunstall (2016) states that it is important to "accept systems and cultures as dynamic and not static (p.279)." In the case of cultural identity, this statement is reflective of how identity is performative and always in development (Hall,1994). Tunstall (2016) also addresses the idea that "each generation goes through processes of negotiating elements of their value systems and community cultures" (p.279). Sudanese identity reflects a shared history and community culture, but it is also in the process of change. In the words of Hall (1994):

> Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. (p.225)

How can my design process reflect this 'continuous play' of contemporary Sudanese identities online while acknowledging a fixed cultural past? Through the use of image and typography, I examine relevant cultural artifacts, signs and symbols shared within Sudanese communities' online circles of interaction. Earlier projects — created before the events of the uprising — address the constant negotiation and tension between a dissent from the present situation and a nostalgic pride of the past. Through the use of coding to produce design artifacts, my process has developed to find meaning in the unpredictability of the online content. Helen Armstrong (2011) states as designers, "we must look to users for contribution, celebrating the unpredictability of responses and enjoying the serendipity of process-oriented work" (p.15). As the Sudanese environment has changed, the contributions of users online have also changed. Hence, later projects look at how design can work not only as a means to negotiate cultural identity, but to propel social action. My design process has provided a way to be reflective and creative; designing is a way to approach challenges related to Sudanese activism and politics, and helps facilitate a conversation between present contexts and visions of the future without losing sight of the past. It has provided me with a way to bring light to new Sudanese narratives and stories through the merging of visual elements and a cultural experience.

Tunstall (2016) also states that design can "create conditions of compassion and environmental harmony" (p.280). In the wake of the uprising, we witness how this unfolds in the Sudanese context. Design's role in Sudanese activism has been to create

with aims of intervening, educating, and augmenting a future and identity. For those in the diaspora, designing has become a way to engage with the Sudanese cultural experience; based on the relationship between knowing the culture and performing the act of expression. To borrow from Otto and Smith (2016), designers have distinct ways of knowing and doing — like ethnographers; designers have to begin with immersion in real-life situations to gain insight into experiences and meanings that form the basis for reflection, imagination and design. As individual voices combine on Sudanese online spaces, expression strengthens and political movements flourish through the expression of cultural identity. Theorist Henry Jenkins explains that "we now have a greater capacity to create again and we are forming communities around the practices of cultural production and circulation" (as cited in Armstrong, 2011, p.26). This materialization and engagement with the digital community opens up new experiences and understandings of what is performative cultural production. As designers, we can support these new approaches by establishing frameworks that amplify the voices of individuals (Armstrong, 2011). My design projects in this thesis aim to understand, explore and negotiate what is meaningful by the material expression of a digital, intangible, imagined world. I look at how the processes of online sharing come to operate on a larger scale; they concern politics, culture and the expression of future Sudanese identities.

4

Visual Artifacts in Response to Cultural Theories

Throughout this thesis, I produce visual artifacts using content from social media. They explore how graphic design can work with the aim of messaging and communicating the performativity of cultural identity. Through my visual explorations, I identify, and breakdown cultural messages articulated by an online community made up of individuals with a collective voice.

In this chapter, I discuss my visual explorations and cultural theories that have informed them. My initial investigations aimed to 'find' and 'identify' symbols of Sudanese culture and ways in which the diaspora experiences cultural identity; the questions these investigations hoped to explore were why and how was the diaspora completely connected to and enveloped in Sudanese-ness?

Emotional Connections to '*home*'

The diaspora voluntarily engages in the Sudanese community online. In his analysis of the online Eritrean diaspora, Bernal (2006) expresses this dimension of citizenship as 'emotional citizenship':

> This voluntary engagement in relations of sovereignty with the Eritrean state from overseas suggests a dimension of citizenship that might best be understood as 'emotional citizenship.' That is, Eritreans in diaspora in North America and Europe are for the most part legally citizens of the countries where they reside and earn their living, but they are emotionally pushed and pulled into Eritrea's national politics. Their sense of themselves is intertwined with Eritrea's destiny as a nation even if they have no intention of living there. (p.163)

Emotional citizenship reflects how Sudanese people abroad participate in and are aware of happenings at home whether political, historical or cultural, and their identities are intertwined with Sudan, even if there is no intention of going back home.

How can design help in the process of locating a physicality to this experience, to untangle the makings of Sudanese cultural identity in their subtlety? From a contemporary millennial viewpoint, it was challenging to find symbols and objects that represented being Sudanese in the diaspora in my everyday life. However, from experience I knew my cultural identity was informed and maintained by Sudanese happenings elsewhere. Connecting within these online communities is a way to traverse the boundaries between Sudan and abroad.

There is a sense of a strong bond between online members of the Sudanese diaspora and those at home. Boym (2001) explains that we base cultural identity on specific social poetics or "cultural intimacy." We foster a sense of recognition through “common frameworks of memory, unwritten rules of behaviour that we understand from half a word” (p.42). On social media, we base this affinity and sense of community on small visual signifiers to which people have fixed cultural meaning. Through my explorations, design provided a way to unpack these visual signifiers and dissect their meanings to investigate the makings of Sudanese cultural identity.

Throughout the previous chapters, I have discussed the role of design in communicating cultural identity within an online space. Following December of 2018, this experience is primarily marked by a charged political uprising that has changed the way the Sudanese community communicates cultural identity online. This change brought forth a discussion on the role of activism in design. Later visual explorations look at the role of design in shaping, reclaiming and shifting cultural identities that work towards a broader aim of instigating change in society. It is important to realize that for the Sudanese individual, a large part of our cultural identity and its contestation is in our political histories. Protest and fight have been a part of Sudanese culture for a long time, now more so than ever. There is a cultural identity reflected in how Sudanese people perform activism, and there is activism in how Sudanese people perform a cultural identity. “Cultural identity is a matter of becoming as well as being” (Hall, 1994, p. 22). It belongs to the future as much as to the past; it is not something that already exists. In this way, identity is always in progress. How people present and mediate cultural identity online can dictate how it is

then perceived and shared. In these online spaces, design has helped in creating and absorbing new symbolism and cultural references.

Journals/ Dialogues/Poetry

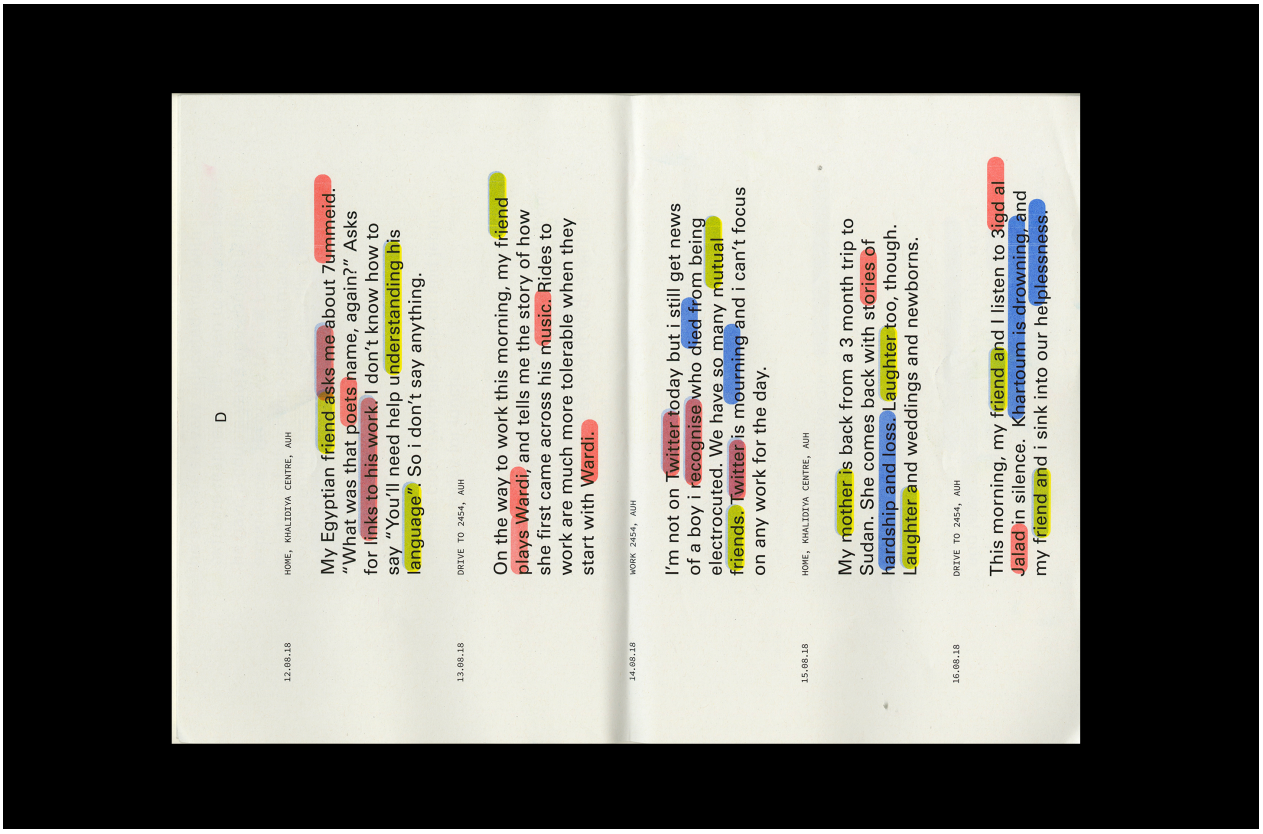

Fig. 1. Aala Sharfi, *Journals/Dialogues/Poetry*—book, Risograph Printing, 8.3 x 11.7 in, 2018

This project started with a series of journals compiled to note experiences of Sudanese diaspora in the UAE. The question I aimed to explore was: how is cultural identity practiced and articulated in the daily lives of members of the diaspora? And through what forms and actions? Berger (2011) notes that "culture can be understood as a collection of codes", in order to understand it, we have to decode the behaviours of people within the culture (p.53). My objective was to decode the content of Sudanese cultural identity in diaspora and to then make meaning of it. The journals provided content to analyze a society through their texts. In a diaspora, one's location, positioning and identity may be pivoted elsewhere from their country of origin. How does this relationship apply to aspects of diasporic and transnational life?

The LATCH method of organization (Location, Alphabet, Time, Category, Hierarchy) was used to categorize the different experiences specific to Sudanese diaspora. The

categories chosen were: interaction — both real and virtual; politics; food; and cultural reproductions. Each category was then assigned a different colour (Fig. 1). This analysis was then used to map the locations of Sudanese migrants in places where these cultural interactions took place. The exercise revealed the prominence of communication circles in everyday experiences of diaspora and the relationship to Sudan as a hub or a pivot. We re-create memories of the homeland through various forms of oral and visual culture. As Elhillo (2015) has expressed, home becomes a "portable environment" (p.71) which migrants actively reconstruct in their host lands.

	A	B	C	D
8	video	image	Jebna beyda	3igd al jalad
9	video	sudanese corner shop	Kunafa	Mustafa Seed Ahmed
10	pictures	madeeh	Shai bel laban	asks me
11	historical image archiver	in Spain	Bskaweet	links to work
12	television shows	come across	Foul	Twitter
13	Whatsapp discussion	recieved emotional texts	Salatat tamatim beljebna	recognize
14	arrives in Abu Dhabi	call	watching	Twitter
15	play	emailed	sudanese football match	scrolling through twitter
16	lives in London	in America	7abat albaraka	get the fuck off twitter
17	shows	messaged	BlueNileTV	friend
18	Facebook	in Saudi	interview	understanding
19	mum	making calls to Sudan	ElTayeb Saleh	language
20	mum	talked	interview	friend
21	discussion	Sudanese man	tens of books	mutual friends
22	family	avoided eye contact	Alhilal omdurman match	mother

Fig. 2, 3. Aala Sharfi, *Journals/Dialogues/Poetry*—Excel Video Screenshots, August, 2018

The ability to process this information using a design perspective opened up the potential to view these journals as an ongoing experience. Design practices have always attempted to "make connections between the past, present and future" (Gunn et al., 2016, p. *xiii*). Thus, the challenge was to push further than the creation of nostalgic design and create a future-oriented project, with the idea to look at how design could frame these texts in a way to represent the performative formation of cultural identity. In *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, Hall (1994) expresses that cultural identity is always in production, it is never complete and is always in process.

With these cultural theories in mind, I randomized the categorized information through an excel formula (Fig. 2, 3). This formula would draw from the texts within the four journals to create new diaspora dialogues or conversations. It was inspired by branching structures in linguistics, using a word from each journal to form a part of the structure of

a stanza (Fig. 4). The project used audio and video to probe topics of language and cultural identity as a way to study different interactions and conversations that take place between Sudanese people in the diaspora. The journals were presented in the form of audible poetry, narrated using my voice to reflect my position as the designer. My voice worked as a way to navigate between personal and collective modes of expression, and the designed work was then a visual manifestation of that process.

Fig. 4. Aala Sharfi, *Journals/Dialogues/Poetry*—Excel Video Screenshots, August, 2018

The project was not only visual, but it was also designed as a sensory experience to give the content an additional layer of meaning and engagement. The creation of new dialogue from old texts spoke to how the diaspora is performative and always in production. Through this initial project and the accompanying analysis, it became evident that the performativity of the Sudanese diaspora is very much based on communication and interaction. This realization led to a focus on online communication spaces as gradations of place that reflect the intersections of Sudanese cultural identity.

Imagined Community?

With the rise of social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram and Facebook, Sudanese people have created a large number of accounts that solely aim to share imagery and texts of culture and history. The use of the internet as a means of connection in the diaspora is not recent; Sudanese people have long been using the internet as a transnational public space to produce and negotiate narratives of history, culture and identity. People have found a way to express their identities for themselves and others within the online sphere. The internet is a means to solidify their presence using visual and textual references. These online collections of culture are virtual, and the connections people form on the online sphere can be interpreted as imagined.

The notion of the imagined community as used by Anderson (1994) was to define the nation:

> It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know their fellow members, meet them, or even hear from them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. (p.6)

Imagined community describes the breadth of a nation as limited, "conceived as a deep horizontal comradeship with finite but elastic boundaries" (Anderson 1994, p.6). This idea extends to the description of the Sudanese diaspora online; we do not know who the holders of these accounts are specifically. We base our interactions on the knowledge that others share a cultural identity and belong to a common us or we.

More recently, Hage (2005) discusses the use of the term imagined and its application in diasporic studies. He states that at times there is little evidence that a group of people form a community. This statement has pushed me to rethink the use of the notion imagined about the online Sudanese diaspora. In reality, Sudanese people form their communities on the basis of never-ending series of ties, more than often explained as a long-run of cousins, grand aunts and in-laws. Hage (2005) describes this as a “definite analyzable ensemble of social relations” (p.468). However, online Sudanese users do not form their communities in this way. The younger generation does not seem to go through the extensive efforts to find real familial connections with others. This is not to say that these connections are not sometimes found or discussed as a result of meeting others

online. However, the connections formed are, for the most part, reflective of the limitations of the online interaction; just knowing that someone is Sudanese is enough to generate virtual support through a ‘retweet’ or a ‘like.' The internet allows for the creation of a transnational diaspora; one that is not limited to a single geographic place. Similar to descriptions of other African diasporas (Koser, 2004), there are transnational linkages within geographically dispersed Sudanese diasporas. This online community is one that is virtual; it is a “diasporic media space” (Fazal, 2002, p. 2). where claims of belonging, identity and solidarity coexist and become articulated. The concept of imagined here alludes to how we form communities through imagined connections to our homeland rather than physical proximities.

Scrolling Texts

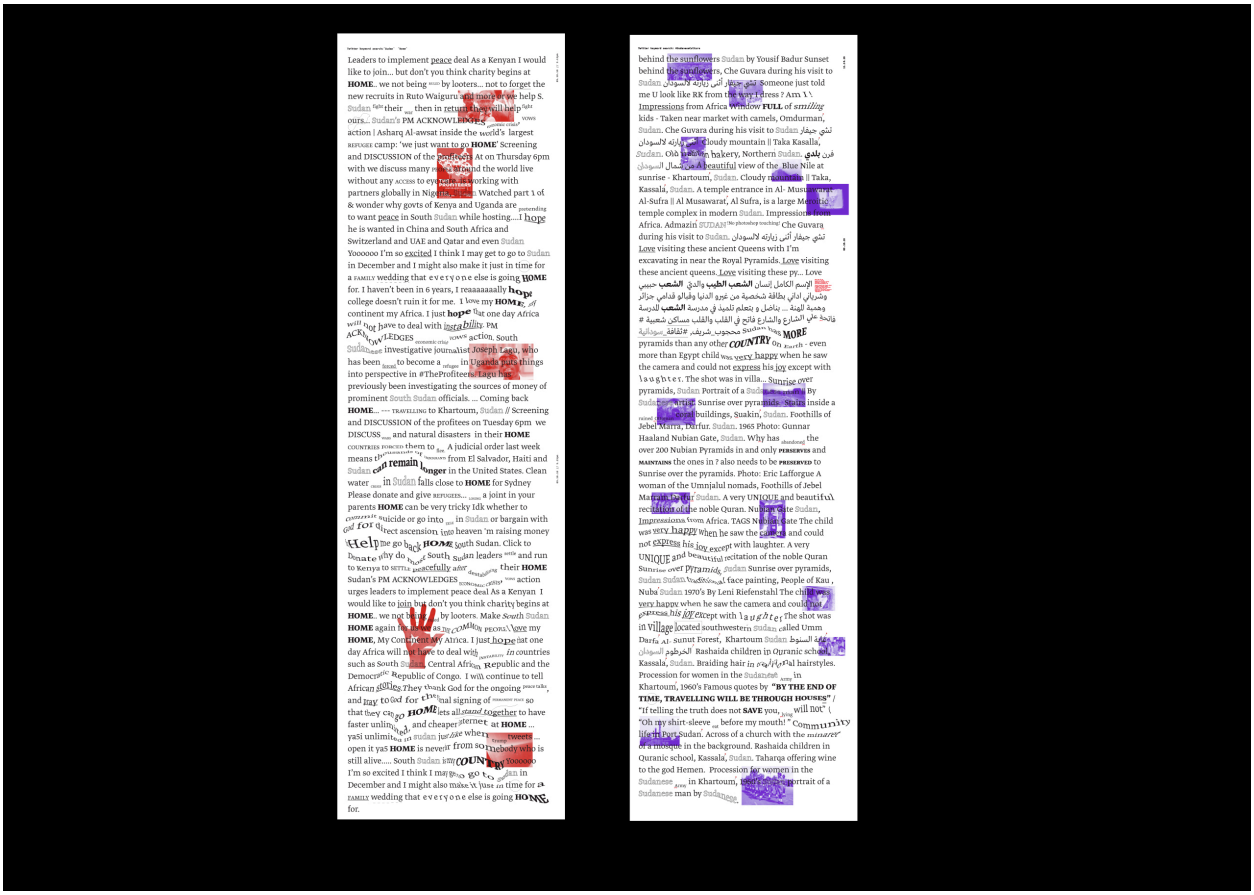

Fig. 5. Aala Sharfi, *Scrolling Texts*—Posters, inkjet printing, 24 x 81 in, December, 2018

‘Scrolling Texts’ engages the unpredictable nature of the content generated on Sudanese online communities. I used the coding program Processing3 with the Twitter API to explore the dynamics of Sudanese cultural dialogue on online platforms. Through it, I was able to recognize patterns within the content posted and reposted online through a series of initial experiments.

The code extracts a random selection of tweets based on specific keywords related to Sudanese culture. Searches of keywords “Home” and “Sudan” generated a more charged dialogue. The tweets expressed dissent towards the political and economic situation. Another search using the keyword “#SudaneseCulture” generated tweets aimed at

promoting a cultural identity. These tweets showed elements of landscape, nostalgic tourism and sentimental cultural productions.

'Scrolling Texts' visualizes these random tweets as an ongoing flow of text that alludes to the everyday consumption of Sudanese-ness in the diaspora (Fig. 5). The visualization presents the Sudanese experience as equal parts sentiment and politics; it displays the two searches as opposing narratives. The act of sharing cultural content is also an act of performing against the reality and current situation. The typographic treatment expresses personal interpretations of the meanings within the dialogue based on experiences of Sudanese identity and history. It picks up terms such as “economic crisis,” “war” and “instability” that are expressions of dissent, and highlights words that feature connotations of a sense of nostalgia, pride and belonging such as “unique”, “happy” and “laughter.”

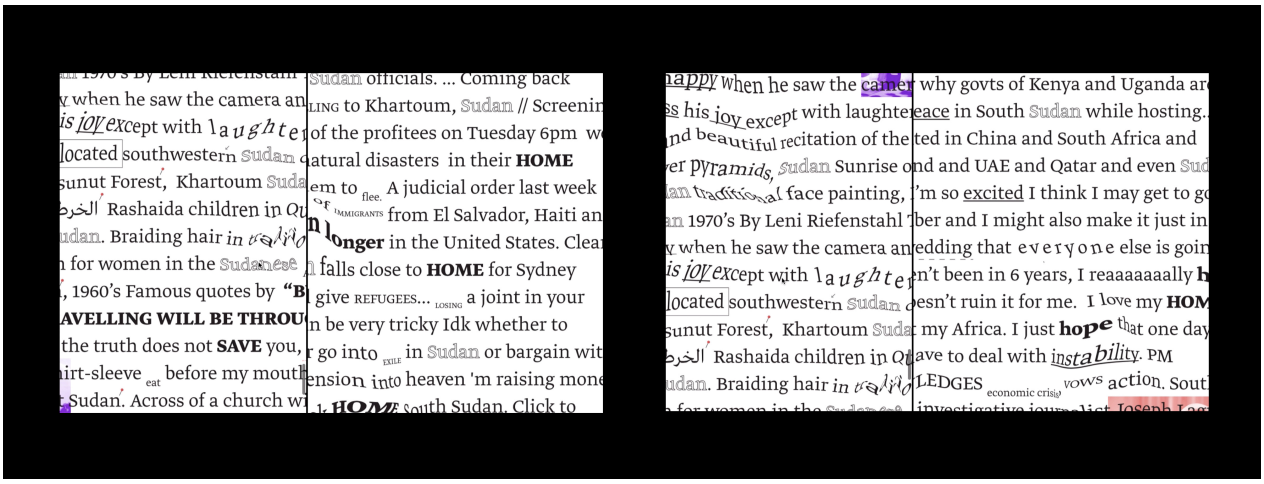

Fig. 6, 7. Aala Sharfi, *Scrolling Texts*—Screenshots of Video, December, 2018

The aim was to visualize these texts as socially dynamic and fluid rather than static, to point to the performativity of what it means to aggrandize Sudanese culture (Fig. 6, 7). The act of scrolling symbolizes the daily practice of connecting and touching home and those within it through virtual mediums. The visual juxtaposition of the narratives does not deny them their oneness as an experience. It calls upon Barthes' (1977) theories in “From Work to Text”, where he states that the “text is not a co-existence of meanings but an over-crossing” which answers to an explosion or a dissemination of meaning (p.159). Barthes (1977) also explains that the text is plural in its meanings, as a weave of

signifiers including citations, references and cultural languages (p.160) which I have picked up through the typographic treatment. Through this visualization the reader actively interprets the text, viewers are free to read these social texts simultaneously or separately. It opens up the possibility for interpretation in how they move in and out of one another.

٣٨ Minute Feed: On Nostalgia and Politics

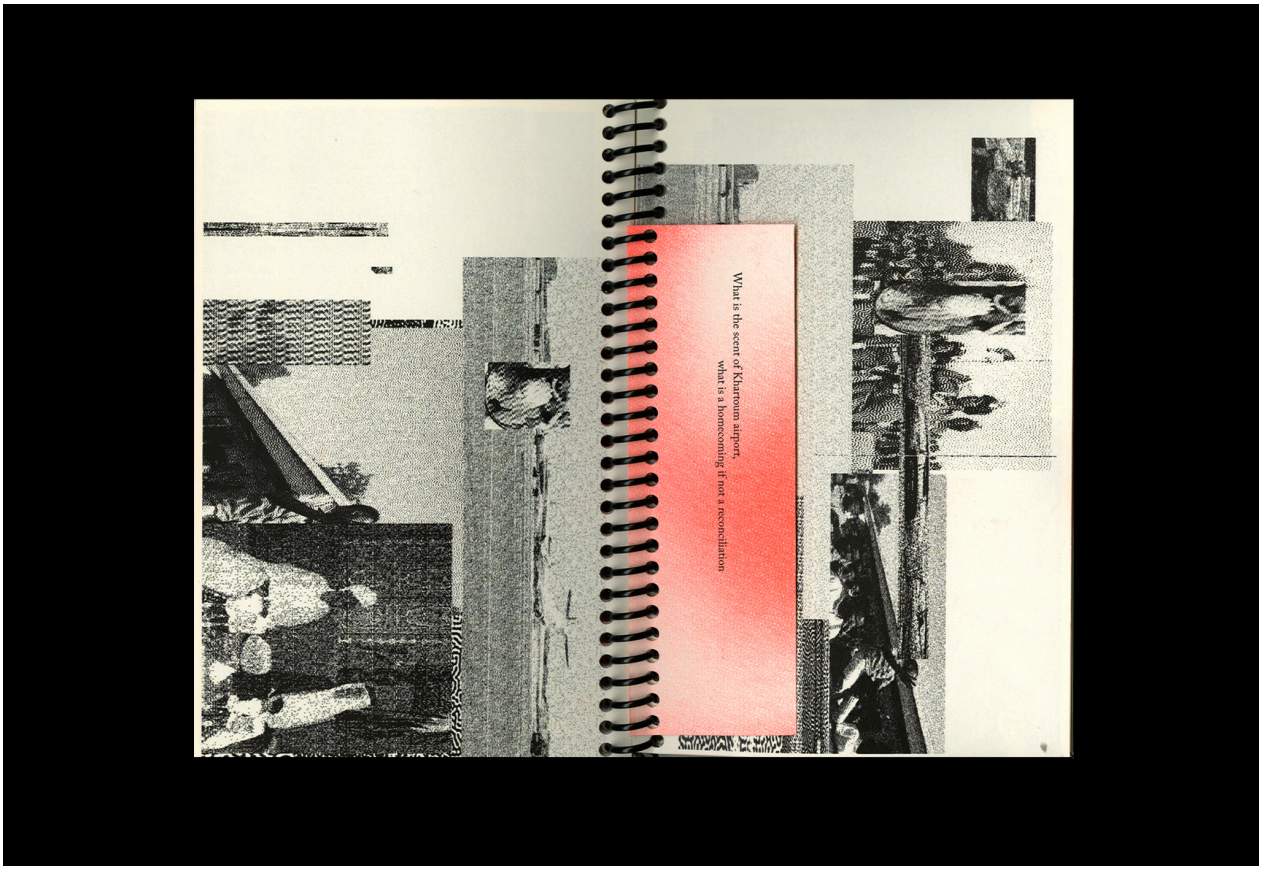

Fig. 8. Aala Sharfi, *38 Minute Feed: On Nostalgia and Politics* — book, 155 pages, Laser and risograph print, 5.5 x 8.5 in, 2018.

This series of collages aims to visually represent arguments and counter-arguments iterated through the production and circulation of Sudanese cultural imagery on twitter. The title is reflective of my experience of connecting with home by spending time scrolling through these virtual online spaces.

This project again uses Processing3 and the Twitter API to pull random images from a twitter feed using specific keywords. The collages aim to explore what people in Sudan and the diaspora choose to display and share as symbols of their cultural identity. Similar to the narratives in 'Scrolling Texts,' the images here show political and culturally sentimental dialogues. Through my analysis, it was evident that for every political image tweeted, there was a reminiscent or nostalgic cultural counter-image.

The juxtaposition of images in the collages opens up the interpretive possibilities of image-making. I attempt to explore the meaning of the image and how it changes according to what one sees immediately beside it, or what comes immediately after (Berger, 1972). In the words of Berger (1972), “seeing comes before the words” (p.33). The images start to illustrate a Sudanese narrative based on personal experience and cultural references.

Fig. 9. Aala Sharfi, *38 Minute Feed: On Nostalgia and Politics* — detail of spreads, 155 pages, Laser and risograph print, 5.5 x 8.5 in, 2018.

The process of visual abstraction through collage is necessary to display how political and sentimental narratives coincide. The simultaneity of the narratives represents how Sudanese people in the diaspora express the complexities of their cultural identity online.

The code generates new collages using the same group of images but ensures that no two collages are the same. This generation of new collages reflects how images are shared numerous times online, then re-authored, reposted and reused in multiple contexts; although the image is the same, the surrounding narrative might not be. The booklet is designed not to have a cover; there is no beginning or end. It is populated by inserts, which narrate the collages with nostalgic poetry, contrasted on the other side by tweets of negative news headlines related to the images (Fig. 9). This experience of reading political and sentimental narratives is reflective of the experience of scrolling through a social media feed.

Fig.10. Aala Sharfi, *38 Minute Feed: On Nostalgia and Politics* — selection of spreads, 155 pages, Laser and risograph print, 5.5 x 8.5 in, 2018.

The presentation of these collages in book form represents the idea of moving from one online space to the next. Once new tweets or images load on a newsfeed, the previous ones are erased from the current screen. The use of Processing resulted in the creation of over 150 different collages which is symbolic of how many times images are shared and re-shared online in different ways and in different contexts (Fig.10). The repetition of the

same image in different collages reinforces this idea, and I can relay this experience of the online space in placing these works in a book. The collages speak of a moment in time; they aim to transport the viewer into the Sudanese context of current and recent events regardless of geographic location. As Donald Carter (2004) has expressed, diaspora is an experience of "being here or there and all the points in between" (p.x). As a member of the diaspora, the collages sometimes offer glimpses of familiarity where I am connected and engulfed by things happening at home, and at other times images are unrecognizable. They stimulate my imagination by way of memory and cultural familiarity. The distortions are representative of these different and opposing realities which combine to create one that is reflective of the experience of Sudanese diaspora.

Experience & Counter Experience:
On the Identity of the Sudanese Individual and Collective

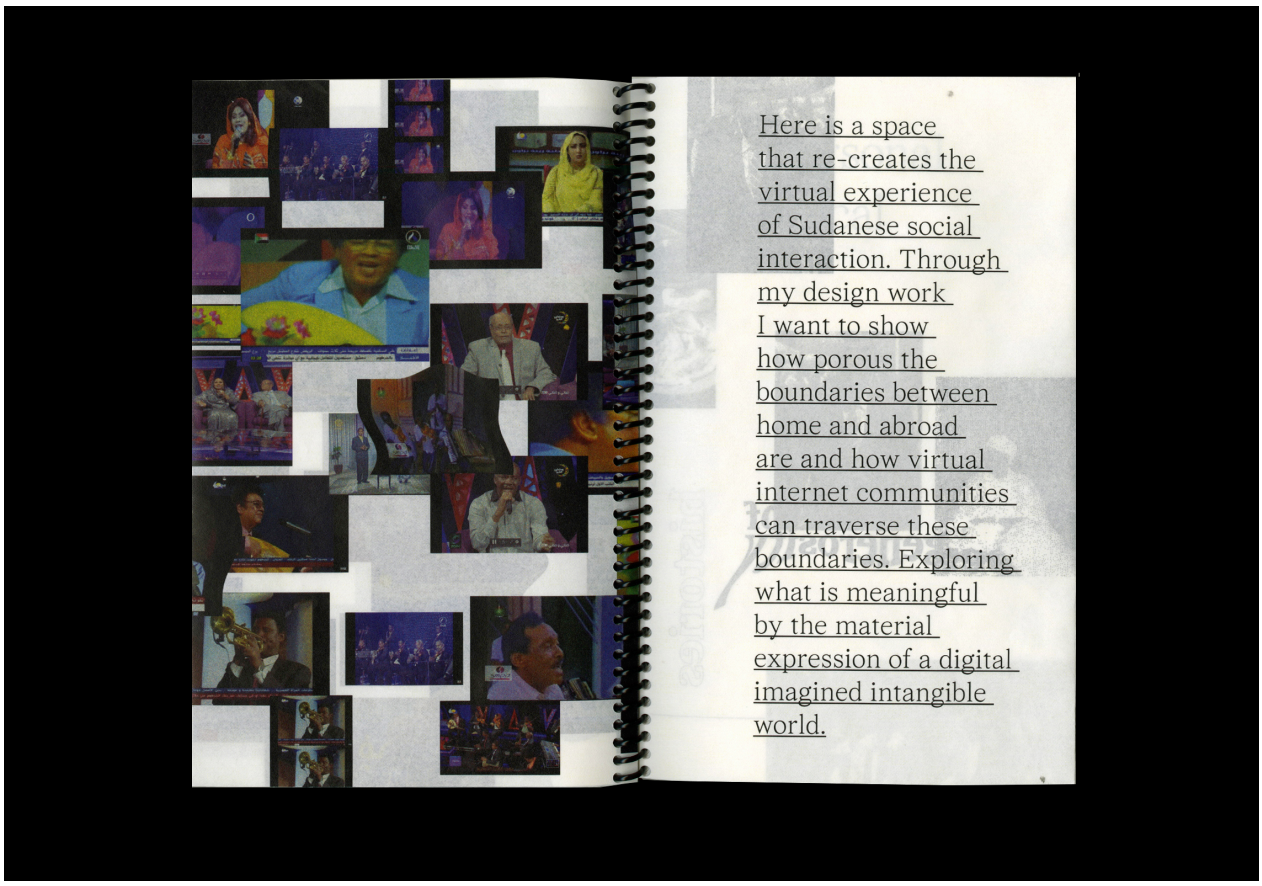

Fig. 11. Aala Sharfi, *Experience & Counter Experience: On the Identity of the Sudanese Individual and Collective* — book, 25 pages, Laser print, 7 x 11 in, 2018

Upon reflection on the previous processing projects, this piece aimed to be more deliberate in the contrasting of nostalgia and politics. It is designed to more clearly communicate the tensions that exist in the articulation of Sudanese identifies and culture online. These tensions may be all too obvious to me in their subtitles, but may not be evident to others unfamiliar with the politics of Sudanese identity.

The booklet is made up of french-folded pages, which act as a direct metaphor for the hidden political messages within cultural images and symbols (Fig.11). The visuals work to discuss the complexities of Sudanese identity by communicating through images, symbols and language. The spreads are composed of screenshots from national television

channels, which show colourful images of national dress, musical performances and tourist landscape. To contrast these culturally positive images, the booklet features a collage of presidential speeches around Sudan aimed to spread propaganda. The booklet also aims to show the humorous and satirical way in which Sudanese people express political dissent online. People produce parody music, memes and comedy. Here, this is expressed in the repetition and the juxtaposition of images with text.

In addition to nostalgic imagery and poetic expressions, I draw upon the underlying messages communicated in national slogans and cultural slang. The booklet uses design and typography to contrast these elements through Arabic and English (Fig.12, 13). It draws on the description that "culture and design are not separate domains" (Otto and Smith, 2016, p.13). They are complex and intertwined formations of meanings we develop through our everyday lives (discussed in chapter 3).

Fig. 12,13. Aala Sharfi, *Experience & Counter Experience: On the Identity of the Sudanese Individual and Collective* — book, 25 pages, Laser print, 7 x 11 in, 2018

The layouts within the booklet reveal the expressive dimensions of a generative online space. It reframes the production of these images online as a form of expression towards the lack of freedom of speech. The sharing of these images is an act of resistance towards forms of propaganda circulated by national media channels. In reframing this user-generated content, this project aims to explore what is meaningful through the material expression of an online imagined world. It emphasizes that the personal is political,

reflecting the idea that Sudanese cultural identity and politics come hand in hand, and aims to perform as a space that re-creates the virtual experience of Sudanese social interaction. Through this project, I recognize that the Sudanese online sphere is a place where the past, present and future come together through the act of posting, sharing and responding.

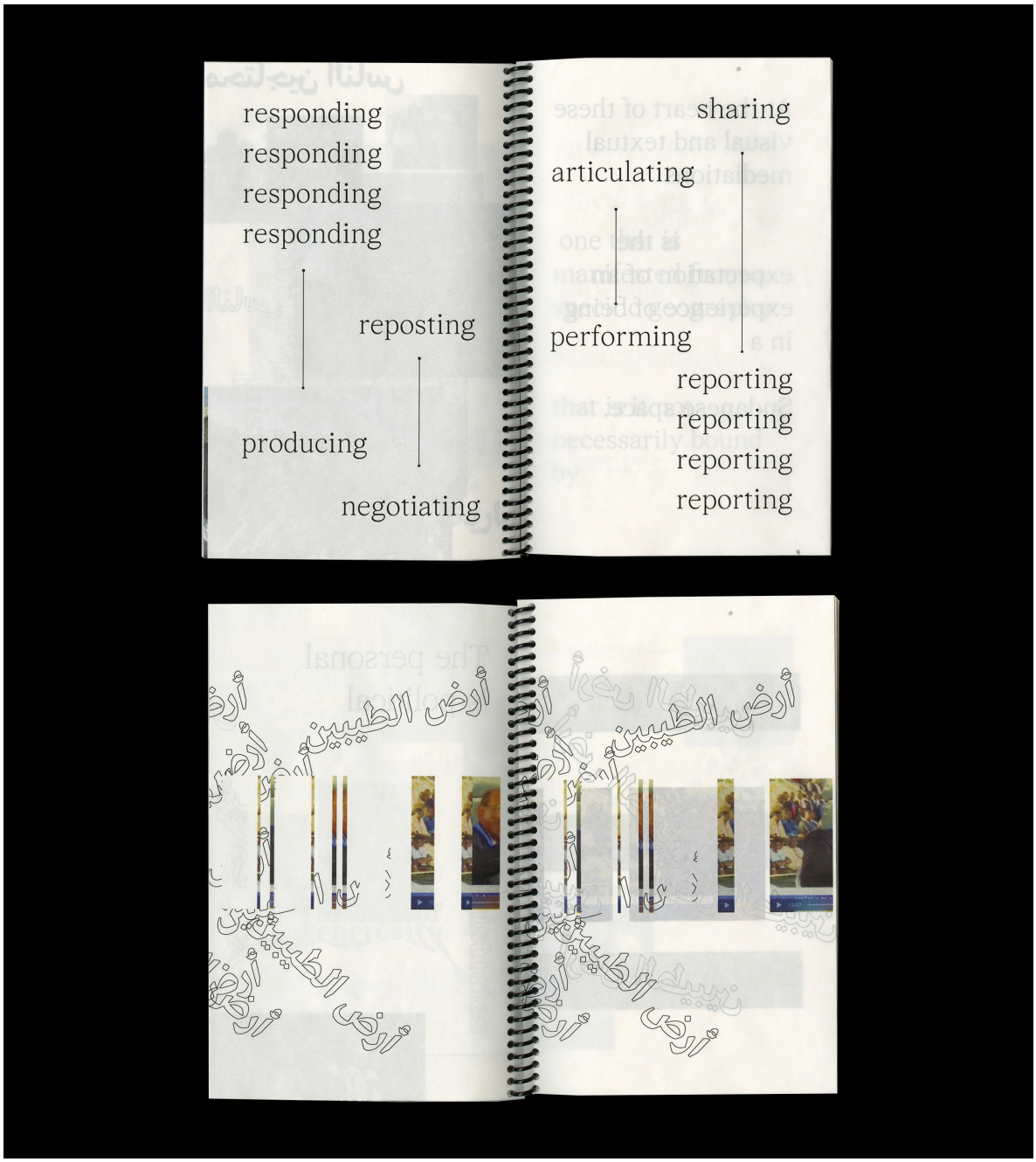

Fig. 14,15. Aala Sharfi, *Experience & Counter Experience: On the Identity of the Sudanese Individual and Collective* — book, 25 pages, Laser print, 7 x 11 in, 2018

Performing Tomorrow: Resistance and Social dreaming

Fig. 16. Aala Sharfi, *Performing Tomorrow: Resistance and Social Dreaming* — book, 90 pages, Laser and risograph print, 11 x 17 in, 2019

Previously, I had been looking at how the Sudanese experience is equal parts sentiment and politics. My design projects have worked to reveal the tensions that exist in the articulation of Sudanese identities and culture online. Through the process of coding and book design, I aimed to unpack the subtleties of Sudanese culture through exploring hidden messages, cultural symbols and images. It looked at how these images and texts shared online are not only a form of identity making, but also a form of resistance. Owing to the user-generated content in the design investigations my projects reflect the current productions of Sudanese online community. Following the uprising in December of 2018, the challenge has been to explore ways in which design can intervene in this new politically charged environment.

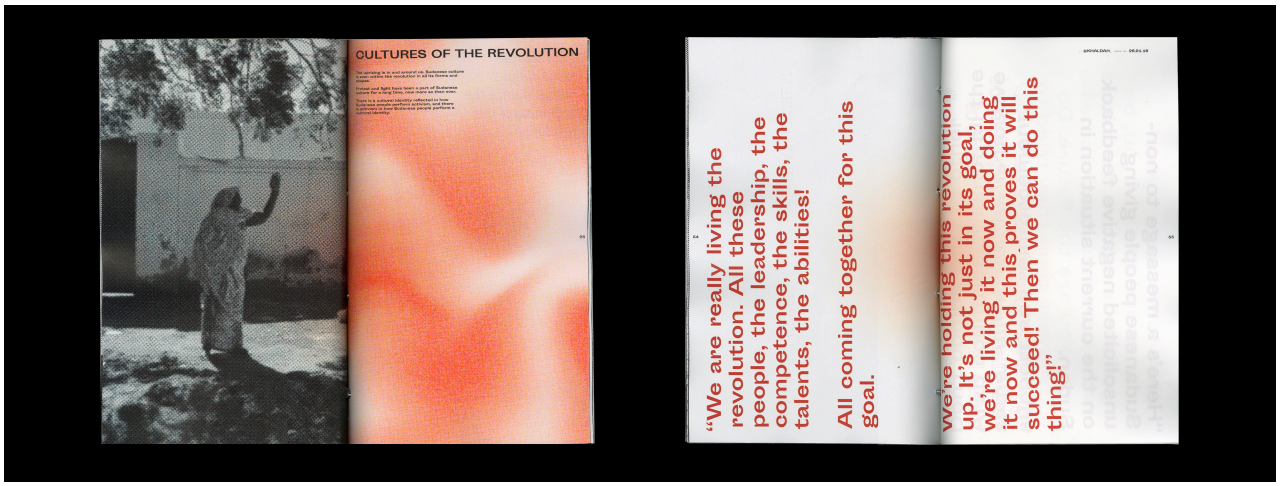

Fig. 17,18. Aala Sharfi, *Performing Tomorrow: Resistance and Social Dreaming*— book, 90 pages, Laser and risograph print, 11 x 17 in, 2019

As a response to these events, the aim of this project was to reimagine my previous investigations to reflect the recent changes in the expression of Sudanese identity. I question how expressions of Sudanese culture have changed since the uprising. It is evident that Sudanese identities, desires and ambitions are being reframed and recreated on the internet as events unfold daily.

This booklet expresses the differences both in format and content. It is larger, which contrasts the previously smaller booklets. The scale of these visuals represents how Sudanese cultural identity is no longer subtle or hidden within the message; it is much louder and empowered. The booklet consists of three sections: the sounds of the revolution; the cultures of the revolution; and the language of the revolution (Fig. 19). These three sections speak to how the uprising is in and around us. They explore how Sudanese culture is present in the uprising in all its shapes and forms. Slogans of the uprising are now present in the everyday language of Sudanese people.

The visuals within this booklet aim to evoke the experiences of the protests using content collected during the current uprising. They channel the feeling of being immersed in the revolt. The images are enlarged to show the transparency that people are trying to maintain throughout the uprising. There is a clarity to how people are organizing and mobilizing themselves, and the online community is systematic in how it is recording and

archiving the revolution. People share images, news and updates about the daily protests with specific hashtags organized by date.

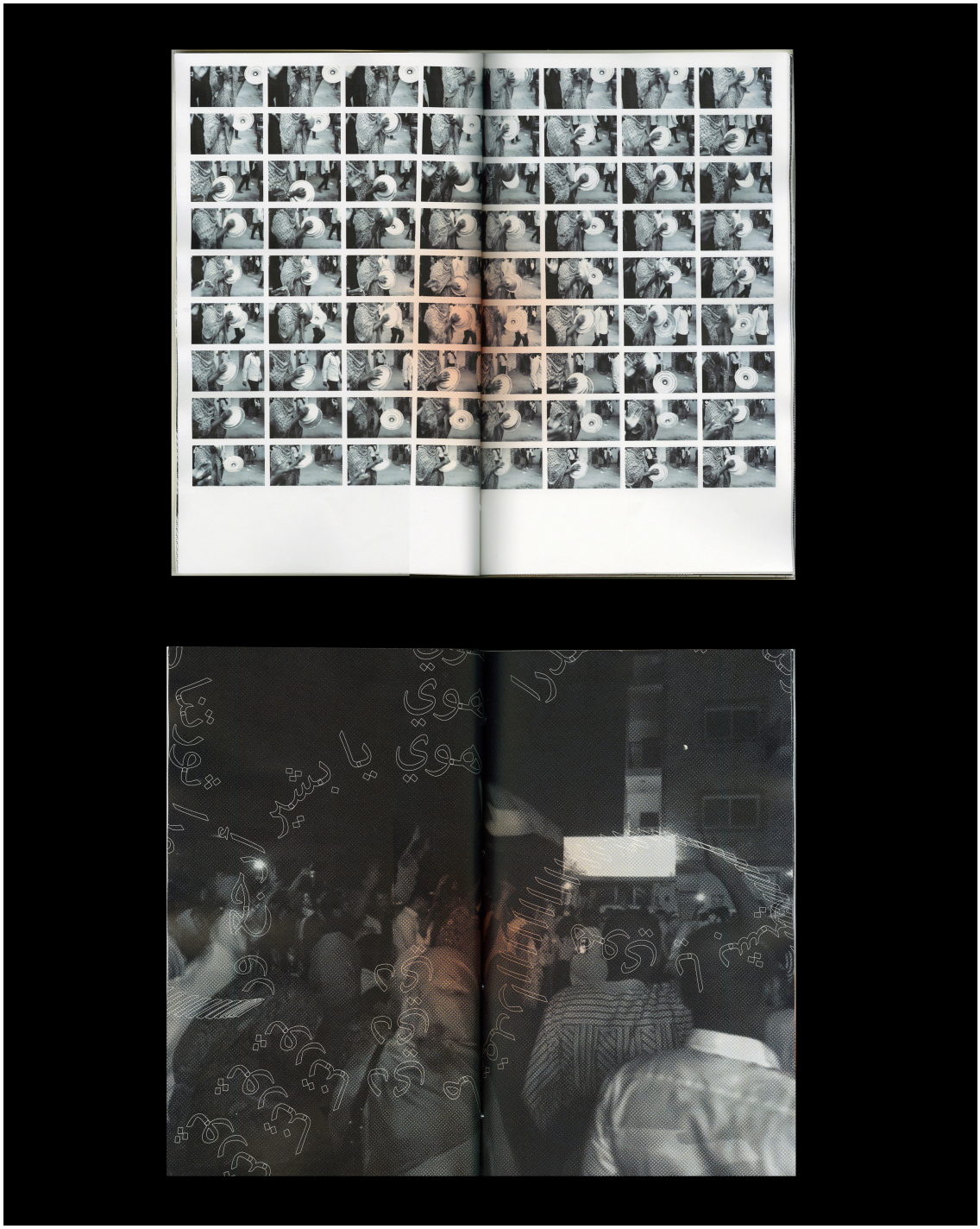

Fig. 19, 20. Aala Sharfi, *Performing Tomorrow: Resistance and Social Dreaming*— book, 90 pages, Laser and risograph print, 11 x17 in, 2019

The typography is expressive of the types of texts shared online, and the culturally specific slogans of the revolt (Fig. 16, 20). The chants have different rhythms and beats and almost act as a new form of Sudanese song (Fig. 18). Language has also played a role in the sharing of the uprising. People have unified and adopted a specific vernacular to become a part of the conversation. There is a weight to the Arabic language. It represents a proximity to the uprising and its reality.

Overall, this booklet investigates how the visual can communicate the performativity of the Sudanese identity. The book form here works differently, I am able carry a narrative that is representative of the experience of the protest through the layout of the page in relation to its placement within the whole book. This project explores how design can be used to express current experiences of what it means to be Sudanese through images and language. I am able set a specific tone, to take pauses or create surprise in the size and placement of image and type. There is a more hopeful and optimistic attitude towards the current Sudanese identity. It is one that is different from previous nostalgic representations. The political narrative here is clear; it is not peeking through a nostalgic reference.

The Online Dialogue

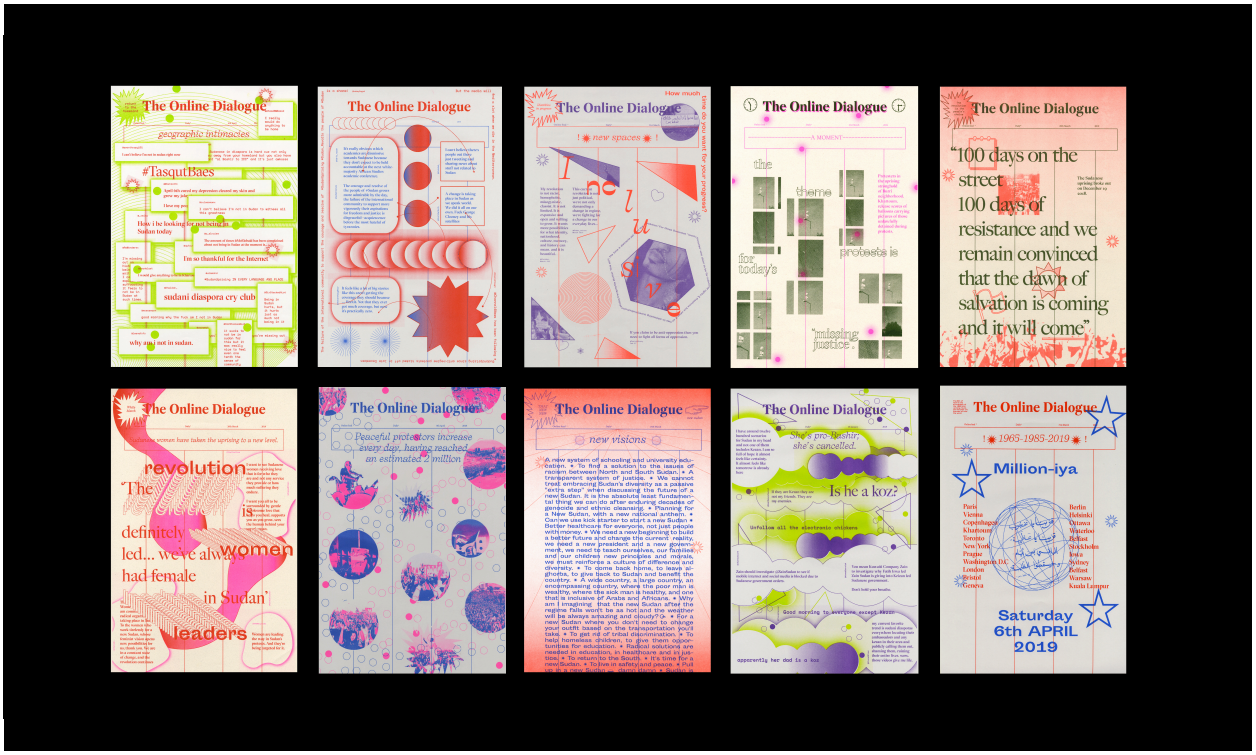

Fig. 21. Aala Sharfi, *The Online Dialogue*— Posters, Two-Colour Risograph, 11 x 17 in, 2019

Throughout this thesis, I state that Sudanese identities, desires and ambitions are being reframed and recreated on the internet as events unfold daily. This online space shows an ongoing dialogue where thoughts, comments and reactions to specific topics are shared. This dialogue represents the current process of constructive social imagination for what it means to be Sudanese. This final project thematically categorizes the specific productions of identity and resistance during the current uprising. They are a series of posters which draw conversations from the online platforms Twitter and Instagram to highlight certain dialogues, reactions and productions regarding new forms of identity.

The posters are inspired by the idea of a newspaper relating to how Sudanese people now use online platforms to understand, document and learn about the latest events as state media channels have remained uninformative and propagandist. The idea was to create a project that can grow and change to capture the performativity of the Sudanese identity during this time of instability.

The posters feature a consistent headline and format through a grid, however the layout and content changes depending on the overarching theme or topic the online community discussed on that date. The use of shapes and form depicts the idea of a conversation, and the use of colour portrays the emotions experienced in this emergence of new identities. By maintaining a consistent framework, the posters are legible; however, the placement of forms and text imitates the chaotic nature of the online space in how opinions and statements are shared rapidly.

The different posters highlight different discussions generated online every day. Some look at specific topics of discussion and others highlight milestones of the uprising. One poster looks at conversations around the inclusivity of the uprising regarding racial and tribal discrimination which is a topic that has been at the forefront of this revolution pushing past the previous agendas of the regime and society for freedom, justice and peace for everyone. It also highlights the conversation around gender identities and sexual freedoms which is a topic that has emerged during this uprising as various groups identify it as their battle in everyday society (Fig. 25). Another poster picks up on discussions on the role of regional and international media and the coverage of the Sudanese revolution. The uprising has been scarcely covered, and this has strengthened the role of the Sudanese online community in sharing and reporting on it themselves (Fig. 26). Additionally, the role of women in the uprising has been a powerful feature that has persisted throughout the Sudanese space online (Fig. 30); many see that young female figures in the community lead the uprising and this narrative has recently been picked up by Western media. Another theme a poster addresses is the active disassociation with those that are pro-government and those that have benefited from the corruption of the previous regime colloquially named ‘Kezan' (Fig. 29). As a member of the diaspora, the uprising has highlighted the role of the diaspora in this revolt (Fig. 31), and as a result, many Sudanese people around the world have expressed their geographic intimacies to the homeland through their online resistance and standing in solidarity in the many marches organized in cities around the world (Fig. 27). Finally, one poster depicts the articulations of a multifaceted vision for what Sudanese people want for a new Sudan fill the online space (Fig. 23); there are discussions on the improvement of educational systems, healthcare, infrastructure, and significant changes in societal thinking.

Fig. 22. Aala Sharfi, *The Online Dialogue*— Poster, Two-Colour Risograph, 11 x 17 in, 2019

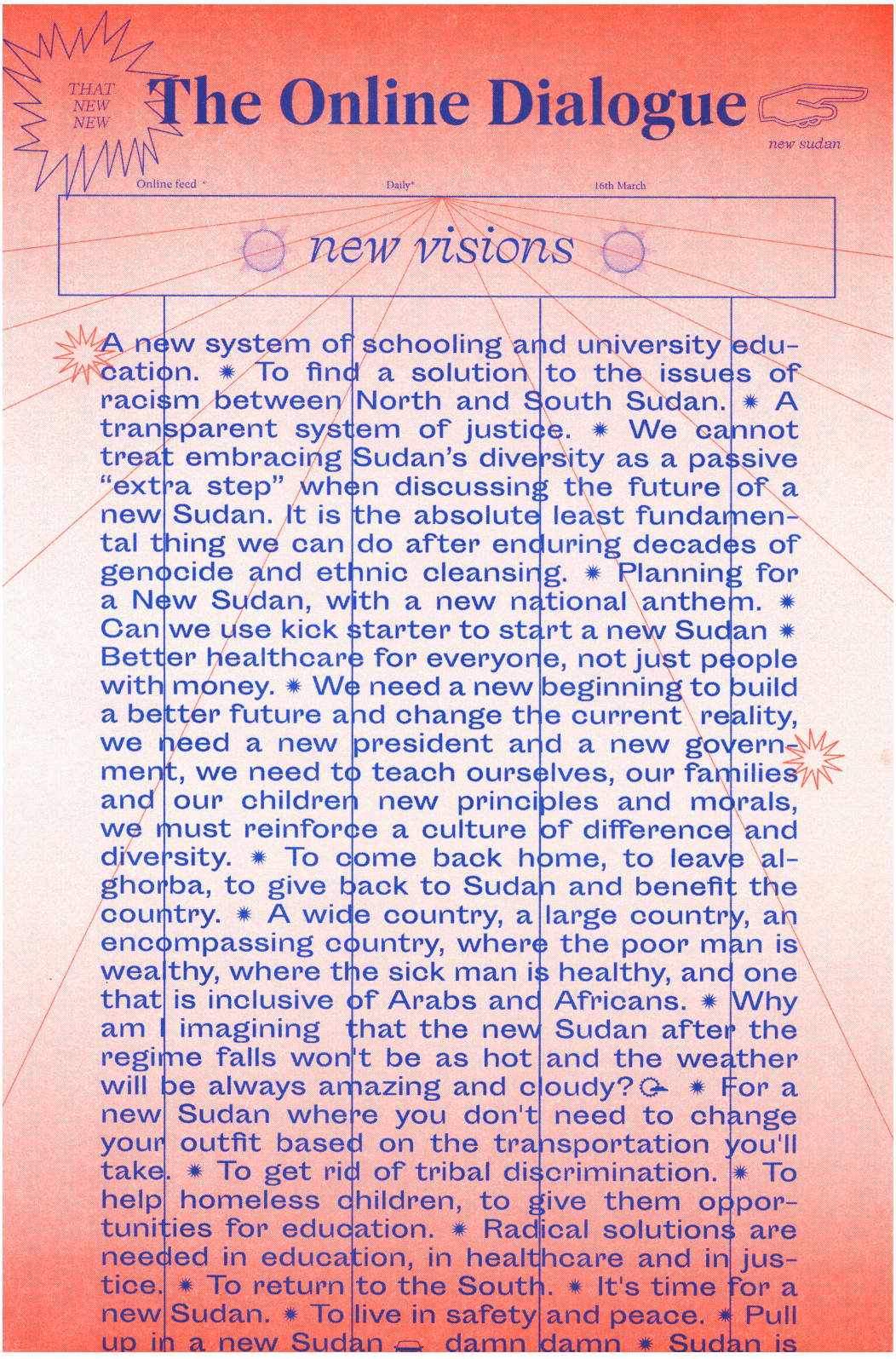

Fig. 23. Aala Sharfi, *The Online Dialogue*— Poster, Two-Colour Risograph, 11 x 17 in, 2019

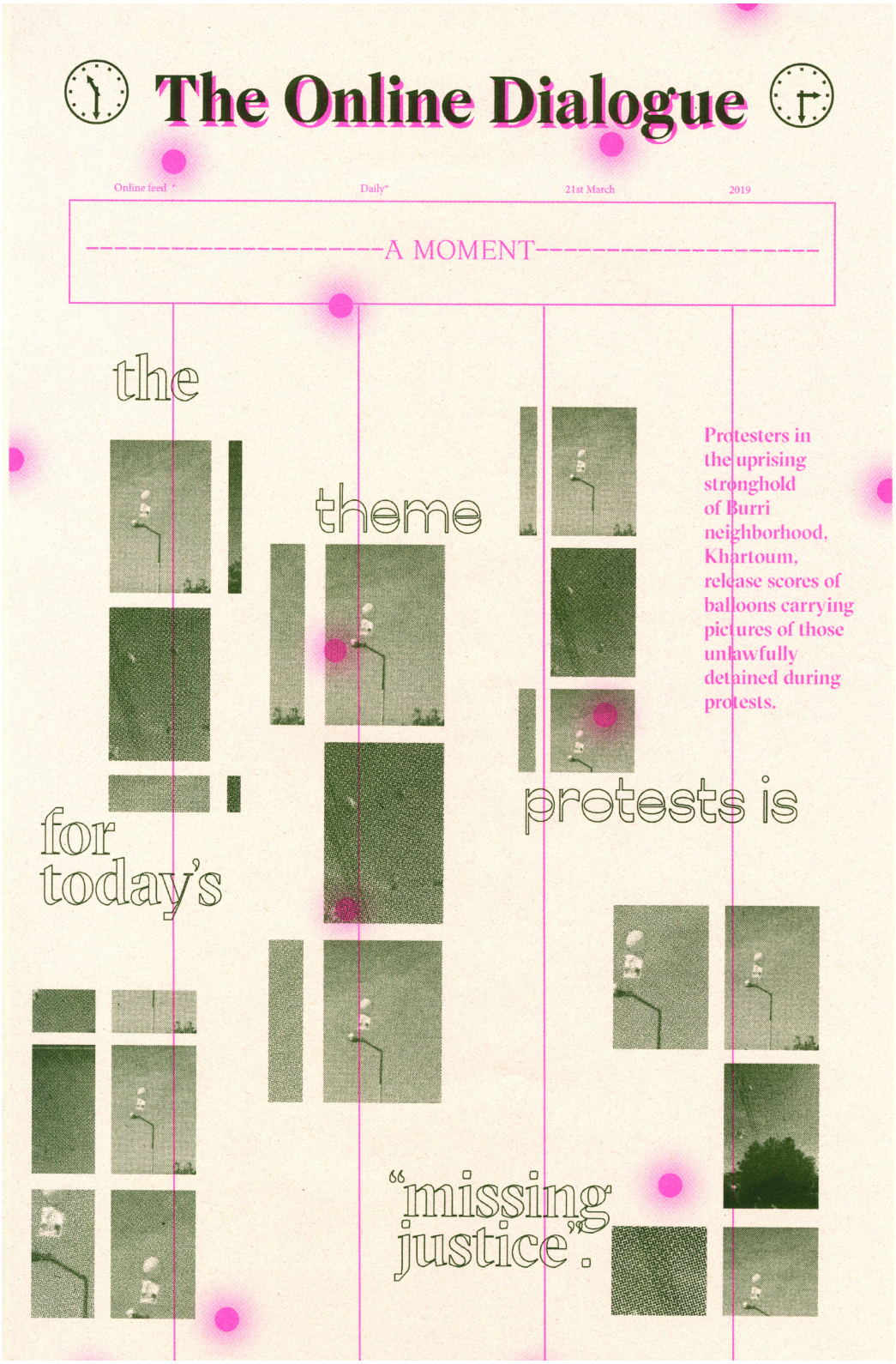

Fig. 24. Aala Sharfi, *The Online Dialogue*— Poster, Two-Colour Risograph, 11 x 17 in, 2019

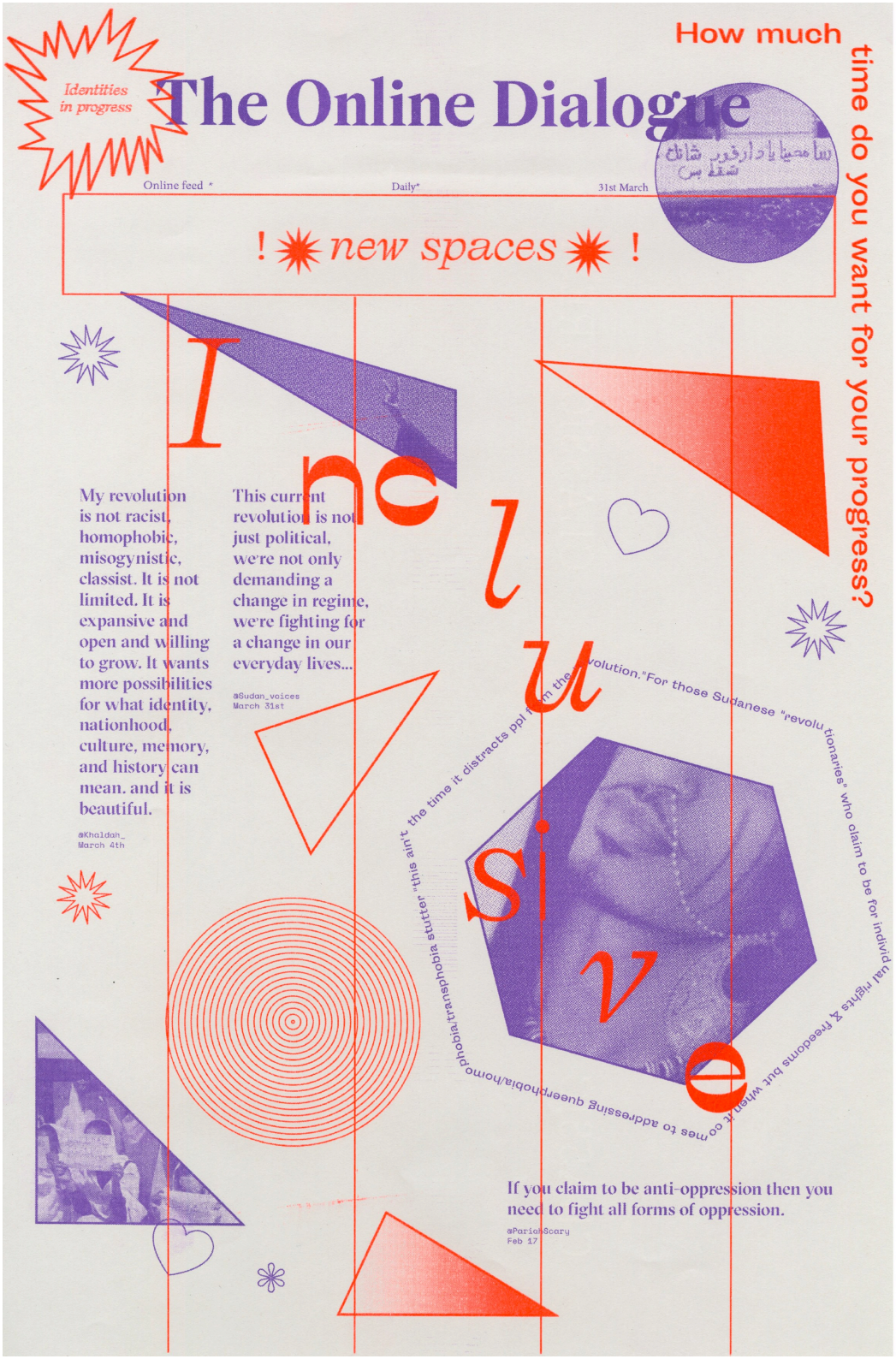

Fig. 25. Aala Sharfi, *The Online Dialogue*— Poster, Two-Colour Risograph, 11 x 17 in, 2019

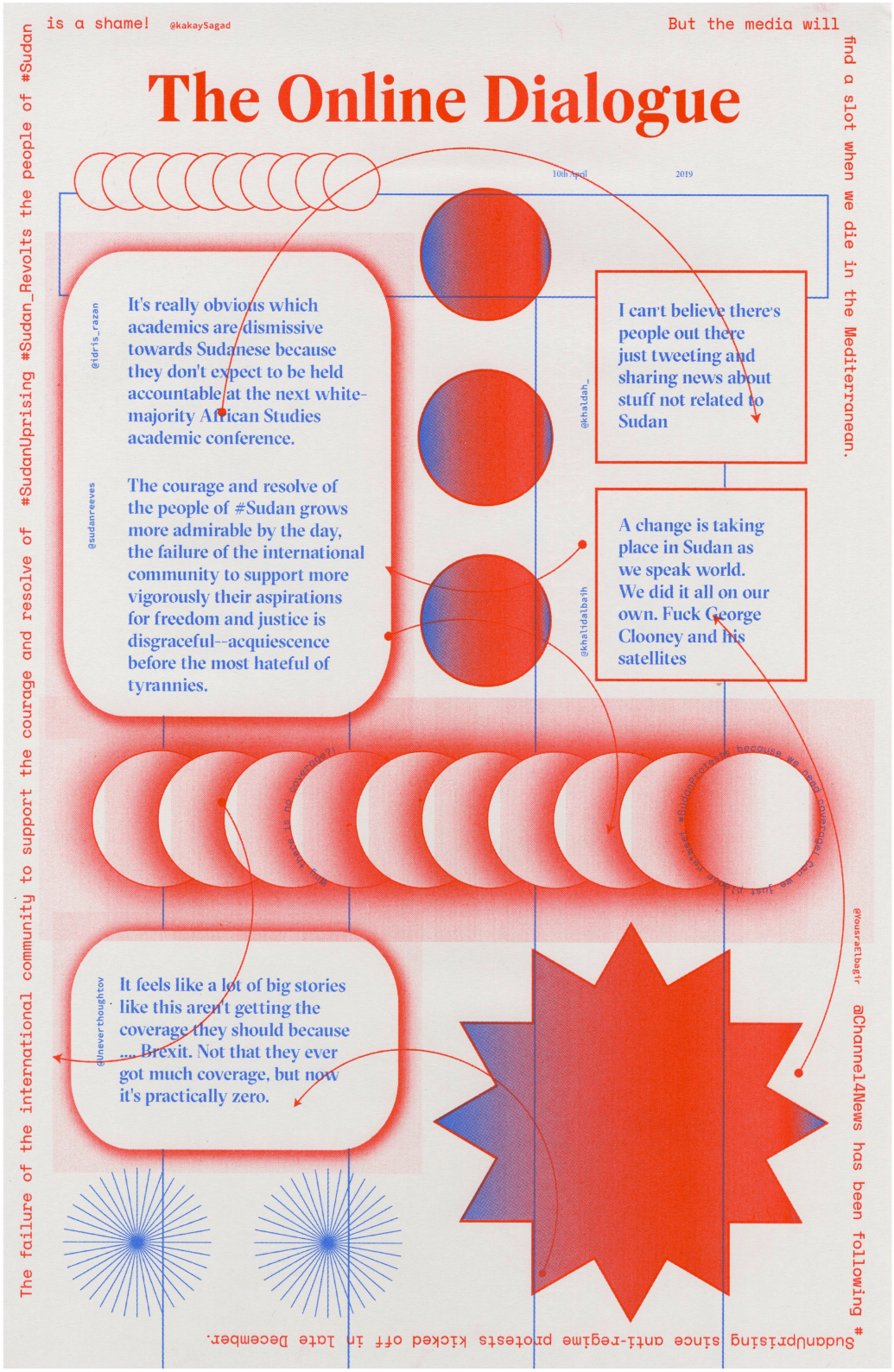

Fig. 26. Aala Sharfi, *The Online Dialogue*— Poster, Two-Colour Risograph, 11 x 17 in, 2019

Fig. 27. Aala Sharfi, *The Online Dialogue*— Poster, Two-Colour Risograph, 11 x 17 in, 2019

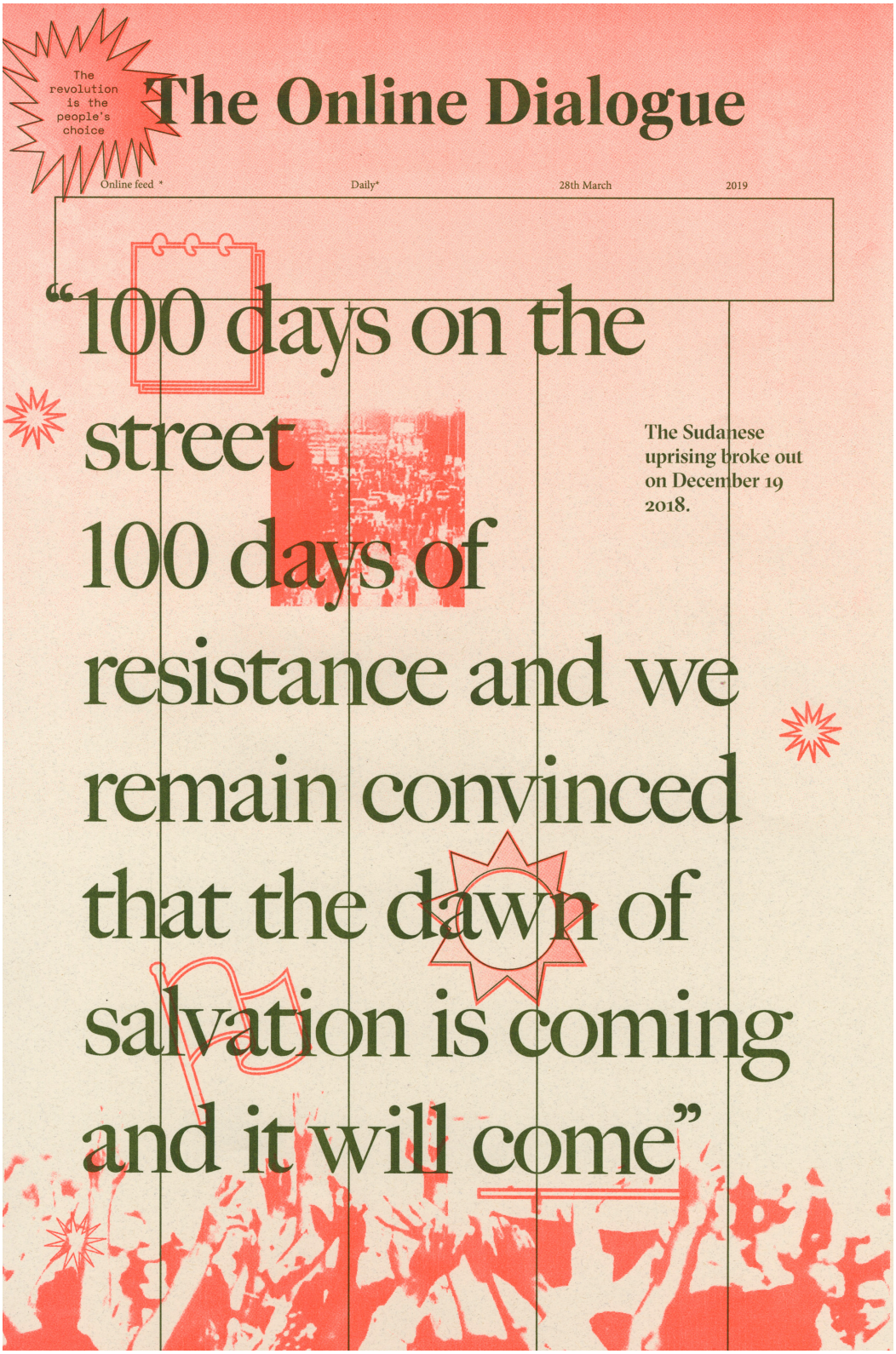

Fig. 28. Aala Sharfi, *The Online Dialogue*— Poster, Two-Colour Risograph, 11 x 17 in, 2019

Fig. 29. Aala Sharfi, *The Online Dialogue*— Poster, Two Colour-Risograph, 11 x 17 in, 2019

Fig. 30. Aala Sharfi, *The Online Dialogue*— Poster, Two-Colour Risograph, 11 x 17 in, 2019

Fig. 31. Aala Sharfi, *The Online Dialogue*— Poster, Two-Colour Risograph, 11 x 17 in, 2019

Conclusion

Through this thesis, I respond to my experiences, relationships, and understandings of Sudanese identity. I have learned that while the practice of identity is different by Sudanese people in Sudan and those in the diaspora, they share a commonality in longing for a wistful past. This past represents a positive projection of Sudanese identity that resides within a social reality — not without its difficulties — that is, in hindsight, romanticized and remembered as a time with a sense of success, freedom and self-determination. This partial memory of the past bears a significant influence on the articulation of the present Sudanese experience. In the diaspora, the online sphere provides a space for connection. Within this space, Sudanese cultural identities are enunciated, remembered and produced through the sharing of imagery and language. In the words of Bernal (2006), these spaces are "like a mirror that reflects, reinforces and validates" the Sudanese experience and identity (p.173). The online space is where Sudanese people render themselves in their own imagination; we witness the productions of cultural identity and reactions to them. These reactions result in an ongoing negotiation of identities which, in turn, leads to their continuous transformation.

My design practice produces a multilayered visual narrative that captures the qualities of this complexity. It allows me to grasp the unique experience of what it means to be Sudanese. I have come to approach design not only as an outlet for cultural expression and self-reflection, but as an inherently political activity. It functions as a way to unpack a unique definition of Sudanese lived experiences, reflect socio-political realities and reimagine possibilities for a future. Design acts as a transformative element reflecting personal and collective agency, and thereby serving as a tool for empowerment. Through articulating cultural identity, we can visualize a narrative of progress. My visual investigations have provided a way to navigate the politics of representation in a highly politicized context. User-generated content allows the design projects to negotiate different perspectives and reflect the multiplicity of Sudanese cultural identities.

I have navigated the representation of Sudanese cultural identity by exploring the meanings of language and image through the use of metaphors, symbols, and cultural

rhetoric. I use sound and video to recreate the experience of Sudanese cultural identity within the online space. My visual projects are an attempt to portray the fluidity that is central to the performativity of Sudanese cultural identity. These explorations demonstrate a continuous interplay between sentiment and politics, highlighting how socio-political histories are attached to our cultural identities. Ultimately, at the heart of these visual and textual mediations is the expectation of an experience of being in a Sudanese space; one that is manifested from a specific geography, but extends beyond it.

This thesis embodies the expression of cultural identity as a forward moving conversation. We are witnessing a political uprising that is leading to a significant change in the representation of Sudanese identities in online spaces. This change speaks to the argument that cultural identities are performative and in progress. As such, this thesis frames Sudanese people as active co-producers of their cultural identity, through which they express belonging, unity, pride and resistance.

Bibliography

Abu Sharaf, Rogaia. (2002). *Wanderings: Sudanese Migrants and Exiles in North America*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press

AlBaih, Khalid. (2015, October 15). How WhatsApp is feeling a 'sharing revolution' in Sudan. The Guardian. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com

Ahmed, Samah. (2018, November 7). Taking Charge of Cultural Diplomacy – One Tweet at a Time. 500 Words Magazine. Retrieved from http://500wordsmag.com

Armstrong, Hellen. (2011). What is Participatory Design?. In Armstrong, H., & Stojmirovic, Z. (Eds.), *Participate: Designing with User-Generated Content* (pp. 11-27). New York, NY: Papress.

Amnesty International, (2018 December 21). "Sudan: Shooting of protestors must be immediately investigated" Retrieved from https://www.amnesty.org

Anderson, Benedict. (1983). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York, NY: Verso.

Barthes, Roland. (1977). From Work to Text. In *Image Music Text* (pp.155-164) (S. Heath Trans.). New York, NY: Hill and Wang

Berger, A. A. (2011). *Media and Communication Research Methods: An Introduction to Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches.* (2nd ed.). London, UK: Sage.

Berger, John. (1972). *Ways of Seeing*. (5th ed.). London, UK: Penguin Book Limited

Bernal, Victoria, (2006). Diaspora, Cyberspace and Political Imagination: the Eritrean Diaspora Online. *Global Networks* 6, no. 2 (April): 161-179

Blauvelt, Andrew (1996). In and Around: Cultures of Design and the Design of Cultures Part I. *Emigre,* 32

Boym, Svetlana. (2000). *The Future of Nostalgia.* New York, NY: Basic Books

Brah, Avtar. (1996). *Cartographies of diaspora: contesting identities*. London, UK: Routledge.

Carter, Donald. (2004). Preface. In Koser, K. (ed.) *New African Diasporas.*London, UK: Routledge.

Colomina, B., & Wigley, M. (2016). *Are We Human? Notes on an Archeology of Design*. Zurich, CH: Lars Müller.

ElHassan, Sara. (2019, February 21). How Sudanese Art Is Fueling the Revolution. Okay Africa. Retrieved from http://www.okayafrica.com

Elhillo, Safia. (2015). Writing from a Third Culture. Thesis. New York, NY : Parsons The New School.

Fazal ,Shehina & Tsagarousianou, R. (2002). Diasporic Communication: Transnational Cultural Practices and Communicative Spaces, *Javnost-The Public*. 9(1), 5-18

Gunn, W., Otto, T., & Smith, R. C. (2016). *Design Anthropology: Theory and Practice*. London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic.

Hale, Sondra, & Kadoda G. (2016). *Networks of Knowledge Production in Sudan: Identities, Mobilities and Technologies*. Lanham, ML: Lexington Books

Hall, Stuart. (1994). Cultural Identity and Diaspora. In Williams, P. and Christman, L. (eds) *Colonial Discourse and Post Colonial Theory: A Reader* (pp. 222-237) New York, NY: Columbia University Press,

Hall, Stuart. (1987). Minimal Selves, in *Identity: The Real Me*. pp 44-46.. London, UK: Institute of Contemporary Art.

Hage, Ghassan. (2005). A not so multi-sited ethnography of a not so imagined community. *Anthropological Theory* 5(4), 463-475

Idris, Amir. (2005). *Conflict and Politics of Identity in Sudan*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan

Idris, Amir. (2013). *Identity, Citizenship, and Violence in Two Sudans*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan

Koser, Khalid. (2004). *New African Diasporas.* London, UK: Routledge.

Lupton, Ellen. (2011). Foreword. In Armstrong, H., & Stojmirovic, Z. (Eds.), *Participate: Designing with user-generated content* (pp. 7-9). New York, NY: Papress.

McQuiston, Liz. (2015). *Visual Impact: Creative Dissent in the 21st Century*. London, UK: Phaidon Press Limited.

Otto, Ton. & Smith R. C. (2016). Design Anthropology: A Distinct Style of Knowing. In Gunn, W., Otto, T., & Smith, R. C. (Eds.) *Design Anthropology: Theory and Practice* (pp.1-29) London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

Resnick, E., Maviyane- Davies, C., & Baseman, F. (2005). *The Graphic Imperative: International Posters for Peace, social justice and the environment 1965-2005*. Boston, MA: Massachusetts College of Art.

Slyomovics, Susan. (2015). Every Slight Movement of the People is Everything: Sondra Hale and Sudanese Art , *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies* 38(3) 101-128

Smith, Rachel C., (2016). Designing Heritage for a Digital Culture In Gunn, W., Otto, T., & Smith, R. C. (Eds.), *Design Anthropology: Theory and Practice* (pp.117-135). London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

The Institute for Comparative Modernities (ICM) Cornell University. (2015). Modernity & the Making of Identity in Sudan: Remembering the Sixties and Seventies. Retrieved from http://www.icm.arts.cornell.edu/2015_modentity_making_identity_sudan

Tunstall, Elizabeth. (2016). Cultural Respect, Not Social Responsibility: The Seven Principles of Design Anthropology. In Resnick E. (Ed.), *Developing Citizen Designers* (pp.278-280). New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic Press.

Wells, Carol A. (2005). Why the Poster in the Internet Age?. In Resnick, E., Maviyane-Davies, C., & Baseman, F. (Eds.), *The Graphic Imperative: International Posters for Peace, social justice and the environment 1965-2005* (pp.10-13). Boston, MA: Massachusetts College of Art.

Appendix

Images from research book compiling a selection of 92 images found online of work generated by various artists and designers during the Sudanese uprising between December 2018 to April 2019. Refer to section on “Design Activism Through Cultural Identity” on page 10.