Commodity Fetishism and Performative Identity:
Studying the Effects of Neoliberal Reform on the Work of Non-Governmental Organizations in Cairo

by
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ABSTRACT

Cynthia Bauer: A Study of the Effects of Neoliberal Reform on the Work of
Non-Governmental Organizations in Cairo
(Under the direction of Dr. Vivian Ibrahim)

"Markets are social and political worlds with their own cosmologies. Each is a cosmos of its own, an intricately functioning field of power. The expansion of the neoliberal market is much more than the selling of an economic device. It is a political project par excellence; it is a massive exercise of power aiming at no less than creating a world- the whole world- in the image of neoliberalism."

- Julia Elyachar, *Markets of Dispossession: NGOs, Economic Development, and the State in Cairo*

I: Introduction

Present in many works on the post-colonial Middle East is the discussion of the role that knowledge creation has played in past and present forms of dominating the Middle East. Looking to the past, Orientalism as an academic lens shows us the flagrant misinterpretations of "Eastern" life, society, culture, and politics that were produced during the colonization of the Middle East. In the modern day, Western dominance in the international political sphere has led to an imbalanced construction a universal conception of "human rights," which is subsequently applied in subjective ways that reflect global power imbalances.

However, I would like to posit that in the context of modern neoliberal economic reform in the "Third World," this production of knowledge not only has political dimensions, but economic ones as well. Aihwa Ong uses the term "neoliberalism as exception," to refer to this economic dimension of the politics associated with the production of knowledge. By this term, she means to address that which lies strictly between the neoliberal economic reform and the political negotiation that are products of globalization (Ong 4). Through her use of putting political negotiation of knowledge within the economic context of neoliberal economic reform, knowledge now has positive value from which wealth can be gained.

In looking at this issue, I use the case study of the Egypt-based non-governmental organization *Safarni*, with which I volunteered in the spring of 2018. This organization focuses on children's education, hoping to imbue the participants with the ideals of diversity and coexistence. I look at the history and structure of this organization in the background section.

Through the case study of *Safarni*, though, one can see the commodification of the constructions of ideas such as "race," "ethnicity," and "gender" in order to gain economic value from these social constructions, which I will argue is a new phenomenon characteristic of neoliberal economic reform.

By looking at the way in which the organization volunteers interacts in a "performance" with the Egyptian children who attend these workshops, the ways in which race and ethnicity are being commodified through these performances become clear. *Safarni* serves as an ideal case study for this research project, as the organization's explicit focus on issues of diversity allow for a much clearer viewing of the commoditization of such issues.

Safarni is an organization with which I am intimately familiar. I spent over ten hours a week over the course of the spring of 2018 volunteering with this organization: participating as a volunteer in their workshops and talking with their director. By pairing first-person observation with secondary analysis of the organization and theoretical literature, I have constructed a versatile analysis of *Safarni*'s activities and the related socio-political implications of these workshops.

In examining *Safarni* as a case study, I employ a number of theoretical frameworks in order to analyze the activity of *Safarni* beyond simply a description of its work. As I mentioned earlier, this research project will focus on performance, and in doing so I am employing Erving Goffman's definitions of the "front region," "back region," "performer," and "performance" in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* as a way to break down the interactions between the organization's volunteers and the children who participate in the workshops. By means of explaining this terminology, Goffman defines the front region as "the place where the

performance is given" (Goffman 107). Opposite of this region is what Goffman terms "the back region," or a place relative to the front region where the "impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted" (Goffman 112). This is the place where the preparation for the performance takes place, and where the actors of the performance engage in addressing the fact that the performance is not reality. Arguably the most important term in this thesis, which I have derived from Goffman's work, is that of the "performance," which he defines as "all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any part of the other participants" (Goffman 15). These participants are who Goffman refers to when using the term "performers," by which he means the individuals who aim to project their interpretations of reality upon those who watch their performances.

In addition to this, I break my analysis into two parts: that focusing on the economic dimensions of *Safarni*'s performance and that focusing on its political dimensions. In looking at the economic dimensions, I focus on the idea of the "commodity" and the process of objectification that happens in order to "extract new economic value… by transforming social networks and culture *into* value" (Elyachar 9). In the case of *Safarni*, there exists a process of commodifying the concepts surrounding "diversity." For my economic framework, I will be relying primarily on three main texts: Julia Elyachar's *Markets of Dispossession: NGOs, Economic Development, and the State in Cairo*, David Harvey's *A Companion to Marx's Capital*, and Michael Taussig's *Mimesis and Alterity*.

I also look at the political dimensions of this idea of commodified performance. The questions that I will address in this section are: What are the political factors that make this process of commodified performance possible? How does this phenomenon reflect historical

colonial power relations? And what does this mean for the sociopolitical dimensions of the work

of non-governmental organizations in Cairo? On the level of theory, I will be employing

primarily Timothy Mitchell's *Colonizing Egypt* and Julia Elyachar's *Markets of Dispossession* in

order to answer the aforementioned questions.

In this thesis, I focus on neoliberal economic reform, by which I mean the economic system

that is a form of the free-market capitalism adopted in the 1980s under Reagan, and that

abandoned developmentalism in the wake of policies such as the Washington Consensus. More

specifically, I will be speaking about the rise of the creation of wealth out of abstractions, which

is characteristic of this economic movement (Comaroff 2000:313). To this end, neoliberalism has

created "a world in which the only way to create real wealth seems to lie in forms of

power/knowledge that transgress the conventional, the rational, the moral" (Comaroff 316).

Therefore, the simplest forms of creating wealth are those that involve twisting and questioning

the notion of "value" itself, using it to manipulate the market, and not simply the transaction.

This is a world in which labor becomes abstracted, and therefore self-identity is conceived in

a very different way. The person is not the laborer in the factory, but rather a conglomeration of

the different "values" of which they can manipulate to gain wealth and economic status. By

looking at these issues within the lens of the continuously expanding markets of neoliberalism,

one can see the changing nature of identity and wealth creation, which is ultimately what this

paper aims to address.

The point of my research is not proving that identity can be commodified or that this

commodification plays a role in the market, but rather it is analyzing how neoliberalism has

produced "technologies of subjectivity," or created knowledge that animates citizens to act

according to certain norms (Ong 6). These technologies are utilized in *Safarni* workshops and are symptomatic of an increased subjectivization of human labor in the modern age. Therefore, I do not aim to make any moral judgements on the commodification of identity present in the workshop setting of *Safarni*, nor do I aim to address this subject. Rather, this thesis focuses on looking at the trickle-down effects of neoliberal economic and political reform in the age of globalization.

My methodology involves the framing of my personal vignettes from working with this organization cohesively with online data on *Safarni's* work and the body of theoretical body that I have constructed below into a framework through which I view my primary sources. This paper will be split into seven sections accordingly: the introduction, background information on my case study, an in-depth explanation of my methodology, my three analysis sections (*Safarni* as Performance, Economic Dimensions of Performance, and Political Dimensions of Performance), and finally my conclusion. Each analysis section will start with a vignette, picture, or other primary source that I will use to discuss the relevant dimensions of the organization.

II: Background Information

*Safarni***'s Mission Statement and Purpose**

Safarni is a non-governmental organization based in Cairo, Egypt that implements workshops that are designed to engage the children participating in them with issues of diversity and multiculturalism. Their mantra, "every child is a global citizen," gets at the heart of the organization's goal, which is to, "create a platform for emotional and critical engagement with

human difference, wherein children discover and immerse themselves in cultures from around the world without ever leaving their neighborhoods, and learn to see their own neighborhoods through new eyes." ("About *Safarni*"). Through this goal, *Safarni* aims to help compose "a generation that is globally aware, inclusive, curious and loving; a generation that feels connected to diversity and celebrates this through friendships with people from around the world." ("About *Safarni*").

To this end, this organization puts into play these dreams through educational workshops. The following section will look at the practical and technical application of the aforementioned mission of the organization in real life.

Safarni was founded in 2012 by French-American Raphaelle Ayach who, while studying Arabic in Spain, started to become more aware of the racial and ethnic prejudices against Arabs living in Europe. In travelling to the Arab world over the course of her Arabic studies, she encountered similar prejudices held by the Arabs about Europeans. In discovering the extent to which prejudice guided people's notions of "the other," Ayach decided to connect these two groups of people, through which she found that "simple friendships had the incredible power to create empathy, awareness and solidarity" ("About *Safarni*"). She then partnered with an intercultural facilitator, Walaa Ahmed Abdel Moety, and developed a curriculum that focused on teaching children about the power of diversity in its various forms.

Safarni started as a small organization, running only the program "Diversity in the World," but has since expanded to include two subsequent programs titled "Diversity in the City" and "Diversity in the Community." As of November 2018, *Safarni* has expanded from working in Cairo with about 20 volunteers and 60 children, to the northern city of Alexandria

where around 10 volunteers with with around 25 children (*Safarni*-Intercultural Children's Workshop).

In addition to the geographic expansion of *Safarni,* the organization has also gained international recognition in the past couple of years and received funding from multiple international bodies, including the European Union, the International Organization for Migration, The United Nations Migration Agency, the LEGO Foundation ("Partners"). In 2017, *Safarni* was also chosen as the second place winner of the United Nations' Intercultural Innovation Award, a financial partnership with the United Nations Alliance of Cultures ("*Safarni*").

Structure of *Safarni* and its Volunteers

Safarni, as an organization, is structurally simple. Ayach directs all the programs in the different neighborhoods, and leads all efforts, projects, and training sessions. Raphaelle works directly with an education specialist, who helps her develop curriculum for the workshops. She then leads training sessions for project managers: about three senior volunteers who have extensive experience with *Safarni* workshops and who coordinate lower-level volunteers. These project managers are placed in the different workshop locations in Cairo and Alexandria, and are each responsible for a team of ten volunteers. These volunteers have a variety of jobs: there are "team leaders" who direct a small group of children during the workshop, "foreign friends" who are international volunteers who present about their cultures, and generic volunteers who stand to the sidelines during the workshop to do whatever tasks may need to get done during the course of a workshop. The volunteers, with the exception of the "foreign friends," are all Egyptian and range in occupation from elementary school teachers, to psychologists, to university students.

The volunteers arrive to the workshop location, usually a rented apartment in one of the buildings of the neighborhood, three hours before the workshop starts in order to decorate the space, run through the activities of the workshop, and check in with the other volunteers before the children arrive. Three hours are dedicated to this preparation, as volunteers are more often than not running late, and food must be eaten and tea must be prepared before much work can actually get done. As the children arrive at the workshop space, the volunteers take their respective positions and the workshop begins.

Each workshop is part of a larger program, with each program consisting of 7-8 workshops. The children will come to the workshop space once a week for eight weeks and participate in two hours of activities before leaving with a homework assignment. *Safarni* is currently operating with three separate and subsequent programs. Their initial program, "Diversity in the World" teaches children about global cultural diversity and the different problems that can arise because of it. At the end of this program, the children become "Ambassadors of Diversity," and are charged with bringing the ideas of diversity and openness to their communities. The following program, "Diversity in the City," applies these ambassadorial ideals and lessons, as the children venture out into Cairo and learn about the aspects of cultural diversity that exist within their own city itself. The third program, "Diversity in the Community," builds even further upon this, as the children develop and implement a service project within their own communities that is intended to bridge social gaps and bring people of different identities together.

"Diversity in the World" Activities

The first program, "Diversity in the World," consists of eight workshops spanning the course of eight weeks. In the first session, the children learn about the globe more generally, focusing on learning to read a map, and where they can find themselves on it relative to the rest of the world. It is in this session as well that the children write a "*Safarni* constitution," outlining the rules about how they will treat eachother with respect, and honor the cultures that they will come into contact with. The next session is the first "travel session" for the children, as they visit the United States of America and participate in workshop activities focused on American culture. In subsequent weeks, the children travel to France, Sudan, the Philippines, Eritrea, Egypt (to look at their own culture in equal light to foreign cultures), and finally celebrate a graduation ceremony in the last session for the program.

Looking more specifically at the organization of individual *Safarni* workshops, each session is split into four different stages, which take place over the course of two and a half hours. The first stage is the pre-workshop stage, where the children are gathered in one room where they take part in a self-reflection exercise, which can range from writing a poem about an Egyptian food that they like, to speaking with a friend about why they think racism is bad in America. This lasts for half an hour, before the children are shepherded into the main workshop space for the beginning of the group activities.

In the group section of the workshop, the children are gathered together to sing a song about the different continents, to be reminded about the rules of the "*Safarni* Constitution," and to dance to a song from that week's country. Afterwards, the children break up into their

pre-assigned groups led by an Egyptian "team leader" to discuss what they think that they will learn in that day's adventures. This introductory session lasts half an hour before the activities begin.

The activities section of the Safarni workshops are broken into five different stations, with each of the groups spending twenty minutes at each station over the course of the hour. The stations are "the house," "the garden," "the workshop," "the kitchen," and "the lab." In each rotation there is an activity that corresponds to the part of the house after which the station is named. "The house" features pictures of everyday household items that the children could find in a house of that week's country, "the garden" features a game from that week's country, "the workshop" features a craft that is famous in that week's country, "the kitchen" features a popular food from that week's country, and "the lab" focuses on a social challenge that the children have to resolve. For example, the day in which the children travel to the United States features a game of Twister, peanut-butter and jelly sandwiches, cardboard crafts, looking at racism in the United States and Egypt, and pictures of dental floss and hair-straighteners in the house.

The last half-hour of the workshop consists of the different groups of children reassembling and talking about what they learned that day. They then sing another song and then learn about what country they will travel to next. Once this is done, the children leave the workshop space and the volunteers begin cleaning up and debriefing. The debriefing section of the post-workshop period is extremely important to the organization, as volunteers' feedback and suggestions are recorded and everyone gets to air their frustrations with the day and exchange stories about precious moments with the children.

"Diversity in the World" Graduation Ceremony

The first seven weeks of the workshop proceed accordingly, with the children engaging in similar activities about different cultures and societies. However, the eighth session: the graduation ceremony, is the most interesting to examine when thinking about the process of commodification in this interaction between Egyptians and this foreign organization.

During the graduation session, the children spend two hours preparing a cultural program, which they will then perform to their families (mostly mothers and sisters) in the graduation ceremony. Each group chooses to talk about their favorites aspects of each culture, and the whole group engages in song. The director of the organization then presents the children with diplomas and t-shirts, making them official "ambassadors of diversity" and charging them with going out and teaching their friends and their family members about the things that they learned in the workshop.

The children then have a party to celebrate their graduation from the program. It is during this time that the economic exchange between the organization workers and the mothers of the children take place.

This process starts before the commencement of the workshop, when the director of *Safarni* holds a meeting with interested parents. In this meeting, the interested parents sign contracts with the organization, designating their approval of their children's participation in the workshop as well as their acknowledgement that the organization has the right to take pictures and videos of the children to post to their social media sites and to share with their sponsors. To encourage the mothers to let their children participate in a workshop and have their pictures

taken, when the children could be working or helping in the home, *Safarni* promises a subsidy of one liter of oil, one kilo of sugar, and one kilo of flour upon the graduation of the child from the program. This ensures the full participation of the children in the workshop, as well as the attendance of the parents to the graduation ceremony at the end of the program. For context, these subsidies are critical in ensuring that the family can eat. As staples of making tea, bread, and cooking food, these items are universally used in the home and therefore will alleviate the costs of cooking food. Such items are also the same basic commodities that the government often subsidises.

Therefore, during the graduation party while the children are snacking and trying on their new t-shirts, the director of the organization takes the mothers into a side room and closes the door. She thanks the mothers for allowing their children to participate in such an educational opportunity and points to how much they learn and grow in the eight weeks. She then passes out another waiver, this time for the second-stage of the program, the workshop titled "Diversity in the City," and promises the parents that they can receive another subsidy if they sign the form and allow their children to participate in a second workshop series. She explains what the program is and why it is important for the children to participate, thereby doing her best to sell the program to the attending mothers. Some mothers sign the waiver, some do not. At this point, the subsidy bags are brought into the meeting room and passed out to the mothers, with each mother receiving the same number of subsidies as the number of children she allowed to participate in the workshop. The meeting then concludes, and the mothers start to leave the workshop space with their children.

Diversity in the City

A few weeks later, the second phase program, "Diversity in the City" starts with the children whose parents signed the right waivers during the graduation party. This program is much shorter, only spanning three sessions over three weeks, and focuses on ethnic and cultural diversity, not only in the world, but also in Cairo.

The children spend the first week talking about the diversity amongst themselves and in their communities. The program leaders discuss with the children the idea of migration and refugees, and talk about issues that this can cause in their society.

The second session is the most important of the three. During this six hour session, the children go on a field trip with the volunteers to different spots of cultural and religious diversity in Cairo. There are usually five different field trips that the children can choose from: one is visiting a church, a synagogue, and a mosque in Coptic Cairo, one is traveling to the Syrian Quarter in the neighborhood 6 October, one is eating at the Indonesian restaurant in Islamic Cairo, one is eating at a Sudanese restaurant in the neighborhood Dokki, and one is eating at a Chinese restaurant in the neighborhood Mohandiseen. The children also have tasks that they must complete on the field trip: they must interview someone from that culture and ask them questions about why they are in Cairo, they must take pictures, and they must write a little about what they think of the culture themselves.

The third session is a debriefing session, where the children go over their experiences and talk about the vast cultural diversity that exists within their city. They present to their peers who went on the other trips about what they saw and ate, and talk about the culture that they

experienced. Through the workshop, the children are supposed to learn about the diversity that exists within Cairo, and learn to be accepting and open to it when they encounter it in their own lives.

At this point in time, the third stage of the program, "Diversity in the Community," is just beginning, and therefore there is no data on this segment of the program to include in this research project.

III: Methodology

This research paper will look at *Safarni* as a case study, analyzing their work in the low-income neighborhood of Ard al Lewa in educating the children there on issues of diversity. My analysis of the economic and political dimensions of this organization's work will consist of a mixed-method approach, primarily based in ethnographic data I collected through participant observation of *Safarni*'s work in Ard al Lewa in the spring of 2018. A combination of vignettes from my experiences, pictures that I took, and other secondary material taken from the *Safarni* Facebook page serves as the foundational evidence for this research paper, allowing me to connect different elements of the organization and its work through the theoretical frameworks which I will employ.

This project is primarily concerned with the economic and political dimensions of *Safarni*'s work, though subjects relating to society, culture, post-colonial thought, and discourse do necessarily make an appearance as well. The paper itself is split up based on the different theoretical lenses: the two main analysis sections (V: Economic Dimensions of Performance and VI: Political Dimensions of Performance) examine the evidence placed at the beginning of each

section, deepening our understanding of the vignette or the picture to evaluate the relevant economic and political implications. In order to be able to directly place the evidence from *Safarni* next to the literature, I use Erving Goffman's idea of the performance to abstract the components of the workshops to a level at which point I can more easily talk about the process of commodification. Most of this linking is done in the section directly preceding my analysis, in section IV: Looking at *Safarni* as Performance.

I found, that by this method, I am best able to address the abstract concepts and problems that I came across while participating in *Safarni* workshops, while not neglecting the actual evidence itself. By intertwining the literature with the evidence, rather than placing the relevant literature in its own section separate from analysis, I found that I could more concisely address the issues that I wanted to discuss in this paper.

While I believe that the methods employed in this research project are the best given the confines of the paper, there are additional studies that could be done to improve the generalizability of this study. I would like to, in the future, do a survey-study of *Safarni* participants, analyzing the language used by the children participating in these workshop and how it reflects the ideas put forth in this paper. The following discussion makes theoretical claims on the economic and political consequences that something as seemingly wholesome as "friendships creating empathy" can have in practice ("About *Safarni*").

IV: Looking at *Safarni* as Performance

When I was a volunteer with *Safarni*, I was what they called a "foreign friend" during the "Diversity in the World" program. My job was to sit in the kitchen section of the

workshop and make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches with the children who passed through my station. I would explain in Arabic how to make the sandwich with the Egyptian group leader sitting next to me, who also engaged me in dialogue by asking me questions about my country and when Americans ate this type of sandwich. Every group would have two or three children who really loved the sandwiches, two or three who were ambivalent about it, and two or three who did not like peanut butter and jelly. During one rotation, I had a young boy who smelled the sandwich, scrunched his face in distaste, and refused to take a bite of it. The Egyptian group leader sitting next to me admonished the boy, taking a bite of her own sandwich and dramatically showing how much she liked it. When that did not convince the boy, she asked the group what they were supposed to say instead of saying that they did not like something. In a unified chorus, the group replied, "That's not gross, that's new to me" (جديد عليّ).

There are numerous factors that make the case study of *Safarni* interesting sociologically and politically, all of which tie to the organization's performative aspects. In the background section, I detailed the workshop activities that take place during the first stage of the *Safarni* programming: "Diversity in the World." In the following section, I want to look closer at the activities that go on during the workshops, and what the relative implications that these actions have for the greater social and political power dynamics of non-governmental organizations in Cairo.

The vocabulary and analogies of Erving Goffman's work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* is a useful lens for us to deconstruct the performance of culture and aspects of identity seen above. Goffman uses the metaphor of theatre in this work and claims that the presentation of the self is similar to the presentation of a play: there are actors, an audience, a setting, and both a front and backstage (Goffman 22). In doing so, he means to address the insincere nature of human expression and interaction, saying that the, "expression of the individual is in two forms: the expression that he *gives* and the expression that he *gives off."* (Goffman 2).

Safarni claims to "engage children to explore and appreciate diversity in all its forms"

(*Safarni*). In engaging the children to explore concepts related to diversity, *Safarni* volunteers engage in a type of performance, acting out the values of diversity that they wish the children to mimic and adopt in their daily lives. Seen in the above vignette, the role of the group leaders in *Safarni* workshops is to act out the proper response of the children and to admonish them when they do not comply by correcting their language or behavior. By having the Egyptian group leader sit next to me, the "foreign friend," the children see an "intercultural" performance with an American and an Egyptian cooperating in teaching the children to make food.

This example clearly shows that *Safarni* volunteers are engaged in a type of performance. Looking more specifically at the different aspects of Goffman's analogy of the performance: the actors/front-stage, the audience, the backstage, and the setting, will allow me to further dissect this analogy.

Actors:

In this thesis, I conceptualize the volunteers of the organization as the "performers" or "actors," and the children as the "audience," responding to the performance of the volunteers in various ways. This is vital to seeing the ways in which the organization affects the performance of the identities of the children in the audience. While each individual volunteer performs in their own way, the performances of all the volunteers are coordinated, with the entire workshop forming what Goffman would term a "team performance" (Goffman 79). In viewing the interactions of the *Safarni* volunteers as those of intertwining performances, I can more fully incorporate these exchanges of identity as one distinct and homogenous entity, combining the

individual performances of the "foreign friends," "program director," and "group leaders" into one performance.

Audience:

I employ Goffman's terminology to break the performances that take place in *Safarni* workshops into two "team performances" that of the actors/volunteers and that of the audience/children. The children compose the audience team, as they are not asserting their thoughts and ideology on the volunteers, but rather are on the receiving end of the education. As audience members, the children are expected to respond to the performance, the response of which is a type of performance itself. This type of performance has more rules governing the actions which the audience can take, the implications of which I will discuss at the end of this section. First, however, I would like to focus more specifically on the demographics of the children, looking at who specifically is receiving the education and therefore why certain elements of the workshop are stressed more than others.

This picture was taken on "Youmna" (Our Day), in which the children celebrated the ethnic and cultural diversity among themselves as part of the "Diversity in the World" workshop. Many of the children come dressed in the traditional dress of their country of origin, rather than the tshirts and jeans that we normally saw them in, as can be seen in the picture above. Some of the girls, while they would not wear a hijab to the workshop on other occasions, wore cloth that covered their hair on this day, mimicking how their parents dress.

The sociocultural background of the children who participate in *Safarni* workshops in Ard al Lewa shapes both the way in which the volunteers engage with them and the way in which they themselves experience the workshop. Ard al Lewa is an informal settlement in Cairo, and is densely populated with lower class Cairene families, Egyptian families that have moved to the city from Aswan and Port Said, and refugee families predominantly from Eritrea and Sudan

("Egyptian Informal Settlements to be Displayed at Architecture Exhibit in Venice"). The gender

divide in the workshops is never consistent, though on average slightly more girls attend than

boys.

The children generally are of elementary-school age, 6-12 years old, although some older

siblings of particularly rowdy participants attend the workshop as well. It is common to see

siblings coming to the workshops in pairs- an older sister will come with her two younger

brothers to keep an eye on them, or two sisters come together to keep each other safe while away

from their parents. Because of the young age of the children, their economic status, and the

available schooling opportunities, there is a wide variety in the children's abilities to read, write,

and speak in both Arabic and English. Only a few children I came to know could say a couple of

introductory sentences in English and only a few could write. Commonly, boys are unable to

read or write, and the volunteers have to work around those children, having them participate in

the workshop without drawing attention to the fact that they cannot read or write. This also

affects the children's communication abilities with both the foreigners who speak Arabic as well

as to the Egyptian volunteers themselves. The Sudanese and Eritrean refugee children spoeak in

a much heavier Egyptian accent that is hard to understand. All of the children had a hard time

understanding Modern Standard Arabic (MSA, fusha), as they do not study MSA for very long

in school, and had been mostly exposed to Egyptian dialect.

The divide between refugee and native Egyptian children was an important dynamic present

when *Safarni* first established their project in Ard al Lewa. One of the main goals for the

outcomes of the workshop in Ard al Lewa "will provide Egyptian children along with the

migrant communities [an opportunity] to "meet and interact, learn about cultural diversity, and

most importantly learn to accept each other." (Ezzidin, Toqa). Therefore, the audience of the workshop performance was engineered through the organization's choice to work in Ard al Lewa specificall, and influenced the performance, as the organization tailored their work to address the issues that arise surrounding heterogeneity in ethnicity and race.

When looking at the children in this community as an audience to the performance of *Safarni* ideals, we are forced to see also see them as types of performers, acting and interacting within a certain power structure. This is because it is the performers, or the *Safarni* volunteers, who control the performance, not the audience. The audience members are the passive spectators who take in and respond appropriately to the ideas that they are being exposed to throughout the performance. Within the specific context of *Safarni*, the juxtaposition of values is visible in that the children, as audience members, do not respond to the performance with their own voices, but rather with complacent observation. This can be seen in the vignette at the beginning of section IV: the children know to respond to something they do not like with the phrase "it's new to me," rather than telling their true feelings about the matter at hand.

Front Stage-Back Stage:

The first time I volunteered as an "American foreign friend" for a *Safarni* workshop, the director told me that the event would last for five hours, which was a long time in my opinion for a cultural workshop. When I arrived at the workshop location, down an unpaved road in the poor neighborhood of Ard al Lewa, I climbed the stairs of an apartment building to the third floor apartment where *Safarni* worked. Upon entering the apartment, I found the five volunteers putting up flags, pictures, and poster boards on the bare, unpainted walls, some of which read "*Safarni's* Constitution," and "*Safarni's* Journey," as well as the names of the different stations for the workshop. The director greeted me and asked me to help put things on the wall, showing me around the apartment to the different rooms and explaining what station went in which room. After about an hour of this, the volunteers gathered together, drinking tea and coffee and

talking about their expectations for the day, as well as what they were excited for. Many of the volunteers had done this many times, and said what they always said: "I'm excited for the game station," "I'm excited to make the sandwiches," "I'm excited to see the smiles on the children's faces." After talking for about an hour, the director initiated a run-through of the workshop, with each person practicing what they would say at each station and what they would do if issues arose. The director would give the group leaders hypothetical situations at each stop in the run-through, asking them what they would do. If the group leader responded satisfactorily, the director nodded and told the other volunteers to act the same way. If the group leader did not respond in a satisfactory manner, the director would correct them, instructing them as to what they should say to the child in the given situation.

In the case of *Safarni*, the volunteers coordinated their efforts for hours before the arrival of

the children and spent hours after the workshop finished debriefing and talking through the

problems with the performance of the day. In such preparation before the workshop, the

volunteers go over what they will say if they get asked a difficult question during the workshop

or how they will respond to an incident of racial or gender bias. In order for the performance of

Safarni to run smoothly and without miscommunications with the children, the volunteers have

to practice the performance when no audience is present in order to perfect their part before the

children arrive. Goffman terms this the "backstage activity" of the performers (Goffman 112).

This differs from the front region, where the performance actually takes place. In the case of

Safarni, the organization's volunteers perfect their performance before the children arrive,

checking in with the other performers and going through what they will say and do when the

audience is present. *Safarni* literally takes part in what Goffman describes as the back-region

activity, where "the team can run through its performance, checking for offending expressions

when no audience is present to be affronted by them…" (Goffman 112). Especially since the

performance of *Safarni* involves the teaching as complicated an ideal as that of diversity, the

preparation of the workshop volunteers in the back region is vital to the success of the program.

The idea of the "back region" is extremely important because it separates the performance itself from the relaxed demeanor of the performers beforehand and afterwards. In the case of *Safarni*, the volunteers drink tea and coffee in the back region and address the forthcoming team performance. These activities are things that they would never do in front of the children, especially not talking through the hypothetical situations. By separating the performance from the back region activity, the volunteers treat the *Safarni* workshop performance as an object with chronological borders and social norms that define when and when not the performance is happening. This is vital in the process of creating economic value for the object of the workshop: since the performance has boundaries, defined by the back region activity, it can therefore exist as a definable entity to be sold.

The question that follows is, what specifically is being commodified in the process of objectifying the *Safarni* workshops? The answer lies in both the objective of the organization and what Goffman describes as the "effort of the front region" (Goffman 107). The point of the workshops, in the words of *Safarni*, are to create "a generation that feels connected to diversity and celebrates this through friendships with people from around the world" ("About *Safarni*"). The term "diversity" can mean many things and can be interpreted in many ways. The fact that diversity is the sole focus of *Safarni* shows that the organization is focused on making moral claims on what is diverse and what is not, rather than simply perpetuating ideas that already exist. The organization relies on phrases such as "We believe that dancing together is more uniting than a handshake. Friendship is stronger than a peace treaty. Love is more uniting than an open border" ("About *Safarni*"). What these phrases actually mean is ambiguous, but on the surface it seems that *Safarni* promotes known universal truths about diversity and the goodness

of openness. Goffman addresses this type of moral claim in performance, stating that "individuals are concerned not with the moral issues of realizing these standards, but with the amoral issue of engineering a convincing impression that these standards are being realized" (Goffman 251).

This is important in thinking about the commodification of performance, by which I mean the process of gaining economic value from performances of diversity. Goffman implies above that the moral world only exists discursively, and that the actual performances consists of the engineering of the impression of moral standards. Therefore, the production of morality through the performance makes up the performance in its entirety. Rather, the performance cannot be separated from the engineering of a convincing impression of moral standards where the performers attempt to signify that morals have been realized for the performers and are being realized for the audience.

In the case of Safarni, the goal of the organization is to expose low-income children to the concept of diversity, teaching them about race, gender, and nationality in such a way that reflects certain standards about being a "global citizen." By teaching the children to respond to new things in a certain fashion and by shaping their discourse about racial and gender issues, the organization creates the "reality of diversity" in the lives of these children, the production of which is the commodity that exists as a result of the performance.

Setting:

> One week, I was working in the "kitchen" station of the American workshop day. I was teaching the children to make peanut-butter and jelly sandwiches and answering the children's questions about my life in America. One elementary-

school girl who was wearing an abaya asked me if I had any pets in my house in America. I responded, telling her that I had a dog and two fish in the house in which I grew up. The girl squinted her eyes at me and said, "But that's haram!" The group leader was quick to correct her and asked the group, "we don't say that something's haram, but what do we say?" The children responded in chorus, "It's different from us!"

In the process of looking at the commodification of performance in the case of *Safarni*, one must also examine the setting of the performance, not physically but geo-politically. The idea that morals and values only exist relative to others is echoed in works of sociological thought. A well-known example of this is the work of Emile Durkheim, who, in addressing the sociology of morals, states that, "'To behave morally is to act in accordance with a norm …The domain of morality is the domain of duty, and duty is prescribed behavior.'" (Hall 48). In the case of the girl in the vignette above, it was made clear to her at home that dogs are not allowed in the house because they are haram. Her statement, questioning the fact that Americans keep dogs in their house, was not a moral judgement on me but rather a questioning of the morality to which she had been accustomed. However, the group leader in this instance attempts to re-prescribe her behaviour, thereby attempting to train her to switch her religious mindset with that of the workshop. Thus, something is not "haram," but it is simply "new."

Using the language that Goffman provides us, one could say that Durkheim is suggesting here that moral behavior is a type of performance in which the performer is making a specific claim to his audience, and thereby asserting a type of authority over them. Moreover, Durkheim builds upon this statement, going as far as to say that "'A social fact…is to be recognized by the power of external coercion which it exercises or is capable of exercising over individuals.'" (Hall 51). Therefore, behaved morals are actions which can be defined by the exertion of power. In the case of of the girl wearing the abaya in the *Safarni* workshop, the organization exerted power

over the child through forcing her to change her discourse from that of Islamic jurisprudence to that of diversity and openness.

From this, one can find two different effects of *Safarni* on the audience of children who participate in *Safarni* workshops. The first is political, and relates to the power of external coercion that the organization enacts against the social values and norms of the children. Secondly, there is a type of economic interaction between the organization and the families of Ard al Lewa, signified by the commodification of the *Safarni* performance as well as the exchanging of subsidies for the children's participation in the workshop.

V: Economic Dimensions of *Safarni* Performances

Thus far, I have discussed *Safarni* workshops as a type of performance, with the volunteers of the organization and the children participants working in two teams to perform conceptions of diversity, and therefore also identity. However, these performances do not exist in a social bubble. The actors in these workshops are involved in complex political and economic systems and do not leave those systems at the door upon the start of the performance. Furthermore, in the previous section I determined that the "engineering of social standards" was the product of the commodification of the performance. The following section will look more directly at the economic implications of this commodification, asking the following question: "How does the commodified performance exist within its respective market, and what does this mean for the political-economic systems in which *Safarni*, as an organization, is involved in?".

The integration of *Safarni's* work into the global economy is apparent through the

funding of the organization by the European Union, the United Nations International

Organization for Migration, The French Institute, and the United Nations Alliance of

Civilizations ("Partners"). In other words, there is money being transferred from outside

international organizations to *Safarni* in exchange for the work that they do and the commodities

that they produce.

This picture was taken for the United Nations International Organization for
Migration's (IOM) project *Living Together,* a clickfunding campaign in Cairo for *Safarni*
after the organization won second place in the United Nation's Cultural Innovation award
in early 2017. IOM sponsored the campaign, getting the famous Egyptian actress, Boshra,
to be featured in the advertising. With every point that the campaign received, 1 EGP was
raised for the organization. With over 176,000 views during the first three days of the
campaign, the IOM was able to fund *Safarni* workshops for an entire year (Facebook,
2/5/18). In the summary of this campaign, categorized on their webpage under
"community stabilization," the IOM praised the work of *Safarni*, stating that the
organization is "an initiative that will contribute to IOM Egypt's ongoing efforts to foster

community cohesion and promote cultural diversity between migrants and the Egyptian communities hosting them" ("UN Migration Agency in Egypt Launches Campaign to Foster Community Cohesion").

Upon first glance, it can seem that the workshops that *Safarni* produces are merely manifestations of openness, love, and equality. However, a large amount of effort has to go into the production of these virtues behind the scenes which composes the performance itself. In the case of *Safarni*, part of the back stage activity is the organization's effort to fund their projects. Money is required to make the organization run: the director must have a salary. Food, coffee, tea, markers, and other equipment must be bought each week for the workshops. *Safarni*, like many non-governmental organizations, has appealed to international organizations such as the IOM for funding. Because of this, the commodification of the performances inherent to *Safarni* workshops is also visible through the packaging and selling of "diversity" and "friendship." In the picture above is the Egyptian actress Boshra standing with children, none of whom are from Ard al Lewa, visible through the new clothes that they are wearing, the neatness of their hair, and their demeanor among people that they obviously do not know. The neighborhood in the background is also not Ard al Lewa, the location of the *Safarni* workshops, which can be recognized through the abundance of trees in the background. Translated into English, the caption on the campaign picture says, "#Share_Friendship, Journey through People." Reflected in this campaign is the extent to which the concept of "diversity" is being commodified and sold as clickbait for international investors. While the intentions of the organizations itself may be pure in nature, the organization still actively participates in commodifying their workshop and performances.

This process of economic exchange is not only present on the side of the organization, but also includes the local participants, who are given a subsidy of sugar, flour, and oil in exchange for their children's participation. The participation of the families of these children is motivated by the subsidy of basic food goods, rather than the organization's idealistic view of people wanting the education on diversity. Some mothers are excited by the educational opportunity, however this excitement is always expressed at the end of the workshop, after the point at which they have already signed a contract to have their children committed to going to the workshop. This shows a second sector of the *Safarni* market where the workshop ideals are sold, not for international funding, but for subsidies of basic food items.

Creation of new subjectivities

It is important to draw attention to the fact that the economic exchanges that take place through *Safarni* workshops do not involve the physical production of goods that are explicitly sold to a buyer. Rather, the commodities that are bought and sold through these workshops are not material, but rather ideological and abstract. Julia Elyachar, whose book *Markets of Dispossession: NGOs, Economic Development, and the State in Cairo* takes a look at micro-entrepreneurship projects in Cairo, would say that this economic exchange is a symptom of the innovations characteristic of neoliberalism, claiming that the "expansion of the neoliberal market depends on creating new subjectivities" (Elyachar 214). In an age where the dependence on industries of material goods is on the decline, the economy has expanded the definition of the commodity to include non-material products such as ideas and values. I previously argued that the morals and values of *Safarni* are actions that adhere to a social norm and that the

performance of these actions become ends to themselves. This fits within what Elyachar is referring to, here, as "new subjectivities." A subjectivity can consist of a enacted or created moral, which is commodified in the workshop experience.

Elyachar does not leave it at this, however, and goes as far to claim that "an attempt to extract new *economic* value has been carried out by transforming social networks and culture *into* value." (Elyachar 9). The implications of this, for Elyachar consist of an "extension of the free market to absorb the cultural practices of the poor as a source of social capital and profit." (Elyachar 137). Therefore, it is through the process of NGO projects defining and categorizing cultural practices that the neoliberal market is able to expand in order to include those same cultural practices as modes of production. This has significant implications for the activity of the organization *Safarni* at the macroeconomic level. In this lens, the organization is a neoliberal actor, simply acting within market norms and filling a gap where economic value can be extracted from the subjective and the social.

Consequently, performances of diversity, as present in *Safarni*'s work, are modes of production in this political economy. Since *Safarni* volunteers sell their performance for funding and the parents sell their children's participation for subsidies, the performance of the children (audience) and volunteers (performers) becomes the commodity which is given value in the exchange with the relative buyers. There are severe implications to thinking about *Safarni* performances as commodities, as Elyachar implies by saying that "the transformation of positive relational value into social capital is a form of accumulation by dispossession." (Elyachar 189). In the case of *Safarni*, this means that from the act of commodifying the performance of diversity leads to a tearing away of identity from the self. Within the case study, Elyachar's abstract

"positive relational value" is the concept of diversity, or what differentiates us, and the social capital is simply the wealth gained in the market through the buying and selling of the workshop performances. Elyachar claims that this performance is a "form of accumulation by dispossession," which means that through gaining wealth in this form of economic transaction, the producers dispossess the commodity that they are producing. With diversity being the commodity in this case study, this means that the self is being separated from their tie to "diversity," which is individual identity. The implications of thinking of performances as commodities further break apart the seemingly "human" element of concepts of "diversity" and "inclusivity".

To start looking more in depth at the technicalities of this process, I find it vital to first define what a "commodity" is and how we should conceptualize it. Most prominent in the relevant body of literature is the definition of Karl Marx, in *Capital*, who describes the commodity as that which "congeals value," or the item which represents and symbolizes a certain amount of relative value (Harvey 34). Commodities are also imbued with two different types of value: the value it has as a thing owned by a person, and the value it has in exchange (Harvey 17). This bifurcated notion of the "commodity" is important to consider in its two separate parts. I will refer to the value a thing has as owned by a person as the "commodity-as-object," and to the value a thing has in exchange as the "commodity-as-value." The two following subsections will tease out these two notions and how they relate back to the commodification of *Safarni* workshop performances.

Commodity as object:

One way to define the "commodity" is that as a defined object. Not necessarily something that has any value attributed to it, but rather something that the individual can relate to that is separate from themself. Therefore, by being a commodity, it is necessarily not the self. Another way to look at the object commodity is as the commodity-as-other.

Within the context of the performance of identity, this definition becomes critical to looking at the process of commodification. This is because in order to identify the performance as something that one can reappropriate as a commodity to exchange in the market, the individual must separate their being from the performance so that it can become an object. In the "front stage-back stage" section of IV: Looking at *Safarni* as Performance, I drew the connection between the *Safarni* backstage and frontstage areas of the performance, citing the preparation period as an example of "backstage activity" that prepared the actors for the actual performance. It is this backstage component that allows us to see the commodified performance: the activity of the back region (the self) is necessarily separate and different from the activity of the front region (the object/the other). Going further within the framework of Marx, this objectification of performance becomes a process in which the actors themselves find "pure self-identity in otherness" (Taussig 36). This form of self-identity not only objectifies the values which the actors are trying to portray, but also the identities of the actors themselves, as they themselves become an object.

Commodity as value:

The second way in which Marx defines the "commodity" is as the value that something holds through exchange. I termed this earlier in this section as "commodity-as-value," focusing on the relational creation of the object/commodity through exchange. Harvey, in summarizing Marx's thoughts on the commodity-as-value, explains that "in simple barter situations of this sort, everybody who has a commodity has something with a relative value and looks for its equivalent in another commodity." (Harvey 31). Therefore, commodity can be defined as that which has value, meaning it can be exchanged for something of the equivalent value. Havey uses the term "congealed value," focusing on the value of the commodity in the abstract, rather than the use-value of the object.

In the case study of *Safarni*, the concept of the commodity as "congealed value" rather than an object leads to the conceptualization of the "exchange-value of identity." This is crucial in thinking specifically about teaching about diversity, as an identity can only have exchange value if there is differentiation the way in which participants define themselves. As a more concrete example, there would be no need or demand for such a diversity workshop if American adults and Egyptian children had the same racial, ethnic, and socio-economic identities. Commodities of performative identity only have exchange-value because there are differences in the identities of the participants. This also shows us the fundamental role that the conception of "the other" plays in this type of market exchange.

In looking at the "commodity-as-value," it is important to also define and deconstruct the idea of "value." What is it, and how does it exist in the same sphere as the commodity? In terms

of determining the value that any particular commodity may have, Marx believed that "value is a social relation, and you cannot actually see, touch or feel social relations directly; yet they have an objective presence." (Harvey 33). Therefore to Marx, value is not constant or determinable, but rather it exists only socially, similar to Durkheim's conception of moral behavior, mentioned in the "setting" section of IV: Looking at *Safarni* as Performance.

What this means within my case study goes back to section IV. This objectification of performance tears personal identity away from the individual so that it only exists in relation to the self. For in order to talk about interpersonal differences between "white" and "black," "male" and "female," "rich" and "poor," the participants and volunteers in *Safarni* workshops must first extricate themselves from their identities, presenting their attributes as objects to be compared to those of other participants in the exchange, thereby allowing their attributes to have exchange-values ascribed to them.

The two definitions of the commodity-as-object and the commodity-as-value are embodied in the differences between the operational and relational definitions of "diversity" employed in *Safarni* workshops. Earlier, I argued that diversity was the product that was being created, bought, and sold through *Safarni* market exchanges. Therefore, "diversity" as commodity must be defined and analyzed, which entails looking at "diversity-as-object" (or the operational definition of diversity) and "diversity-as-value" (or the relational definition of diversity). Though these two definitions may differ in actual enactment within *Safarni* workshops, the values embodied in each definition do not necessarily differ. Here, I am looking at the existence of diversity through performance, and how the bifurcated nature of the performance resembles the bifurcated nature of the commodity.

The Overpowering of the Self by the Commodity:

عائشة من احتفالية سلمية بيوم السلام العالمي، بتشوف ان التنوع موجود في كل حاجة حوالينا سواء كان التنوع ثقافي، اجتماعي، مادي، تنوع في أساليب التعليم، أو في وسائل الإتصال، والتنوع الأساسي فينا كاشخاص.

Aisha from Selma event, said that for her diversity is found in many things around us, whether it is cultural diversity, or diversity in social class, in pedagogical approaches, or diversity in means of communication, and most importantly diversity in people. (*Safarni*- Intercultural Children's Workshop)

لما سألنا عمر صالح عن التنوع شاركنا رايه بان التنوع ممكن يكون ثقافي زي التنوع بين ثقافة الريف والحضر، أو تنوع الجنسيات، او تنوع الديانات، والتنوع في العادات... التقاليد، بالإضافة لتنوع اللهجات من محافظة لأخرى ومن بلد لآخر.

When we asked Omar Saleh about diversity he said that it could be cultural diversity like rural vs urban areas, or the diversity in nationalities, in religion, in customs and traditions, and the diversity of dialects from one province to another as well as from one country to… (*Safarni*-Intercultural Children's Workshop)

رشيدة محمد من فعالية سلمية: انا عايشة مع التنوع، انا من بورسعيد، حاليا عايشة في الغردقة، لكن انا اصلا من أسيوط في صعيد مصر... انا مؤمنة ان التنوع بيخلق عالم منكامل وسلمي.

Rashida Mohamed from [the] Selma event: I live with diversity, I am from Port Said, I live in Hurgada but I am originally from Asyut… I believe diversity creates an integrated and peaceful world. (*Safarni*- Intercultural Children's Workshop)

Above are three examples of children participants' thoughts on diversity after

participating in a *Safarni* event. One common element of all three statements is the way

in which the children talk around the idea of diversity- they can identify the contexts in

which diversity is talked about, but they do not really talk about which aspects of the idea

are good and why. The third child, Rashida, gets the closest in saying that "diversity

creates an integrated and peaceful world." She talks about the concept diversity doing

something, but not what it actually is. These are examples of the idea of

"diversity-as-value:" the children understand only the relational component of diversity, but do not explicitly grasp the concept in and of itself. Aisha stresses the importance of "diversity in people" in her description of diversity. Omar talks about the "cultural diversity like rural vs. urban." Rashida talks about her personal diversity exemplified in being "originally from Asyut… from Port Said… [and living] in Hurgada." In each of these examples, the child defines diversity relationally, looking at something versus something else, juxtaposing two different things in order to define the object of "diversity."

Jean and John Comaroff, address this notion of relative identity, stating that "the meaning of politics and national belonging— have become opaque… Out of its shadows emerges a more radically individuated sense of personhood, of a subject built of traits set against a universal backdrop of likeness and difference." (Comaroff 305). Therefore, not only does this creation of new subjectivities through millennial capitalism commodify identity, but this commodification of identity is lucrative such that identity has become merely about identifying similarities in differences. For the only economic value that identity can have is that which others in the market do not.

The idea of the relational definition of diversity is enhanced by the scope of the project in Ard al Lewa. In a early 2018 article on the organization, a partner to the organization explained the importance of *Safarni* being in Ard al Lewa specifically, stating that, "'We noticed that despite that migrants and Egyptians live in the same neighbourhood, and the same streets and the same buildings, they would not meet with each other...Both communities [Egyptians and migrants] are afraid and reluctant of

meeting each other." (Ezzidin, Toqa). The project is directly focused on a ethnically

heterogeneous population, aiming at bridging the gaps between the two populations.

Within this context, the emphasis on the relational definitions of diversity makes even

more sense.

One question that is under examined in *Safarni* ideology is the definition of

diversity. The About Us section on the *Safarni* website contains only statements about

friendship and cooperation. Their mission statement is as follows:

> "We dream of a generation that is globally aware, inclusive, curious and
> loving; a generation that feels connected to diversity and celebrates this
> through friendships with people from around the world." ("About
> *Safarni*").

The phrase "connected to diversity" is a stark example of "diversity-as-object."

The organization itself does not define diversity anywhere in their webpage, with the

children in their workshops, or in their Facebook posts. Instead, the abstract concept of

diversity stands independently as a thing which the volunteers pass onto the children, the

children "connect to." The idea of connecting to diversity exists within the assumption

that diversity is something separate and autonomous, living outside the person and their

ability to relate to others. In this case, the commodity of diversity now takes on a life of

itself outside the participants in the market.

Through the literature on the commodity, one can see the same process. Marx

proposes that "'…persons exist for one another… as representatives and hence owners, of

commodities.'" (Harvey 47). Therefore, the other participants in the market do not

necessarily matter to the individual, rather they symbolize the commodities that they

possess. Because of this, the commodity can be said to actually possess more power than

the individual, as the individual depends on the exchange of commodities and their

identity exists only in relation to that commodity. Taussig explains Marx's thoughts on

this clearly, stating that for Marx,

> "such fetishization resulted from the curious effect of the market on
> human life and imagination, an effect which displaced contact between
> people onto that between commodities, thereby intensifying to the point of
> spectrality the commodity as an autonomous entity with a will of its own."
> (Taussig 22).

Therefore, in visualizing and objectifying the commodity, one enables it to take

on a life of its own and it acts beyond one's control as an entity autonomous from the

individual. This is apparent in *Safarni* ideology, specifically in their use of the phrase

"connecting to diversity." The individual is unable to connect to something that does not

exists outside of the self. We thereby alienate ourselves through the objectification of

"diversity." In his work on mimesis and alterity, Michael Taussig applies the power of

the commodity onto personal identity and knowledge-of-self, quoting Roger Cailliois in

saying, "I know where I am, but I do not feel as though I'm at the spot where I find

myself." (Taussig 34). This describes, not only the aforementioned process of

self-alienation through commodification of diversity, but also the experience of many

Safarni participants through the process of subjecting themselves to the comparative

experiment that is diversity education. For the child becomes not just a resident of Ard al

Lewa, but dark-skinned as opposed to his light-skinned friends, Nubian as opposed to his

Eritrean neighbors, and male as opposed to his female classmates. The self in relational

form becomes not the self through the process of definition.

This phenomenon not only shows an interesting innovation within the occult economies new to this century, but also has serious political implications for the way in which one thinks about issues of diversity and openness. For within this context, the political negotiation of identity becomes something from which economic value is gained.

VI: Political Dimensions of *Safarni* Performances

Picture: (*Safarni*- Intercultural Children's Workshop)

The last *Safarni* cultural day before the graduation was "Our day" (Youmna) in which the children celebrated themselves in Ard al Lewa, looking at the diversity in their neighborhood as equal to that of the countries they had previously visited in the workshop. The "workshop" (warsha) station on this day focused on the construct of color and race, with each child being tasked with mixing/creating their skin color from the paints provided to them. During one session, one of the girls burst out crying, throwing down her paintbrush and retreating from the table. The director rushed over to the station and sat next to the girl, taking her aside and asking her in Egyptian Ammiya what the problem was. After talking with her for a few minutes, the director walked over the to warsha station, confronting a young boy, saying, "Did you call her color ugly?" The boy drew back, knowing that he was in trouble, explaining that he didn't mean to call her *skin* color ugly, but rather that the shade of brown that she had mixed on paper looked gross. The director took the boy, and facing the rest of the room made a speech about how no color is ugly, especially not if it is someone's skin color, and how we need to be careful about the words that we use when we use them. She then made the boy apologize to the girl for his mistake, and then encouraged the girl to continue with the activity. The girl refused, and continued sulking in the corner with one of the volunteers looking after her.

Teaching children about concepts of race, gender, ethnicity, and nationality, mean making claims to know what those classifications mean. Implicitly, therefore, *Safarni* is involved in creating and operationalizing a discourse on the categories of diversity. This is not done through explicit crafting of ideology, but rather through a much more situational-focused approach. The director, in the vignette above, had the authority to judge that within the context of the problem, the boy had exhibited racist behavior.

What does and does not consist of racist behaviour in this context is not as clear as it may seem, and it is through the decision of the director to determine the actions of the small boy as racist that show her feelings of ultimate authority in the matter. In managing thirty small Egyptian children, the director has to make snap decisions about what she is teaching and how. Within the context of the workshops this includes the smallest details, even the simple mistake of

calling a paint color "gross." This is not just a simple correction of a misused word, but as

Edward Said say, this "is achieved by discriminating and taking note of everything, placing

everything of which the mind is aware in a secure, findable place, therefore giving things some

role to play in the economy of objects and identities that make up an environment." (Said 53).

Everything has their place within the standard of order that *Safarni* puts into place, and the act of

recategorizing where the boy can use the word "gross" and where he cannot is part of this

creation of order.

This becomes problematic when looking to the subject material of *Safarni* workshops.

The director is not just categorizing behaviour, but rather is also categorizing color, race,

ethnicity, and gender for these children. In the activity described above, the skin colors that the

children create are painted into boxes and the children are told to come up with a name for their

color (refer to appendix for English translation). The point is to see that the "wheat" skin really is

not really the skin color of the child who created it, the "chocolate" skins do not look similar to

each other, and it seems nonsensical to name a skin color "door." But the systematic boxing and

naming of skin color, and therefore also race, echoes historical colonial efforts at presenting

global diversity, with the Western power controlling what is being presented and how it is being

presented.

In a similar manner, Timothy Mitchell, in his discussion of the Paris Exhibition of 1919

states that, "Exhibitions, museums, and other spectacles were not just reflections of this

certainty, however, but … culture and empire in 'objective' form." (Mitchell 7). Through this,

Mitchell is addressing the many ways in which domination occurs. Looking to Said allowed for

an understanding of how order is achieved through the meticulous processes of categorization

and discrimination. Mitchell builds upon this, adding the dimension of the commodity into the theoretical mix. He claims that it is not just the categorization of things into groupings that reflects the "certainty" of the colonial legacy, but rather it is in the objectification of these categorizations where the true power of colonial domination occurs. For if things are objects, then they can be controlled. They can be arranged into exhibits and can be moved from one place to another.

This same concept represents the brilliance of *Safarni* ideology. Through the process of teaching children about diversity, the volunteers and the director are engaged in the process of defining and commoditizing the very same term. The more skin colors are painted into boxes and labeled by children and the more the behaviour of children is corrected, the more support the re is for the amorphous "object of diversity" that is on display for donors, for the parents, and for followers on social media platforms. The role of the director in this entire process is vital, as a white, Western female slowly defines for these children "race," "gender," "ethnicity," "nationality," and the behaviours that should be associated with each of these concepts.

By means of connecting this to the economic context of neoliberalism within which these thoughts resides, I would like to look to Jean and John Comaroff's *Millenial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming.* As previously noted, the Comaroffs argue that the individual as no longer a "laborer," but rather "a subject built of traits set against a universal backdrop of likeness and difference… The personal is the only political there is" (Comaroff 2000:305). *Safarni*, in not only literally putting race in a box and categorizing the language of the children surrounding race and color, is emblematic of this death of the laborer and rise of politicized identity that serves as the new form of economic gain in the modern neoliberal context.

VII: Conclusion

This research project concludes with the idea order is maintained in *Safarni* workshops through the categorization and micromanaging of behaviour related to the idea of diversity. This order not only changes the behaviour of the children, but is involved in constructing the amorphous object of diversity, the definition of which eludes even the organization itself.

However, in section V: Economic Dimensions of Performance, I determined that *Safarni* performances of identity, commodified as objects, take on a life of their own. The implications of this are that "diversity," of "race," and of "gender," function as autonomous objects to which the individual can only relate. Evident through the case study of *Safarni* is that the economic operationalizing of exhibits of performance of morals can lead to the morals taking on autonomy and power separate from the individuals in the market.

The point of dissecting the work of *Safarni* in this way is to create a tie between the objectification of identity and the very nature of the effects of neoliberal market reform. Elyachar states that,

> "Markets are social and political worlds with their own cosmologies. Each is a cosmos of its own, an intricately functioning field of power. The expansion of the neoliberal market is much more than the selling of an economic device. It is a political project par excellence; it is a massive exercise of power aiming at no less than creating a world- the whole world- in the image of neoliberalism." (Elyachar 214).

And through the case study of *Safarni,* the creation of a new world takes place, where abstract and amorphous concepts such as "diversity" and "race" function autonomously and

serve as modes of production from which economic value can be gained. Neoliberalism has provided the conditions in which not only social and cultural values are being exchanged for economic gain, but that those same social and cultural values are taking on lives of their own as commodities in the market economy. Through extracting value from the subjective values that the organization specializes in, *Safarni* participates in the creation of those values that, once constructed, cannot be controlled by either the dominant or the subordinate groups involved.

Diversity issues and initiatives are thought of in political means, that of colonialism and post-developmentalism effects on the "Third World." However, I argue that the problem is not the politics of the parties involved: the French-American founder asserting her values on low-income Cairene children or the mothers of the children trading their children's time for flour, sugar, and oil. By looking at these issues within the lens of the continuously expanding markets of millenial neoliberalism, the changing nature of identity and wealth creation becomes visible. The individual is no longer defined as the owner of the commodities that they create and own, but rather the individual becomes the commodities themself. What makes one different from those around them is that which they can sell, and the more one learns to sell their differences, the more successful they will become. *Safarni* trains low-income refugee children in Cairo to better participate in the new market, tweaking what makes them "diverse" to match the market standards of production.

In a greater context, this is a process that can be seen in many other facets of humanitarian aid. When refugees apply for refugee status in Egypt with the United Nations High Council for Refugees, they are known to perform their migration story by making their journey seem more harrowing and the situation in their home country seem more dire in order to stress

the importance of them obtaining residency and recognition as refugees in Egypt (Hakli 186).

The status of which comes with economic and social welfare benefits. Outside the context of

refugees, women employment initiatives in the developing world also engage in this behavior,

established for the pursuit of gender equality but simultaneously established to gain wealth from

categorizing and defining women. These organizations, such as the United Nations Women

campaigns, do not open factories for low-income women to employ them, but rather capitalize

on the gender factor, and therefore teaching women about empowerment rather than giving them

long-term means of engaging in those ideals.

In this paper, I have showed how empowerment initiatives, such as *Safarni*, are

emblematic of the economic system of which we are a part. Personal identity is no longer simply

political, but this field of politics is governed by the rules of neoliberal economics and the

recognition of such has severe implications for what comes next.

Appendix 1:

sun	onion	flower	honey	chocolate
tan	chocolate	molasses	door	wheat
yogurt	chocolate	ants	wheat	caramel
flower	sun	pink	red	chocolate
gold	black	red	pink	coal
	chocolate	Nb	Cl	chocolate

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