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Rescripting Religion in the City

Migration and Religious Identity in the Modern Metropolis

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Chapter 6

Performative Languages III: Belleville Bazaar

Liz Hingley and Alice Hertzog

In June 2012 the Parisian gallery La Petite Poule Noire presented an installation entitled *Belleville Bazaar*. Jointly curated by Alice Hertzog and Liz Hingley and drawing on two years of collaborative research examining how shops are revitalizing religious practice in Paris, the piece explored the sale of religious objects in Belleville, a multi-cultural neighbourhood and cheap-and-cheerful shopping area. Since the early nineteenth century, Eastern European Jews, Tunisian Jews, Algerian guest workers, Indochinese refugees, Chinese and sub-Saharan migrants have set up shops in this working-class area. Today the *quartier* has become a bustling cross-roads where faith and diasporic communities intersect, welcoming new migrants as they live, work and shop in Belleville.

The shops cater for a wide range of intra- and inter-faith customers, and bazaars display goods of all faiths side by side or disperse them among a bric-à-brac of frying pans, discount socks and felt-tip pens. Other boutiques have come to specialize in the sale of religious goods, be they esoteric, Lubavitch, Evangelical, Hindu, Buddhist or Islamic. Indeed, Islamic trade has been growing rapidly since the 1970s, and the neighbourhood has become one of the biggest trade centres of Islamic goods in Europe, 'a special area of re-Islamization'.¹

The goods on sale in Belleville range from MP3 Koran players to collectable snapshots of famous rabbis. These religious products are at the heart of our research, conducted in the aisles and behind the tills of Belleville's shops. After presenting initial results in academic contexts, we chose to curate *Belleville Bazaar* in a commercial gallery. We considered that this installation of religious paraphernalia might provide a means to showcase the innovative and at times unexpected religious products on sale but also to explore the shop as an interstitial religious space in the city.

Within the context of French *laïcité*, our search for a gallery entailed facing local resistance to the religious occupation of public spaces. Just as migrants have to jump through hoops and squeeze through loopholes to establish religious sites, we struggled to negotiate an appropriate space for exhibiting our research. Findings showed that as possible religious sites, shops are less controlled and restricted due to their private and commercial status – and Openvizor, the organization supporting

¹ Hervé Terrel, 'L'Enclave Islamique de la rue Jean-Pierre Timbaud', in Gilles Kepel (ed.), *Exils et royaumes: Les appartenances au monde arabo-musulman aujourd'hui* (Paris, 1994), pp. 348–63.



Figure 6.1 Customized mannequin, *Belleville Bazaar* (photo: Liz Hingley)

our initiative, even suggested we rent a shop front for the duration of the show. This experience strengthened our research conclusions that bazaars are precarious, yet highly adaptable places for distributing religious paraphernalia. The shop provides an accessible space and a non-threatening public discourse for spiritual interaction and the development of new religious practices, when compared with more orthodox and unmistakably religious alternatives such as churches or mosques.

One local gallery interested in hosting the installation was hesitant in employing the term ‘religion’ in its communications. As a publicly funded space in a secular country, it preferred to refer to electronic Korans and Chinese God paper as ‘cultural objects’ embedded within a rosy narrative of cross-cultural exchange. Finally the gallery *La Petite Poule Noire*, situated in a more affluent area just 10 minutes walk from Belleville, agreed to host the exhibition. The show occupied two floors, with Liz Hingley’s UK photograph series *Under Gods* exhibited on the ground-floor and *Belleville Bazaar* installed in the basement. Exhibiting the two works together was a comparative exercise in itself, revealing similarities and contrasts between migrant and religious identity in the localities of Soho Road, Birmingham, and Belleville. Both works highlight the transformation of urban space through migrant religious practices; the photos of Birmingham showed this occurring through the alteration of the city’s buildings and private spaces of the home, whereas the installation focused on the shop front as an emerging vitrine of religious identity. The juxtaposition stimulated reflection on the debates surrounding migration, religion and multi-



Figure 6.2 Catholic, Muslim and New Age holy water, *Belleville Bazaar* (photo: Liz Hingley)

culturalism on both sides of the channel. Widening the gaze by including the work on Birmingham also allowed us to disperse the discomfort, and at times taboo, associated with displaying religion in France.

Entrepreneurs in Belleville, in their everyday trading practices, make meaningful and sacred places out of contingent shop spaces. In a similar fashion, we transformed the gallery basement into an installation to convey and reflect our academic research preoccupations. Working in a commercial space, and in a gallery as opposed to a university, allowed us to reconsider the commensurability of religious products. Upstairs, in an immaculate white space, golden-framed photographs were for sale. Without a price tag or till in view, only informed visitors knew that the little red stickers marked photographs as sold. On the other side of the spectrum, the basement evoked an overloaded commercial shop space, in which the paradox lay in the spiritual value of the commodities depicted as for sale.

The process of planning, conceiving and installing *Belleville Bazaar* was itself a research process that led us to delve further into the complex mechanisms used by shops selling religious goods in the Parisian metropolis. Purchasing, bargaining for and borrowing the necessary goods for the installation was an integral part of the research project. Having observed the traders' supply chains, we obtained shop furniture such as vitrines, display boards, mannequins and price-guns from commercial suppliers, and stock from Chinese wholesalers on the outskirts of Paris. We worked with a youth group from a young workers' hostel in Belleville, who

helped us select and purchase the products for the installation. The young workers from France, but also Afghanistan, Algeria, Egypt and Tunisia, lodge in the hostel, which is run by a Christian group. As local migrants, shoppers and residents, we were keen for them to purchase the objects they considered worthy of including in the installation. Over several workshops, we introduced them to our research, to local religious entrepreneurs and showed them the gallery space. Each participant then received a budget with which to purchase an object, they carried on to help us design the show and then worked as mediators explaining and pitching the products to visitors. The project allowed the young workers to enter into open discussions on religious diversity, to share experiences and to transmit religious knowledge across different faith backgrounds. The group were quick to grasp the research project and had a sharp eye for detail, such as the layout of the bazaars.

As curators, we were also assisted by a set designer, Perrine Cado, who helped us to recreate the atmosphere of a dense bazaar, while allowing visitors to examine the products individually. *Belleville Bazaar* reflected the spatial organization of such spaces: with religious toys, *kosher* and *halal* sweets at children's height, fluorescent signs, vibrant colours, noisy flashy chanting electronic goods and overpowering *halal* musk perfume. We were inspired by traders' commercial techniques, for example copying a Pakistani shop-owner by drawing an orientalist moustache onto the shop mannequin (see Figure 6.1). A red shrine glowed from an alcove, to replicate the shrines Chinese shop-owners place in their premises to attract customers and to bring good luck and prosperity to their commerce. Fieldwork also showed that shops intersperse their religious goods with Eiffel Tower merchandise, such as statues, key-rings and posters. Much like the migrant shopkeepers, the installation drew on the iconography of its host city, for example hanging plastic-bags made in China adorned with an image of the Eiffel Tower or Eiffel Tower souvenirs scattered among golden laughing Buddhas.

From the photographic exhibition in the upstairs gallery, a banister covered in price tags led down to *Belleville Bazaar*, guiding the visitor into a space where products lined the walls, among show-cabinets, bargain-baskets, sale-signs and shopping-bags. As the visitors came down the stairs, they were met with quotations collected from various traders of religious goods in Belleville. These phrases, handwritten on fluorescent yellow price-signs, captured the traders' motivations and demonstrated their balance of spiritual and commercial interests. Traders often supply religious goods and spiritual counsel in equal measure. As one shopkeeper neatly put it, 'we are not playing here, we are not selling potatoes. It is a matter of life after death; it is a matter of God.'

Products in the show recreated the commercial but also the imaginary, sensory religious spaces that make up Belleville. The installation produced spiritual sounds: a large framed 3D cityscape of Mecca chanted out prayers next to a running-water fountain upon which a Buddha sat holding a spinning lit-up crystal ball. Iconography of holy cityscapes and the languages of product instructions often referred to migrants' homeland or holy land. Three compasses were



Figure 6.3 Abdul with Buddha (photo: Liz Hingley)

displayed in one cabinet pointing to Mecca, Jerusalem and the location of Chinese spirits. Unlike the visitors to the art gallery, the majority of customers and local businessmen in Belleville are multi-linguists. In the majority of shops, a third language was spoken in addition to French and English: Chinese, Tamil, Arabic,

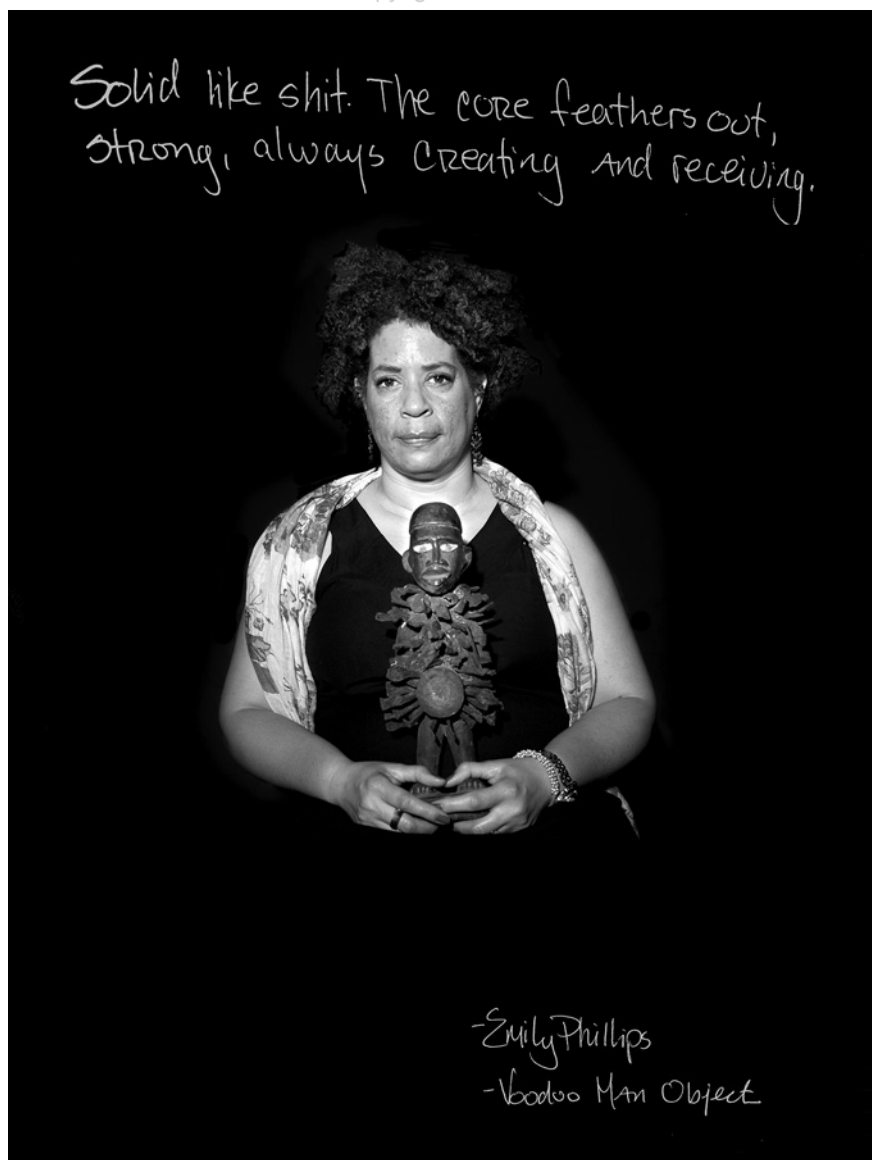


Figure 6.4 Emily with Voodoo Man (photo: Liz Hingley)

Kabyle, Hindi, Turkish and Hebrew being the most common. This was conveyed in the exhibition through the multitude of languages on show: even the goods designed and produced in France will often include packaging and instructions in another language, and many of the audio products chanted out foreign languages.

Many of the products on show related to the means used by consumers to further their religious practice and knowledge within the context of migration. For example, by buying religious children's books, dolls, jigsaws and card games, parents sought to socialize the next generation and to transmit a religious heritage despite living in France. Two such items displayed were a Jewish 'Magneti Family Puppet Theatre' depicting a 1900s Jewish Polish household and a 'Seven Families' card game designed to teach the basis of Muslim faith to the descendants of migrants. Other tools, such as electronic Korans, recite verses for those unable to read Arabic so as to participate orally in religious practices.

Much like the shop-front churches throughout the district, the area's boutiques are showcases of current religious trends in Paris, and the products respond to, but also anticipate, revitalize and stimulate new practices. These shop fronts are religious windows within France's secular public space, while their commercial displays overflow onto the pavements and tint the city with religiosity. The multiple cultural and spiritual identities at play in Belleville are unravelled in the installation through displays of religious products. Indeed the piece required careful consideration of the spatial organization of shops in the area. Special attention was paid to the use of shop display cabinets, glass objects, transparent packaging and shiny surfaces in order to mimic the constant reflections created by the religious objects in 'real life' Belleville. The reflections layered onto objects from different faiths, for example an image of the Ka'aba at Mecca bouncing off a glass cabinet containing Jewish products. Through this presentation, we intended as curators to evoke the close cohabitation of different faith shops and faith traditions within religiously diverse Belleville.

Different faith shops trade side-by-side in Belleville, and in certain shops products from different religions are sold alongside each other. These juxtapositions were translated into the installation. On many shelves in Belleville, products are categorized by type and materiality and not by faith. *Belleville Bazaar* adopted this typology, displaying together plastic bottles of holy water, compasses, sweets or mantle-piece decorations from multiple faiths (Figure 6.2). The installation also showcased various product-lines that have been developed and marketed to suit different religious clients, through altering packaging or forms of iconography. These products, encompassing night-lights, 3D moving posters, plug-in flashing portraits and glass trinkets, allowed visitors to compare the Jewish, Catholic, Buddhist and Muslim versions of the same product. In one esoteric shop we also observed the religious rebranding of secular commodities. The shopkeeper Philippe explained how the blue powder, previously used to bleach white clothes, was now used by Caribbean migrants for protection and purification; 'the power is not in the products, it is in the people'. The installation displays the overlap of commercial and religious imperatives and how mass-produced products are not denigrating religious practices. As one trader puts it, 'we can combine spirituality and materiality: you've just got to be strong on the inside, with an open heart and lots of motivation'. The choice of product and display techniques within *Belleville Bazaar* encouraged visitors to consider the way faith and commerce rub against

each other but also how multiple faiths overlap and overflow within Belleville's high streets.

Events that we programmed during the installation offered a means to collect and assess the audience's reactions to the installation and the subject matter it explored. The workshops with the team from the young workers' hostel in the lead-up to the show produced initial positive feedback on the religious object installation and lively discussion on the value of such products within a very secular context. Many visitors rejected at first the commodification and mass-production of religious objects and were at times dismayed or amused by the kitsch aesthetics of the products. Visitors often voiced their surprise that all the goods, which cover such a wide spectrum of religious practices, had been collected in Belleville. An evening talk was also held in the gallery, bringing together academics and artists to discuss the installation. The event was a privileged opportunity to discuss the contemporary commodification of religion in terms of both academic and artistic research and measure visitors' responses to the work. The discussion focused on the commodification of religious objects and the on-going development and innovation behind new products. A group of visitors was also taken around the shops and bazaars by the researchers. Their reactions and commentary threw up new observations and vantage-points, often because the shop-keepers were keen to show a new group around their business, and visitors trod less lightly on controversial questions. The final event was a spiritual-object portrait session, for which visitors were invited to bring along a personal object or pick an object from the exhibition with which to be photographed by Liz Hingley. The person was invited to write a few words about their choice. Two of these images are presented here – Abdul, a Muslim shop-trader who was raised as a Buddhist (Figure 6.3), and Emily, a visiting arts expert and researcher from America (Figure 6.4). Both images capture the moment when an object comes off the shelf, into the arms of a customer and enters into a new phase of its lifecycle.

Currently *Belleville Bazaar* is also entering a new phase, one in which the role and place of religious merchandise will continue to be questioned in a very different context. The goods have been packed up in silver cases, donated to the curators by an Indian merchant. At the time of writing they are in transit and will soon be opened again at the University of Texas where the collection will be displayed and new questions unpacked.