

this is NOT a drill:
**An Expedition in Iranian Diaspora Through Photography,
Calligraphy and Poetry**

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A thesis exhibition presented to OCAD University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of:

Master of Fine Art in INTERDISCIPLINARY MASTER'S IN ART, MEDIA and DESIGN

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Abstract

The Iranian diaspora is a young and growing community that came into existence mainly after the Islamic revolution of 1979. In this study, I review historical contexts of the Iranian diaspora while comparing it to the common definition of “diaspora”. The Iranian diasporic community shows many of the common features of diasporas, however, it does not have a unified and united relationship. This community includes a multiplicity of genders, sexual orientations, religions, ethnicities, regions, political beliefs, and socioeconomic backgrounds, making it an intersectionally diverse community. The members of the Iranian diasporic community maintain an internal hierarchical relationship among themselves while congregating to form a community. Through qualitative research methodology, archival research, self-reflection, practice-based research, participant observation and a series of informal conversations, I investigate the underlying reasons for this divided and separating relationship. This diversity and separation create many different and even contradictory stories for its members. In this project, I seek to reflect upon Iranian Canadian diasporic subjects' stories in visual forms using photography, typography, and calligraphy in Canada's culturally diverse society. Furthermore, I revisit the art of translation within diaspora to argue for the complexity of the concept of diaspora and how hybrid translation can help members come closer together. I demonstrate how storytelling within diaspora assists the community in restructuring its lost cultural identity and establishing a social space to belong, in the time of spatial and cultural dislocation.

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Dedication

To the Iranians living in diasporas...

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Introduction

It is the scent of home that keeps me going the hope of union, the face of my Beloved.

-Rumi

There is a theory in geology called Plate Tectonics. According to the theory, The Earth has a rigid outer layer which is not a solid mass but is broken up into seven plates, each one slowly sliding over the planet's partially molten plastic layer. These plates move relative to each other throughout millions of years and interact along their boundaries where they cause natural disasters. Events such as earthquakes, volcanoes, and tsunamis are all the results of those plate tectonics.¹ With all the transportation industry development, people from different geographical locations can come together and interact beside each other just like these plates. In this example, different cultures are like plate tectonics and diasporas are like boundaries of these plates which work as social and political hotspots.

In my discussion, diaspora refers to the conciliating ground for culturally diverse subjects to reconstruct their cultural identities in this new space.² With diasporas, conversations around the most controversial, historical, and political debates can occur not only in immigrant communities and the host cultures, but also among the people of the host culture. This is the space where the "stable, unchanging, and continuous frames of references and meaning"³ of

¹ University of the Witwatersrand, "Drop of ancient seawater rewrites Earth's history: Research reveals that plate tectonics started on Earth 600 million years before what was believed earlier", in ScienceDaily (2019)

² Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (New York, NY: Routledge Classic, 1994)

³ Stuart Hall, "Cultural identity and diaspora." *Theorizing diaspora: A reader*, eds. Braziel, Jana Evans, and Anita Mannur, (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2003), 234

immigrant communities and host countries collide. Hence, diasporic subjects construct new cultural identities in these spaces of cultural evolution, “a matter of becoming as well as being”⁴.

While culture and identity are constantly evolving and transforming both immigrant communities and host countries, diasporic communities help the identity development of dislocated subjects whose customs and immediate social groups differ from the dominant social discourse of the host culture. Homi Bhabha locates these dislocated subjects in what he refers to as "the third Space" and "in-between" space. The third space is a hybrid space where the construction of new cultural meaning happens. This hybrid third space is full of ambiguous feelings and evolving ideas where cultural meaning and representation have no “primordial unity or fixity”⁵ and “even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew.”⁶ It also helps to minimize the limitations of existing definitions and boundaries.

The third space questions any developed and established definitions and categorizations of culture and identity beyond any specific cultural borders that “requires that these two places [the I and the You] be mobilized in the passage through a third space. This is a representation of both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot “in itself” be conscious.”⁷ To do so in this third space, we need to start a conversation between these culturally diverse diasporas and host cultures to facilitate the reconstruction of these new cultural meanings and formation of new cultural spaces.

⁴ Hall, 234

⁵ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 37

⁶ Bhabha, 37

⁷ Bhabha, 36

In “this is Not a drill” I seek to reflect upon Iranian Canadian diasporic subjects' stories in visual forms using photography, typography, and calligraphy in Canada's culturally diverse society. This research and the exhibition's title are borrowed from a story told as part of the preliminary research for my thesis project to emphasize how stories are the beating heart of this work from the very beginning. I explain more about the title later on in my chapter on studio work.

From day one, my biggest concern while doing this project was the scope of this thesis. There are many threads in this thesis. For me, the most essential part of this project was to make my voice heard. It means doing practice-based research. In order to properly respond to this need, I divided my research into two parts: diaspora in general and Iranian diaspora. Most of my findings regarding diaspora in general are a basic exploration of the diaspora in addition to some deeper focus on relevant concepts from well-known authors and scholars of the field. However, most of the works regarding the Iranian diaspora are practice-based research. As a visual artist and researcher, I have attempted to create a fine balance between art and qualitative research and to infuse this project with both theory and a visualization of my journey as a diasporic subject in Toronto.

In the Literature Review, I briefly talk about three prominent scholars from fields of social science, sociology, cultural studies, and post-colonial studies whose theories have been mentioned repeatedly in this research and their relevance to my work. In the Methodology section, I discuss methodologies that led me to this thesis project's concepts and strategies. Chapter Four defines diaspora within and beyond its historical roots. While discussing the historical roots of the Iranian diaspora, I try to draw a picture of the current Iranian diaspora in Canada. In the end, in Chapter Five, I go into details regarding the studio works and the stories

they narrate. I explain how I use textual elements, visual images, and design elements in print compositions to narrate diasporic stories through my works.

Literature Review

This paper draws on interdisciplinary scholars, specifically from three scholars, Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall, Robin Cohen. They were each born in a British colony and spent most of their lives outside of their home cultures in roughly the same time period in a turbulent era in British politics. It is worth mentioning that an important point about them is that they all live or lived in a hybrid space between homeland and new host culture. As a result, these hybridities have influenced their theories and works. This hybrid space also is where my visual works happen, and hybridity is what I want to present within my works.

Homi Bhabha (b. 1949) is an Indian-English scholar and theorist working in post-colonial studies. Bhabha's hybridity theory is one of the most widely employed and most disputed propositions in post-colonial studies. According to Bhabha, hybridity means constructing new transcultural spaces and forms within the contact zone produced by colonization and immigration. Bhabha's works emphasize interdependence and the mutual creation/recreation of subjectivities within homelands and host cultures. He "contends that all cultural practices, statements, and systems are constructed in a space" that he calls the third space of enunciation.⁸

But what exactly do these cultural practices, statements, and systems mean? This is where Stuart Hall (1932 – 2014), Jamaican-English sociologist and cultural theorist, becomes important. In his 1996 essay *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, he states that cultural identity is a matter of "being" as well as a matter of "becoming", "belonging as much to the future as it does

⁸ Bhabha, 37

to the past”⁹. For Hall, identities go through a constant transformation, transcending time and space.

In his writings on visual culture, Hall argues that the politics of race and its representation are articulated in the social production of cultural identities. His notion toward contemporary art enables him to reflect on his own journey from colonial Jamaica to post-Empire Britain. He raised questions to the field of visual arts while pushing the limitation of western colonial art practices such that identity is a matter of becoming and opening fresh possibilities for understanding culture critically. For black British artists between 1968 and 1980 representation issues played a critical and crucial role.¹⁰ Regarding the importance of Hall in the era between Enoch Powell’s 1968 anti-immigration talks and Margaret Thatcher’s 1979 election, Osei Bonsu, London based curator and writer, explains that “his attention to the cut-and-mix montage strategies of the Black Audio Film Collective and the Sankofa Film and Video Collective were a response to the medium’s ability to unfix prevailing codes of representation that called into question our accepted reality.”¹¹ His theories regarding cultural identity, particularly the combination of class, race, and gender in the construction of discursive cultural identities allow us to think of the world in an optimistic way. The notion that cultural identities are not innate or fixed but open to change and evolution in order to construct, deconstruct and reconstruct exactly

⁹ Hall, "Cultural identity and diaspora", 236

¹⁰ Osei Bonsu, “Osei Bonsu on Stuart Hall”, *Frieze* 200, (2019)

¹¹ Bonsu

who we want to be can help as a step toward a decolonial future in our era of “Build the Wall”¹² and rise of nationalist politics fuelled by segregationist ideologies.¹³

But where is diaspora located in this era full of segregation rhetoric? To answer this question, I draw from Robin Cohen (b.1944), a South African-English social scientist. In his book, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, Cohen introduces the definition of diaspora, a term which has been used significantly differently in recent years from its original use in the translation of the Bible to Greek, the Septuagint (LXX; 3rd–1st centuries BC) regarding the Jewish Diaspora¹⁴ to mark out all kinds of cultural and ethnic dispersals. He begins by defining the common features of global diasporas. Cohen establishes a typology to show that the foundations of diasporas are based on shared characteristics. Cohen then analyzes different diasporas, starting with the original Jewish diaspora which he calls the “ideal type”. He mentions that an ambivalent relationship between diasporic subjects and their homeland is a common theme. Cohen characterized homeland with fondness or longing, and the host country is seen as intolerant or alienating. As a result, in my artworks, when I blur my subject and typography, I want to visually present alienation and the host country's intolerance. However, diasporic subjects see opportunities in the host country and enrich their life. In a sense, the host country turns into home and influences diasporic subjects even as they keep allegiance to their older homeland. Cohen discusses diasporas from a globalization perspective where the nationalistic cultural identity of diasporic subjects becomes “increasingly anachronistic in a world where

¹² William A Callahan, “The politics of walls: barriers, flows, and the sublime”, *Review of International Studies*. pp. 1-26.

¹³ Kobena Mercer, "Stuart Hall and the Visual Arts", *Small Axe* 19, no. 1 (2015)

¹⁴ Mattis Kantor, *The Jewish timeline encyclopedia: a year-by-year history from Creation to the Present*, (Jason Aronson Inc., Northvale NJ, 1992)

everybody is moving”¹⁵. He argues that diasporas are not isolated groups with victim narratives. Their cultures are reconstructed by their dialectical interaction with their host culture as by their attachment to the homeland. Indeed, they are well-suited in a globalized world. As Andrew Blackman, author and literary critic explains about Cohen’s theories that “we tend to think in simple, absolute categories of race, ethnicity, and religion, but the reality that Cohen describes here is much more adaptive, collaborative, vibrant and, in the end, much more interesting.”¹⁶

Methodology

I come to this study as a visual storyteller with a civil engineering background. My pursuit of being an engineer began with the fact that I was enchanted with the idea of a bridge and its connection to places and people. I loved the idea of connecting people; thus, I trained to be a bridge designer, but later on, I realized that my visual stories and memories are my connection to people and places. This connection was the bridge I was looking for my whole life. As an engineer, I tend to simplify and clarify information, even as I search for deeper meaningful connections in my projects. As a result, the methodology I have settled for is rather an assemblage of some qualitative research methodology, narrative method, archival research, self-reflection and practice-based research, or what I call five fingers for a diasporic expedition.

For this study, I conducted qualitative research to inquire about the unheard stories in the Iranian diaspora and their effect on diasporic subjects' daily lives. Considering the socio-political climate and its influence on the development of the Iranian identity, I examined the

¹⁵ Andrew Blackman, “Global Diasporas: An Introduction: book review”, <https://andrewblackman.net/2010/04/global-diasporas-an-introduction-by-robin-cohen/>, (2010)

¹⁶ Blackman

interpretational definition of the diasporic Iranian identity in Toronto through social interaction with community members. Thus, I conducted informal talks with members of the Iranian diaspora. I was involved as an observatory participant in their daily lives for a period of time to hear their stories and live their experiences in the host country.

I also drew from narrative method. Narrative is an interpretive approach in the social sciences. It involves using a storytelling methodology where the story turns into an object of study, focusing on how individuals or groups make sense of events and actions in their lives through observation and interaction. This method works well for the study of "subjectivity and the influence of culture and identity on the human condition."¹⁷ Through stories, narrative becomes a tool to create meaning and knowledge and capture rich data within stories. Stories are told within their cultural contexts to form and promote specific values and beliefs. As a result, storytelling can help in conveying complex tacit knowledge in order to facilitate the construction and reconstruction of individual identity. "Case studies of narrative in organisational studies demonstrate how narrative can be used to effect cultural change, transfer complex tacit knowledge through implicit communication, construct identity, aid education, contribute to sense making, act as a source of understanding, and study decision making."¹⁸

There is more to diaspora and to the Iranian diaspora in specific than what is on the surface. Therefore, there was a need for some degree of archival and historical research. This archival and historical research was mostly conducted in order to conceptualize my discussion regarding the definition of diaspora, Iranian diaspora, Islam in Iran, and different waves of

¹⁷ Matthew Craig Mitchell and Margaret Egudo, "A Review of Narrative Methodology", (2003)

¹⁸ Mitchell and Egudo, iv

immigration. To do so I draw from Iranian historians such as Parvaneh Pourshariati, Ali Modarres, and so forth.

“Self-reflexive and practice-based research” describes “an inquiry process that is directed by personal interests and creative insight, yet is informed by disciplined knowledge and research...[and] open to alternative conceptions and imaginative options”¹⁹, as Graeme Sullivan stated. In the fine arts, self-reflexive and practice-based research are not only practices deeply involved in the research process, but questions also come from the activity of practices. As a result, questions can help improve and enhance practice by drawing a road map for the next step. Here, for a visual artist like myself, questions provide tools of investigation and exploration “that work in a personal sense as well as contributing to the wider picture”²⁰ by closely connecting to art practice. Basically, “practice-based research is an original investigation undertaken in order to gain new knowledge, partly by means of practice and the outcomes of that practice.”²¹ Thus, an important part of self-reflexive and practice-based research is practical and aesthetic experimentation, emphasizing interpretation, reflection, creative process, and the created works.

The artifact is a key part of the new understanding about practice. Also, “the artist is the key figure in the creation of new insights and awareness that has the potential to change the way we see and think.”²² Stated simply, practice and research work together in order to generate new knowledge that can be shared. The convergence of experiential and tacit knowledge in this

¹⁹ Graeme Sullivan, *Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in Visual Art*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publication, 2010), 110

²⁰ Linda Candy, and Ernest Edmonds, “Practice-Based Research in the Creative Arts: Foundations and Futures from the Front Line”, *Leonardo*, Volume 51, Issue 1, February, (2018), 63

²¹ Candy, 63

²² Sullivan, *Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in Visual Art*,

expedition as practice-based research is a form of self-reflection where my personal experiences facilitate connections to broader cultural, political, and social meanings and beliefs. Self-reflexive practice-based research embodied in my work come from the communities that I occupy: an Iranian, visual artist, poetry enthusiast, diasporic subjects living in Toronto.

Theoretical Framework: Iranian Canadian Narratives

Location, Dislocation, and Diaspora

The complex dialectical interactions among culture, identity, and mobility create and build the concept of diaspora. The dialectical interactions between these components can shape transformative and fluid characteristics for each diaspora. It is not possible to define diaspora mostly based on a series of historical examples that are considered to be encompassing of all dislocated groups with a vast and different national and international history and background.

In his theory of diaspora, Robin Cohen talks about the dialogue among the dispersed subjects, receiving society's response to them, and the significance of home culture in the construction of diaspora.²³ He argues that diaspora starts with dispersal from the homeland into two or more foreign locations. This experience of dispersion might be traumatic. However, he also believes that diasporic subjects construct a collective memory about the homeland, which is idealized and glamourized. I have seen this approach in my conversation with my subjects as they fondly talked about their memories within homeland. Even on a visual level, they wore some personal adornment to present this glamorous past.

Also, the concept of diaspora could seem like an excessive and unnecessary step in the process of identification and cultural evolution for host countries. However, the concept not only

²³ Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, (New York City, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2008)

generates linguistic and practical accessibility for dislocated subjects by bringing diasporic subjects closer to each other but also is an essential and inevitable step toward the post-colonial multicultural system through the coexistence of the colonizers and colonized. The generation and creation of linguistic and practical accessibility for immigrant communities and dislocated others can help them to connect the cultural and spatial past from their homeland with the present of the host culture.

Diasporic subjects construct the path for sharing a collective history or a collective identity to reshape and adjust in the new host society, which in the case of Canada is a multicultural society. As Charles Taylor defines, multiculturalism is a celebrated system for its politics of recognition of different ethnic minority groups.²⁴ This post-colonial multicultural system creates a space for racial and ethnic minorities, especially new migrants, to construct and reconstruct their cultural practices in a new host culture in the context of the dominant Eurocentric English and French culture. The idea of a post-colonial multicultural system is the modern state of rationality that celebrates the racially and ethnically heterogeneous nation-state.

In this post-colonial multicultural Canada, every ethnic diaspora brings something new to the table. It adds new values to Canada's multicultural society. As is stated in the Canadian Multiculturalism Act, “the Constitution of Canada recognizes the importance of preserving and enhancing the multicultural heritage of Canadians.”²⁵ Although, while promoting diversity, the Multicultural Act in Canada perversely distributes power to dominant English and French culture leading to the white dominant Eurocentric Canadian discourse normalizing and maintaining a

²⁴ Charles Taylor, “The politics of recognition”, *New contexts of Canadian criticism*, 98, (1997), 25-73.

²⁵ Canadian Multiculturalism Act, RSC 1985, c 24 (4th Supp)

racial structure in which the white race is the expected yet invisible social norm.²⁶ This invisible social norm can explain why some of my subjects preferred to speak in English. At the same time, they potentially sacrifice some meaning in their communication.

Roots and Definition of Diaspora

Having a closer look at the origin and definition of diaspora will shine light on the Iranian diaspora's hidden corners in exile. Most studies of diaspora begin from the ancient use of the term, widely attributed to the Greek word διασπορά – [the Greek term *diasperian*] “scattering of seeds”. Until the latter third of the twentieth century, scholars such as Martin Baumann and Gabriel Sheffer predominantly used it to describe Jews in exile from the Holy Land, along with a handful of other scattered groups which made the definition ethnically limited.²⁷ This term's application to the exiled Jews of antiquity had the effect of establishing their particular experience as an “ideal type” of diaspora against which all other comparable cases were initially found wanting.

Taken from its historical roots, diaspora currently refers to displaced communities of people who have been dislocated from their original homeland through the movement of migration, immigration, or exile²⁸, or as Walker Connor defined, “that segment of a people living outside the homeland.”²⁹ This definition is not culturally and ethnically exclusive, and it aims to

²⁶ David Theo Goldberg, “The raceless state”, *The Racial State*, (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers Ltd. 2002), P.p. 200-238

²⁷ William Safran, “Comparing Diasporas: A Review Essay”, *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, (1999), 8(3), 255-291.

²⁸ Jana Evans Braziel, and Anita Mannur, eds. *Theorizing Diaspora: A reader*, (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2003)

²⁹ Walker Connor, “The impact of homelands upon diasporas”, *Modern Diasporas in International Politics*, Gabriel Sheffer, ed. (London: Croom Helm, 1986) 16.

produce an overarching definition to explain the experiences of dislocated subjects outside of their homeland whose experience varies from the dominant discourse of the host culture³⁰. The current meaning evolved drastically over time to be an inclusive theory for all ethnic bodies³¹. It has been reconstructed by many scholars such as William Safran to signify the different locations of homeland and the linkages applied by those living in host countries.

Based on Safran's works, Nicholas Van Hear's definition of diaspora consists of three main criteria: immigration and dispersal, outside of the homeland, and social and political exchange. With respect to the first criteria, in historical definition, only those groups that have been forcibly displaced from their native land or have left because of a traumatic event were considered diasporas. However, these days, many sociologists such as Roger Brubaker, Robin Cohen, Thomas Faist, Peggy Levitt, and Razmik Panossian agree that any movement across state borders, including voluntary migration, may be counted as dispersal.

Concerning other criteria used to characterize diaspora, to form a diaspora, a group of people must live outside of the territory in a place they collectively consider their new home.^{32,33,34} In this thesis, 'homeland' refers to "a spiritual bond between nation and territory."³⁵ It is important to understand that homeland is a vast concept that we can talk about at length and the debate over its meaning lies beyond the scope of this thesis project. The dispersed members

³⁰ Vic Satzewich, *The Ukrainian Diaspora*, (London, UK: Routledge, 2003)

³¹ In this paper, ethnic identities/subjects include all races and ethnicities, in contrast to old usage of the term to refer to people of colour before 1980 -1980

³² Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, 165-166

³³ Connor, "The impact of homelands upon diasporas", 205

³⁴ Safran, "Comparing Diasporas: A Review Essay", 255-291.

³⁵ Connor, "The impact of homelands upon diasporas", 205

create and shape a community based on the collective memory and history of the homeland, which is idealized and glamourized.³⁶

Memories establish a connection between our individual and collective past. The past consists of our origins, heritage, and histories. It defines our present, meaning that it is always with us. As mentioned before, there is a tendency for the past to be remembered in an idealized and glamorized version of something we want it to be and not what it really is with all the details. It means that we remember a different version of memories that our biased brain has chosen to recall and not the events' actuality. A simple example could be after a vacation when we remember and reminisce about the wonderful days we had and the people we met. However, we may forget about how awful the flight delays were. Psychologists believe that this act of romanticizing the past helps us to deal with unpleasant situations and achieve a positive outlook on life.³⁷ This is why we have a sentimental longing and wistful affection for home. Alan R. Hirsch states memories from the past and home are “a longing for a sanitized impression of the past, what in psychoanalysis is referred to as a screen memory -- not a true recreation of the past, but rather a combination of many different memories, all integrated together, and in the process all negative emotions filtered out.”³⁸

A more controversial example of this within the Iranian Canadian diaspora could be seen in Nowruz, the Persian New Year celebrations, specifically with a Santa Claus-seeming figure called Haji Firuz. He is a cheerful and friendly icon, dressed in red who shows up to celebrate

³⁶ Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, 17

³⁷ Charles, S. T., Mather, M., & Carstensen, L. L. “Aging and emotional memory: The forgettable nature of negative images for older adults”, *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 132(2), (2003). 310–324

³⁸ Alan R. Hirsch, "Nostalgia: A neuropsychiatric understanding." *ACR North American Advances* (1992), 390-395.

the beginning of the spring and wishing everyone good and happy Nowruz. However, Haji Firuz is a blackface character who celebrates Nowruz by singing for his master. For many Iranian diasporic subjects, Nowruz's celebration is an important part of respecting their culture and heritage. They talk proudly about their customs and traditions and glamourize them while forgetting that Haji Firuz depicted with a blackface is blatant racism.³⁹ This is also part of the idealization and glamorization of memories from home, an emotional state instead of actual reality.

Within theories from diaspora, a form of social and political exchange should continue to be present between homeland and these spatially separated diasporic subjects/communities. The collective history and culture support the cultural transition and adjustment in the new home state⁴⁰. Considering the above discussions, the current view is that diasporas can also result from voluntary migration or state formation and collapse, along with forced exile, with emphasis on having shifted from socio-political explanations such as regime change, to individual and small group considerations of political and economic factors.⁴¹ Scholarly definitions of diaspora now refer to diverse ethnic populations living outside their country of origin for whatever reason and experiencing relations and cultural exchange with their original homeland.^{42,43} With the

³⁹ Beeta Baghoolizadeh "The Afro-Iranian Community: Beyond Haji Firuz Blackface, the Slave Trade, & Bandari Music." June 2020. <https://ajamc.com/2012/06/20/the-afro-iranian-community-beyond-haji-firuz-blackface-slavery-bandari-music/>

⁴⁰ Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, 17

⁴¹ Gabriel Sheffer, "From Diasporas to Migrants – From Migrants to Diasporas.", *Diasporas and Ethnic Migrants: Germany, Israel, and Post-Soviet Successor States in Comparative Perspective*. Rainer Münz and Rainer Ohliger, eds. (London: Frank Cass, 2003), 22

⁴² Barbara J. Merz, Lincoln C. Chen, and Peter F. Geithner, *Diasporas and Development*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 2

⁴³ Shain, Yossi, and Aharon Barth, "Diasporas and International Relations Theory.", *International organization*

expanded definition of diaspora, people who were previously considered migrants are now considered new additions to the diaspora, such as a group with purely voluntary departures.

In many host states, such migrants become “permanent established and organized diasporic entities,”⁴⁴ like Turks living in Germany and Sweden since the 1960s, and Iranians living in the US and Canada since 1980.⁴⁵ Hence, the definition of diaspora is now being reshaped and taken up by migrants themselves, “perhaps in an attempt to invent for themselves a frame of reference different from the standard one that hearkens back to nineteenth-century immigration.”⁴⁶

Identity and Diaspora

Identity is a crucial component in understanding diaspora. We need to understand that the subjective experiences of diasporic subjects are separate and frequently different from the concept of diaspora. In order to define diaspora, we need the process of identification. Identity is a transformative concept, influenced by cultural and social factors at the local and global level with both collective and subjective impacts. Identity is a process of being formed based on common historical experiences and shared cultural codes. However, it is also a process of becoming, shaped by the continuous play of local, cultural, developmental, and global social changes.⁴⁷ Therefore, identity, which is not a stable and fixed concept and entity, is formed based on cultural norms and social mores.

(2003), 452

⁴⁴ Sheffer, “From Diasporas to Migrants – From Migrants to Diasporas.”, 21-36

⁴⁵ Sheffer, 25

⁴⁶ Stathis Gourgouris, “The Concept of ‘Diaspora’ in the Contemporary World.” *Diaspora Entrepreneurial Networks: Four Centuries of History*. (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2005) 383-390

⁴⁷ Stuart Hall, “Who Needs Identity?”, *Questions of cultural identity*, 16(2), 1-17.

Identity formation in the diaspora is a continuing process of construction and constant transformation in a hybrid space where the construction of new cultural meaning happens due to constant interaction among diasporic communities and host culture. In other words, as Stuart Hall states, “identity belongs to the future as much as to the past.”⁴⁸ The personal and collective histories influence the reconstruction of self as a by-product of an individual's participation in social interaction. It results in construction and reconstruction of identity and culture. This dialectical approach helps form the individual's identity, or as Hall states “Identity emerges in the centrality of agency and politics.”⁴⁹

Imagine cultural identity as a mathematical function, $CI = c + f(t)$, where CI is the cultural identity and c is a constant element which represents the first component of cultural identity in terms of one shared culture or a sort of collective “one true self”⁵⁰, the being. The $f(t)$ in this function is a variable element that changes through time and represents critical points of great and significant differences that constitute what we are; the becoming. It is not something that already exists and transcends place, time, history, and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere and have histories, but “like everything which is historical, they undergo constant changes and transformation.”⁵¹ The unstable position of cultural identity is not some universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which history has made no fundamental mark. As Hall said, “It is *something* - not a mere trick of the imagination. It has its histories - and histories have their real, material and symbolic effects. The past continues to speak to us. But it no longer

⁴⁸ Hall, "Cultural identity and diaspora", 236

⁴⁹ Hall, 236

⁵⁰ Hall, 236

⁵¹ Hall, 236

addresses us as a simple, factual 'past'.”⁵² It is more about “positing” that causes a politics of identity and position which has “no absolute guarantee in an unproblematic, transcendental 'law of origin'.”⁵³

It should be noted that this identity formation process applies to the people of a host culture as well. Their cultural identity goes through constant transformation due to having contact with different cultures including the culture of diasporic communities. This means that Hall’s cultural identity theory and my mathematical function could be applied to domestic subjects who were born and raised in the host culture; therefore, c and $f(t)$ from the above function applies to both diasporic and domestic subjects. However, generally speaking, domestic subjects’ cultural formation and change caused by having contact with the culture of diasporic communities usually happens less significantly and at a slower rate. Simply, since the domestic subjects’ culture is the dominant culture, in an average life span, variable elements for diasporic subjects are far greater than variable elements for subjects born and raised in the host culture. This means the influence of host culture on diasporic subjects exceeds the influence of diasporic subjects. A simple and tangible example could be that a limited number of x colour dropping in a big container full of y colour does not cause a huge difference; however, we cannot say that it is still a y colour container.

In the diaspora, diasporic subjects go through "uncanny/unhomely"⁵⁴ experiences. In this state, diasporic subjects use a traditional interpretation of an evolving culture, and, as Bhabha

⁵² Hall, 237

⁵³ Hall, 237

⁵⁴ Homi Bhabha elaborates on Sigmund Freud's concept of the "Uncanny" ("unheimlich") in his essay "The World and the Home". Based on the original definition, Freud's uncanny or "unhomely" refers to the estranged sense of encountering something familiar yet threatening which exists within the bounds of the intimate.

expresses, “Past-Present becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living.”⁵⁵ Bhabha states that history and memory are like roots and diasporic subjects constantly look for a place that has cultural similarity to their experience. In diaspora, the construction/reconstruction of identity is disturbed, but never stopped. The reconstruction of this new identity depends on the previous culture seeking to strengthen its roots in a substantially different space from its ethnic status. The identity has already been shaped before each diasporic subject recognizes herself as an unfamiliar foreign entity. Therefore, in this spatial, temporal, and geographical experience, diasporic subjects' only option to retrieve a sense of belonging is to stick to their history, a history full of traditions and static cultural components. This experience of latching onto the past is similar to what Frantz Fanon calls a state of “occult instability”⁵⁶ that the diasporic body lives. He argues that this cultural dependency could strengthen and empower diasporic subjects. However, due to its lack of balance, it can also keep them in an imaginary society that is spatially specific, building on the myth of one’s cultural identity.⁵⁷

This latch onto a history has been seen in the experience of many diasporic groups. For instance, while the Iranian diaspora attaches itself to a cultural identity that is stuck in the time of leaving the homeland (it is the same concept that Hall calls stable cultural identity), the culture of the homeland has gone through change and transformation. At the same time, while the homeland culture has evolved, the experience of the host land remains unfamiliar and different, which leads to the disturbance of the reconstruction of diasporic identity. For new immigrants, this difference and unfamiliarity feed into feeling distant from the new host culture.

⁵⁵ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 10

⁵⁶ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1963), 227

⁵⁷ Fanon, 277

Lack of connection to host culture causes them to live in a temporary space between the past and future, a space like a gate in the airport where you are landing from one flight and waiting for the next one. It was a pervasive theme for diasporic subjects that I have interviewed for my thesis project. The participants talked about the differences between their lives in Iran and their lives once they immigrated to Canada. The sub-theme of social isolation and unemployment was the first major obstacle they were faced with when they entered Canada. They all firmly believed that integration due to the different cultures and languages is hard. One of my subjects described this obstacle: “Imagine moving to a country that you have never been to, where you do not know anyone, and you do not speak the language”. Interestingly, transnationalism and return migration was not a theme in my conversations with the participants, unlike what I have read about with respect to many other diasporas.⁵⁸ Many of the participants noted that it is improbable that they would go back to Iran and would live in Canada to make a new life. However, they are missing home very much. This hesitation in returning to home lies in the fact that homeland could not offer suitable conditions for them to develop and enrich and not lack connection to the home. To put it simply, the homeland becomes uninhabitable for them at a certain point. As one subject stated: “there is nothing for me to go back.”

Historical Context of Iranian Diaspora

To understand the Iranian diaspora, it seems essential to review its historical context while comparing it to the common definition of diaspora. I argue that the Iranian diaspora exhibits Cohen's theory's main features to conceptualize the Iranian diaspora. For instance, the

⁵⁸ Asha-Leila Hussein, *The Settlement and Integration Experiences of Immigrant Men in Canada: A Case Study on the Somali-Canadian Diaspora*, (Ottawa, ON University of Ottawa, 2016)

Islamic revolution of 1979 was the traumatic event that originated the biggest and most important dispersal of Iranians to multiple foreign countries worldwide. Based on the interaction of three social factors, immigration and dispersal, outside of the homeland, and social and political exchange, Cohen established a typology to show that the foundations of diasporas are based on nine shared characteristics. According to his theory, each diaspora starts from an initial dispersal from the homeland into more than one foreign location. This experience is usually traumatic, but the dislocated subjects create a community based on the collective memories of their homeland with a victim narrative. They share a cultural history distinct to their community. These collective memories, culture, and history facilitate the cultural transition and adjustment in the new host culture. Therefore, there is a constant desire to return. However, the members answer this need with indirect and virtual relationships with their homeland. Also, dislocated subjects' experiences as the non-dominant minority create friction with the host nation, resulting in social unacceptability. This social unacceptability helps bring the diasporic subjects closer together and encourages an enriching life in the host nation.

First, “dispersal from an original homeland, often traumatically, to two or more foreign regions” is the initiation of diaspora. As mentioned above, in the modern history of Iran, this traumatic event was the Islamic revolution of 1979, which caused the first wave of immigration and resulted in the creation of the first Iranian diasporas around the world. The Iranian diaspora did not have a recognizable existence until the Islamic Revolution of 1979.⁵⁹ This first wave mostly included “political exiles”, monarchist officials, political activists, and religious minorities who had to flee the country since their lives were in danger in Iran.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Shirin Hakimzadeh, “Iran: A Vast Diaspora Abroad and Millions of Refugees at Home”, *Migration Information Source*, 4. (2006)

⁶⁰ Ali Modarres, “Settlement patterns of Iranians in the United States.” *Iranian Studies*, 31(1), (1998), 31-49,

The second feature is “the expansion from a homeland in search of work, in pursuit of a trade or to further colonial ambitions.”⁶¹ This feature connects to the second wave of immigration of Iranians, which happened after the revolution and included people who left the country because of civil and economic instability due to the Iran-Iraq war. This instability of Iran's economic situation caused a brain drain for the younger generation searching for better and more prosperous life status.⁶² Later on, during and after the alleged presidential electoral fraud of 2009 and the green movement, the third wave of immigration happened. This wave included political activists, asylum seekers, and younger generations who lost hope for a peaceful transition toward democracy in Iran.⁶³ As one of my subjects said: "after the election of 1388 [2009], I lost my hope for a transition toward democracy in Iran. That's where I decided to leave the country". Also, the third wave includes a group of entrepreneurs who migrated from Iran during this phase.

Therefore, each immigration wave brought its own characteristics and qualities to the Iranian diasporas and strengthened them in host countries.

Third, "a collective memory and myth about the homeland, including its location, history, suffering, and achievements"⁶⁴ works like glue for diasporic communities. It is the beating heart of the Iranian diaspora and what connected the community together. Many Iranian diasporic subjects find pride in their idealized and glamourized ancient culture and history. This collective

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⁶¹ Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, 17

⁶² Hakimzadeh, “Iran: A Vast Diaspora Abroad and Millions of Refugees at Home”, 4

⁶³ Chaichian, Mohammad A, “The New Phase of Globalization and Brain Drain”, *International Journal of Social Economics* 39, (2012) 18-38.

⁶⁴ Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, 17

memory and history create and maintain connections with the homeland, a bridge that is resistant to outside influence. The historical memory of the Persian Empire's traditional and cultural superiority creates pride for some Iranians as opposed to the traumatic and darker history of Iran after the 1979 revolution. It is worth mentioning that the word “Persian” has better connotations for many Iranian diasporic subjects compared to “Iranian” due to its reference to the prideful ancient history of Iran. This is the reason many members of the Iranian diaspora identify themselves as Persian rather than Iranian.

However, technically, “Persian” relates to ethnicity while “Iranian” refers to a nationality. Thus, a person could be one without being the other. Historically, in the western world, Iran used to be known as “Persia” when the country and vast surrounding lands were known as Persia (derived from the ancient kingdom of Parsa and the Persian empire). Later on, in 1935, Reza Shah Pahlavi asked that Persia be called by its endonym, Iran, in all official foreign correspondence. Today, Persia may not exist by name anymore, but it lives on in the form of historical sites.

Fourth, many of the post-revolution generations who experienced the era before the 1979 revolution through their parents’ memories reminisce about this part of Iran's history. However, they rarely question the underlying reasons for the revolution such as the broken system of governance, economic difficulties, and sociopolitical repression. This romanticization of the pre-revolution history feeds into future generations to create and recreate the homeland's lost beautiful image. This notion is known as diasporic amnesia which exists due to idealization and glamourization of the past. Cohen describes this notion as “an idealization of the real or imagined ancestral home and a collective commitment to its maintenance, restoration, safety, and

prosperity, even to its creation."⁶⁵ In the eyes of many Iranian diasporic subjects, the Islamic Revolution of 1979 gave power to a religious regime of Iran that failed to carry on its promises of equality for all, social justice, freedom and democracy, and independence from great power tutelage⁶⁶ and used Islam as a tool to ignore and skip the Persian culture.⁶⁷ As a result, many Iranians who found pride in their ancient history became angry with Iran's Muslim clergy leadership and consequently expressed their anger toward the religion that justified the revolution. However, Islam has been practiced in Iran since the Muslim colonization in 650.⁶⁸ The Islamic Revolution of 1979 and Muslim fanatics who executed the national referendum of March 1979 and declared Iran an Islamic Republic while excluding their former left-wing, nationalist, and intellectual allies from any positions of power in the new regime, and enforcing a return to conservative social values formed a victim narrative for the Iranians who had to flee their homeland and were forced to join their diaspora.⁶⁹ This caused a heated Islamophobic movement in Iranian diasporas. For example, associating the Islamic practices such as hijab or mourning in Ashura with the Islamic regime in Iran creates aggression and violence toward this

⁶⁵ Cohen, 17

⁶⁶ Ali Fathollah-Nejad, "Four decades later, did the Iranian revolution fulfill its promises?", Brookings, 2009, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/07/11/four-decades-later-did-the-iranian-revolution-fulfill-its-promises/>

⁶⁷ Amir Taheri, "The islamic attack on persian culture", Index on Censorship, 1981, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/03064228308533535>

⁶⁸ Parvaneh Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire: The Sasanian-Parthian Confederacy and the Arab Conquest of Iran*. (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, in association with the Iran Heritage Foundation, 2009), 469

⁶⁹ Hammed Shahidian, "Our' Reflections in 'Their' Mirror: Cultural Politics and the Representation of the Iranian Diaspora in the Islamic Republic.", *Muslim Diaspora: Gender, Culture and Identity*. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007), 99-115

symbolic display, leading to public shaming and verbal abuse of Iranian women who wear hijab or people who march to commemorate Ashura in Toronto.⁷⁰

Fifth, “the frequent development of a return movement to the homeland gains collective approbation even if many in the group are satisfied with only a vicarious relationship or intermittent visits to the homeland.”⁷¹ Many Iranian diasporic subjects go back and forth to revisit their family and friends in Iran but this is mostly vacation and not permanent resettlement in Iran. Although, these revisits can cause sadness due to the cultural gap between the diaspora and homeland culture after migration. In these trips, many diasporic subjects realize that they do not feel they belonged in Iran anymore. However, they also do not feel that they belong to their host country either. As one subject stated: “I don’t belong here, I don’t belong there [Iran]. I don’t know where I really belong.”

Sixth, this state of homelessness and in-betweenness of migration persuades homesick diasporic subjects to form a community, or as Cohen states “a strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time and based on a sense of distinctiveness, a common history, the transmission of a common cultural and religious heritage and the belief in a common fate.”⁷² Bonds of language, religion, culture, and a sense of a common history and fate fill a transnational relationship and turn it into an affective and intimate quality that formal citizenship or even long settlement frequently lack.⁷³ Therefore, they congregate to construct the diasporic community

⁷⁰ “Ashura in Toronto.” <https://circanada.com/2018/09/20/ashura-in-toronto-meets-opposition-from-the-communist-party-of-iran/>

⁷¹ Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, 17

⁷² Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, 17

⁷³ Robin Cohen, “Diasporas and the Nation-State: From Victims to Challengers”, *International Affairs* (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-) 72, no. 3 (1996), 517

based on these commonalities and similarities of history of migration.

Seventh, Cohen argues “a troubled relationship with host societies, [which] suggests a lack of acceptance or the possibility that another calamity might befall the group.”⁷⁴ We can see this in the lack of belonging and acceptance in the host nation. “Belonging can be an act of self-identification or identification by others, in a stable, contested or transient way.”⁷⁵ Therefore, this need for stability and safety forms a social bond between diasporic subjects and host nations, creating borders and boundaries between them. As Floya Anthias states “such constructions produce a ‘natural’ community of people and function as exclusionary borders of otherness.”⁷⁶ We could argue that the Iranian diasporas or diasporas in general create a safe familiar space in the strange host nation, where the sense of belonging is lost. In favor of that, the lost sense of social acceptability and belonging becomes the main reason that diasporic communities come together.⁷⁷

Eighth, bonds and commonalities of language, religion, culture, and a sense of a common history and fate in Iranian diasporas in different countries can bring these communities together. In addition to that, many diasporic subjects relocate between these communities. This movement creates a transnational connection and relationship between diasporas. Furthermore, in the age of cyberspace with all the technological development, these communities are frequently in touch with each other, shaping a greater transnational Iranian diaspora outside of Iran. This is what Cohen calls “a sense of empathy and co-responsibility with co-ethnic members in other countries

⁷⁴ Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, 17

⁷⁵ Nira Yuval-Davis, “Belonging and the politics of belonging”, *Patterns of prejudice* 40, no. 3 (2006): 199

⁷⁶ Floya Anthias, “Belongings in a globalizing and unequal world: Rethinking translocations”, *The situated politics of belonging*, (2006), 21

⁷⁷ Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, 17

of settlement even where home has become more vestigial.”⁷⁸

Ninth, there is a “possibility of a distinctive creative, enriching life in host countries with a tolerance for pluralism.”⁷⁹ Many diasporic subjects state that they relocate to have an enriching life with better quality. They use the opportunities provided in the host country to flourish and promote a positive outlook. Besides, diasporic scholars, authors, artists, and academics aim to reinforce and reconstruct their cultural diasporic identity in diverse host nations, such as Tirgan Festivals in Toronto and Mehregan Conferences at the University of Southern California. Similarly, Iranian diasporic subjects try to integrate into the host nation and raise their quality of life, individually and collectively, while maintaining the Iranian cultural ancestry and history. They try to paint a picture of what it means to be part of the Iranian diaspora worldwide.

The above discussion shows that the Iranian diaspora has many of these nine features, and they accurately describe a broad experience of the Iranian diaspora. However, the last three characteristics limit the understandings of Iranian diaspora's experience because of a pre-assumption that the members of the Iranian diasporic community have a unified and united relationship. The Iranian diaspora includes a multiplicity of genders, sexual orientations, religions, ethnicities, regions, political beliefs, and socioeconomic backgrounds. It is safe to say that it is an intersectionally diverse community. They keep an internal hierarchical relationship among the members while congregating to form a community. A study of the Iranian diaspora showed that the Iranian diaspora experiences class segregation among their community members.⁸⁰ The older and dominant classes of the Iranian diaspora usually ridicule and criticize

⁷⁸ Cohen, 17

⁷⁹ Cohen, 17

⁸⁰ Cameron McAuliffe, “Transnationalism within: Internal diversity in the Iranian diaspora”, *Australian Geographer*, 39(1), (2008) 63-80.

the new members' conspicuity and transparency for appearing as established members of the community, not a new arrival. This notion is not specific for a particular geographical location. It can be seen in all Iranian diaspora around the globe. The Iranian diaspora creates a community to provide a remedy for their collective aching heart; however, not everyone belongs. Upon crossing borders, the home nation's national identity loses its social location in the host nation. To construct a new home, new norms and values are added or introduced to maintain the boundaries of belonging within and outside one's diasporic community. This can explain why some Iranian diasporic subjects do not feel they belong to their community. Therefore, this causes a divided diasporic community.

I think that conversation around accepting our differences and focusing more on commonality would help create a better and healthier relationship between the members of the Iranian diaspora. Facilitating a better relationship between the members of the Iranian diaspora and bringing them closer to each other was my goal from the very beginning. I hope to follow up the completion of this thesis and its accompanying artworks with publication and exhibition. My initial plan was to have a show collaboration with two well-known Iranian cultural organizations outside of Iran, Tirgan at Toronto and Farhang Foundation at Los Angeles. These two cities host the biggest Iranian diasporas around the globe. They have the widest range of audiences both inside and outside of the Iranian community and it can help me to present these stories to more people. In addition to this, it gives me the opportunity to have potential diasporic subjects for future works since one of my goals is to continue this project beyond academia. I believe this can serve my goal of bringing the Iranian diasporic subjects closer to each other. To make this happen, I had an initial conversation with the Tirgan Programming Director, and she was very interested in my proposal. However, due to the global pandemic, every program was canceled or

shifted online, and my proposal was put on hold. As the pandemic comes to a close, I will renew my efforts to promote my work to these two organizations.

Language, Translation and Diaspora

“Inshallah!” Joe Biden perfectly used a ubiquitous Arabic and Farsi phrase to blast Trump on tax returns in the first 2020 presidential debate.⁸¹ This kind of expression can show that language, as a prominent part of a culture constantly crosses physical boundaries which results in developing and enriching other foreign cultures. This shows that any group culture must have a certain relation to growing and an isolated cultural space cannot exist. Therefore, these forms of cultural crossing of boundaries are not only a big step toward a cultural exchange but also a driving force of cultural innovation. This shows how different diasporas that are naturally involved in crossing boundaries facilitate the cultural exchange between the host culture and themselves. As Maria Tymoczko and Edwin Gentzler state, language and translation are important parts in the process of cultural transformation and exchange, with contact, interaction, and even collision (like plate tectonics theory) between two languages and cultures.

Therefore, they define translation as the conversion of a self-cultural identity to a host cultural identity in order to transfer and transmit the cultures and enable each culture to articulate its distinctiveness as part of a cultural communication and interpretation.⁸² However, gaps

⁸¹ Theo Armus, “‘Inshallah’: The Arabic ‘fuggedaboudit’ Biden dropped to blast Trump on tax returns”, *The Washington Post*, September 2020.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/09/30/inshallah-biden-debate-trump-taxes/>

⁸² Maria Tymoczko and Edwin Gentzler, *Translation and power*, (Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002)

between two languages and cultures have always been an issue for translators to be aware of when they render meanings of words, since those meanings have various connotations and implications in their different cultural settings. Therefore, for better intercultural communication, translators need to compare the source and the target culture and language. There are some strategies such as domestication and foreignization that translators can benefit from.

"Domestication and foreignization are two basic translation strategies which provide both linguistic and cultural guidance"⁸³ for the conversion of the culture-specific source language into the target language. According to Lawrence Venuti, domestication means "an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values"⁸⁴ while foreignization means "an ethnodeviant pressure on those [cultural] values to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad."⁸⁵ Generally speaking, domestication tends to minimize the strangeness of the foreign text for target language readers, and foreignization tends to break target conventions by keeping something of the foreignness of the original.⁸⁶

From a diasporic perspective, the diasporic translation should happen in a hybrid space of homeland and host culture, the "in-between space" and "third space". This is a space where resistance and negotiation, fusion, and bricolage happen, and as Bhabha says, it is a place for "the construction of a political object that is new, neither the one nor the other."⁸⁷ Here,

⁸³Wenfen Yang, "Brief study on domestication and foreignization in translation", *Journal of Language Teaching and Research* 1, no. 1 (2010),78.

⁸⁴ Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. (London & New York: Routledge, 1995), 20

⁸⁵ Venuti, 20

⁸⁶ Mark Shuttleworth & Moira Cowie, *Dictionary of Translation Studies*, (Manchester, UK: St Jerome Publishing, 1997), 59

⁸⁷ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 37

translation is more of a negotiation between source and target language; it is not an exchange between separate and distinct languages, but a process of selecting adequate tools in order to not only transfer meanings but also create new meanings; it is not moving from source to target but locating in a “third space” between or even beyond both, where negotiation between cultures is constantly happening.

Zrinka Stahuljak offers that “based on the idea of biological *métissage* (mixing of races), translation is seen as a textual *métissage*, a liminal, in-between space that performs the borderline work of cultural production, and that negotiates and politically transforms the strict delineations of homogeneous national cultures and colonial representations.”⁸⁸ A translator who actively and effectively complies with the cultural diasporic translation perspective can have a unique and successful translation in order to facilitate cultural communications and relations and deal with cultural differences. As Douglas Robinson states, “translation does not only show differences, but differences beyond.”⁸⁹ Although translation should benefit from domestication strategy, it is a good idea to invite the reader to the hybrid space of third space by highlighting the source text's cultural identity and familiarizing the reader with the cultural differences in order to shape a cross-national identity.

Studio Work

Here, I talk about my thesis artworks, the catalyst, and the product of my research and time at OCAD University in order to bring some light and insight into the criteria that directed my decisions. My art practice includes two main components: a theoretical framework with

⁸⁸ Stahuljak, Zrinka, “Minor Empires”, *The Translator* 16 (2), (2010), 256

⁸⁹ Douglas Robinson, “Theorizing translation in a woman’s voice”, *The Translator*, 1(2), (1995), 153

thorough reading of scholars like Bhabha, Hall, Cohen, and so forth, and a series of artworks created with photography, typography and calligraphy. My narration of these artworks tries to translate my research findings of diasporas through interconnected visual elements rather than analyzing the isolated events. However, the meaning of my works only proceeds from the visible. In a larger and more invisible sense, meaning continues to exist in the untold and unseen connections. My narration helps to encourage interpretive participation and collective engagement with stories that the artworks tell. An assemblage of stories and meanings results from the speculations of the contributing creator, participants, and observers.

In the creation of visual artworks intended to carry diasporic stories, I thought it was essential to try to understand emotions and experience the diasporic subjects' lives. I believe that a visual storyteller must translate the ideas and emotions hidden in memories, moments, and spaces into something that can be physically seen and felt. To do so, I benefit from foreignization and domestications strategies within the literal and visual languages while trying to create the conditions that my artworks emerge from the third space.

By presenting the story's ideas and emotions, the visual artist supports the story's visual form through his/her adequate tools. Therefore, the crucial initial step was to collect emotions, feelings, ideas, and memories. These components came from extensive conversations with diasporic subjects, listening to them, laughing with them and sometimes, crying with them. Their stories and memories are the heart of my artworks in this project. Through conversations, I was able to understand how to apply what I was learning to my design work and add some creative and imaginative qualities towards new uses of each technique. As a result, final works are created within the relation of subjects, visual tools, and the artist.

I hope to help subjects be heard and be seen to fulfill the vision of me, the photographer. The photos may look good, but they will not work for the story until the composition, lenses, and lighting express and enhance underlying feelings of the photographer and subjects and the subtext of the story. Working with these new emotions and knowledge, I began the design process from ideation to experimentation in order to finally get to the final prototypes for the exhibition “this is NOT a drill”. My designed typography's main goal is to tell diasporic stories while being contemporary and nostalgic at the same time. The contexts of these typographies are the Persian and Arabic poetry designed by drawing from the Persian and Arabic Calligraphy techniques. It is worth mention that from the perspective of someone who is unfamiliar with either the Persian or Arabic languages, they both look the same. However, Persian and Arabic are completely different languages, but both have a mostly common alphabet, overlapping vocabulary, and ties to Islam.

These self-reflexive calligraphic designs are my diasporic perspective and take on my participants' stories as part of the Iranian diaspora through rich Persian and Arabic poetry. They cover both ancient and contemporary poets such as Rumi, Hafiz, Ibn Arabi, Sohrab Sepehri and so forth. This way of using typographic designs also feeds my exploration of visual storytelling and the confrontation and resolution of issues and hardships surrounding living in the diaspora. However, is benefiting from ancient poets while using techniques from an ancient form of art like calligraphy not idealizing and glamorizing the past? To answer this question, I should say that I firmly believe that history, memory, and past are inseparable parts of any country and nation, however, they need to be realistically understood and reviewed and not blindly romanticized. As an artist/researcher who uses ancient Arabic and Persian calligraphy, I carefully try not only to treat these forms of ancient arts in an idealized and glamorized way, but also

dismantle those techniques by having a relatively contemporary approach toward them. I believe that ancient Arabic and Persian calligraphy is a vanishing form of art and there is a need for preserving it. However, to be able to not only save this ancient form of art but also incorporate it in the contemporary art world, they need to be adopted to new circumstances like modernization and digitalization. Therefore, I use digital calligraphy and not the traditional way of handwriting calligraphy.

Moreover, an important part for me is telling diasporic subjects' stories in a tangible way for the audience in order to bring people closer to each other. However, I am reluctant, or not fully satisfied, to put these stories into words. As part of the visual culture, I am concerned about oversimplifying both the context and the knowledge presented by written stories. Ideally, sharing artworks is a relational process, in which the story that accompanies each image is conveyed through visual storytelling.

I try to use storytelling within diaspora to assist the community in restructuring its lost cultural identity and establishing a social space to belong. To do so, storytelling works as a bridge between members of the Iranian diaspora by giving a voice to less-heard members to narrate their hardships, struggles, emotions, concerns, and so forth in order to provide an opportunity for members to accept others' differences and focus more on their commonality. Therefore, they can feel more belonging to the diasporic community which brings back a bit of home and lost cultural identity to the new host country.

Much of this work is inspired by personal experiences. When I speak aloud or show the stories, they become free. They are not spatial or temporal. They continue to live beyond their origins and forms. If I were writing the stories, I fear that I would trap them in words and letters. Therefore, I use photography and other visual languages where other forms of language fail. As

Graeme Sullivan in *Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in Visual Art* explains, visual language can go beyond transferring through conventional language and, in fact, does something more. The photos' construction and reconstruction are inherently connected to a push-pull relationship with participants within their stories and through the research process. These photos were shaped through my conversations with participants long before capturing them. Their stories create the pathway to the ultimate true shutter, diaphragm, light, and lenses; hence the rest of the details become a matter of technicality. The locations of photoshoots differ depending on the subject. It can be a cultural site, a favorite spot, an airport, or even around their home, due to limitations in a global pandemic. During each conversation with the participants, I try to ideally be a friend and not an outsider observer who tries to analyze their behavior or potentially judge them. It was important to me that they felt comfortable enough to talk about the hidden corners of their stories. The participants did not require preparation, and I tried to make the photoshoot a more fun and friendly photography process and not a serious work-oriented session.

As Frank Serafini states, a visual work, or as he calls it “a mode” is “a system of visual and verbal entities created within or across various cultures to represent and express meanings”⁹⁰. He explains that a mode includes “textual elements”, “visual images”, and “design elements” in print compositions. Therefore, I use all the modes to wholly narrate diasporic stories through the “transformation of these modes for the designer’s purposes.”⁹¹ As a result, “this transformation gives agency and voice to the designer”⁹², which helps to shape the visual narratives that I was looking for.

⁹⁰ Frank Serafini, *Reading the visual: An introduction to teaching multimodal literacy*, (New York: Teachers College Press, 2014), 12

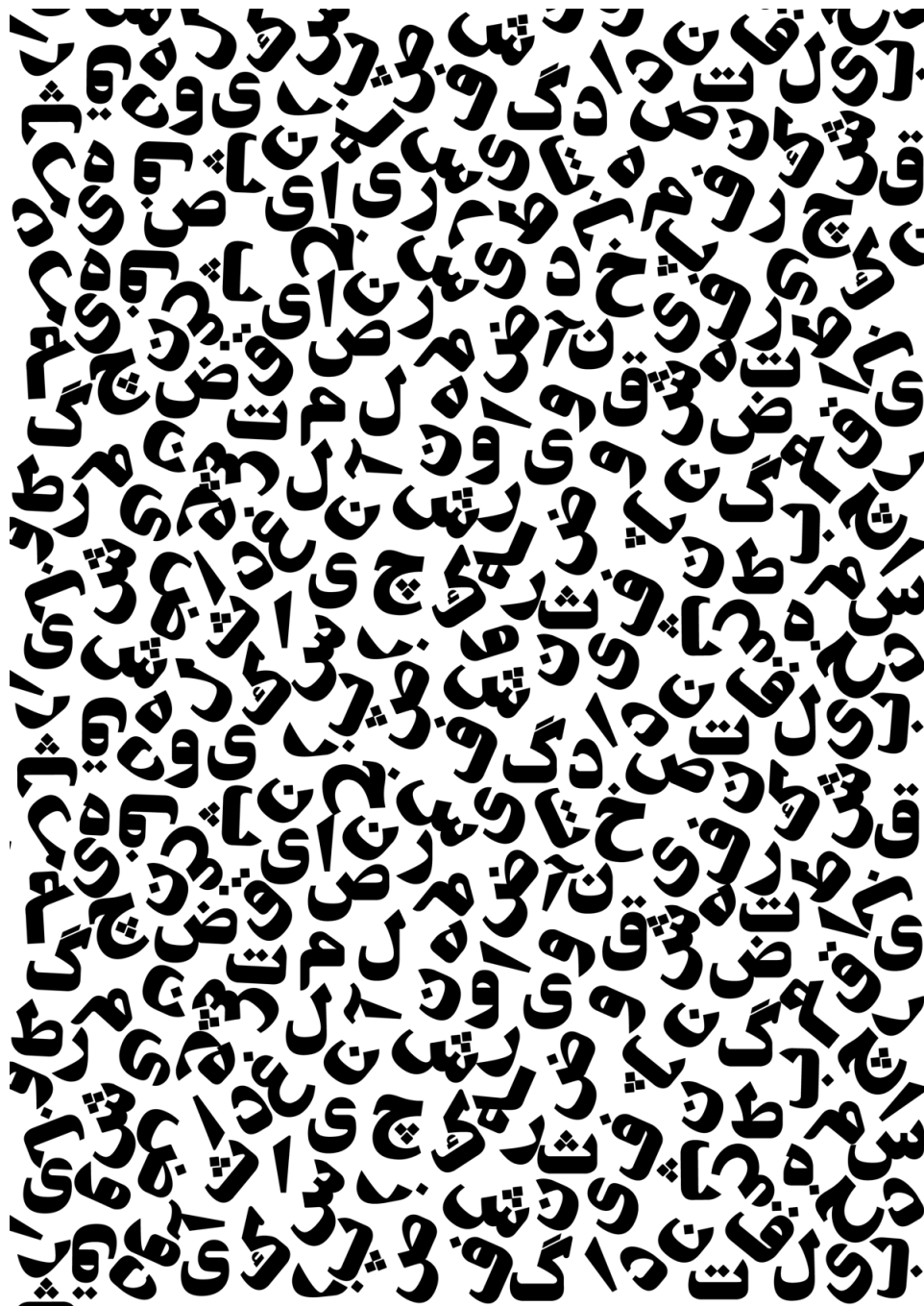
⁹¹ Serafini, 52

⁹² Serafini, 52

My Thesis

The thesis, this is NOT a drill, tries to shine some light on the less seen Iranian diaspora corners. It includes homesickness, loneliness, depression and heartbreak, love, solace, belonging, development, and enrichment. The name of the project comes from a story that I once heard from an Iranian diasporic subject. During the Iran and Iraq war, there were many emergency alerts that warned people to hide in shelters. These alerts always started with "this is not a drill". Iranians had to go to shelters with distress and anxiety, thinking of a chance of being bombed and killed. But there is more to this story. The narrator of this story fell in love with a boy she met while sheltering in their building basement. This created mixed feelings toward the alerts; the feelings of love, passion, and enthusiasm to see the lover, wrapped in hatred, anxiety, and distress about the attacks and bombs. These mixed feeling situations are prevalent for Iranian diasporic communities. Living away from home in a hybrid space creates a hybrid emotion of love and hate. The dispersed members create and shape a community based on the collective memory and history of the homeland, which is romanticised. Memories establish a connection between our individual and collective past. The past consists of our origins, heritage, and histories, and defines our present, meaning that it is always with us. However, there is a tendency for the past to be remembered in an idealized and glamorized version – something we want it to be and not what it really is. This act of romanticization of the past helps us deal with unpleasant situations and achieve a positive outlook. This is why we have a sentimental longing and wistful affection for home.

When I started this project, I was aware of what I want this project to consist of, but I did not know how different parts could complete each other and create a cohesive thesis. The work, “My Thesis” was created at the time when I had all the tools but not the blueprint for making it. Language can be a good metaphor in this context, in the sense that I had all the letters and words, but I needed to communicate with full sentences to transfer meaning. To create this work, I literally spelled all the ideas and titles I had at that time in Farsi and arranged them into the design.



1. Arash Safavi, *My Thesis*, 2020, *Print Media*

Living in diaspora means being in the state of homelessness and in-betweenness of migration. You put your whole life in two 23kg travel bags and leave your homeland to live in a miles-away to-be-home country. The cultural identity that you carry all the time in an unfamiliar society makes belonging harder. “I am not Iranian. I am not Canadian. I don’t know who the hell I am?” as the subject describes it. A genderless subject becomes part of the word Irani (means Iranian) while standing in the



2. Arash Safavi, *Blue Irani*, 2019, Print Media

middle of the text. The text consists of words that are part of the implications of being Iranian for me. The subject is passing through some and facing some other in the in-betweenness state that the immigrants live. This causes sadness and a "blue" feeling, which is why this work is "Blue Irani".

Stormy Sea

The theme of being alone and distant is part of any conversation regarding diasporas. This also applies to all of my communications with my participants. They were all feeling it at the time of our talks. They sometimes described the feeling as living on a deserted island in the middle of a stormy sea. The traumatic act of dispersal creates all kinds of experiences and emotions, which surround the diasporic subjects. The diasporic subjects need to swim in this dangerous sea to get to the safe shore, which translates to the first step for enriching life in the host country. This image describes all the hardships the diasporic subjects and communities have to go through to better integrate into the soon to be new home, as Rumi states that this way we chose we are full of joy and enthusiasm but alone with many difficulties and hardships.



3. Arash Safavi, *Stormy Sea*, 2020, Print Media

Grey Sleepless

Bonds of language, religion, culture, and a sense of a common history and fate can bring diasporic subjects closer to each other. The beginning or even the rest of living in the diaspora is full of homesickness, loneliness, and depression. Therefore, looking for some human connections or as I like to call them, bridges, between people can be a peaceful remedy. The mutual sense of distinctiveness, the



4. Arash Safavi, *Grey Sleepless 1*, 2020, Print Media

transmission of a common cultural and religious heritage, and the belief in a common fate can make these connections stronger, leading to some intimate friendships. These connections are more pleasant and attractive than what is waiting for diasporic subjects outside, in the host country's less-familiar and less-friendly society. Yet, it can be more pleasant than sleeping and may create a sleepless state for them. As the poem by Hossein Monzavi in the works explains, there is no sleep for the person who thinks about these friendships. The subject in the work who is eagerly moving toward this circle of an unstable sleepless state placed in the sea of the unknown is more than a memory for most diasporic subjects.



5. Arash Safavi, *Grey Sleepless 2*, 2020, Print Media

Blue Jean Love

“I will love you 'til the end of time
I would wait a million years
Promise you'll remember that you're mine
Baby can you see through the tears?”⁹³

The Iranian diasporic subjects in their 30s who left their homeland for a better future have experienced love back home. Some may leave a lover or try to keep their love fresh while being away. As American singer and song-writer Lana Del Rey states in the “Blue Jean” song, there are always tears in love next remembrance of love, and that is where the name “Blue Jean Love” comes from. Love in the diaspora can be more than a literal translation of feeling for a lover in the homeland. It can be anything, parents, neighborhood, city, or even a smell. “You sometimes miss the smell of your friend”, as my subject said. The typographic design is based on the poem of Hafiz, the great Iranian poet who explains that it is easy to start to love but there will be lots of hardship in the path for its existence.



6. Arash Safavi, *Blue Jean Love*, 2020, Print Media

⁹³ Lana Del Rey, *Blue Jean*, in *Born to Die*, (Interscope: US, 2012)

Gold Occurrence

There is a tendency for the past to be remembered in an idealized and glamorized version – something we want it to be and not what it really is. It means that we remember a different version of memories that our biased brain has chosen to recall and not the events' actuality.

These home sweet home memories and stories keep you busy in a waiting state, expecting them to reappear.

Even if a similar incident happens after a while, you miss it because now you are so lost in your memories that you cannot see events around you, and you space out. Life is a collection of small memories and events while we wait for big and superb, or better called, a

gold occurrence to happen. Waiting for a good change is a common theme of diaspora for many diasporic subjects, just before realizing that “we are alone, and nobody comes to save us”, as the subject in this work said. The quote in the artworks is from Ibn Arabi who explains that everything starts and finishes with this waiting.



7. Arash Safavi, *Gold Occurrence*, 2020, Print Media

Alone Moon

We all heard or read about how social media kills friendships and makes people alone. But what happens when it is the only way to connect to your family and close friends? For many diasporic subjects, Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram, and so forth are the only way of connecting to an important part of their life, their homeland. However, social media's negative effects such as increased depression and anxiety and feelings of loneliness can even worsen their feelings of homesickness, disconnection, and loneliness caused by immigration and relocation.



8. Arash Safavi, *Alone Moon*, 2020, Print Media

Another negative feeling caused by social media is FOMO, fear of missing out. FOMO can turn into a vicious cycle of comparison and inaction. Worse, it may cause users to live other people's relationships on social media. Instead of enjoying quality time with friends and family or even trying to find new friendships and relationships in the new host country, the users watch others' stories and videos with their friends and family. Instead of engaging in meaningful hobbies, they watch others engaging in the hobbies they wish they could have. This type of spending time on social media can result in neglecting life. It can make the users disconnected and alone, causing even more social isolation for diasporic subjects. The poems in this work come from an ancient poet, Rumi and a contemporary poet, Sohrab Sepehri. Rumi talks about how he is in search of a real human. In contrast, Sepehri talks about how we should acknowledge that we are alone but the moon shines on our loneliness and brings us light.

Purple Musician

The Islamic Revolution of 1979, which gave power to the religious regime, is the key reason for the creation and formation of the Iranian diaspora in Iran's modern history. It is accountable for daily harassment, purges, persecution, imprisonment, torture and mass executions of many Iranians. It formed a victim narrative for the Iranians who were forced to join their diaspora. As a result, some Iranian diasporic subjects possess hatred and aggression towards Islam, while some have mixed feelings about it. This juxtaposition can even be seen in



9. Arash Safavi, *Purple Musician*, 2020, Print Media

the music of diaspora, like the works of Shahin Najafi, a musician living in exile. In the philosophy of colours, purple is considered a rare and unique colour since it is less common in nature and difficult to produce biologically. Najafi, the musician in the photo, is also considered a phenomenon in Iran's contemporary music and culture. Most of his music is a protest against Iran's current regime and about sensitive issues regarding Iran such as Islam, alcohol, feminism, gender, etc. The moving musician with an electric guitar in a concert, singing about the benefits of being drunk while alcohol is banned and against the Islamic law in Iran can represent the constant contradiction and juxtaposition in which Iranian diasporic subjects live. Maybe as Najafi sings a poem by Yaghma Golroei in “Purple Musician”, the solution is some wine, otherwise “with sobriety, you won’t be able to solve your problem”.

Permanent Tattoos

The flight PS752 was shot down by the Iranian regime's military branch with 176 passengers on board, including 138 Iranians en route to Canada. Many were in their 20s and 30s, and several young children were also on board. Almost all Iranian Canadians lost someone they knew on that flight, but the grief was bigger than a loss. For Iranians that immigrated, these flights are very familiar; all of us have been on at least one. We all experienced homesickness, sadness, distress, and emotional turbulence on our way to soon be in our new home. Simply, this incident could happen to any of us because our lives are not that different from those of many killed in the plane crash. Just for this reason, we, Iranians living outside of our homeland died on that plane, or at least a part of us. That is why these losses have put permanent scars on our minds and bodies. The work “Permanent Tattoos” is about these scars on Iranians, especially those who live outside of Iran. The typographic design includes names of those who died in the crash. It is cut out of a photo of a surface covered with my actual blood. The use of my blood is essential to this work because it represents my relation to this work as not only an Iranian

Canadian but also a diasporic individual who lost friends in this crash. The design was projected on an Iranian diasporic subject's body, presenting the scars and pains that these losses left us with.



10. Arash Safavi, *Permanent Tattoos*, 2020, Print Media

Metallic Sculpture

Since the traditional Persian and Arabic calligraphy is the artistic practice of handwriting of valuable and religious text such as the holy Quran and poetry, it is considered an opulent form of art for transferring knowledge and meaning.

Visually presenting Persian and Arabic calligraphy while separating it from its mission to carry information contradicts not only its origin but also its purpose. Although, I believe even this



11. Arash Safavi, *Metallic Sculpture*, 2020, *Print Media*

visual form of presentation conveys some sort of meaning. Perhaps it aesthetically communicates a need and urgency for communication. It seems that we are used to writing and reading so much that we forget there is a significant aesthetic dimension to them. We can focus more on typography and calligraphy as an ancient form of art when separating communication from it. We should remember that each letter and word is a shape and form and by repurposing the letters and words, visual artists can create almost purely visual artworks. The idea behind the Metal Sculpture is to stimulate a situation for an audience who can read Persian but are not able to read this specific calligraphy design just like audiences who are not able to read Persian as a reminder that this project is created in a third space where new cultural meanings are constantly constructed. This piece was supposed to be created using the CNC machine at OCAD University, however, due to the COVID-19 lockdown and university closure, only a mock-up version is shown in this thesis.

Rumi Stamp

This work is my personal journey as a new member of the Iranian diasporic community in Toronto with its enthusiasm, affection, hardship, sadness, depression, and homesickness. When I moved to this new to-be-home, I felt a gap, which has been becoming lesser by time. I was a stranger in the land of strange. I did not know a place or a person and I was deeply



12. Arash Safavi, *Rumi Staple*, 2019, *Print Media*

situated in-betweenness of migration. As a result, I had plenty of time on my hands. I started walking in the city, reading poetry, and metaphorically building bridges in my host country. In one of those times, I read a poem from Rumi that said, “what you seek is seeking you” and it gifted me a long-awaited peace. That is where this artwork comes from, a stamp that works as a reminder for me of tough times. With the help of some ink, this stamp can be in every piece of life as a token of self-appreciation and self-empowerment. It is worth mentioning that Farsi is read right to left, however, when audiences use the stamp, the Farsi typography on their bodies is backward. Instead of fixing the stamp to be backward and the resulted typography be right, I ironically kept it that way as a reminder to myself that even when “what you seek is seeking you” is just right in front of you, it is hard to see and understand it. Just like the real life.

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Appendix

1. Artworks File:

It can be found in the Image Section on the OCAD University Open Research Repository.