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Learning From The Living Room

FRAMES

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The early days of the NYU TreeSchool introduced me to a concept: people can be segregated to frame-builders or frame-followers. From what I gather, a frame defines one's MO to approaching knowledge or one's knowledge building capacity. Certain people struggle to follow a frame, while others cherish being handed down a rulebook. Understanding this concept opened a profound perspective through which my life has been enriched, hence, I would love to expose this idea further and help readers explore their own capacities.

The world is geared towards certain specific frames such as individualism or productivity. It only permits dissertations that are heavily cited, determines the value of artwork by its price tag, and tries to promote global governance by notions of globalization or universality. These frames were engineered and later popularized in the world we currently live in. This is not to say that these frames should hold any negative connotation, but rather, as followers of a singular frame, we can lose sense of the beauties of other frames. Simply put, since we are programmed to become frame-followers, we can ignore or even resist our natural instincts when looking to build "unorthodox" frames. Although a signature from an esteemed artist increases the price and the value of an artwork, why can't we construct a frame where a journey of an art piece constitutes its value?

No one frame is better than the other. I've learnt that as one frame gets popularized, one must not forget and be educated that no singular frame is perfectly adaptable.

In my experience, I am inclined to express myself through writing whether it be reflections, extracurricular work, or academia. In a lot of instances this seems to be my natural instinct but, in some cases, I feel like the frame of writing has been imposed on me. When I took up doing this piece, I felt the pressure of layering this article with flower-y language which challenges the story-like nature of my experience. As I write this article, I struggle to distance myself from formal writing and into a frame of storytelling. And challenging frames (and struggling to do so) is a recurring occurrence. In school, I wanted to please the frame of being a top student, but secretly I had built my ways of sneaking my own frame. As an example, my Theory of Knowledge teacher (one whose subject supposedly lends itself to encouraging students to be frame-builders) complained that my thoughts were scattered and unfounded. Despite this, I was stubborn to stick with my creativity (as for such original things I have great passion) and disobey conventions. More often than not, education inhibits me from exploring my frame-building. I wonder if this cumulative suppression is slowly diminishing my originality. This idea is not restricted to academic approaches. As the eldest sibling and the eldest cousin on my mother's side, the eyes of my extended family were always prying, and I felt the paternal pressure to be responsible. This meant that any creativity or frame that I chose to build would inevitably come under great scrutiny, thus I was careful to mask my persona. And possibly like many of the readers, I am conscious of masking my actions such that it satisfies the frame, hence why I put a lot of thought into how I structure my creativity or disobedience.

This is where my experience with the TreeSchool enlightened me. The notion of collective production (or even collective unproductivity) taught me that there were other equally valuable frames. These "unconventional" frames may not be prominent or as successful in contemporary terms, but they have immense value, especially to the one who built it. It taught me to explore my frame-building capacity and take joy in its fruits. It was through building a frame of art as an expression that I learnt about being able to express myself publicly yet with confidentiality (I can't hide the fact that I struggle committing to creating art). I am privileged to reinvent myself through building my own frames because now I enjoy art exhibitions… something I couldn't dream of a year back. In fact, I have built my own frame where I refuse to read the descriptions of artwork until the end or try to visualize the piece without color. What I encourage the reader to take away is a process of unlearning. Unlearning what you have learnt is a challenging process that requires commitment. Unlearning conventions and creating new paths to build knowledge is very rewarding (these don't have to be novel ideas but one that challenges the current lifestyle). It allows you to explore yourself from another angle. And over my course of unlearning with the TreeSchool, I have found out that collaboration has tremendously helped me progress in this process. Feel free to embrace unproductivity and creativity in one stride. Happy unlearning!

Listen to the podcast below to learn more about frames and what it means to Professor Sandi Hilal. In this podcast we discuss her definition of frames, how she challenges frames, how she finds the unlearning process, benefits and tips on becoming your own frame-builder.

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Transcript:

[Nathan] Hello miss Hilal. So just a few questions. How would you define a frame?

[Sandi Hilal] Well… actually I think somehow I would both define a frame comforting and oppressing you know? And they both work in some way together. I mean, for example, I consider my extended family one of my most comforting frames ever and it nourishes me, it gives me a lot, but it's also you know being an Arab woman. That same frame of love and care is the same frame of control and sometimes even, you know, highly making me feel that I'm not doing what I should be doing. So, I think that you know it can really it can go from being the most nurturing thing that we belong to, but I think for me what I would define the frame of is the ability of being able to make it visible. So, the moment that you would understand that frames create thresholds and that when you would understand you are crossing these frames and the ability of being in between the frames as much as I consider the frame important, I would also consider being in between that frames equally important. You know a lot of times they convince us this is a

multi-, we talk a lot about multidisciplinary and, you know, that we would like to have a multidisciplinary coursing and yet, you know, we are always almost a lot of time confined with the same frame yet maybe bringing up knowledges from other disciplines rather than the multidisciplinary as a way of crossing things of not only being sort of framed by something and if in some way I would also argue having created my own frame together with others created an art collective called DAAR - decolonizing architecture art and residence - a lot of time I feel that because we inhabit different frames, you know, this is it can be considered an art practice. It's also an architectural practice. It's pedagogical, a lot of time even seen as academical practice, yet I think I always say is that we have the right to be residents in that so as if we are we have a permanent temporariness position in these fields, yet we never got any passport any citizenship because we are never fully artist, we are never fully architects, we are never fully academics. And the fact that we are able to move between many, of course makes us a little bit less of everything, but at the same time it is the source of our own freedom in our work. So, in some way I would not say frames are good and bad they can be both in the same time I would argue that many of us coming from the South of the world felt constantly that we are challenged by the western frame as the only valuable frame and the western knowledge as the only valuable knowledge and we will arrive to these western universities - I mean I arrive to Italy - and all my knowledge before 19 years of knowledge in Palestine valued almost nothing, you know. there was almost no curiosity towards that kind of knowledge I felt that I value nothing for many years, and I had to build my own self-confidence to think you know the knowledge I carry value something. So, I do believe that if frames becomes colonial, if frames becomes oppressive, if frames becomes a way to expropriate people knowledge, I frames becomes a way for people to feel a little bit less

valuable, I would argue that we should absolutely - and a lot of times people would do that because you know they are convinced that it is a good frame. This is the only framework they have been in they never exercise what does it mean to move between frames they never been in these thresholds. They even fear to be in the threshold and sometimes, you know, it is not they don't do it in the in the, you know, in a bad faith yet a lot of time if you inhabit only one frame, you tend a lot of time to think that this is the only frame. Even our I mean our most approximate friends and parents do the same thing; you know. they want always to convince you this is the best frame. You know as an Arab woman, they always convinced me that this is the best frame. I should belong to - I mean so in some way I think this is a little bit might take to recognition. I think we should recognize frames and learn to inhabit them. I'm challenging – and challenge them when needed.

[Nathan] OK, so this sort of leads into my next question. What frames did you challenge when you were younger and has it stayed the same when you've gotten older?

[Sandi Hilal] Well actually I think that my frames are in a constant shifting, and I have to admit that I even, maybe at the beginning, challenging frames were a little bit more a more difficult, more you know a little bit to put myself in a situation of unknown or feeling exposed you know. There is a lot of feeling of being exposed when you challenge your own frames and your own convictions. And definitely I think that when - I challenge different frames. The first one I think that the Israeli colonial frame because I born in Palestine and have been in Palestine during first and second Intifada and in some way, I find myself physically challenging physical occupation, military occupation, so this is like - and maybe this gives me also a lot of courage to

challenge other frames because I still remember my feeling when I was 15 years old. When in some way the first intifada was still there and I was always worried about my teacher, head minister, I mean principal of the school. And they were the power for me at that moment me and in some ways, this is what represent what power is and it was simultaneously that the first intifada came up and us as young generation, even at 15 years old, we were fighting against with simple stones. We were fighting against the military regime. And I still remember that moment when we decide to do the first strike at school. And our - the school principal came and was trying to exercise her power and we just realized that she doesn't have the gun with her and that he will not be killed if we will sort of challenge that frame. And I still until today remember that moment when I realize, you know, if she is pushing us to do something that we are not willing to do we should - especially because we were collectively team, we were 200 students sitting and being convinced that we should strike because our friends were killed the day before, right, so we felt all the right to sort of say we strike and she wanted to follow her own protocols in some way. So, in that moment realized that this was a little bit of another frame of power, and she wanted us to follow that frame and to get in and forget for a while that we were fighting another frame and these overlapping of these two frames, I think was maybe my first time that I was conscious of challenging these frames. And then you know and somehow, I went to Italy and there I was confronted by a western frame and especially, you know, coming again from a place like Palestine where I was extremely proud of being, you know, during the first intifada, of being part of a bigger collective that is fighting for freedom, etcetera, etcetera. It felt that, you know, all this did not mean didn't mean anything in my moment of studying in Europe and that I had to begin from zero. I didn't know a lot of philosophers, a lot of architects, a lot of - you know. I was completely beginning from (?) while all

other, all my other colleagues in the university were sort of - we're not like in in your case in multi-cultural university, it was mainly Italian one, so I had to, I felt for so many years that I value less and then the moment that I realized I managed to combine these two powers later on, I became a combination of two cultures: the western and the Palestinian one. And the moment that I overlapped them together I became way stronger. I was surprised on how these bringing these two together rather, than deleting one in order to success in another, I decided you know in in this I will never succeed as people that began 20 years before me. So, what I decided to do is that I am a combination for these two cultures and decided to put them together as a result of me. and in there it was one of the best reframing ever that I did and it's still following me and the moment that I began to do all this. For me now actually challenging the frame becomes part of my, I would say almost everyday routine. I get used to it. I still feel exposed, definitely, but this exposure is also a sense of being alive, of being, you know - of challenging my own borders constantly, of challenging my own self constantly, so I guess yeah this was my practice of framing. I still remember certain moments but now it's really something that I enjoy doing but I actually I never whenever I do it I am still conscious of doing it. So, it becomes a practice, and you are conscious you are doing it and you try to hurt as much as possible to hurt less yourself and other people and to create that sense of safety-ness so we can do it together. But I think that I arrive to the point where I am conscious of framing and reframing as a practice.

[Nathan] Yeah. In fact, when you brought up like western and eastern frames and when you shifted between both you felt like you knew nothing, and yeah, that - I was - it sort of links in with one of the reflections I had today. It was about how I usually believed, or I was brought up to believe

that knowledge building capacity only belonged to experts or researchers or teachers but when you said when you shifted to the Palestinian frame, you felt like you knew nothing. And then you shifted to the western frame you felt like he knew nothing again. That's when it sort of hit home saying that everyone has their own knowledge building capacity, it's not just like, you know, these experts in these fields. So yeah, it was just a reflection I had and then it resonated with me. I'll move on to the next question. So, how do you unlearn, and do you still find it challenging given that you may have like you know experience with unlearning?

[Sandi Hilal] I would say that you know unlearning for me until now it's the hardest by the way because a lot of time you think that you- these things belong to you because you're born like this, because most probably sometimes even your grandmother would have told you this and you know it's already part of your DNA and the moment that you would discover that it was actually also part of this was imposed on you. I am always having this feeling of, you know, sometimes I say I a little bit got addicted to unlearning as a- but it feels sometimes to me as if I am going in a rollercoaster. In real life I don't like to go into risky, you know, things, games and something that I don't enjoy that much. I fear it. But in a lot of times the unlearning makes me feel so excited, you know, so also adrenaline, feeling I am yeah- There is something that happens in me that I feel I begin to recognize and like so much and even sometimes I'm worried, I begin to worry that I can become addicted to this whole unlearning so to where you will push yourself but I think I I'm lucky enough to surround myself also with people that actually adapt unlearning as their way of living because this is also something that requires you to constantly question your own life almost every morning and sometimes this is, this can be, you know, it's a lifestyle. It's a way of thinking. I would like to do that, and I think that if you are not surrounded by

other people that would like to do so you might begin to feel that this is too much. Also, people surrounding you would feel "my God, how heavy are you? why should we reflect on everything that happens to us?". But I think that the moment that you begin to do it and enjoy it, it becomes as part of your way of dealing with life, of dealing with your job, of dealing with your family, or dealing with looking at what is surrounding you. And I guess that it's a- also in here, I would not argue that it's still something that is both amazing and in the same time also hard to adapt because you might feel alienation, you might feel that, you know, what you would like to have your own community you might feel isolated. So there is a lot of feeling of loneliness, isolation, and a lot of time yeah- I guess it's a- the fact that we organize this that that the group in in the tree school was that group that accepted unlearning, I don't know if it is the way that the course was described or what is it but I feel that in somehow there was no opposition to the unlearning as practice or maybe because it's we are only together for three weeks so we created that momentum of, you know, outside of real life. But imagine if these three weeks would become an extension and how heavy would you feel that you like your life to be. Because my life is almost like this constantly and sometimes it can be- because the moment you begin to enjoy it will not feel hard, but in somehow it is it's demanding. It's demanding because you have to move. You are a little bit tough with yourself constantly and you are realizing that what you have is never enough, you know, because what is what is experts if not 'I know much to the point that I would teach you'. This is what a definition of an expert is. At the moment that you are an unlearned or it's so hard that you can even speak about yourself as an expert. So what you do? You know, it's also, there is this…

[Nathan] …challenge to a power structure. I also thought about this. About how beautiful it would be if we had like this unlearning corner in school. I thought about like we have a classroom but maybe shifted off like another half of the classroom it's just this unlearning section of this tree school section where it was beautiful, it was outdoors, and then you spend your time reflecting on emphasis on unlearning. And we always talk about adaptability in this world, but I never hear unlearning and adaptability in the same sentence. So I was- I think you sort of hinted upon it but it would be so much nicer to see adaptability and unlearning in one sentence or related to each other. So, what would you say the benefits are of becoming frame-builders?

[Sandi Hilal] First of all I think I never feel in my entire career to be fired because who will be firing me from my own frame? So this is like the first and the most sort of-Second it gives you a lot of autonomy because it's something that you built in first place. Here, you know, I mean I have been your teacher, but for me this was a very interesting life experience. I didn't, you know, it is not- I teach you what I know. I mean I feel almost like you know when our grandmother teach us how to sew, or how to play a game, or how to- either whatever is that she teach you with joy. I think for me I mean a lot of time people speaks about such courses as a little heavy-handed, you know, teaching 3 hours a day etcetera, etcetera. In my case I feel I am like a carpenter that is building a piece together with other people coming from so many parts of the world and it has been simply joyful. So, when you are a friend builder, you feel confident in some way within your- and the problem is that when- but I have to say also one more thing. If you will build one frame and then try to protect it all the time and become defensive, this is even worser than following the frame of someone else. So, it's also a little bit this, you know. How you will build frame. And

then building frames and unlearning are extremely important together because if you only build a frame for recognition and for feeling that you will not be fired and for feeling confident and blah blah blah, and then all what you do is to defend your own frame as others defended their own frames, then you are the same point of departure.

[Nathan] OK and final question. I think I was reflecting today but I think I have this fear that in the future, or in my professional life, when I mature more, I'm going to lose the ability to unlearn or I won't give as much emphasis to unlearn or to be part of a reflection or something of that sort so do you have any tips on how to unlearn? Any tips on how to become frame builders? And what should we target, what should we look at?

[Sandi Hilal] I don't know. I think if you will only manage to have a bit of a more holistic vision. Not to divide your life from your work necessarily, it already helps a lot. Because if you find yourself among only few friends or a lover or someone that actually a little bit share similar desire that would change- I mean I think being alone, in the process of frame building might be the hardest. So I would say if you would manage ever to think yourself as part of a collectivity or even to initiate the collectivity but this collectivity can be two, can be three. I mean in Arabic we have this (?) that even two people are in some way you can be singular. You can be two, you can be three. But I think collectivity, because a lot of time you might feel alienated, and being part of the collective will encourage you, remind you always what you are doing. So I would say, I don't know, love and friendship, I mean as simple as they might look, they are quite crucial in permitting you. If the person you are sharing your life would not understand why you would do a certain effort to unlearn rather than you know that- because it sets your priority. Money is not anymore the only thing. It's important because it gives

value to certain things but it's not the only thing and, you know, sharing value with other peoples becomes extremely important. So, I think that it departure from my collectivity or a single person. Do I need to compete in this life in order to go up? Or I do need to build- For example with me now, it is all about understanding what kind of collectivities I'm thinking. So, we are inviting friends to build houses, one house together in South of Italy. We are doing- So, in some way we are experimenting with so many collectivities because this is where we feel our future should look like, you know. We do not want to be alone anymore. Because the moment that you are in 10, you feel such power. That I give you an example, you know. We are in 10 and we decided to go and buy a small piece of land and we want to have a second house together. And this second house we would like to open it up for friends, to do workshops, to do- If we are only in two, we will never have access to such and this means sharing values, sharing- and you can be an initiator because you will super enjoy that kind of collectivity so if you will enjoy collectivity I would say, you know, it makes you already powerful because it's not only one hand, you know. I mean its many hands clipping together. It's- We all dream of a house and then of a summer house or winter house. If these second houses you have become your way of thinking collectivity, of way of sharing the land, sharing this, sharing that, I think in some way you would inspire and become inspirational, and a bit change your life. But you- I think, you know, you ask me tips. I would argue friendship and love are two major things. If they don't share your same values, I would find it the hardest. You would get the super harsh life.

[Nathan] And what should we, finally, what should we like target to unlearn? Maybe as someone who's starting to unlearn, as maybe a teenager, as a university student, what should we target to unlearn? And what are like the

frames, it goes in hand with that question, what are the frames that we should be aware of?

[Sandi Hilal] But I think you are super ready. I mean you just shocked me with what you read.

[Nathan] But in general, for maybe a reader who's listening.

[Sandi Hilal] No, I mean try to elaborate more the-

[Nathan] OK. So, say we have a listener on this podcast, and they're interested to start unlearning. What should they maybe target in their lives? What, not like a category, specific category, but a trait that they have. Or maybe what are the frames that they should be aware of? Because we talked about the importance of like you know NOT following a singular frame AND ignoring the beauties of others? So, how can you start the unlearning process?

[Sandi Hilal] I think that unlearning process starts from questioning your own frame. I mean first of all you are all here right? And in some way, you fought to be here. So, it's good that you would recognize "what is this frame?" I mean "what is it that I can get from that frame, and what is it that I would like to-" I would argue contributing to opening up frames becomes a very important thing, so I think many people are- The unlearning begins with being aware of the frame. Now how you will become aware of the frame. I think either through a collective conversation like the ones that we had and building on top because I would argue that for you the first week was not like the second week, the second week was not like the third week. And every time we sort of put layers on layers and to the point- and

sometimes I know that if I would have brought the principles of the tree school the first class, nobody would have got them. While the third week, it took me 3 minutes to explain what are the principles of the tree school, what is an unlearning, what is unpredictability, what is framing, what is this, and what is that. So, in some way I think that it begins from the desire of actually thinking one's own life because we tend always to think that studying is something else and then you want to come back to our own life. So, the question would you want your life could become- would you like to actually understand which frame you are staying in this moment? Do you have the desire? Or you are satisfied that you prefer not even to open up that Pandora box? I mean it begins also from certain desires. So, if you will feel the need, if you read this article, hear this broadcast, it says you know yes, I would like to question my frame. I think that in some way you would be attracted to certain discussions, and you will see, you will begin to be attracted because then you will begin to recognize certain- You know, I always, I will finish with this example. Before having kids, and I am an architect, before having kids, I would never notice certain baths that they were doing for kids, certain places- Never value the places based on what they have. Do they have a place where kids could play? Don't they have… and, you know, I was completely unaware of many things. The moment I had kids and I began to be aware of myself being a mother, then I would just like to see specific- "but how did I never notice that this is here", right? So the moment that it becomes clear to you, then you have a sort of magnetic to certain knowledges, certain philosophers, certain art, certain things that you begin to recognize, and at that point this is where you will begin your process.

[Nathan] OK, perfect. You've been wonderful, thank you so much.

[Sandi Hilal] Welcome