

HERitage emBODYment: Reclaiming Histories through Digital Scholarship

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Research Rational

In dominant media and education narratives, Middle Eastern North African (MENA) women remain misrepresented. They are spoken about rather than with; portrayed as “voiceless” and in need of saving (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Ibroscheva, 2013), or “docile, male-dominated, secluded, and subdued” (El Nossey, 2016, 148). These colonial, Orientalist descriptors erase their agency and lived realities.

Ancient Egyptian antiquities are similarly Orientalized. “Domesticated within European frames of knowledge and appropriated as narratives of the development of Western civilization,” they are curated by and for foreigners (Abd el-Gawad & Stevenson, 2021). The vast scale of colonial extraction is just starting. Yet, MENA and Egyptian scholarly voices are minimally included.

Over the past decade, Egyptian women have adeptly used digital communication platforms to “(re)claim agency, assert identity, and create their own historical narratives” (Abouelnaga, 2016, 48). MENA women also use creative forms of expression like theatre, visual arts, music, especially applied theatre to support their embodied self-expression for self and civic advocacy (Al-Azraki, 2020; Fahmy, 2019; Kandil, 2015; Skeiker, 2015). Egyptologists similarly use visual arts to extend a community-oriented “more critical engagement with archaeological and colonial histories” (Abd el-Gawad & Stevenson, 2021). Yet, there remain limited avenues for Egyptian women to creatively discuss their identities or cultural heritage within educational settings.



Participant in Goddess Isis costume on boat along the Nile in Aswan, Egypt. Photo by Hagar Nada.



Participants at the Nubian Museum in Aswan, Egypt. Photo by Olivia Attwa.

Research Questions

How may performance-based digital humanities support young women author and embody a decolonial feminist identity?

Can HERitage emBODYment offer a space for Egyptian young women to: (1) disrupt the colonial narratives of both women and Egyptology? (2) reconstruct the histories of Egyptian artifacts through embodied manners (such as poetry, dance, theatre), and (3) contribute to decoloniality discourse beyond academic jargon?

Creative Research Methods

Background: HERitage emBODYment uses Participatory Action Research (PAR) to create Digital Applied Theatre to cultivate asynchronous, interactive space for young women’s embodied engagement with their heritage. This work builds on in-person performance-based research programs I created and facilitated with 100+ young women since 2018, at the Arab Academy for Science Technology and Maritime Transport, in Egypt. It emerges from the participants’ request for ongoing, year-long programming.

Participants: young Egyptian women ages 13-19

Method: Through PAR, participants offer feedback on research design, creative methods, and website usability before the website is launched as well as while participating; and the analysis of the outcomes. I designed the interactive WordPress/Omeka website “HERitage emBODYment” using createFSU. Here I link open-access 3D virtual tours of Ancient Egyptian heritage sites (created by Mused.com for education purposes). Creative prompts that I wrote in Arabic and English correspond to each tour. Participants self-select tours to view at their own pace. They engage with the prompts before, during, and after their virtual exploration. Participants’ individual responses are collected and presented on the website.

They are randomized into a collective collage creating asynchronous, multidisciplinary performance pieces (text, drawing, videos etc.) across time zones, geographies, and language.



Program participants engaging in Applied Theatre practice, in Aswan, Egypt. Photo by author.



Program participants engaging in Applied Theatre practice at the Philae Temple, in Aswan, Egypt. Photo by author.

Why Applied Theatre?

Applied Theatre describes the use of various performance-based practices in non-conventional performance spaces, to support participants address and practice resolving self-identified issues of social concern. It can be an accessible, low-cost opportunity to foster collaborative, creative spaces for self-actualization, and community building.

Digital Applied Theatre

Digital platforms have a broad reach and keep evolving as more users engage with them, but lack interpersonal connectivity and physical embodiment. Applied Theatre fosters collaborative, embodied, interpersonal engagement, but demands a specific time and space, potentially affecting its long-term sustainability. In HERitage emBODYment, I merge the benefits of both through a Participatory Action Research framework, to cultivate a space for accessible, embodied, asynchronous ways for participants, that does not lack the personal communal experience. Digital Applied Theatre offers experimental practices to envision new ways of making theatre across time and space boundaries.

Sample “creative prompt” to engage with 3D Tour

Take your time exploring the space, use the arrows to move up and down, and attentively read the captions on the tour. Once you have sufficiently explored the space, go back to a spot that really grabbed your attention. Perhaps it’s the story, or a specific figure, or the intricacy of the drawings, or the designs. Once you’ve picked this spot, take a screenshot of it (as if you are actually there taking a photo!)

Respond to the following:

- Where this spot? (for example: In Queen Meresankh III’s tomb, I’m drawn to the rock cut statues of 10 women in the northern chamber. See my photo)
- Write down 3 words or short phrases that come to mind when you see this: (for example: gendered familial ties, strength, protection)
- What are 3 gestures that represent each of these words? Take a video of yourself saying each word and its corresponding gesture. (for example, see my video).

Participants upload their responses via a Google Form. I upload their responses to the HERitage emBODYment site. Visitors view the “collective collage” and encouraged to allow the young women’s authorship to guide their learning, understanding, and appreciation of Ancient Egyptian heritage.



Sample screenshot of Queen Meresankh III’s tomb, created by <https://mused.com>

Future Research/Next Steps

- Seek past participants input on the creative prompts and website usability pre-launch.
- Publish website after participants’ input and revisions.
- Present on creative process at the Association of Theatre for Higher Education (ATHE) August, 2024.
- Present on work in progress at the American Society for Theatre Research (ASTR), November, 2024.
- Report on future methods and outcomes as a chapter in forthcoming monograph.