



TOWNSEND

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ZEINA BALTAGI AND ELIZABETH SKALKA The Artist in Conversation with the Curator

Transcribed 28 February 2022

Elizabeth Skalka: Hi! Welcome.

Zeina Baltagi: Hi!

Elizabeth Skalka: So we're going to just ask a couple questions to help the audience better understand you and your artwork. So to truly grasp the meaning of *The Sidewalk*, the audience must understand some elements of your biography. Can you explain for us: What was your living situation like growing up? Where did you live? Who were the people in your life? And what would you describe as "home"?

Zeina Baltagi: Home is a complicated question for, I think, any person from the diaspora. And that means anyone that is anyone that is not living in their ancestral land or area where their grandparents and great grandparents have lived and worked land before. So I think- I feel like I have multiple homes. I was- my parents immigrated in '83 to Los Angeles, California, and they were here for a few years and had my eldest sister in '84. And I could say Los Angeles is really a big marker for my entire family and extended family as a landing pad from Lebanon. And from there I was born in '88 and my parents moved to Stockton, California in Northern California. Stockton is a smaller town but really growing at the time, and my father is a pita-pocket lavash baker, and all around baking family. My mom quickly realized there was already a wholesale pita bakery in Los Angeles, but there wasn't one in Northern California, so we moved to Northern California for that possibility of economic growth that didn't seem possible in Los Angeles. So I was born in Stockton and I- so was my little brother, we're a family of three kids, I'm the middle child- and I stayed there from birth until six years old. So there's a pivotal very young childhood part of Stockton where I was very much a part of parents' growth and economic growth in the United States. I think that's also a result of being in an immigrant family, or a family that is building in another state, in another country is the family kind of operates like a unit, like a little business. So the kids feel the growth and the mobility that the parents are trying to chase after as well. So because of that my parents were working very hard, long manual labor hours and my mom, very quickly- from '83 coming into the States- realized that there is no way that the family is going to survive just off of my father working. And she also really wanted to go to school- part of that mobility and that growth is that they were coming to the States as well because she really wanted an education. She had a wonderful education in her younger years in Lebanon but she never had the opportunity to go to college or really complete her education. My father as well, who stopped going to

school after fourth grade, and simply just went to work, because that's what you have to do. So for that growth, but having children, my mother sent me and my sister- I was six years old, and my sister was ten- to Lebanon to live with my grandmother- my grandparents- on my mom's and my grandpa on my dad's, and all my aunts, and it was the most beautiful experience. It definitely was a sacrifice on my mom's part, she would've loved to have raised her own children that were so young- and I was super young- so there is, it was a large sacrifice for her to essentially send her children to live with her sister and her mom so that she could work her long hours and like build the American Dream, you know [air quotes]. That doesn't- and it's such an interesting thing because it's a chase and it's a growth and you can grow to some kind of economics in the United States, but the American Dream is such a key to how we treat each other, to how we- it's what we aspire to while we're here, and that's something that I always was very sensitive to as being a part of a working class household, not being very wealthy Arabs, being humble in that way, and the criticism that we would get from other folks as well. And that really comes down to classism in the US. And it comes down to classism amongst minority groups, where- it's just simply that. So within that there is definitely a large- I think- thing inside of the generation- I have older parents, so they're not Gen Xers, I think they're the generation before that. You know the folks born in the 50's? So I think that's, they're kind of Boomers actually [laughs]. Cause my mother is- my father is seventy-five now, so I think that's like somewhat Boomer, right before that Gen X actually. I lost track of what I was saying. But anyways, the point is that home is, for me, it's really everywhere and, personally, I spent so much time going up and down the I-5 between Northern California and Southern California, it feels like the I-5 is home at this point. Like I don't feel really like I am LA [laughs] down to my core, I think Los Angeles people even call me out on that, and at this point- I left Stockton when I was eighteen- so I was in Lebanon between the ages of six and ten years old for really four years and then I returned to Stockton and stayed there until I was now sixteen years old, and then moved down to SoCal- and even when I- what's funny is when I lived in Northern California I was constantly taking the Amtrak train and going to Southern California. And now that I'm in Southern California, I'm constantly going up the 5 and going up to Northern California. So really it's that like, that road is where I feel like the most at home. And so I think that's definitely something that I feel experience. With regards to *The Sidewalk* in relationship to home, I think of the road at my grandparents' house that's not paved because we are from Northern Lebanon, Al-Minya, where the government doesn't really pick up the trash or pave the roads, so there's more trenches than sidewalks [laughs]. There are sidewalks in Beirut- when I stayed and did some schooling with my auntie in Beirut- but it's something that was a kind of striking difference between a childhood running between grandparents' houses- and really loving it, honestly, it was a really beautiful time in Lebanon, it was just beautiful. Just like, family, and everything was kind of healthy-going, no bombs. It was a good moment in the 90's, early 90's. But coming to the States and really seeing the sidewalks here, and then also seeing the way that the sidewalk is used to delineate where we're supposed to walk. And that's what it's there for, right? It's like essentially like a guide for how you're supposed to move and mobilize on the planet. And I always thought that was kind of strange, of course, because you're dictating where people get to walk and not walk. But the advantage of that is that you can create handicap accessible

sidewalks. You could create roads that are more- that like, you could mobilize yourself further on regardless of your physical ability. And it feels like that was the purpose of that sidewalk, right? It's supposed to be a public space. It's not yours, it's not in your home, and it's not the street, it's the space specifically for the pedestrian, for us to walk, jog, play, protest, whatever the hell we want to do. So I often think, like what Theaster Gates said, actually this, in a lecture that I was in, many years back-I don't remember the year. It's kind of like you hear these lectures and then the soundbite of what really resonated just like sticks with you really deep. And Theaster Gates said "you need to constantly question what is public space and who is it for." And that's something that I'm constantly thinking about as well. And that's something that I'm constantly thinking about in the construct of mobility. So there was a huge change- which actually goes into other things that we've spoken about before- on September 11 of 2001. Uh, it's a huge marker point in my life. And it is... I like to think of it as the moment that my art practice really began in regards to these concepts. And literally from the age, from that day and on. So, now, twenty years. So, um, September 11th 2001 I actually missed the entirety of the day. I woke up in the morning, and what was happening on the television in the U.S. was all over the TV. But I was twelve and turning thirteen, so it was my thirteenth birthday and I was up very early so I saw simply... uh, it was very strange, I saw the planes coming into New York City and then I was put under, under anesthesia. Because my surgery was scheduled for that day as well. So, um, at twelve years old I was diagnosed with osteosarcoma, a bone cancer which is the size of a tumor, a softball tumor, like the size of a softball right at the bottom of my knee. It's a very kind of rare teenage cancer, but at the same time not really rare that much any more. Like more kids are getting it. It specifically only impacts people when they hit puberty until, maybe, their early twenties – is the eldest case. And, um, pretty much six months prior to September 11th I was going for chemo treatments, and on September 11 was scheduled my surgery to remove my tumor. And all good that it was my birthday, and all of that, I was excited about that 'cause it's like I'll wake up with, you know, this cancer out of me and I'll start learning how to walk again. So, um, the surgery happened, it was around, honestly, twelve hours of surgery, maybe fourteen – twelve to fourteen hours – because the surgeon and his mentor was in there doing it, and then, um, ten hours in there was a large, gaping hole where the tumor was and, so, they went to my mom and asked if they could bring in the cosmetic surgeon. And the cosmetic surgeon did a good job at, um, shifting some muscles around and filling that hole. So, everything changed for me September 11. The sidewalk changed for me. Everything changed. And, um.... So, where before I'm thinking of the sidewalk as this thing that is actually supposed to give space to handicapped folks to be able to go down. Um... And I'm also thinking about the various sidewalks that are in the United States and how we didn't grow up on a cul-de-sac like neighborhood, a nice neighborhood, but it was something my mom always wanted. And it's part of the classism in the United States of, like, you know, get that nice house in the cul-de-sac neighborhood, probably in a gated area, and you know you made it and you get to sleep comfy. So, post surgery that sidewalk outside my house became a whole other thing. Another layer of things for me to think about while walking. I'm already thinking prior to 9/11 how so vulnerable to others, physically, altogether, as a person who going through chemo treatment, your immune system is so low that you really have to be careful interacting with the public. That is

something that we are finally realizing in the pandemic, is that we are vulnerable to each other. You can walk on the street but you don't see yourself vulnerable to other persons walking down that street. And you interact and that creates that moment of vulnerability. And it can create those spontaneous acts of responsibility essentially because you're responsible for that other human being across the street, or just walking by you, and that's something in the pandemic. So, post 9/11 all of that really changed because now I'm not only thinking about how I am physically vulnerable to others via my health, and re-learning how to walk. I am twelve turning thirteen, so I'm growing boobs and becoming more perceived as a woman, as someone that could be hit on. So cat calling started to occur more, and all of that. And all of this is interacting at the same time, and at the same time Islamophobia really being at a high, high rise. So I knew as a Muslim, Middle-Eastern person that there, that as part of racism people like to point the finger, especially with something so traumatic that happened to people here in the United States. But I was very sensitive because I was in the hospital recovering from my surgery. And I was watching TV, because that's what you do when you're in a hospital. And it was a really big year... Aaliyah passed away that year. Totally was a huge impact. She was so young. Watching Missy Elliot cry on TV. A lot of things happened that year but I was flipping through and there was a story of a Sikh-American named Balbir Singh Sodhi and he was murdered in Mesa, Arizona on September 15th, 2001, just a few days after September 11th. And it was one of the many attacks that happened post 9/11, Islamophobic attacks. And what really struck me was that Balbir Singh Sodhi is not Muslim he was Sikh-American. He just simply had a head scarf on. And a big moment of realization of being twelve, of like, it's like it started to all kind of connect. Like classism, racism, economic mobility, all of that, and like actual Balbir Singh Sodhi being murdered or violently attacked, all of that coming together in one place for me. It was a lot for me to take in. And a lot for any child to take in. It was a very important lesson for me to learn is that it doesn't matter what believe, it doesn't matter what music you listen to, it doesn't matter how I dress – and I was pretty punk, goth so I was like really into X, Dead Kennedys, Black Flag. Basically I was like a Muslim, Arab girl trying to be a punk, white skater. (Laughs) I still kind of want to be a skater boy. (Laughs) I started to come to the realization that it doesn't matter what I do, it doesn't matter, you are still susceptible to being seen as the other, to being attacked, and your humanity being diminished. It was a big impact when I heard about Balbir Singh Sodhi. So the very fact that the turban became a target, and it always was to a certain degree, but this moment a huge target really made me think a lot about the head scarf and turban and how it shifts in meaning. I think a lot within my work all about material memory. Mobility in every single form, really is a prism form because it's an attachment to all of your being and walking space. Essentially being super vulnerable to each other and acknowledging that, and trying to unwrap that... in a way where it's like I think it's important for me as an artist – it's one thing to study theory, and study racial theory, it's so important to do so. It's sad that I didn't get it until grad school because it would have been really useful to me at twelve. Because all of the things I had to really experience and learn, it's all in there but I had no language for it, so I felt like I was truncated in even how I could speak about it. So it's taken me the entirety of twenty years to be able to actually like talk about what I'm doing and why I'm doing it. And the reason why I do the work that I do is because I'm constantly trying to see my place in the

world. It seems very self-centered but I really only have myself to point out of. And I only have agency over myself. I only have agency over my own story. But through that other people could essentially related to it, and connect to it. Hopefully. I fell like my job as an artist, but also as a human being is to really constantly see how I'm maneuvering in this world and really checking myself: Is this the healthiest way for me to maneuver in this world? How am I impacting others around me? And what does it mean for me to be here? What are the layers of history and information that it took for me to stand where I'm standing, and do the work that I'm doing? So I think of a sidewalk and I think of myself walking on a sidewalk and I think of the massive amount of layered history that happened on that sidewalk from the very formation of Modernity, that idea of Modernity in the US cause all the city planning and concrete structures are suppose to imbue Modernity. It is literally the layer on top of the earth. It no longer gives us access to the earth underneath. But within that thinking the amount of information in experiences that happened on that sidewalk. And now I'm there, on that sidewalk, what is that? So they're the things I think about. It's important for me to learn about myself and my place, and how I maneuver through, and within. And that learning and internal growth speaks to the growth it then speaks to the growth that happens materially, performance, and whatever way it kind of comes out. Because they are like these weird performative but activated sculpture objects things. Yeh. I hope that makes sense.

Elizabeth Skalka: Thank you very much. You've touched on so many important aspects of your life and your work and I really appreciate that thoughtful response. So, my next question would be: What is the impact of your surgery on your health today? How did it change the way that you move around the world?

Zeina Baltagi: I had a replacement knee, tibia, and femur. And half my femur, actually, but my ability to move, walk around, climb stairs, ride a bike is just different. At this point, twenty years later, I'm not really seeing, it's not like I think much about the ability of mobilizing that I had before. Though sometimes I really miss riding a bike because I went to UC Davis, which is a bike town, for graduate school, and, literally, they ride their bikes everywhere. It's like Berkeley and Santa Cruz. And I would get jealous of other people. I would be so much faster for me to go to class if I could ride a bike, instead I'm like walking it. So that's something I really think about often, especially when in institutions, and is your institution handicap accessible? And for various people, and different kinds of disability, because some people are on wheelchairs and wheels, and some people are on foot, and some people are on crutches, and some people are hopping on one foot. It needs to be accessible in all those forms. And that was something that I really struggled with on really large campuses like Cal State Northridge and UC Davis where essentially you going to classes is walking across town. And I'm not on wheels and I just have my prosthetic. I can't skate there, I can't bike there. I'm really thinking about how that should be a service, especially if you're an institution. If you are calling yourself inclusive and expecting inclusivity... disability is something that impacts every person regardless of race, age, class, everything. It's something that I really notate on campus. So if your elevators are broken, yeh, that's not cool. (Laughs) So it's something I'm constantly

thinking about. I used to, for the decade, post 9/11 – 2001 to like really just recently – I had this thing inside of me that had to be therapized out, this overcompensation of I can do it. And that comes from being told down “you can’t”. (Laughs) Low down you shouldn’t. No-one with any disability likes being told “no”. Like it’s impossible. Because with certain persistence sometimes it is possible. That is something that you can definitely see in the sidewalk, this compensation of I can do it and I can do it times a thousand. I’m going to lay this concrete, and I’m going to lay it really good and beautifully....in the middle of the pandemic... with one assistant. (Laughs) I definitely, there’s a drive in me that pushes me to really prove people wrong, that I’m not just this sick kid to be dismissed. That’s just like complaining, you know. I’m actually not complaining, I’m just trying to say, to explain that life experience and what I’ve learned. What really that surgery changed was, it changed the way and how I walk into spaces now that it also took me over a decade to learn how dangerous it is for me to be in spaces that aren’t safe for me because I can’t run away. It’s really that simple. I can’t run. Any sticky situation I’m stuck there. I could fight (laughs) but I can’t flight. My instincts want to flight, but I physically can’t flight. So that’s something I have to think about walking down the sidewalk... as a woman, as a disabled person, and as a brown person these things are huge impacts for me. I truly feel like I am coming from my perspective through this surgery, that I’m so lucky to actually have because I’m lucky that I didn’t get my leg amputated, that I was able to get an endoprosthesis. Which would come with a whole other experience of pain and issues. And also these advancements in our health, inventions and all these things has really changed how we’re able to move with our bodies and carry on in a way that we didn’t have ability... if I were to simply have done this, like if I would have had the surgery in 2000 it would have been an amputation. That’s something that’s a huge impact on me, is knowing – that’s a part of mobility too – that the only reason why I really survived and am able to walk and have beautiful skin on top of my knee (laughs) and it not being a metal amputation is because my mom is super tenacious as hell, and hadn’t had health insurance prior to then, and got us health insurance. And her being by my side. And advocating for me. Being in a hospital noticing how the other kids are, you share a room and the hospital, in the children’s hospital, I was at Oakland’s children’s hospital... so I shared rooms with many other patients with different kinds of cancer, sickle cell anemia, and different kinds of hardcore illnesses, which is why we’re there. It was always really... I mean it brings tears to think about it... but it was also a huge impact watching the other kids that couldn’t have their moms by their side. Didn’t have someone advocating for them. And the care that they got was less, so that goes part to privilege as well. At that time, in the ‘90s I had returned from Lebanon, ‘cause my mom sent us there, and they worked hard and we were lucky... it was a very special moment that I had my cancer my father was able to hold down the fort for my other two siblings while my mom, essentially, just sat by my side every single day and advocated and fought for me and I had a social worker – my social worker was awesome, she go me into some really cool cancer camps, and got me in Make a Wish – sorry for the tears. So, yeah, that part is privilege too. The other parents, it’s not like they didn’t want to be by their kids, it’s because they physically couldn’t because they had to go to work. You know! You have to make money! They tried to pay for all of these medical expenses, and the cancer ward, and all of that, and the children’s hospital –it’s a commuter hospital – so a lot of the kids are coming from Lodi, Stockton, Tracy,

different places from around the area, it's not like all the kids are from Oakland. So really thinking about that commute to your health every day and your family commenting to see you and the privilege I had being at that hospital. It may have been hard for my mom to watch me but it really wasn't, like all that medical shit and surgery and all of that, none of that really was difficult for me. Also because I'm on drugs most of the time, really I'm on a cloud. (Laughs) Yeah, morphine drip was nice during the surgery. What was hard was watching my mom watching me go through it. That was hard. Wishing you won't so sick so that they could enjoy the joy of the child. So the impact of the surgery on my health today: I have to be careful where I walk, I used to try to be extra humble as to where I lived. I lived in some pretty shitty places, up flights of stairs in cold-ass warehouses – in "artsy" situations that are really super illegal (laughs). And I've finally grown out of that phase in my life where... I can't be carrying heavy shit up flights of stairs anymore. I can't be doing the work I did before, because I'm so lucky that my leg was able to withstand that amount of labor it's been through until this moment. I want it to last, and I'm starting to feel like, like a car part, it's starting to be used. (Laughs) That's something that I went and checked in with my doctor... I was so excited... In this past year September 11 of 2022 [sic], right? 2022? [sic] This year we had our twenty area anniversary meeting, it was beautiful. I took my parents up on a road trip straight to San Francisco. He runs the oncology department at UCSF. My surgeon. Long story short, the impact of the surgery is forever. If I don't take care of it now and try to continue to, it will break down like a car part. And that's literally what he said. He said you are wearing, tearing your part, and you're going to have to get it replaced if you keep going. No more ten hour work days. Which is a part of my compensation too, I can work, I can work double shift, I can do this. (Laughs) And I can lay a sidewalk and I can do grad school and I can do it all. I can do it, but should I?! (Laughs) That's the thing. Should I live in a cold warehouse? Should I live this way? In the end, now, twenty years later, I'm starting to realize no, I really shouldn't. I should take care of myself. Because if I want to continue to walk, and take care of my hands and make work for the rest of my life, then I need to take care of that tool. And that's what my leg is, it's a tool. Just like a tire. It's definitely my way, about how I think about how I use my body, use my energy has shifted completely. Also, as a person that... and I think that every person that has chronic pain constantly thinks about how they're going to spend their energy, and their physical ability. That's something that I think about constantly. I used to give so much of that labored energy to work. ...limiting my ability... Basically my time off is me coping with pain to work again. And now I'm starting, finally, to use that time and that energy and trying to keep those good moments for also for some happiness and joy. Use my leg for dancing, as well. (Laughs) You know, not all lifting, walking, and moving. I think that's totally changed everything.

Elizabeth Skalka: Thank you so much for honestly and vulnerability. I could see that it was making you a little emotional at times. So I really appreciate you sharing all of that with me and with our audience at Townsend. I can't express my gratitude enough and I appreciate you being here today and sharing your story.

Zeina Baltagi: I appreciate you. Thank you for allowing the space for vulnerability. 'Cause I'm realizing that as an artist this shit is so personal. (Laughs) It really is! Even if it doesn't seem like it from the outside, and it seems like a political thing or maybe something that's aesthetic, but it's all really personal.

Elizabeth Skalka: Yeh, and that's part of why I thought it was really important to ask you to share your story because it all ties in, your life ties in with your art. And, again, I'm so glad that you were able to do this, and that you were willing to, and I appreciate everything that you've shared with us today.

Zeina Baltagi: I appreciate you. I do want to mention something to think about with the sidewalk. It's really like a prompt to the audience. I think about the sidewalk, and the reason why it's a public space, and I wanted one in public is I really wanted a spot for people to contemplate themselves, and their own origins, and their own lived experience while standing on it. Because all of this work I did for my growth, for my transformation, and for me to learn about myself and to move through the world with more knowledge of the self and how the self impacts the collective. I want the audience to do that (laughs) standing on the sidewalk. Just that thing. On any sidewalk. I often think of the sidewalk directly outside of my house, because that's the space right outside, in between. But, really, anywhere. Thinking about when going down a cul-de-sac, and that grid, and what was this cul-de-sac for originally. Why were these built? There's lots of theory and writing about how it was built for white flight. Essentially a space to disengage from politics, from anything. Out of that cul-de-sac you live your secular little unit family. I think it's something I thought about that really hit me was while doing the sidewalk – it scared the shit out of me too – and it was hard for me to put out the work, I'm glad that we're putting it out now, because even though it was made a few years ago, because while I was making it Ahmaud Arbery was chased down the sidewalk, and murdered by white supremacists. I go to Balbir Singh Sodhi as well. And the many other folks that simply... that very experience to simply walking down that sidewalk. And that experience that Ahmaud had on that sidewalk. Just things to think about. You know. Your access to it. Do you get to own the house on that cul-de-sac? Do you get to even walk through it? Are you that kid smoking pot on it? (Laughs) All of that information is part of that sac. I want the audience to think about their place in society, and their ability to walk on that sidewalk. And gauge that with others. When you start to think more full circle when it comes to the economics, class. The idea of the place of the American dream to aspire to. A place to disengage from society. And all these things. And really think about your self while walking down it. I think it's important to really think about that because the suburban household is a huge part of American society, the fabric of American society. The person that was raised in Stockton is a huge, striking difference from the kids that lived in the good neighborhoods – the kids that lived on the "regular" streets. Our house was on North El Dorado Street, which is one of the main streets of Los Angeles. It's definitely not a cul-de-sac. You drive out and freeway. Like many of the street of Los Angeles where you exit out and you're on a very fast highway, which is a huge difference with the San Fernando Valley and San Pedro and these other neighborhoods. Just things to think about. Like a prompt.

Elizabeth Skalka: *Thank you so much, Zeina. Is there anything else that you want to share?*

Zeina Baltagi: *No, I think that's it. Do you have any questions? Anything I didn't explain good?*

Elizabeth Skalka: No. You covered so much and you are such an excellent speaker.

The end.