CARRYING DISTANCE

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Speaking Across the Divide
The Shell Projects (Alleyway behind 13 Mansfield Avenue, Toronto, Canada)
August 4-September 5, 2022
Performances: August 6, 2:00pm EST and August 10, 7:00pm EST

Tkaronto, Ontario, Canada, 2022.

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Abstract

Carrying Distance is a body of research in the form of visual artworks, performances, and writing that takes up the idea of distance as a poetic framework for approaching contexts and conditions of displacement and diaspora. I generate embodied knowledge through movement by performing live, collaborating with my family, and engaging in tactile and laborious making processes such as ceramics and natural dyes. The project is comprised of an exhibition of two curtains and two live performances, with a door and one of the curtains respectively.

The hands-on making of the two curtains activates body memory and a meditative place for reflecting on diasporic entanglements. I position curtains as symbolic manifestations of sites where multiple distances converge, gesturing to borders shaped by geographies, cultures, languages, gender, and time. My door shape shifts into a diasporic in-between space: a threshold, a borderland, and a crossroads. Insisting on staying in this liminal doorway—as opposed to moving to a known destination beyond—represents a commitment to carrying embodied traces of many lives, making room for contradictions and unbelonging, and seeing what can be made of them. With *Carrying Distance*, I ruminate on what it means to inherit diasporic families and colonial ruins.

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For that which we carry

For that which haunts us

For that which words cannot express

For those who know

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Dear Reader,

I want to tell you a story. When I was younger, my grandmother told me about a time, long before I was born, when the family lived in a house with two doors. Two openings, but also two exits, each leading onto a different street. What was unique about this house, especially among other houses built during that era, was that most people would not have expected there to be two doors.

Those two doors were important for my family, because if the house got swarmed from one door, they could escape to safety through the second door.

At some point, the house became a refuge for some other people whose own houses hadn't had two doors. That space between those two doors—I imagine it carpeted with rugs I remember from my childhood and some others I probably never saw—was a safe haven. The second door represented an ability to run if the haven became unsafe.

The house was tucked away at the very end of an alleyway. One day, people swarmed the alleyway intent to set fire to the house. You don't need to know why. The *why* does not really matter. A whole lot of people showed up because they wanted to hurt my family, badly. I picture everyone huddled inside the house, not only my family but also those sheltering there because their own houses got torched. Everyone exchanging silent looks, breaths held in their chests.

Here is when something magical happened. Before the angry mob crowd reach the front door, some of the neighbours went out into the alleyway and formed a line. I don't know how exactly, but I like to imagine them linking arms, standing shoulder to shoulder, their brows furrowed. It probably wasn't that dramatic. In any case, the neighbours went out into the alleyway and they refused to let the violent mob pass. They chose not to stand back and allow violence against my family to occur unchecked. That day, my family were not forced to use their second door.

This is a story I inherited. I will always carry it in my body whether I like it or not. It shapes the way I move through the world and the kind of artist I hope to become. But there are other reasons why this story is important to me.

My recent artworks and research have increasingly led me towards ideas of doorways. When I am thinking artistically, I like to allow thoughts and associations to flow freely. Being immersed in making is like being in constant movement: the process itself often leads to new ideas and realizations. This is how I found myself at the doors in my grandmother's story, but also at other doors. Through the thinking and making process, these doors led me to thresholds, crossroads, borders, fortresses, and borderlands.

I envision the belly of my grandparents' home on that fateful day as a crossroads. Inside, my family could either go through one door leading to looming violence, through another to an uncertain but possible escape, or choose to stay. Outside in the alleyway, the neighbours formed a border and held its gate. The alleyway transformed into a borderland, a contested space where the different camps vied for control. The angry mob pushed against the gates, huffed and yelled, maybe shoved a few people, but eventually gave up and retreated for the day.

This story has been at the back of my mind since I first heard it. So, when my father shared a very different story with me last year that also centered doorways and gestured towards borders and borderlands, my interest was immediately piqued. You should know that I inherit different ethno-cultural, linguistic, and religious traditions from my mother and father's families. The relationships between these identities, in particular histories of oppression and power, inform my work.

Last winter, I returned to Iran after nearly five years and spent close to eight weeks with my father and paternal grandparents in the Kurdish regions of Iran. This visit and relations with Kurdish family transformed how I position myself within these intersecting identities and as someone living at a distance. It also reaffirmed my desire to actively pursue relationships with family and the land there, in spite of all the ways living in diaspora complicates those connections.

The story my father shared was a short play he had written about a newly immigrant family living in Sweden, which he wrote in 2003. My father (my baba) is a theatre practitioner living and working in Iran. He writes plays and short stories, directs, designs sets, teaches, and generally maintains an active practice spanning over thirty-five years. Given its themes around migration, distance, diaspora, and family dynamics, the play was closely aligned with my research interests in diasporic experiences, performance art, and familial archives. The more time I spent with the play the more emotional and inspired I got, until eventually it became clear that I needed to make it the central impetus of my current research.

Returning to the play for the first time as an adult felt like receiving an inheritance or being entrusted to carry a legacy of creativity. On the one hand, I was learning about a lineage of creativity and performance rooted in swimming against the current, of resistance to what has

been, that passes between my baba and me in ways that I could not have noticed or articulated until recently. I was inheriting an artistic tradition that I felt compelled to respect and care for, while also finding my own path so as not to merely re-present his voice. On the other hand, there are painful histories embedded in his writings. The fact that I am distanced from my baba and our culture makes carrying and caring for these difficult inheritances more complicated. *What does it mean to carry the stories of our kin from a distance?*

In this work, I am using distance as a broad framework for approaching contexts and conditions of displacement and diaspora. I came to the idea of distance because I realized it is what materializes doors, borders, and borderlands in the first place. Distance is a vast word. It helps me to think deeply about how I (and my family before me) move through the world and how I wish to move through the world. Considering distance allows me to be more attuned to when I am reaching towards relation and when I am closing doors. Sometimes closing a door, or imposing a distance, is necessary.

I focus on objects from the set of the play, described as a lone door in the midground and a long, white curtain in the background, and complicate these objects symbolically, materially, and performatively. The work as a whole is a rumination on distances both personal and global.

The term distance helps me to notice experiences shaped by or made more visible by diaspora. Often, conversations around diaspora rely heavily on nationalistic tropes such as the pain of a life in exile, a desire to return to one's "homeland," or even assimilation with Western values and culture.[1] Distance on the other hand, provides a wider frame for thinking through movement, borders, and geographical boundaries, as well as divides magnified by gender, language, race, age, and class differences. The idea of distance presented in the play, as well as its mirrors in my father and my lived experiences as a father and child living in two countries, form the backbone of my artistic explorations surrounding and expanding beyond the play. *How might performance and poetry both stretch and shrink distance?*

Nirmal Puwar's *Carrying as Method: Listening to Bodies as Archives* provided me with a useful framing for navigating these inter-generational inheritances. Puwar notes that researchers are "embodied and affected" by the messy knots of lived experiences, and as such, "carry sounds, aesthetics, traumas and obsessions'' that inform their practices and which can double as

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[1] Tara Bahrampour, *To See and See Again: A Life in Iran and America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Persis M. Karim, *Let Me Tell You Where I've Been: New Writing by Women of the Iranian Diaspora* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2006); Nima Naghibi, *Women Write Iran: Nostalgia and Human Rights from the Diaspora* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016); Peyman Vahabzadeh, "Where Will I Dwell? A Sociology of Literary Identity within the Iranian Diaspora," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 28, no. 3 (2008): 495–512. https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201x-2008-028.

methodology.[2] Puwar reflects on how "inter-generational carrying occurs through the relationships we seek out and build in archives, with archives involving paper, things, bodies, sounds, feelings and above all relationalities."[3]

I have been trying making sense of these stories, particularly my father's play, the only way I know how: by making art. This text is an accompaniment to research in the form of visual artworks and performances exhibited together under the title *Speaking Across the Divide*. The exhibition was on view from August 4-September 5, 2022 at the shell projects, a garage-turned-gallery located in the alleyway behind 13 Mansfield Avenue in downtown Toronto, Canada. Two live performances took place in the alleyway outside the gallery on August 6 at 2pm EST, and August 10 at 7pm EST. The exhibition included installations of two curtains—one ceramic and the other fabric—and a cellphone video (See Appendix A). I performed with the fabric curtain. I also performed with a handmade, life-sized door which I added to the exhibition following the performance.

I will tell you more about my father's play later. What you need to know right now is that I have been thinking closely with these stories of doorways, borders, and borderlands that I inherited from my family. These stories that move in and out of reality. That is part of what makes them so compelling: that they move. They are alive.

I carried the curtains I made with me across vast stretches of land so they would learn to move like the stories that sparked their existence. My art needed to move because *I* needed to move. As a diasporic person, I had to adapt to movement at a young age. I do not only mean physical movement, but moving between languages, social behaviours, and cultures too. I feel validated when Puwar says that knowledge is formed when the body moves[4] because then perhaps diasporic movement can teach us something. *How might a thorough consideration of distance allow us to connect with people and land more thoughtfully and responsibly?*

The longer I stayed with my father's play, the more my thoughts flowed like a river. Before I knew it, the thinking and making led me to other connections, ideas, and research. There is now a large web of influences, inspirations, and motivations behind this body of work which I will tell you more about in the pages that follow.

My approach to writing this text is inspired by Julietta Singh's ways of writing body memory. Singh's meandering musings, at once deeply profound and mundane, point to the layering of experience, like thin sheets of veneer that stack to build a solid board. As the title of her book

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[2] Nirmal Puwar, "Carrying as Method: Listening to Bodies as Archives," *Body & Society* 27, no. 1 (2020) 3. https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034x20946810.

[3] Puwar, "Carrying," 8.

[4] Puwar, "Carrying," 15.

No Archive Will Restore You suggests, Singh weaves seemingly disparate memories, affects, phobias, and desires in an effort to Frankenstein together a sense of wholeness as a person whose body bears the weight of distances shaped by femininity, racialization, queerness, and chronic illness. These fragments are at times disturbing and absurd—such as her desire to eat her own mother—but placed into context with countless other fragments capture several lifetimes of carried affects. In lieu of tangible inherited objects, Singh's own body becomes a container for archiving her and her family's migratory journeys.

Similar to Singh, writer and performance artist Jana Omar Elkhatib stitches together fragments of memory—both her own and those she inherited. "This is an inventory, a transcript, a poem, or a memory," she tells us at the start of her performance text *Eight Notes on Time*.[5] She asserts, from the outset as well as throughout the rest of the text, that we are not witnessing a single, fixed experience but an entangled web of carried traces. Her narrator shape shifts through bodies, intergenerational memory, time, language, and translation:

> This man's image I learned from memories I wrote to memory, from the recollections of our shared kin; from a photograph. I collected the stories of the 70s and the 80s. More precisely, I collected outside the span of my own life, extending parts of my self, overwriting others.[6]

In a performance born from the text, entitled *A body is a distant witness* (2019), Elkhatib uses repetition, transcription, and sound to collapse distances caused by time.[7] At the heart of Elkhatib's work are painful inheritances of colonial violence, familial connections and loss, and a question of what it means to carry these realities across generations. I curated her work in an exhibition in 2019[8] and have been deeply influenced by her poetic approach to writing since.

I have loosely structured the text that follows in three acts. Act One, entitled *I'm at the door*, introduces the impetus behind this research and the first work from the series: a performance with a door influenced by the one in my father's play. This performance shaped my ideas around staying at the threshold, which later doubled as methodology for some subsequent pieces. Act Two, *Carrying Distance*, broadly focuses on the fabric curtain and its accompanying performance that bears the same name as my exhibition: *Speaking Across the Divide*. Here, I expand my thinking on bodies in movement, body archives, and embodied modes of knowledge production and preservation. Act Three, *Facing the Fortress*, adds the ceramic curtain to the

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[5] Jana Omar Elkhatib, *Eight Notes on Time*, 2019. Unpublished performance text. 1-8.

[6] Elkhatib, on Time, 7.

[7] Jana Omar Elkhatib, *A body is a distant witness*, performance, October 26, 2019. Hamilton Artists Inc., Hamilton, Canada.

[8] Abedar Kamgari (curator), *To see and see again*, Exhibition. Cannon Gallery, Hamilton Artists Inc., Hamilton, Canada. September 4-November 2, 2019.

mix, which emerged directly out of aesthetic and conceptual threads from the two preceding works, as well as some other influences. In this section, I confront monumental inheritances beyond the personal and familial to grapple with what it might mean to ruin ruins. I return to ideas of border and borderlands, both real, imagined, and imaginary. Again, these are not cohesive chapters but a loose clustering of related thoughts in three parts.

I chose to write this text as an assemblage of carried traces and as a sister piece to my artworks. I needed this writing to move, to shrink and stretch distance, to break time. That is why I travel between voices, address different people, repeat myself, and play with fragmentation in my writing. This text is meant to be read circularly: moving backwards, re-reading, skipping ahead. In other words, writing and reading in ways that transgress expectations of linear movement, gesturing towards the disjointedness of living diasporically—at thresholds between worlds.

Act One

I'm at the door

Baba,

I am writing to you in a language that escapes you, just as you write in a language that escapes me. Is it strange that we both write in tongues that our ancestors did not dream in? I can taste Farsi on my tongue because *mamanam yadam dad*: My mom taught me to remember. You didn't pass your mother's tongue on to me, or your mother's mother's tongue. I know only fragments.

Your mother's tongue is snipped by the sharpness of my mother's tongue. Your mother's tongue knows mine all too well, looks at it askance, slightly mistrusting— just as she should.

You write in my mother's tongue, but unless you write for children I can hardly understand. Yet I save copies of your plays on my hard drive, a back-up just-in-case, knowing I may never know of what you spoke.

You and I have lived apart for most of my life. First in different cities in Iran, then in different countries that share a border, and now on opposite sides of the planet entirely. I wish you could come to Canada and stay with me, because there is so much of my world I wish I could show you. Sometimes distance creates more distance; it takes work to be in relation with you.

I've spent my life longing for the sound of your voice. I long because the distance is long. I could count the days your voice did not travel time to reach mine. Your voice and mine have played phone tag on every internet calling platform since internet calling became a thing.

There's a place in my throat for the familiar frustration of when your voice drops across time-- when that incomprehensible distance teaches us to remember. I've lived with the distance between you and me for almost all my life. In fact, I have trouble separating my experiences of migration and diaspora from this distance that has conditioned my sense of the world just as much.

It's only apt that this story should become a measure of distance.

Here is another story.

Years ago, Beroj Akeri wrote a short story about a migrant father and daughter, entitled دریچه / *Doorway* (2000).[9] An immigrant father goes to visit his young child. It soon becomes clear that the parents are separated, the mother is not home, and the little girl of four or five years old cannot figure out how to unlock the door by herself. And so, the father and child speak to each other across the boundary imposed by the locked door.[10] The palpable distance between them, represented by the door, permeates their entire encounter and points to contexts and conditions of contemporary diasporas.

Akeri's life trajectory took him to Iran as a refugee when he was a child, to Sweden as an immigrant, and finally back to Iraq to live in his homelands much later in life. As a Kurdish person, Akeri held a diasporic picture of the world in his body, a picture that gave shape to and informed his poetry and short stories. My father read Akeri's short story in a magazine, and a few years later, perhaps with the weight of his own child's imminent emigration heavy on his heart, adapted the narrative of Akeri's story into a play. My father's play looked to its parent-story but he also imbued it with his own diasporic consciousness as an internally displaced ethnic and religious minority within the Iranian nation-state.

My father's short play, entitled ماهیِ با قلاب گریخته / The Runaway Hooked Fish (2003),[11] sets the scene like this: A white curtain in the background and a lone, wooden door in the midground. The door is decorated with a peephole and doorbell button in addition to some roman numerals, and further down, a mail slot. It's a cold, wintery night. The light from the moon casts skewed shadows of a black fence and a gothic-style window onto the ground. Techno music seeps out from one of the apartments nearby. A dog barks incessantly. Farther away, an old woman speaks Swedish. The dog goes silent. The sounds of footsteps echoing on stairs; a slight, thirty-six-year-old man approaches. He is wearing a long coat, hat and scarf, and carrying an intricately-decorated gift box. He removes his hat, revealing his balding head. Rubbing his face with his hand, he rings the bell—briefly at first, then sustained.

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[9] Beroj Akeri دریچه , به روژ ئاکره یی ["Doorway"], (Karnameh Magazine, 2000); Beroj Akeri, "Doorway," Ghesseha Podcast, Spotify, last modified January 2021. 21:29. https://open.spotify.com/episode/0XxYsgvXrgSeuYlrgSuQ2t

[10] The title of my exhibition, *Speaking Across the Divide*, is borrowed from a text by Gloria Anzaldúa of the same title.

[11] Naseh Kamgari, ماهیِ با قلاب گریخته ["The Runaway Hooked Fish"], in سه نمایش در یک دکور [Three Performances in One Décor]. (Tehran: Nashr-e Yekshanbe, 2003), 5-14.

> A little girl's voice rings out from within, "Ya?"
> "Sweetheart, it's me," responds the man.
> "EEEeeeeee!" shrieks the little girl in delight. "Hi baba!!"[12]

The father in the play recounts passages from Ahmad Shamlu's poem, "Pariya" (1953)[13] to his young child, who, despite beginning to lose her mother tongue, seems to know the words by heart. Shamlu's poetry, and "Pariya" in particular, is well known among most Iranians. With its rich intertextuality and political undertones, "Pariya" reflects Shamlu's ease with many forms of literature, borrowing figures from Persian myths, nursery rhymes, Zoroastrian customs, and widely recognized oral storytelling conventions which in turn demands a degree of cultural literacy from its readers. The poem's flowy verses and vivid imagery lend it well to a bedtime story. Indeed, it was used as such in Akeri's short story, my father's play adaptation, and even throughout my own childhood by my mother, but the poem is not intended for children. Shamlu weaves intricate metaphors for oppression, injustice, and collective power in "Pariya" that remain poignant to this day.[14]

"Pariya" tells the story of three *pari*—beautiful, otherworldly beings with long, blacker-than-black hair—huddled together in the desert, weeping uncontrollably. From the outset, the *pariya* are positioned within a liminal space: before them lies a downtrodden city where the people have just won a great victory against their oppressors, while behind them stands the cold and ominous fortress of legends. Yet the mysterious pariya seem landlocked; perched unsteadily between city and fortress, reality and fantasy, they occupy a treacherous borderland between past and future. The poem's narrator, an optimistic hero whose people have just risen up to defeat the evil *deeb*[15] and freed themselves and their city, attempts to console the pariya to no effect. The pariya just go on crying.

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[12] N. Kamgari, "Hooked Fish," 6. Translation mine.

[13] Ahmad Shamlu, "Pariya," 1953.

[14] Based on its narrative, I think it is likely that Pariya was inspired by the 1953 CIA-orchestrated coup d'état in Iran. Sadeq Saba, "Obituary: Ahmad Shamlu: Towering figure of Iranian poetry and an intellectual symbol of the fight against oppression in his country," *Guardian* [London, England], July 28, 2000, 22. Gale Academic OneFile (accessed September 5, 2022). https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A75733641/AONE?u=toro37158&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=aed08f7c.

[15] Monstrous, demon creatures from Persian mythology.

Baba,

Like the father and child in that story, the distance between you and me has been four years, since 2008. Time has been as big of a distance as the vast geographies that separate us, swathes of land dissected by borders.

Last year, when we were both stuck in lockdowns and seeing almost no one, I think the distances between us nearly disappeared. You would wake up early in the morning and I would stay up late into the night, and we would talk almost every other day. I felt closest to you in those moments. When the world seemed still, when I thought I could hear the morning birds through your phone, when time itself seemed to collapse. Speaking to you for hours without realizing it made the distance momentarily disappear, only to have it loom again larger than ever when it was time to say goodbye.

Around that time, I was writing that review of Golboo Amani's project زبان مادری من داغ لهجه تبعید دارد / *My mother tongue is burdened by the accent of exile* (2020).[16] Amani takes up Ahmad Shamlu's poem "Pariya" as a way of articulating fragmented cultural and linguistic fluencies. Amani's parents, first-generation immigrants anxious that their children were losing their mother tongue and with it access to their ancestral culture, began using poetry to teach their children Farsi. Amani was assigned to learn "Pariya."

During one of our calls, I asked you if I had interpreted Pariya correctly. You paused and ignoring my question, said something like, *Remember that play I wrote? I used Pariya in that too, how interesting.*

When I was nine years old, you wrote a play that seemed to foresee my life in diaspora. A newly immigrant father goes to visit his young child, but the door is locked. And so, the entire exchange between father and daughter occurs across this boundary. In fact, viewers do not see the child in the play at all.

Among other things, the father character in your play plays with his kid through the closed door and even presents her with a fancy gift he has brought her—a large female china doll with jet black hair, wearing an old-school dress. You don't describe the doll's dress in the play, but I always imagined her in this way because that is what the china doll you gifted to me wore—although the doll bought for me had blonde hair. Maybe the blonde hair was another one of your subconscious predictions for where I would end up.

Since the little child in the play is heard but never seen, you recorded my voice for the role of my imagined double. As a nine-year-old, I was enlisted to sound like a younger version of

[16] Golboo Amani in collaboration with Maryam Hafizirad and Mohammad Rezaei, *My mother tongue is burdened by the accent of exile,* Digital Exhibition, 2020. Koffler. https://koffler.digital/accent-of-exile-exhibition/

myself. I remember you took me to *Amoo* Jafar's music school and, holed up in a sci-fi-looking sound-proofed room, directed me through the lines. I already sounded far too mature for my younger counterpart, and you coached me through multiple recordings of certain portions.

Then, when maman and I were living in Turkey as refugees, you made the play into a short film and sent me a copy on a DVD.[17] I would watch it and weep. In those days, I thought I would never see you again. Ripped from the only environment I knew, I had suddenly realized the vastness of the world, and if the previous fourteen-hour distance between us was any indication, I felt certain this goodbye would be final.

I had forgotten all about the play. Rediscovering it as an adult was such a strange experience. This strangeness comes from several places:

One, that you've written something with such deep diasporic resonances, despite never having lived beyond the borders of present-day Iran. How could you have predicted that I would lose my language like the child in the play, and grow as frustrated as her father at its loss? In the past, I would speak of diaspora with a lump in my throat and you would compare it to your move from Sanandaj to Tehran. It would exasperate me! I thought you couldn't possibly understand. It was years before I realized that diaspora knows no borders. That to be a Kurd, to be you, within Iran, is to be at odds with the world at every turn.

Two, how could it be that a story originally written 23 years ago, adapted into a play nearly 20 years ago, still feels so relevant today? Is it because we haven't moved forward at all, or that the ocean we're swimming across is so vast we're still in the crossing?

Three, that you've archived all of these ghosts of our lives so perfectly that years later you could send me original MP3 files—of each one of the lines I spoke out loud when this play was only a fiction to me and not an eerie image of my life.

And four, that this script still moves me to tears every time.

Akeri and my father met and became friends in the late 80s when they crossed paths making theatre and literature. Akeri lived in Marivan at the time, a city in Iran's Kurdistan province. My dad recalls visiting them there and even staying the night.

While my father's play is a clear adaptation of Akeri's story, there are key differences. In Akeri's story, for example, eventually the mother returns home, the door opens, and the father goes inside. In my father's story the door remains closed through and through, arguably a more

[17] ماهیِ با قلاب گریخته ["The Runaway Hooked Fish"], DVD, directed by Naseh Kamgari (2004).

heart-wrenching approach to telling the tale: that there is no possibility of reconciliation between the parents. When I asked my dad about this, he said:

> In my play I depict a door that stays closed to the end in order to show the termination of a relationship. […] The man in my play has seemingly changed his mind about the separation and brought with him an engagement ring, whereas in *Doorway*, the man is pursuing letters and lawyers needed for the divorce. […] But the most important difference between my play and the story is that in the play, the daughter initially tells her father that her mother has gone out alone. Yet towards the end, she admits that she lied; her mother has not in fact gone out alone. This realization shocks the father and it dawns on him that his wife has a partner, that he doesn't have the option of returning to that life. Of course, in my play I also portray the man as overly conservative and hot-headed, such that he cautions his daughter to not jump down from chairs, believing, as is common among traditional men, that this could damage his daughter's "virginity." Ultimately, I am showing that this man is stuck in outdated cultural traditions and beliefs, and even though he migrated elsewhere he is like an escaped fish with the hook still in its mouth—trapped in his past life.[18]

In my father's version, the door is final. There is no returning. I am interested in this framing of a closed door diasporically, as it points to exile from what is supposed to be home to living in a form of cultural exile or *unbelonging* abroad.

I researched *Returning* as a diasporic phenomena and artistic methodology for my curatorial exhibition *To see and see again* (2019).[19] The phrase "to see and see again" (from the Farsi: دید و بازدید) describes the customary practice of visiting one's relatives, wherein each person is indebted to returning the visit in a seemingly endless cycle of guesting and hosting. In her 1999 memoir with the same title, Tara Bahrampour recounts her experiences of growing up between two different cultures and political realities, and eventually abandons the comforts of her life in the United States to experience her childhood home once more.[20] *To see and see again* explores the impulse, particularly in individuals who have experienced displacement, to want to visit or revisit a lost place of origin.

I curated six artists who take up returning—whether in a physical, psychological, or metaphorical sense—as an artistic methodology for making sense of their experiences of

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[18] Naseh Kamgari, whatsapp message to author, July 12, 2022. Translation and emphasis mine.

[19] Abedar Kamgari (curator), *To see and see again*, Exhibition. Cannon Gallery, Hamilton Artists Inc., Hamilton, Canada. September 4-November 2, 2019.

[20] Bahrampour, *To see and see again*.

diaspora. For some, the return is directly connected to where they were born or knew as a child, while for others, it is tied to an ancestral homeland that is further distanced through the passage of time, or is now entirely out of reach. Artists Felix Kalmenson and Zinnia Naqvi's projects involved a physical returning to what used to be their families' homelands.

In 1989, Kalmenson's family made plans to depart the Soviet Union. At the time, citizens who left the USSR had their passports confiscated at the border and were forced to become stateless, never to return.[21] As a way of mediating this loss, Kalmenson's father hired a professional videographer to record the family in their hometown of Leningrad. But instead of documenting the family at home, in their neighbourhood, or the places they frequented, this strange departure memento is set against the backdrop of well-known historical sites and national monuments. As Kalmenson describes it, "In light of this ultimate departure many families, like my own, hired a videographer to film them, not in intimate spaces, but in central touristic sites, in turn producing the subject as a tourist in their own city."[22]

The VCR footage was thought to have been lost until Kalmenson rediscovered it in their twenties.[23] Then, they returned to Leningrad (now Saint Petersburg) for the first time to trace, frame by frame, the strange performative archive captured more than twenty years prior. Kalmenson's near-perfect contemporary retracing is interrupted by traffic, construction, and even a film shoot for a period drama, all of which emphasize surprisingly unchanged monuments alongside drastic transitions to a neoliberal society.

The resulting two-channel video, *Neither Country, Nor Graveyard* (2017), features the original VCR footage on a small monitor on the left and the contemporary recreation on a larger flat screen television on the right.[24] In my curatorial exhibition, we wall-mounted the screens onto a vinyl reproduction of a photograph from the artist's family archive. Conversations between Kalmenson and their family members intersperse the recordings at moments where the archival footage had degraded beyond retrieval, ruminating on memory, nostalgia, and life conditions in the late-Soviet era. The project as a whole provides an intimate glimpse into the politics of migration and the artist's desire to revisit places they inherited largely through their family's memories.

Zinnia Naqvi takes a similar approach in her short, single-channel video work entitled *Seaview* (2015). Naqvi returns to Karachi, Pakistan to compare her childhood memories with lived

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[21] Felix Kalmenson, phone conversation with author, March 14, 2019.

[22] Kalmenson, "Neither Country, Nor Graveyard," Artist Statement, 2017. Accessed July 25, 2022. https://www.felixkalmenson.com/neither-country

[23] Kalmenson, phone conversation.

[24] Kalmenson, *Neither Country, Nor Graveyard*, video installation, 2017. Exhibited in *To see and see again*, September 4-November 2, 2019. Cannon Gallery: Hamilton Artists Inc.

experiences. In particular, she investigates her romanticized memories of her first visit to Clifton Beach, captured in home movies seventeen years prior, juxtaposed against her stark impressions of the same place as an adult. Naqvi grapples with the seemingly inescapable orientalising gaze of her camera and societal limitations as a woman and visitor.[25] As a way of pushing against these challenges, Naqvi gestures to figures outside of the limited view of her frame, collages archival footage alongside her contemporary shots, and voices self-reflexive commentary in the on-screen captions.[26]

Both Kalmenson and Naqvi recreate accounts of the past in an effort to reconcile the present. But whether this present reconciliation occurs or is even possible is of little concern; in effect the artists are pursuing relationships with places they carry through intergenerational memory and loss. The artists take up performative tactics such as gesture, mimicry, and re-enactment which prove poignant tools for navigating returns through artistic process.

Returning, as a methodology, is employed by contemporary diasporic artists in many ways. Returning does not necessarily have to be physical. With Kalmenson and Naqvi, their physical returns exist alongside other, simultaneous returns through intergenerational memory to languages, places, and histories they did not necessarily live first-hand, but that are still part of their lineage. Both artists rely on their family members, particularly parents, to help fill the gaps in their cultural and historical knowledge. In this way, returning becomes an omni-directional movement through different spaces, times, and bodies.

Amani takes up a similar methodology in their online project, زبان مادری من داغ لهجه تبعید دارد / *My mother tongue is burdened by the accent of exile* (2020) which consists of video, sound, and text presented as a digital exhibition.[27] In the project, Amani and their collaborators take up retellings of Shamlu's "Pariya" as a starting point to unpack narratives of displacement, access, and belonging shaped through language.[28]

The work opens with a short video of Maryam Hafizirad, one of Amani's collaborators, situated against various urban settings, signing "Pariya" in Iranian Sign Language, accompanied by Amani's voice-over and bold Farsi captions. Shamlu's poem is thus translated in fragments by an out-of-sync chorus: Amani's halting Farsi, the written captions, moving and still images on screen, and Maryam's grounded presence mouthing and signing. The short videos are interspersed with excerpts of recorded and transcribed conversations between Amani and their

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[25] Zinnia Naqvi, "Seaview," Artist statement, 2015. Accessed August 3, 2022. https://zinnianaqvi.com/seaview-as

[26] Naqvi, *Seaview*, video, 2015. Exhibited in *To see and see again*, September 4-November 2, 2019. Cannon Gallery: Hamilton Artists Inc.

[27] Amani, *My mother tongue*.

[28] Abedar Kamgari, "My mother tongue is burdened by the accent of exile," exhibition review, 2022. Forthcoming.

parents, Ahmad and Mahshid Amani, in a hybrid combination of Farsi and English. These conversations emphasize diasporic parents' role not only as keepers of a cultural knowledge, but as its interpreters, translators, and educators, too.

For children born or raised in diaspora, parents often become the central link to the worlds of their kin.[29] Amani deftly builds on a methodological lineage of diasporic artists who rely on their parents as formal and informal collaborators. As Hafizirad notes, she too had to consult with mentors to understand the complexities of "Pariya," since poetry was not taught to Deaf students in school.[30] The contributions of Amani's parents and Hafizirad allude to the ways in which language is often leveraged as a hegemonic tool for constructing borders—distances—between people.

The fact that the door in Akeri's story eventually opens can be interpreted as desire for a possibility of return. To have the choice to step into the apartment for a conversation, even if the marriage is ending in divorce, is to be able to maintain some kind of relationship regardless. In my father's interpretation, the relationship is entirely terminated. The man finds himself at a dead-end, his grief and loss amplified in stark contrast to the youthful, free voice of his excitable little one on the other side. While he puts on a playful persona for his kid, his grave sense of melancholia is palpable. There is no returning for him, and the path forward seems just as uncertain. As the title suggests, he may have escaped but he is cursed to carry the hook. In his new environment, he may as well be a fish out of water.

When I first decided to take up your play as impetus for my master's research, we began by reading it together. I insisted on this, and you, perhaps lovingly or begrudgingly, went along. Week after week, we would read the play together over whatsapp and I would record the performance. The disciplinary distances between you as a theatre practitioner and me as a performance artist trained in the west soon became clear. You couldn't understand what the repeated rehearsals were helping to achieve, while I stubbornly insisted on staying with it. Despite having my own doubts, I hoped that a regular, ongoing practice would eventually lead me to new ideas in time. You chalked this up to my western education, with an amused and slightly exasperated air of a teacher who might go along with a student's circular learning.

As a performance artist, I was using the play as a frame for capturing my raw affective responses. I saw little separation between this story and our lived experiences as a father and daughter in diaspora. But for you, coming from a theatre background, it was purely fiction.

[29] A. Kamgari, "My mother Tongue."

[30] Maryam Hafizirad, email to author, May 5, 2021.

I realize now, after our many conversations about it, that I had been wrong to interpret the play as a mirror of our lives. Likely due to my distance from our culture and language, I simply could not understand some of the finer nuances in your writing. I had not picked up on the father's misogynistic beliefs around gender roles, for one, until you explained it to me in very plain terms.

As we pushed forward, other fissures began to emerge. I felt you were using your writing as a way of distancing yourself from having a real relationship with me, your living and breathing child. As though by writing such tender, poetic encounters between a father and daughter somehow alleviated your need to live in the real world. I was mad at you because I thought you were using poetry as a shield, but I never told you this is how I felt.

I grappled with these tensions in my research for months. When time dulled my initial anger—and I recognized both the time and anger as distancing mechanisms themselves—I wondered if perhaps writing was the only way you could articulate how you felt. Not a stretching of distance as I had initially assumed, but your way of shrinking it. Part of my frustration was due to a cultural illiteracy. Poetry, by which I mean not only poems or verse, but a sense of the metaphorical and symbolic, is deeply embedded in Persian culture. It is a manner of speaking I was mostly unaccustomed to, having privileged open and direct communication in my own art up to that point. But you live in a place that has restricted open expression for centuries. Metaphor and allegory became ways for poets to pretend to distance themselves from taboo or forbidden topics while continuing to articulate those very things through masterfully woven literary veils.

Our late-night encounters, especially conversations before and after readings of the play, often centered on the nature and function of performance within our lives. These were deeply treasured and vulnerable moments for me.

At some point I realized that the thought of sharing our recordings of the play with strangers made me feel extremely uneasy. Even though you had given me your consent repeatedly throughout the process, I did not want others to be able to consume these mostly unscripted father-daughter interactions. Part of my hesitation came from my past experiences of exhibiting my video art and the ways in which non-diasporic viewers' responses to my similarly personal and vulnerable works seemed to miss my intentions entirely. I constantly felt I had to justify my life to strangers who did not understand, nor really cared to try and understand, and for whom my work was never intended in the first place. I did not want to share these videos publicly for fear of going through the same subtle violence yet again.

I had half a dozen recordings of the play and no desire to show them to anyone at all. Perhaps these were performances just for you and me. Perhaps we were performing this play to learn how to be a father and child in real life. Performing together, each in our own way, was

shrinking some of the distances between us. I wondered if it was the performing together that shrunk the distances, or that we were spending time together regularly?

But what is the door and the distance it creates? The exchange between the father and child in the play, mediated by a door that never opens, represents a myriad of distances—some, such as language barriers with the child gradually losing fluency in her mother tongue, are triggered by life in diaspora, while others are indicative of longstanding hierarchies of power, such as traditional beliefs around gender and femininity.

I developed a performance in order to think through and expand on the door as symbol. Performing live with the door served both as a form of embodied knowledge production and a mode of communication. I put my ideas about distance into motion and through this movement, I brought them to further clarity and even arrived at new ideas. At the same time, I tested whether the ideas transmitted through my embodied gestures were being effectively received by viewers.

In this performance, entitled *Carrying Distance*, I carry a life-sized door—complete with working a door knob, peephole, and mail slot.[31] While it is life-sized and made to look realistic, upon closer inspection viewers may notice that it is made of foam similar to theatre props: an intentional decision both to avoid injuring myself as the performer and a clue that this story dapples in fiction (See Appendix B).

I carry the door and use it to enact distances through various gestures. In doing so, I complicate the understanding of the door and what it might signify. On its own, the door is just a static door. But when placed in dialogical relationship with my body, the door becomes a living object that is reinvented with each gesture. At times it is an impossibly heavy weight, a tool, an instrument, a tent, a toy, a dance partner, and so on. Each gesture stretches and shrinks distance differently.

Reframing the potential meanings of an object through performance is a methodology I have often used in my past works.[32] I learned this performance method from Grace Ndiritu's video work, The *Nightingale* (2003). In this single-channel video, Ndiritu

> …twists, wraps and folds [a piece of] fabric in a sequence of simple movements to transform her appearance. Each action reveals another identity, the fabric

[31] I rehearsed an early iteration of this work to a small, invited audience of my friends, family, and professors in December 2021 in OCAD University's Graduate Gallery.

[32] Abedar Kamgari, "Finding words for the feeling," *abedarkamgari.com*, 2016. http://abedarkamgari.com/works/finding-words/

> being exploited for its versatility, playing the role of blindfold, hajib, headscarf, burka, veil, bandanna, purdah, gag and turban. Its reference to an assortment of cultures is both joyful and unsettling, developing with the rhythm of the music, pausing into moments of playful seduction and sculptural beauty.[33]

I enact gestures of "door open" and "door closed." By this I mean moments when the door is an impossible, impermeable barrier alongside moments when one may sense a possibility—no matter how improbable or difficult—for reaching across to someone on the other side. Linguistically, I draw on passages from my father's play, Persian nursery rhymes and fairy tales, as well as well-known songs to look at the door from various vantage points.

I stay on the same side of the door throughout the performance. I attempt to reach viewers across the door, by calling out, looking from the peephole, or putting my fingers out of the mail slot. I covered the side facing viewers in a reflective, mirror-like material, such that viewers are confronted with distorted images of themselves. The abstraction caused by the reflection further complicates the door as a recognizable object, rendering it at once familiar and foreign.

By incorporating the reflective material, I activate the viewers' presence, making them an agentive part of the door and therefore responsible for it and the distances it engenders. Therefore, bodies on both sides of the door become entangled in its existence. The mirror pulls viewers' attention to themselves, masking my presence on the other side and making the possibility of connecting even more difficult. Ayumi Goto, one of my advisors and a witness to the live performance that day, tells me that at times the door reflected the sky, its distorted blue reflections becoming like ripples on water. Those moments transformed the door as an object, briefly collapsing distances, and instead gestured to ideas of flight, openness, and diaspora.[34]

True to its title, physically *carrying* the door is a key gesture in my performance. The object is a heavy load on my back, a physical and metaphorical symbol of carried affects from my and family's pasts.[35] I reference and draw inspiration from Kurdish *koolbaran* carry the door as a performative gesture Kurdish *koolbaran*, who scrape a living by hauling goods on their backs

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[33] Grace Ndiritu, "The Nightingale," *gracendiritu.com*, 2003. http://gracendiritu.com/Film-Video/The-Nightingale-2003

[34] Ayumi Goto, comment send to author, September 7, 2022.

[35] Just as I was writing this paragraph, the strangest coincidence occurred which I thought apt to document here. The First Aid Kit album I had mindlessly put on as background music echoed my thoughts with the lyric "It's a heavy load upon our backs/ the things we carry from the past."
First Aid Kit, "I Found a Way,"2012, Wichita Records. YouTube Video, 26:59. Accessed September 4, 2022. https://youtu.be/AplhZ3Dpcwc?t=1619

through the mountains (See Appendix C).[36] These workers traverse border spaces, often facilitating the transport of goods from Iraq to Iran and through remote mountainous regions at great physical risk to themselves. I gesture to their bodies through my own body in performance. In doing so, I hope to honour them and ensure I am always putting real bodies at the heart of my performances. The experiences of Kurdish *koolbaran* is charged with markers of distance, their oppression closely tied to their positionality as a religious and ethnically minoritized people. The precarity of their labour in the context of systemic marginalization of Kurdish peoples in Iran is emblematic of distances cultivated over many years of discriminatory policy.[37]

Through performance as a mode of knowledge generation, I consider the door as an in-between space, a threshold, a borderland, or a crossroad.[38] I am interested in the door as a manifestation of the ways in which being in diaspora can be generative. I position diasporic life not as a desolate place of loss and trauma, but rather as a permeable membrane that can engender different potentialities for sensing and moving through the world. While I do not shy away from representing the painful, heavy, and scary moments at the threshold, my door also doubles as a constant companion, a dance partner, and an awkward instrument. In other words, its connotations are multiple and complex: not all pain and misery.

I am thinking of Janus, the Roman god of doorways, thresholds, passages, beginnings and endings. Janus is often depicted as a figure bearing two faces looking in opposite directions—one of a young boy and the other an old man—one looking to the past and the other towards the future.[39] Janus attempts to derail travellers, cause indecision, and perhaps elongate one's stay in the doorway. Janus' trickery provides a framework for a deeper consideration of what choosing to remain in the doorway could materialize. Insisting on staying in the doorway—akin

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[36] Awin Mostafa Zadeh, '"Koolbars", new "slaves" in Kurdistan,' MvoicesIran, 2021. Accessed September 4, 2022. https://mvoicesiran.com/2021/11/24/koolbars-new-slaves-in-kurdistan/

[37] "Annual Report 2021," *Kurdish Human Rights Network*, January 18, 2022. https://kurdistanhumanrights.org/en/annual-report-2021/; "Iran: Human Rights Abuses Against the Kurdish Minority," *Amnesty International*, *International Secretariat*, July 2008. Accessed September 6, 2022. https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/MDE130882008ENGLISH.pdf; Oubai Shahbandar, "No country for minorities: The agony of Iran's ethnic Arabs, Kurds, Balochis and Azeris," *Arab News*, March 8, 2021, updated December 22, 2021. https://arab.news/mr5ew

[38] I discuss Gloria Anzaldúa's borderlands in more detail in the third act of this text.
Gloria Anzaldúa, "To Live in the Borderlands Means You," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (1996), pp. 4-5; Walter D Mignolo, "Geopolitics of sensing and knowing: on (de)coloniality, border thinking and epistemic disobedience," *Postcolonial Studies*, 14:3 (2011), 273-283, DOI: 10.1080/13688790.2011.613105.

[39] Patti Wigington, "Janus the two-faced god," Learn Religious. Last updated February 13, 2019. https://www.learnreligions.com/janus-the-two-faced-god-2561967

to Donna Haraway's idea of staying with the trouble[40]—as opposed to moving to a known destination beyond means to commit oneself to carry the embodied traces of many lives, to make space for contradiction and unbelonging, and to see what can be made of them. Haraway discusses the idea of *kainos*, a Greek term with surprising resonances:

> Nothing in *kainos* must mean conventional pasts, presents, or futures. There is nothing in times of beginnings that insists on wiping out what has come before, or, indeed, wiping out what comes after. Kainos can be full of inheritances, of remembering, and full of comings, of nurturing what might still be. I hear kainos in the sense of thick, ongoing presence, with hyphae infusing all sorts of temporalities and materialities."[41]

Haraway's framing of this term perfectly encapsulates what the space of the doorway, the threshold, potentializes. The doorway is a space of constant movement and hybridity—similar to what Haraway calls "hyphae" and what Gloria E. Anzaldúa refers to as a "borderland." It is a platform from which one can remember the past in vivid hues, remain immersed in the present as though diving into a deep pool, and steer towards the future with intention.

Being in the diasporic doorway, a kind of borderland, means to be hypervisible and invisible[42] all at once. But instead of this invisibility and hypervisibility becoming a burden, the diasporic body must learn to become a shape shifter, to be Janus-faced. Perhaps never a perfect one, but a shape shifter nonetheless. Artist Marigold Santos draws on the Philippine myth of the *Asuang* in her works, recontextualizing the supposedly-evil shape shifting demon as a diasporic guide:

> [The *Asuang*] is a shape shifter who inherently possesses multiple identities. Shy and quiet by day, the Asuang severs her body at the waist to hunt for human livers and unborn fetuses by night. If her separated parts fail to return to her body by dawn, they cannot rejoin, and she will remain forever fragmented. In post-colonial Philippines, colonizers used the Asuang myth as a patriarchal tool to limit dissent from the people. Labeling *babaylan* (female healers and spiritual leaders who were at the core of pre-colonial religion in the Philippines) as evil Asuang, the Spanish used this as a manipulative device in their attempt to

[40] Donna Haraway, "Introduction," Staying with the trouble: making kin in the Chthulucene (Duke University Press, 2016), 1.

[41] Haraway, "Introduction," 2.

[42] Marissa Largo, "A Scholarly Kamayan," presented at *The Reception*. The Spice Factory, Hamilton, ON. November 30, 2019.

> convert people to Christianity. Santos reclaims this powerful demon as a feminist symbol for the fluid and porous identity of the modern immigrant woman.[43]

Being at the space of the doorway is to shape shift, to code switch, to speak in many tongues, and to perform visions of oneself in multiple worlds. Most importantly, it is to transgress borders by carrying traces of other places across.

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[43] Abedar Kamgari, “Fragmentation and Hybridization: Constructing Identity and the Diaspora,” in *Marigold Santos: BLACK MIRROR*. (Hamilton: Hamilton Artists Inc., 2015). https://www.theinc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/SANTOSWEB.pdf

Act Two
Carrying Distance

Shahram Khosravi positions border smuggling as a decolonial practice in the podcast *A Moment of True Decolonization*.[44] He speaks of his experiences in a small prison along the borders of Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan where he was imprisoned at the age of nineteen for trying to cross the border illegally.[45] Everyone at the prison had been arrested in relation to the border: smugglers of all sorts – undocumented migrants, refugees, and "local native Baluchi tribesman—who for generations had crossed the border freely and were now being punished for violating the nation state system."[46] Despite abysmal conditions at the prison, Khosravi recalls that many ways of being in the world coalesced in that small space. Border transgressors of diverse ethnicities and speaking many languages were housed there. The people imprisoned there had all refused to respect the border law and the existence of the border. They took care of each other in subtle ways, such as taking turns to sleep sitting or laying down in the crowded cells. Khosravi continues, "That prison was the best school I ever had in border studies, or any other studies related to what it means to be human today."[47]

Khosravi's anecdote is an example of staying at the doorway, the diasporic threshold, or in other words, staying in the charged space of the borderland.

When my mom decided that continuing to live in Iran was no longer an option, she began researching how we could leave. I say "decided" because we were privileged enough to have had some choice—although life conditions in Iran at the time, for a divorced single mother at

[44] Shahram Khosravi, "Border Smuggling as Decolonial Practice" in *A Moment of True Decolonization*, the Funambulist Podcast, episode 26. 21:23. April 16, 2020. https://thefunambulist.net/podcast/a-moment-of-true-decolonization/daily-podcast-25-shahram-khosravi-border-smuggling-as-decolonial-practice

[45] I do not like using the term "illegally" when it comes to movement of bodies across borders, because I do not wish to reinforce the logic of the border. However, I do use this term in this text, sparingly and hesitantly, as I have not yet developed language for replacing it.

[46] Khosravi, "Border Smuggling."

[47] Khosravi, "Border Smuggling."

that, certainly forced her hand. Sometimes life conditions become so unbearable that forced displacement gets mistaken with desire, confusing the latter for choice. That is to say, many racialized or otherwise colonized people's need to escape to safety is so mired with our lustful romance for Europe or North America that we forget this desire is not neutral or natural, but conditioned in us over centuries of Occidentalism.[48]

The first path my mother considered was a fake marriage to someone already holding European citizenship. She went as far as exchanging letters and meeting with him to discuss the possibility, but her potential partner wanted a permanent marriage and to have children. The prospect of agreeing to such an intense commitment with a relative stranger was not something my mother was prepared to shoulder. As a woman in her forties, she had little interest in having more children and certainly not in a marriage of convenience.

The most appealing option was of course the formal immigration route. In mid-2000s Iran, you could file for immigration at the embassy of the country you wanted to go to. You had to prove you had six months' worth of living expenses saved up to sustain yourself upon arrival. In dollars, that was a lot of money for my mom. Not to mention the process often took upwards of five to six years, with no guarantee that you would even be accepted.

Another option was to pay smugglers to sneak you into Europe. A friend of my mom knew some people with connections in airports and embassies, who apparently arranged fake visas and flew people to European countries where you would file for refugee status. This option required a hefty sum per head and while it was an appealing solution, there were also risks. For one, it was unclear if the smugglers could really be trusted. What if they took you to a different country than your desired destination, took your money and ran, or worse, turned you in to the authorities? If you were caught at any point in the process, it would be a prison sentence without a doubt. Not to mention that there being no guarantee that you would be accepted as a refugee in Europe. You could be deported or forced to live undocumented with little possibilities. Though my mother seriously pursued this option, she ultimately couldn't get in contact with the right people.[49]

The final option was to cross the border into Turkey legally or illegally, depending on your situation, and then present yourself at the offices of the United Nations in Ankara to file for refugee status. You would plead your case and the UN would determine if you would be recognized as a refugee or not. It was a process that could take years. Even if the UN accepted you as a refugee, you still had to be accepted by the embassy of the destination country. Your

[48] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 1-28.

[49] Mitra Kamali, conversation with author, July 30, 2022.

chances of success depended on your age, education, religious, ethnic, or political position.[50] While my mother and I were refugees in Turkey, we witnessed that *Baha'i* people were generally treated favourably (and rightfully so), with their refugee claims typically recognized and their tenure in Turkey expedited, while Kurds and political dissidents of other religions faced far more rejections and deportations. In hindsight, I question the degree to which refugee processes were unofficially influenced by a group's supposed alignment with western European ideologies and a perception of "civility" not often extended to Muslims, Atheists, and Kurds.

Of course, I was still a little kid at the time so I might not be remembering these details right.

Homi K. Bhabha's writings on colonial and orientalist structures provides a helpful frame for understanding these realities. Bhabha analyzes the ways in which Indians under British colonial rule would perform or mimic whiteness as a survival mechanism to gain a semblance of power.[51] Yet British colonizers maintained such vast distances between themselves and Indians that no matter how "perfectly" an Indian person assimilated it would never be enough to be equals. Indians had to remain Other in order to preserve the existing balance of power—as Bhabha repeatedly puts it, "*almost the same, but not quite*" and "*almost the same, but not white*."[52]

Thinking with Bhabha, I wonder if my mother and I just performed whiteness well enough, civility well enough, suffering well enough, for our humanity to be accepted and the gates of asylum to be opened for us. The brutality of a system that arbitrates whose life is truly in danger and who deserves a chance to live is beyond words. Cruelty and white saviourism were playing their endless game, those twisted twins. After you filed for refugee status you had to surrender your passport to the Turkish police in your local municipality and then visit the police station several times per week to prove you hadn't run away.

I think of our friends who were stranded there in Turkey. If your refugee claim was rejected by the UN, you either had to accept deportation to your home country or go underground.[53] Some of our friends were ghosts even before we met. Failed by governments and systems time and

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[50] "Determining whether the applicant has the ability to establish in Canada," Canada, accessed August 4, 2022. https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/publications-manuals/operational-bulletins-manuals/refugee-protection/resettlement/eligibility/ability-establish.html

[51] Homi K. Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse." *October* 28 (1984), 125–33. https://doi.org/10.2307/778467.

[52] Bhabha, "Of Mimicry," 130. Emphasis original.

[53] Martin Baldwin-Edwards, "Migration in the Middle East and Mediterranean," *Global Commission on International Migration.* (2005). Accessed August 4, 2022.

time again, they supposedly did not exist.[54] Even my childhood innocence could not make me oblivious to the pain and anger many of those families carried on the shoulders, and the abysmal conditions they were forced to live in. In that place that was home for some and a borderland for others.

Someone decided that there would be a border between Iran-Turkey. There would be Turks on both sides of the border. There would be Azeris on both sides of the border. There would be Kurds on both sides of the border. But nonetheless there would be a border. I remember that border, because it was the first time I moved from one nation state to another, and perhaps the first time I became aware of how large the world really is.

The train stopped one last time in Iran. There was a large administrative building next to the train tracks. Everyone disembarked and went inside to have their passports processed. It was quite busy. There was a large concrete and asphalt open space behind the building, with a bakery to one side. It was sunny. It was late summer and the weather was warm, but not too hot. The bakery was making *lavash* bread. Everyone clamoured to that bakery; people were saying that the bread in Turkey was no good, and were buying more bread than they could possibly eat. In those anxious moments at the border, when many of us sensed that our lives were about to change beyond imagination, the bread became a container for multiple distances.

Perhaps the most obvious one was that people envisioned such great distances between themselves and the Turks living in Turkey that even the thought of eating their bread seemed unbearable. Small cultural distances between people living on two sides of a line (a border) were magnified to such an extent that we might as well have been aliens from different planets meeting for the first time.

Another distance was the one between the lives people wanted for themselves and the life that our homelands rendered possible. As though by carrying bread across the border people were shielding themselves from the worst things about leaving home. As if the bread was the land

[54] The above cited article quantifies illegal immigration in Turkey in the late 1990s and early 2000s, under the sub-section entitled "Turkey." As both a destination and transit country, Turkey housed all "three types of irregular migrants […] – economic migrants, who remain for some time before moving on to western or northern Europe; overstayers, who work illegally; and rejected asylum-seekers. However, because of the illegal nature of all types, along with the nature of the Turkish approach to asylum applications, there is great overlap between all three. Nevertheless, the nationalities of these three types tend to be specific: overstayers working illegally tend to be from the former Soviet bloc […]; economic transit migrants are from the Middle East – predominantly Iraq and Iran, but also Asia[…]. Asylum seekers are also predominantly from Iraq and Iran, as noted above; because of the uncertainties in the asylum process, they go underground and add to the stocks of illegal migrants."

they couldn’t take with them. Understandably, people were terrified of leaving. Of not knowing what awaited them on the other side of that border. And all of that stoic fear, grief, and anxiety manifested itself in a dramatic and unnecessary hoarding of bread. The bread became a way of cushioning the violence of forced displacement.

The bread wasn’t even that good, but I think we bought a little bit too. We soon learned that the Turks made delicious bread.

I remember the moment we crossed that border. The train stopped again after a short time. Everyone had to disembark again, this time on Turkish soil. My mom ripped off her hijab with a great flourish and sense of triumph, like *I never have to wear this shit again.*[55] I stubbornly took her scarf and put it on. Maybe some part of me felt I had to hold on with every ounce of my being, even if I was holding on to the wrong thing.

Zahra Moqinami (Abu Moqinam) and Nader Sadon Barihi, two people fleeing Iran into Turkey, froze to death at the border this past winter.[56] They had been attempting to cross the border illegally and hoping the snowstorms would help conceal them, but they were caught by Turkish Border Patrol agents and forced to return on foot. The few articles that reported on this incident framed their cause of death as hypothermia, but that is not an accurate framing of this story. The border patrol agents knowingly forced them to return on foot in the middle of a snowstorm in spite of (and likely specifically because of) the risk of death.

The news article lists other recent examples of deaths at borders, noting a surge in Iranian asylum seekers, be they political or religious dissidents or ordinary people attempting to escape harsh socio-economic conditions. Another recent example is that of an Afghan mother who froze to death attempting to cross into Turkey from Iran on foot with her two young children. An article on Stockholm Centre for Freedom says “The woman had given her clothes to her two children in an attempt to keep them warm. […] her feet [were] wrapped in plastic bags, and the hands of the surviving children covered with their mother’s socks.”[57]

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[55] Hijab is compulsory in Iran, under the Islamic Republic.

[56] “Two Iranian Asylum Seekers Die from Cold at Turkey Border”دو پناهجوی ایرانی در مرز ترکیه بر اثر سرما جان باختند, Radio Farda, January 18, 2022. https://www.radiofarda.com/amp/31659379.html

[57] “Turkish gendarmes discover 2 refugees frozen to death at Iranian border,” Stockholm Centre for Freedom, January 17, 2022. https://stockholmcf.org/turkish-gendarmes-discover-2-refugees-frozen-to-death-at-iranian-border/

A few weeks later, Turkish police discovered bodies of two other refugees frozen near the border, an "Afghan woman and a man whose nationality could not be determined."[58] Turkish officials carried the woman's body to the Iranian side of the border and left it there—a move activists argue is Turkey's way of concealing just how many people have lost their lives at its borders.[59]

I learned about these incidents, all of which occurred in January 2022, because I was in Iran at the time. Instances of unimaginable violence occurring at borders are rarely covered by news sources in North America.[60] I felt my world shift on its axis when I went back to Iran, if in the least because I suddenly became thoroughly exposed to news from this part of the world.

This is not about Turkey's borders in particular. All borders are inherently sites of intense violence. In other words, enforcing the intended function of a border necessitates and justifies violence.[61] That said, I have a personal connection to the Iran-Turkey border that compels me to pay it special attention.

I came across a significant online list compiled by a European organization called United Against Refugee Deaths, who document instances of refugees who died in relation to Europe's border policies and have done so for decades. Whether or not the Iran-Turkey border can be considered part of this research is uncertain, despite the fact that most refugees entering Turkey are in fact hoping to eventually find their way to Europe. The current version of the list (last updated in June 2022) does not include Zahra, Nader, or any of the other recent deaths I mentioned earlier.[62]

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[58] "Turkish gendarmes," 2022.

[59] Dario Salvi, "Turkey pushing corpses across Iranian border to hide refugee deaths," Asia News, January 18, 2022. https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Turkey-pushing-corpses-across-Iranian-border-to-hide-refugee-deaths-54936.html

[60] "Morocco/Spain: Horrific Migrant Deaths at Melilla Border:

Investigate Fully, Preserve Evidence, Ensure Dignified Treatment of the Dead," *Human Rights Watch*, June 29, 2022. https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/06/29/morocco/spain-horrific-migrant-deaths-melilla-border

[61] Chiara Brambilla and Reece Jones, "Rethinking borders, violence, and conflict: From sovereign power to borderscapes as sites of struggles," *Society and Space* 38, no. 2 (2020). 287–305. DOI: 10.1177/0263775819856352

journals.sagepub.com/home/epd; Rahel Lorenz and Benjamin Etzold, "Journeys of Violence: Trajectories of (Im-)Mobility and Migrants' Encounters with Violence in European Border Spaces," *Comparative Population Studies* 47 (2022): 211-232. DOI: 10.12765/CPoS-2022-09

[62] "List of 48.647 documented deaths of refugees and migrants due to the restrictive policies of 'Fortress Europe,'" United Against Refugee Deaths, last updated June 1, 2022. https://unitedagainstrefugeedeaths.eu/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/ListofDeathsActual.pdf

We have lived with the Iran-Turkey border and its ghosts for many years. When I was three or four years old—too young to remember, though I have snippets of memory—my uncle and his daughter who was around my age returned across that border. On foot, in the night. They had escaped as refugees to Turkey, and I don't know why they had to return, only that it was extremely risky. I remember having a blast playing with my friend during that visit, unaware of everything that was unfolding.

My uncle planned to transgress that border once again, in the middle of the winter, on foot. My mom, fearing for their lives, bought fabric and sewed a warm winter onesie for my cousin and according to my dad, also a harness of sorts to make it easier for my uncle to carry her on his back. My mom saw it as her duty to do all she could to keep them safe at that border. She moved to shrink distance—to mediate the violence of a heavily enforced border. It was not blood relation that compelled her to act, as there was none. I like to believe that she would have done what she did for anyone in that circumstance.

I wonder if my mother could have predicted she herself would move through that border just a few years later, albeit in less of a blatantly dangerous way, and that my uncle would show up for her without ever being asked.

This story has since been carried by my mom, dad, uncle, and little cousin, as well as by me as an unknowing witness. It is a story and a call to action I inherited from my mother. In writing this text, I asked my mom, "do you think you would have maintained a relationship with uncle today, if it weren't for that?" "I don't think so," she responded almost immediately.

A palpable distance engendered by the very existence of that border, and a small act towards shielding a child from the violence of that distance. My mom, uncle, and now-adult cousin do not need to acknowledge it in words, but all three of them know they were bonded for life with every stitch my mom sewed into that warm winter onesie.

Lawrence Abu Hamdan's recent project *45th Parallel* was filmed site-specifically at the Haskell Free Library and Opera House.[63] Abu Hamdan took interest in this site as it exists in both Canadian and American jurisdictions as well as neither, due to its unique position on the Canada-US border. In fact, the border runs through the centre of the building, demarcated by a black strip taped to the floor. In an essay accompanying the exhibition, Tina Sherwell writes, "In the opera house, the audience sits in the US and watches a show in Canada. However, as

[63] Lawrence Abu Hamdan, *45th Parallel*, Exhibition. Mercer Union, Toronto, Canada. March 26-June 4, 2022.

Fleifel[64] explains, those entering from Canada must exit back into Canada and vice versa, activity which is monitored by a patrol car outside the building."[65] While visitors from either side of the border can enter and use the space freely, the site is heavily policed so as not to become a border crossing.

I notice an inherent contradiction in how this border space is governed. For one, to be at the library is to be in the space of the crossing. I do not mean because it is literally on the border. The border is both arbitrary and real. Arbitrary because someone decided to fabricate it to control human bodies—for the border is meaningless to wind, to seeds, to networks of roots and fungi under the surface of the earth, to forest fires, to birds. And real because to cross it could be fatal, as Abu Hamdan's project deftly demonstrates using the case of Hernández v. Mesa. In 2010, unarmed 15-year-old Sergio Adrián Hernández Güereca was shot by US Border Patrol Agent Jesus Mesa Junior. Hernández was playing in a cement culvert on the Mexican side of the border. Mesa fired his weapon with his feet firmly rooted on US soil; the bullet that murdered Hernandez is the only thing that crossed the border.[66]

To be in the borderland is to be at the crossroads. You need not necessarily transgress the border physically to cross it. Hernandez's story is only one example of how dangerous that crossroad can be. Abu Hamdan links the example of the cross-border killing of Hernández by Mesa with other cross-border shootings, particularly drone strikes conducted by and from the United States in locations throughout West Asia and North Africa.

The arbitrariness of borders is bitterly humorous. How absurd of humans to think we can look at a pile of dirt and say this is one country and that's another. When the wind shifts that dirt from one side of the supposed border to the other, does the border shift too? How absurd to draw an imaginary line and legislate murder to maintain the fantasy. When I took a handful of earth from Iran with me to Canada, did that earth suddenly become Canadian soil? I am really not sure.

What the border actually does is fabricate distance. Often the distance manifested by the border is so significant that it bleeds into spaces well beyond the borderland.

The border patrol agent parked outside the Haskell Free Library and Opera House cannot prevent crossings just as he cannot stop the wind from picking up dust. Language, culture, social values all transgress the border at Haskell. The border might slow them down, make it more difficult, but everything other than the physical flesh of visitors to the library crosses that

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[64] The narrator, whom Abu Hamdan describes as "the Private Eye", is played by filmmaker Mahdi Fleifel.

[65] Tina Sherwell, "A Pair of Boots," essay in *Lawrence Abu Hamdan: 45th Parallel*, Mercer Union.

[66] Lawrence Abu Hamdan, "45th Parallel," Exhibition statement, Mercer Union, accessed July 20, 2022. https://www.mercerunion.org/exhibitions/lawrence-abu-hamdan-45th-parallel/

border. To my own amusement, I wonder which country is responsible for draining the library's toilet waste?

When I decided to visit Iran in December 2021 after nearly five years, I hoped to somehow archive the visit. You were reminiscing about things we did during my last visit to Iran and to my terror, I realized I had forgotten much of what you seemed to remember in vivid detail. In the absence of regular contact with you and other family, I do not always have people with whom to casually recall these experiences, to fill gaps in my memory, to help me to remember.

In your play, a white curtain in the background is mentioned once in describing the mise en scène and not activated again. It simply frames the performance area as is typical in theatre. At the time, I was shifting my attention from the narrative in the play, instead getting more and more interested in studying its set as a representation of the contexts and conditions of displacement and diaspora. I was thinking deeply about the presence of this curtain. Why is it mentioned yet not activated? It seems omnipresent. I picture it circling all around the performance area like a border, yet it is rendered dangerously invisible by its ubiquity and familiarity in a theatre setting. You described a white curtain which is almost ironic given the weight of Whiteness in my world, both pre- and post- migration. I wonder if the curtain was a passive addition on your part or if you considered these connections—I must remember to ask you about this next time we talk.

I knew that my interpretation of the curtain could not merely be an object in the background. I wanted to centre the contexts of diaspora, and this is what the curtain was to represent. At the same time, trying to pinpoint the context and conditions of displacement and diaspora seemed like an impossible task. For a while I put pressure on myself to be an anthropologist, feeling like I needed to present definitive, quantifiable information on the myriad causes of contemporary displacement. Eventually I realized that that was not my task as an artist, nor was art (or rather, my art practice in particular) a suitable medium for achieving such outcomes. But art *was* an ideal tool for considering and communicating these ideas in other ways. Perhaps the poetic potential of visual art could aid in an embodied sensing of worlds shaped by displacement and diaspora. My curtain needed to be borders in all their rigidities and fluidities. Not an object in the distance, but an object *of* distance itself.

Moving through these ideas and motivations, I hoped that the making process and resulting curtain itself would help me to remember this visit to Iran. Perhaps it would become a map of

my desire to build deeper relations with you, other family, and the land—a desire that dances with distance.[67]

As has been our tradition every time I visit, we went on a big trip together. You wanted to revisit some of the places to which you were deployed as a young conscripted soldier during the Iran-Iraq war as site research for your novel. As for me, my thinking around objects from the set of your play, the door and curtain, as well as its references to the "Pariya" poem had increasingly led me to thinking about borders, distance, borderlands, and liminal spaces. We set off, driving south from the city of Sanandaj in Kurdistan province, through the western provinces along the border with Iraq, at times following along and crossing the Dez, Karun, and Karkheh rivers, ancient sister rivers to the Tigris.[68]

Knowing that we would be travelling, I thought I could gather natural materials along the road to stain and dye the fabric on the land. As soon as I arrived in Tehran I bought a large piece of white cotton. I theorized that the hands-on process of collecting or harvesting plant matter, learning to pay close attention to the land, and experimenting with extracting and combining dyes in various ways would serve as a memory tool, such that I could later read the curtain to remember what had been taking place while I made it, drawing from *pardeh khani* ("curtain reading") traditions.

Pardeh khani is an old Iranian performance tradition wherein a *pardeh-khan* would tell epic stories from the Qur'an or Persian mythology with the aid of visuals painted on a large, portable fabric curtain. The performer is referred to as a pardeh khan (curtain reader), or "*pardeh dar* (a person who has a screen), or *morshed.*"[69] Pardeh khans were travelling performers who would set up for a day or two in neighbourhoods, sometimes in teahouses, and oftentimes outdoors on a wall, to entertain and make their income. They were not elites and used the language of common folk, who were also their intended audiences. Lashkari and Kalantari explain in their text *Pardeh Khani: A Dramatic Form of Storytelling in Iran:*

[67] Is it the distance that incites or magnifies this desire for relation in the first place?

[68] Interestingly, some believe that the Karun and Karkheh rivers are two of the four rivers in the Garden of Eden mentioned in the bible, along with the better-known Tigris and Euphrates in modern-day Iraq. Dez is a tributary of Karun.

[69] Amir Lashkari and Mojde Kalantari, "Pardeh Khani: A Dramatic Form of Storytelling in Iran," *Asian Theatre Journal*, vol. 32, no. 1 (Spring 2015). 249.

> The *pardeh khan*, on his own or with the help of his assistant (*bache morshed*), would mount the screen on a wall and then call the audience to watch and listen; people clustered round the singer and his dramatic narration started.[70]

They quote from Khosro Shahriari on the next page, who offers more detail as to the structure of the performance.

> First in the order of performance was the performer's rolling up and carrying the screen. Then, wherever he found suitable, he unrolled the screen reciting some verses of a poem and in this way attracted people to him. Unrolling the screen, he explained some parts of the stories painted on the screen. He, sometimes, covered the screen with a white cloth and then, while recounting the story, he gradually uncovered the screen. At the end of one part or the whole story, the singer started collecting money from the audience.[71]

I was interested in pardeh khani as a performance methodology for my curtain for several reasons. I intended to activate my yet-to-be-made curtain performatively and wanted to expand my performance strategies. Unlike many forms of theatre, pardeh khani was rooted in bringing poetry and performance to ordinary people where they lived in their villages. This non-bourgeoisie ethos around curtain reading attracted me because I am always attempting to push against structures that position visual art and performance as solely for middle- and upper-class people. Looking deeper at traditions such as pardeh khani would allow me to build a performance knowledge and vocabulary beyond those concentrated on Euro-centric histories and values of creative practice.

On the other hand, pardeh khani is largely affiliated with religious storytelling and a way of spreading Muslim faith and culture. Since performances often recount Qur'an stories about Imam Hossein's martyrdom, I question whether bringing these performances to the people doubled as a means of indoctrination. Islam has a complicated history in Iran. The region was colonized by Arabs nearly 1400 years ago, who brought and enforced the Muslim faith. The Arab conquerors suppressed Zoroastrianism and other Indigenous beliefs and traditions leading

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[70]Iraj Sa'di, *Tarikh-e Namayesh dar Malayer (The History of Theatre in Malayer)*. Malayer: Elmgostar. 1378 [1999]. Cited in Lashkari and Kalantari, "Pardeh Khani," 252. Emphasis original.

[71] Khosro Shahriari. *Ketab-e Namayesh: Farhange Vazhe-ha, Estelahat, Sabk-ha va Jaryan-ha-ye Namayeshi* [The Book of Drama: Dictionary, Expressions, Styles and Dramatic Trends] (Tehran: Amir Kabir. 1365 [2006]), 44. Quoted in Lashkari and Kalantari, "Pardeh Khani," 253.

to mass displacement.[72] These violent histories carry into current socio-cultural dynamics, leeching into all aspects of people's lives in present-day Iran of which education and the arts are no exception.

Pardeh khani inspired and informed my initial vision for the curtain as a visual record for collective memory, an object that could be read. Ultimately, I chose not to draw from the tradition too explicitly for several reasons. I did not want my work to be placed into a conversation with a performance tradition that is predominantly associated with Islam nor were the narrative and oratory facets of pardeh khani appropriate for my ideas and skills as a performer. The prospect of 'reading' the affects embedded in the fabric's materiality—treasured, intimate moments with my family—for a public seemed violating. As an artist and performer, my practice reflects my life, including topics that can be deeply personal or painful. I am constantly determining how much distance I need between these aspects of my projects and viewers to ensure my ideas can still be communicated without rendering myself overly exposed in the process.

Being in Iran and making the curtain drastically transformed my expectations of what it would become. I originally thought it would help me ruminate on various forms of distance, such as gender and time. This was my first winter in Iran since I left as a child, and my longest stay in Sanandaj (the capital of Kurdistan province and my paternal grandparents' home city). Logistically, dyeing the fabric on the land was not feasible because finding vacant land was difficult and the cold and snow complicated matters further. My baba was also worried that if I unfurled it just anywhere to work on it, people might assume I was making a political banner which could have disastrous outcomes.

Instead, I did the majority of the actual dyeing on grandma's large fifth-floor balcony. I also worked on it in their living room, the bath, narrow stairway by the elevator, and the building's garage on wet and icy days, as well as in my aunt and other grandma's living room, garage, and backyard, and baba's front yard in between his neighbours' cars (See Appendix D).

The fabric curtain is 10x33 feet in size and coloured entirely with natural dyes. I used scraps from foods my family and I were eating, plants gathered on walks around my grandparents' homes, and other natural materials I collected while I was travelling the western provinces with

[72] Pallav, "The history forgotten: The persecution of Parsis by Muslims in Persia and their migration to India," *Opindia*, July 3, 2022. https://www.opindia.com/2022/07/the-persecution-of-parsis-by-muslims-and-their-migration-to-india/

my dad. The materials such as pomegranate skins, fresh rosemary, acorns, eucalyptus leaves and bark, and indigo are themselves archives of specific places and relations.

The blue colour is the only colour on the fabric not sourced from materials I gathered myself. While in Sanandaj, I had the privilege of meeting Mr. Farzad Ebrahimi, one of only three remaining master dyers in the city. Mr. Ebrahimi learned the art of natural dyeing from his late father, who learned it by apprenticing with Jewish master dyers in the Sanandaj bazaar in the 1950s and 60s. Later, Mr. Ebrahimi's father took over the trade when his teacher-turned-employer migrated to Israel, at a time when apparently many Jewish merchants were leaving their long-standing businesses behind. Natural dyeing was a key part of the chain of production for Persian carpets but is now a dying trade due to economic sanctions on Iran and the affects of mass production on valuation of slow craft.[73]

Mr. Ebrahimi generously took the time to teach me indigo dyeing in his workshop, the same storefront where his father and other master dyers before him operated for decades. I decided to incorporate indigo dyeing on my curtain to record the experience of meeting and learning from Mr. Ebrahimi. Indigo is one of the only natural sources of blue dye in the world. For this application, I purchased processed indigo from Mr. Ebrahimi's supplier in the Sanandaj bazaar.

I dyed the fabric without pre-planning an image. Conceptually, I was interested in the unpredictability of natural dyes: how I could not really control how they adhered to the fabric or what colour each material would yield, how dyes reacted chemically with each other, and their ephemeral nature being prone to fading. Surprisingly, many of the colours resembled landscapes where the source materials were gathered (See Appendix D).

The result is an object that is completely unique, but also alive like a memory. Over time with exposure to the sun, it will slowly change and lose its original vibrance. There is an inherent tension between a desire to protect this object from its nature, which is to fade, by storing it away from light to supposedly elongate its life; and the desire for it to be out in the sun and moving in the wind, where it is at its most vibrant and alive despite having a supposedly shorter life.

I hoped the finished object could be a memory tool for me, documenting specific moments with my family and the land during the visit. The final outcome was quite different. I wanted it to help me remember but I was only thinking of recalling memories in my mind. I forgot about body memory altogether. Working on the curtain for two months, I built up a tactile language and memory in my body tied to the process of making. More than anything, the curtain became a tool for teaching my hands how to do certain things, like hand dye a massive, unwieldly length

[73] Farzad Ebrahimi, conversation with author, February 7, 2022.

of fabric. As Puwar poignantly says, "we are embodied beings as knowledge makers"[74] and "knowledge comes into being when the body is put into motion."[75] Through the making process, I put my body into motion and generated embodied knowledges. I hope that I will continue to remember these lessons held in flesh.

Forough's poetry was on my mind more and more after I returned to Iran and especially while we stayed with grandma and grandpa in their new apartment.

The evening of our first day there, grandma's sister and another relative came to visit. Grandma and her sisters are very close and visit each other all the time. Grandma had gone into the bedroom to get a phone call. My auntie made a subtle comment about being thirsty and made to get up to grab a glass of water. Grandpa, not missing a beat, looked to me sternly and said something like, *Abidar, go fetch your aunt a glass of water.* And you, passively, concurred, *yes go on.*

I made my way into the kitchen and since I hadn't visited my grandparents' new apartment before, had to open nearly every cabinet just to find the drinking glasses. Why was I asked to fetch water and not you, since you know your way around this apartment? Would it have been so bad if auntie simply got her own glass of water? Or, why not even grandpa himself?

In that moment, I felt strongly what Sara Ahmed describes as sensing a wrong, and coming back to the sensation because it does not make sense: "Feminism helps you to *make sense* that something is wrong; to recognize a wrong is to realize that you are not in the wrong."[76] I knew in my gut that something about this encounter was not right. I suddenly felt like I had left the safe bubble of childhood behind, and was now expected to play the role of the good little woman our society so insistently demands. As Ahmed says, "To be a feminist can feel like being in a different world even when you are seated at the same table."[77] Even in a household of relatively educated folks, I could not escape pervasive gender stereotypes and expectations.

Later, in private, I confronted you about not having my back. I was concerned that as someone who aspires to champion women's rights, you hadn't noticed the problem. You seemed taken aback, clearly it simply hadn't crossed your mind, but you were also quick to apologize.

[74] Puwar, "Carrying," 5.

[75] Puwar, "Carrying," 15.

[76] Sara Ahmed, "Feminism is Sensational," in *Living a Feminist Life* (Duke University Press: 2017) 27. Emphasis added.

[77] Sara Ahmed, "Feminism is Sensational," 40.

I was considering curtains as a representation of distances shaped by gender. I had already been thinking closely with Iranian feminist poet Forough Farrokhzad who wrote,

> My lot is a sky,
> taken from me
> by the drawing of a curtain.[78]

These lines from her seminal poem "Another Birth" (1964) reference restrictive social norms that situate Iranian women squarely within the home. Forough would be considered a second-wave feminist by North American definitions and that is certainly the era she lived through. However, her writings remain painfully relevant and radical in Iran even today. The categorization of feminist thought in the West (i.e. feminist waves) simply does not make sense in the Iranian context due to how gender has long been constructed and measured through religious ideology with little space for deviance.

Sometimes I bitterly wonder if life conditions for women in Iran have improved in the last 65 years. Perhaps today women are encouraged to get PhDs so they have something to brag about as they continue to fulfil their supposed purpose: to clean, cook, look pretty, please men, and bear and tend to children. In such a society, it is no surprise that Forough wrote of curtains as invisible prisons for women; they frame an enticing world beyond the glass that remains largely beyond reach. In "Captive" (1955), Forough reflects on her marriage:

> I think about it and yet I know
> I'll never be able to leave this cage
> Even if the warden should let me go
> I've lost the strength to fly away.[79]

Some borders, some distances, are easier for me to comprehend than others. I saw the Iran-Iraq border for the first time this year when we drove through the western provinces. This

[78] Forough Farrokhzad, "Another Birth," in *Another Country and Other Poems*, 1964. Translation mine.

[79] Farrokhzah, "Captive," 1955. Quoted in "Overlooked No More: Forough Farrokhzad, Iranian Poet Who Broke Barriers of Sex and Society," *University of Virginia*, *Department of Women, Gender & Sexuality*, February 5, 2019. https://wgs.as.virginia.edu/news/story/overlooked-no-more-forough-farrokhzad-iranian-poet-who-broke-barriers-sex-and-society

particular border has been aggrandized in Iranians' cultural imaginary over years of post-war propaganda.

We headed south from Kurdistan province, intentionally bypassing the capital city of Kermanshah province in favour of some of the smaller towns along the way. It's a mountainous region, going up and down hills and incredibly beautiful. After a few hours of driving, the cold, snowy climate changed so drastically that we appeared ridiculous for wearing thick winter coats. Nestled in a valley, the city of Ghasr-e Shirin was warm and tropical with lush greenery and palm trees that reached straight for the sky. We were the closest I have ever been to the Iran Iraq border. Ghasr-e Shirin sits only a 10 to 15-minute drive from the Iran-Iran border, along ancient trade routes active to this day.

It was as though the heavenly climate itself was signalling our entry into a mythical realm. A space conditioned over centuries by a line both real and imaginary. Here, for the first time, I realized that this carefully narrativized border—molded to inform ideas of what makes us *us*, what constitutes duty and sacrifice—is for the most part just a mountain range. One country on one side of the mountain and another on the other. It made perfect sense! And Ghasr-e Shirin is nestled right up to it.

As we approached Ghasr-e Shirin, the sun was dipping into the horizon. I stood in a gendered line at a bakery for some fresh *sangak.*[80] The streets were relatively quiet, but stores were open and (mostly) men were out socializing in front of their businesses, enjoying the slightly cooler night air. Looking to the west towards those mountains it was hard to imagine that beyond them lived people supposedly so different from us.

The next morning, you got talking to the motel owner about what the war had been like for residents of Ghasr-e Shirin. He told us that fighting had started in their town months before the "official" announcement of war.[81] For a while the city was even besieged by the Iraqis—it had formally become Iraqi territory. The political distance between governments of these two nation states had made itself visible to the people of Ghasr-e Shirin long before the rest of the country even realized a war was coming. The people in this border town, this borderland, had been in the eye of the storm.

As we continued driving south, you started to tell me about some of your experiences of the war. You turned eighteen at a terrible time given that military service is mandatory for men in Iran. More than thirty-five years later, the marks from the war were still visible on the land. You pointed out the mounds of earth piled high on the western side of many roads we were driving

[80] Literally translates to "little stone"; a type of Persian bread cooked on a bed of hot rocks.

[81] Speaker unknown, conversation with author, January 2022.

along which served to conceal military vehicles transporting goods and personnel from "enemy" surveillance and targeted bombs.

In my exhibition, I installed the curtain on a flexible rail bent to loosely mimic the jagged lines of borders. The curtain flows onto the floor, moving gently with the flow of air, and folds in on itself to create undulating patterns resembling hurricanes, layers of rock, pools of water or perhaps a clear blue sky. The installation shapes the movement of visitors in the small gallery, creating intimate, secluded spaces within folds of fabric where viewers might momentarily enter immersive zones.

Behind the curtain in one of these spaces, I installed a flatscreen TV in portrait orientation showing a video of my father and grandmother folding up the fabric curtain.[82] I titled this unedited cellphone video *Radiant Moments*. It is about seven minutes long, and I did not add English subtitles. This video was filmed on my last day in Kurdistan province in my grandparents' home. The video helps to contextualize the making of the curtain, and provides a glimpse into how involved and invested my family became in the whole process.

My father and grandma speak Kurdish to each other, while I converse with them from behind the camera in Farsi. Near the end, I move towards the window to show my grandparents' balcony where the majority of the dyeing was completed—colourful stains are visible on the stone. A deep blue sky and earthy mountains (including the mountain for which I was named) are visible in the near distance. Folks seeing the curtain in the exhibition may have been struck by visual similarities between this landscape and colours on the fabric.

The most unexpected thing was that you, grandma, the great aunts and even to a lesser extent grandpa began to get invested and involved in this weird project I was working on. Instead of a reflection of gender as distance, the making of the curtain became a way of shrinking the distances between all of us. Grandpa was unique in that he sometimes got involved by jeopardizing things, such as by turning off the gas on the little outdoor stove I was using to slowly simmer dyestuffs in my massive dye pot. He assumed I was simply forgetting to turn off the stove, when in reality the dye pot was so large that it took hours just to bring it to a simmer, not to mention the fact that certain colours needed gradual and gentle heat to take effect.

[82] This footage is exhibited with permission from my grandmother and father whom it depicts.

Every day and sometimes several times a day grandma and grandpa would tell me to bundle up better or cover my head, constantly worried that I would catch a cold. The fabric was so large and unwieldy that you often had to help me move it in and out between the balcony and the bath where I would crank the heated towel rack, creating a mini sauna to dry the material overnight. Your involvement was stoic and constant.

Grandma was a regular collaborator too. She is the kind of person who does not know the meaning of sitting still and resting, and seemed pleased about having an additional task. I rarely asked for her help because I wanted her to stop working, but she was eager to give it of her own accord. The whole process seemed to jog her memory of activities she had observed or partaken in as a child in her father's home and as a young woman in her husband's home—my great great grandfather and great grandfather owned a leather tannery while my great grandmother (my grandma's mother-in-law) was a skilled carpet maker. I was packing and preparing to leave on my last morning in Sanandaj, and I came out of the shower to catch you and grandma carefully folding the fabric together. I had to take out my phone to document the moment.

In the live performance with the curtain, I once again put my body into motion. This time I generated new knowledges distinct from those that arose from the tactile making process. I removed the curtain from the gallery and put it up in a straight line bisecting the alleyway outside. I set up a speaker on either side. The gallery is situated in a narrow alleyway running perpendicular between two other alleys, so audiences naturally arrived from both sides and seated themselves on different sides of the curtain. I began the performance by humming.

I had printed out one copy of the poem "Pariya" in Farsi which spanned 11 pages. This is the same poem that is included in my father's play, that my mom used to read to me growing up, and which I've recently come to appreciate even more given its subtle diasporic resonances. I handed out the individual pages to audience members on either side of the curtain until the poem was scattered randomly. I wanted the audience to be responsible for this knowledge, even though most of them did not know what they held and could not read the text.

I returned to the curtain, walked along its length, and breathed and moved with it as it swayed gently in the wind. It would balloon out in both directions, as though sticking out its belly or arching its back. I proceeded to the west side of the curtain and turned on the speaker which played a female voice, my mother's, reading the "Pariya" poem. I recited the poem from memory with this voice, able to remain mostly in sync with it both in terms of rhythm and intonation. At moments, our voices became one voice speaking in near-perfect harmony.

Then I moved to the east side of the curtain and turned on that speaker. This time a male voice, my father's, reading the same poem played. I attempted to recite the poem with this voice, but we were out of sync. I tried learn from this voice by repeating how it enunciated the poem. I continued the performance in this way, moving from one side of the curtain to the other, pausing and playing the voices and trying to mimic each one as closely as I could.

Intermittently throughout the performance, I walked among audience members and searched for written pages that corresponded to the portion of the poem playing on the speaker at that moment. If I found the right page, I would read the passages out loud before handing the paper back to the audience member. At times, I was unable to find the right page, or people had abandoned the fragments of knowledge entrusted to their care, symbolically rendering them inaccessible to me.

The curtain glowed in the golden afternoon sun. Weeds in the alleyway cast unexpected shadows on the fabric. The wind lifted the curtain at times, momentarily revealing people on the opposite side. I continued moving between the two sides, the two voices, growing more and more tired. Eventually, I turned off the speakers and moved back to the curtain, once again moving my body gently to mimic the rise and fall of the material, as though breathing with it. Slowly, I walked into the curtain, becoming entangled with it, this borderland between mother and father, male and female, east and west, there and here. I allowed the warm curtain to envelop me. I wrapped myself in it. After some time, I emerged, held the mass of fabric like a bundle on my shoulder, and looked towards the two sides with a contented look on my face, ending the performance (See Appendix E).

Act Three
Facing the Fortress

Yesterday my two uncles who live in the States came to Toronto for a visit. My uncle posted a picture in the family whatsapp chat of everyone crammed around the dinner table in my mom's small apartment. Today, for the first time in 18 years, my grandma is in a room with four of her five children. *For the first time in eighteen years.*

I am grappling with this realization tonight as I sit in my living room writing in a city about an hour away. I am picturing how happy my grandmother is right now. I am picturing the tears of joy in her eyes, but also the weight of distance that I know lingers on her skin. I am picturing the way she must have grabbed her eldest son whom she hadn't touched in seven years—my tall uncle folding nearly in half—to kiss his cheeks not only once but countless times in quick succession.

As of this summer, none of my mother's immediate family members remain in Iran. We have all been forced to leave. This includes my grandmother who is in her eighties.

It has been one month since my aunt and uncle arrived in Toronto from Tehran. My aunt and uncle faced more injustice than anyone else in our immediate family, and yet they held on the longest. It is of course not a competition, nor particularly useful to measure one's tolerance for suffering. This is simply to say that they did not want to leave. Almost no one leaves their homelands if they really have a choice.

Thanks to my great uncle's tireless efforts, we have names for 11 generations of relations on my mom's side of the family. It is devastating to reflect on the fact that within the span of only 25 years my entire family has been forced to leave the place they lived for 11 known generations and countless others before.

As my father's play suggests, departure is a door that will not reopen. Returning to what was is not an option. For the visual parallels alone, I must acknowledge Dionne Brand's *A Map to the*

Door of No Return. Brand skillfully weaves theory, histories both known and contested, personal anecdotes, memories, and mundane experiences into a lived poetic of contemporary Black diaspora. She tells of doorways that are real, imaginary and imagined.

> The Door of No Return is of course no place at all but a metaphor for place. Ironically, or perhaps suitably, it is no one place but a collection of places. Landfalls in Africa, where a castle was built, a house for slaves […] A place where a certain set of transactions occurred, perhaps the most important of them being the transference of selves.[83]

She is speaking, of course, of places where Africans were forced into slavery. She continues on the following page:

> [The door] is a place which exists or existed. The door out of which Africans were captured, loaded onto ships heading for the New World. *It was a door of a million exits multiplied.* It is a door many of us wish never existed. It is a door which makes the word door impossible and dangerous, cunning and disagreeable.
>
> There is the sense in the mind of not being here or there, of no way out or in. As if the door had set up its own reflection.[84] Caught between the two we live in the Diaspora, the sea in between. […] Our inheritance in the Diaspora is to live in this inexplicable space.[85]

The unplanned visual connections between my body of artwork and Brand's articulations of the Door(s) and adjoining castles are undeniable. However, it would be foolish to compare my family's experiences of displacement to the transatlantic slave trade, the greatest violence known to humankind. There are striking resonances in *A Map to the Door of No Return* that inform my thinking and writing, but at the same time, Brand's writings articulate a diaspora distinct from the one I wade through.

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[83] Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Penguin Random House (2011). 18.

[84] As I edit my own writing, I find myself pausing at "the door had set up its own reflection." Though I wrote this text and placed this quote before my performance with the door took place, I had not actively noticed this specific description until now—weeks after the fact. I covered one side of the door I created for my performance in reflective vinyl. Now I am not sure if it was my original idea to do so or a subconscious inspiration from Brand's description.

[85] Brand, *Door of No Return*, 2011. 19-20. Emphasis added.

Continuing along the mountain range from Ghasr-e Shirin[86] we visited the ancient city of Shush (Susa) in Khuzestan province. There we visited the Palace of Darius (also known as Apadana), an Achaemenid era complex built circa 500 BCE. To my surprise, all that remained of the supposed palace were broken fragments of the massive stone statues and columns, and a haphazard tracing of the original floorplan using mud and straw that seemed strange and out of place. I learned, via the nearly illegible, sun-faded didactics, that the site had included dozens of stone columns, fired clay bricks, and even massive glazed tile murals depicting mythological creatures and other scenes.

I did not see any of these architectural marvels there that day. What remained were fragments of carved stone too broken to restore. Nearly everything was taken by French archeologists in the late 1800s and early 1900s and is now in the collection of the Louvre. Apadana palace in Shush is a sister palace to Persepolis, ruins in my home province, that I visited many times as a child. As we stood in the glaring mid-day sun trying to piece together what little was left, you humourlessly remarked that even though you visited Achaemenid historical sites for years, it took going to the Louvre for you to finally grasp the original function of the lion-bull statues that capped the stone columns. They held the ceiling up on their backs.[87]

The Palace of Darius (Apadana) is up on a hill. As we explored the outskirts, a middle-aged security guard came riding up on his motorcycle. He took us to the top of a viewing platform, sharing facts about the site in his thick *Dezful* accent. He pointed out the hills below that held evidence of numerous settlements, towns built atop towns over millennia. Shush is one of the world's ancient cities, dating to 4400 BCE and located between the Karkheh and Dez rivers and 250 km from the Tigris river.

Right next to the crumbling ruins of the Palace is a large, well-preserved castle. We learned that French archeologists came to the region in the late 1800s to excavate at Darius. But every night, local villagers would break in and steal their findings. In order to house themselves while keeping the locals at a distance, the French archeologists ordered the construction of a castle with plans adapted from medieval European monuments, notably the Bastille prison.[88] Perhaps even more shocking was the fact that the French built their imposing fortress using ancient clay

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[86] The name Ghasr-e Shirin translates to Shirin's Castle. The town is named for Emarat-e Khosrow, a sassanid-era castle belonging to Shirin's husband.

[87] "Persian Collections at Louvre Are Worth the Journey," *The New York Times*. 2019. Accessed August 2, 2022. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/12/arts/persian-collections-louvre-susa.html

[88] "French Castle; Historical Gem in Iran's Shush," Iran Front Page, April 15, 2020. https://ifpnews.com/french-castle-historical-gem-in-irans-shush/

bricks from Palace of Darius as well as Chogha Zanbil ziggurat, an even older, Elamite monument dating to 1250 BCE, situated 30km from Shush (see Appendix F).

On our visit, the French prison-fortress was not open for public viewing. I refer to Shush Castle as a prison-fortress because it was built to resemble a notorious prison with the explicit intent of keeping local villagers out. We were only able to walk around the outside of it and in one of its small courtyards. Scattered among the outer bricks, we spotted fragments of colourful glazed bricks, probably from friezes, scattered in random spots on the exterior wall. We also found a number of bricks bearing ancient Cuneiform writing, again seemingly placed without rhyme or reason (See Appendix F). The only creatures capable of scaling the formidable walls were the surprisingly fat pigeons that had claimed the upper windows and battlements as their home.

I thought of the ordinary people whose hands built these architectural marvels across the centuries, only to be barred at their gates. I reflected on the vast distance the French archeologists must have perceived between themselves and people from the region to erect a prison where they could have otherwise fostered understanding and trust. Such monuments, even those erected by ancient Persians themselves, ultimately existed for the comfort of ruling classes and to ratify their power, wealth, and influence in the region.

Instead, I choose to focus on these monuments as archives of the very bodies they tried so hard to exclude. They represent a lineage of labour, carved and constructed brick and brick by real people across centuries. The fact that the ancient bricks survived thousands of years to be appropriated by the French in this way is a testament to the incredible skills of artisans. The glazed bricks, though worn and partial, are an archive of their makers' hands: perfectly complementary colours placed side by side, expertly drawn lines, and a delicate, flowery motif carefully painted in glaze.

I wanted to reflect on the intersecting distances held in these monuments through an extended making process. Several months after returning to Canada, my thinking around curtains as stand-ins for borders and distances, influences like my father's play, the "Pariya" poem, and archeological sites in Shush finally coalesced into an idea for a project. I would reinterpret the imposing French prison-fortress in Shush using thousands of tubular hand-rolled ceramic beads. I would deconstruct and re-envision the fortress wall by softening it into a beaded curtain, like the one my grandmother always had in her home.

The project I conceptualized was labour intensive and unlike anything I had undertaken previously, as I had no experience hand building modular ceramics on such a large scale. The repetitive, labourious process of rolling thousands of clay beads would give me an opportunity to think through making. The tubular shape of the beads was inspired in part by glass beads that adorned the original doorway to the ziggurat at Chogha Zanbil (See Appendix F). I made

these beads with help from a number of other folks, in Sackville, New Brunswick and Toronto, Ontario.[89] My beads are imperfect in ways that gesture to the hands that made them. Signalling the presence of real bodies and human labour in this object was important to me, in order to push against fortresses like this one, designed to keep certain bodies out. I wanted to articulate imperialist histories as modes of distance while pointing to bodies whose labour enabled the foundations of empires.

Similar to methodologies I engaged for my fabric curtain and live performances, I was once again putting my body into motion to generate knowledge, only this time, I knew better than to underestimate embodied knowledge. Over the course of three months, I trained my body into rolling nearly identical ceramic beads. I became intimately familiar with the specific movement of muscles in my palm and wrists in concert with the tool in my hand (a knitting needle) that together yielded a specific bead form. As a multi-disciplinary artist, I have not worked in any one medium extensively. But through this process, I finally understood how some artists can spend their entire lives perfecting a single, seemingly mundane skill. I could have easily spent another ten years rolling ceramic beads, and I would still have gained new haptic knowledge.

Materially, most of my ceramic beads are made with either a red or sandy-coloured clay body. A smaller number of beads are made with white clay, as well as a combination of the three clays in various ratios and patterns. Some beads are glazed or underglazed in hues referencing glazed bricks I saw in Shush (See Appendix F), while others are tinted with black or purple ink and charcoal. The materiality of ceramic echoes the rough earthy feel of bricks, while the tubular shape of beads reimagines bricks as a more delicate form.

I wove my beads together into a solid yet flexible curtain, measuring 72”x75,” using the peyote stitch. The peyote stitch is a simpler cousin of the brick stitch, and visually identical in its final appearance, which imbues the work with another subtle reference to brick walls that inspired it. Several of my friends and family joined me in the studio to help thread the beaded panels together and assist with other preparations for this ambitious and time-consuming installation (See Appendix D).

I titled the work *Fortress of Legends* after the mysterious castle mentioned in “Pariya.” At the start of the poem, the three pari are situated within a liminal space. They are faced with a downtrodden city, but sit with their backs to a cold and dark tower, described as the fortress of legend. I envision the fortress as a place where old traditions and mythologies are carefully guarded. The title holds a double meaning, either referring to fortresses mentioned *in* legends, or an imaginary origin place of legends and traditions. Perhaps it is where the pariya came from, or maybe they want to leave it behind. The fortress carries baggage, a ruin that demands

[89] I was in Sackville, NB in May 2022 as an artist-in-residence at Struts Gallery.

maintenance by sticking to old ways long past their usefulness. Like such long-standing structures, my beaded curtain appears formidable and ever-lasting, but in reality, it is delicate and fragile.

I hung my beaded curtain in the garage entrance.[90] I wanted visitors to transgress a boundary formed by this object to enter the space, to have to move beyond the curtain. In its current iteration, the piece is not quite large enough for that intent to work effectively but I hope to continue adding to it in the future.

The prison-fortress and ruins at Shush carry traces of colonial, imperial, and orientalist distancing frameworks. Though they may seem distant from our lives due to the passage of time or their larger-than-life presence, the histories they hold are still relevant today. As Haraway reminds us, "all of us inherit the trouble of colonialism and imperialism."[91] But the question is, how do we orient ourselves towards these unwieldy and painful inheritances?

I am building on Haraway's idea of staying with the trouble through diasporic and performative modes of engaging with the world. As I mentioned in the first act of this text, my idea of staying at the doorway came out of my performance with the door. The threshold of the doorway is a borderland: deeply uncomfortable yet alive with movement, fluidity, and possibility. It necessitates entanglement and being present. It recalls Haraway's *kainos*, "full of inheritances, of remembering, and full of comings, of nurturing what might still be."[92] The threshold is a generative space largely *because* it is so uncomfortable and unfixed.

I am taking up staying at the doorway as a diasporic methodology for making sense of the overlapping distances I came across in Shush. I am reminded of Eve Tuck and C. Ree's idea of wronging wrongs. Sometimes, distances we inherit are too corrupted to right. It might be better to wrong the wrongs instead. Tuck and Ree write in *A Glossary of Haunting*:

> Righting wrongs is so rare. Justice is so fleeting. And there are crimes that are too wrong to right. Avery Gordon (1997) writes that our task is to "look for lessons about haunting when there are thousands of ghosts; when entire societies become haunted by terrible deeds that are systematically occurring and

[90] Shell, where I exhibited my project, is a garage turned gallery.

[91] Haraway, *Trouble*, xiii.

[92] Haraway, "Introduction," 2.

> are simultaneously denied by every public organ of governance and communication."[93]

I am not sure if I could ever right the wrongs contained by these monuments. I am not interested in redeeming these histories or inadvertently glorifying colonial structures. What I can do is refuse to turn away, minimize, or pretend these histories did not exist or no longer matter. I may not be able to dismantle the prison-fortress through my art practice alone, but maybe I can wrong it. Flip it on its head. Soften it into its own worst nightmare. Make it porous and thus less formidable. Hopefully by staying with it and doing these things, we generate new ideas for what else can be done. When faced with the fortress, perhaps we must learn to ruin ruins.

Shush is a site of intersecting distances splayed over centuries and civilizations, rife with tensions and contradictions. These include distances between French archeologists and local villagers, or colonial ideologies and Indigenous ways of life. Distances between ruling classes living in palaces and labourers building said palaces—likely at the risk of death for the latter. Distances between history and fiction. Distances between preserving and ruining. Shush is a borderland.

Anzaldúa's conceptualization of borderlands refers to the Texas-US Southwest/Mexico border specifically, but also other physical and non-physical spaces where distances weigh heavy. As she puts it, "Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy."[94]

I use distance as a lens to expand on the idea of borderlands: places where many distances converge, often to violent results. I braid some such spaces through this text: my grandparents' house with two doors, Ghasr-e Shirin, the archeological ruins alongside the prison-fortress at Shush, the liminal space where the pariya dwell, and the doorway in my father's play. As a person invested in thinking about diaspora in ways that challenge nationalism and binary thinking, I like the term borderland because it implies hybrid spaces where the mucky run-off multiple realities bleed into each other. Throughout this text, I have also used words such as doorways, thresholds, crossroads, and liminal spaces to articulate similar and adjacent environments.

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[93] Avery Gordon, *Ghostly matters: Haunting and the sociological imagination*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 1997). 64. Quoted in Eve Tuck and C. Ree, "A Glossary of Haunting," in *Handbook of Autoethnography*, ed. Stacey Holman Jones, Tony E. Adams, and Carolyn Ellis. (Left Coast Press: 2013). 654.

[94] Gloria Anzaldúa. *Borderlands La Frontera*. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987). Preface.

Anzaldúa's borderland is not unlike the inexplicable space between Brand's door and diaspora. The Door as point of departure and diaspora as destination frame "the sea in between"—the Middle Passage. As with borderlands, "the sea in between" is a space that is charged, treacherous, and multiple. They are both treacherous because they are tombs for countless bodies. Anzaldúa's borderland and Brand's "sea in between" are both real, imagined, and imaginary. They exist on multiple planes. Both can be mapped, and at the same time, neither can be truly and fully understood with only a map.

How might borders be defined, if we refuse to accept that a border simply refers to or can *only* refer to where one nation state meets another? What does it mean to apply the idea of borderland to spaces that are nowhere near physical borders? As demonstrated by Brand and Anzaldúa, borderlands need not necessarily be fixed, physical spaces.

I find Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's rhizomatic framework helpful in envisioning these environments.[95] Distance is not static but ever-shifting, fluidly blinking in and out of existence across vast stretches of time, sometimes amplifying and piggy-backing on other distances, sometimes flickering so dimly as to be nearly imperceptible. Instead of framings of diaspora that fall back on Othering tropes, I am interested in approaching diaspora as a borderland. Living in this borderland means attuning to traces of distance.

[95] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. "Introduction," in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983). 3-25.

Dear Reader,

I was not yet born then, but I realize now that I’ve been in the belly of that house with two doors this entire time. I thought I was alone in this charged borderland, frozen in place by the gravity of all that distance, until I was reminded that my family have been in the living room with me all along. Not only that. I have kin in my neighbours keeping me safe. More and more of us are gathering in the alleyway, knocking at the doors. We’re at the threshold and we’re here to stay.

To survive the Borderlands
    you must live *sin fronteras* [96]
    be a crossroads.[97]

        — Gloria E. Anzaldúa
        "To Live in the Borderlands Means You"

[96] *sin fronteras*—without borders

[97] Gloria Anzaldúa, "To Live in the Borderlands Means You," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (1996), pp. 4-5. https://www.jstor.org/stable/3346863

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Appendix A: Documentation of *Speaking Across the Divide* exhibition

Location: Shell (Garage gallery in alleyway behind 13 Mansfield Avenue. Toronto, Canada)

Photo Credit: Mitra Kamali, 2022.

Photo Credit: Mitra Kamali, 2022.

Photo Credit: Abedar Kamgari, 2022.

Photo Credit: Abedar Kamgari, 2022.

Photo Credit: Abedar Kamgari, 2022.

Photo Credit: Abedar Kamgari, 2022.

Radiant Moments, 2022. Video still. Video Credit: Abedar Kamgari.

Photo Credit: Abedar Kamgari, 2022.

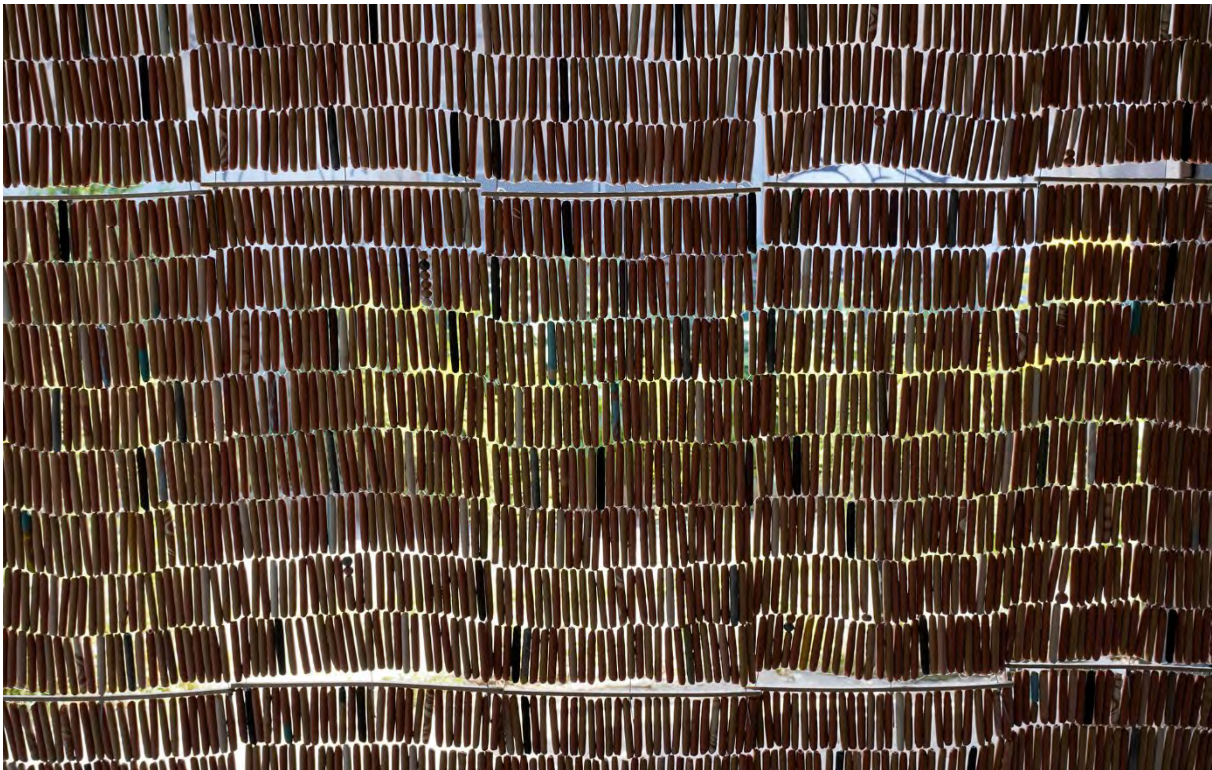
Photo Credit: Abedar Kamgari, 2022.

Photo Credit: Abedar Kamgari, 2022.

Photo Credit: Abedar Kamgari, 2022.

Appendix B: Documentation of performance with door, *Carrying Distance*

Location: Alleyway outside of Shell. Toronto, Canada.

Duration: Approximately 20 minutes.

Photo Credit: Melissa Teo, 2022.

Photo Credit: Žana Kozomora, 2022.

Photo Credit: Žana Kozomora, 2022.

Photo Credit: Melissa Teo, 2022.

Photo Credit: Tyler Matheson, 2022.

Photo Credit: Tyler Matheson, 2022.

Appendix C: Kurdish *Koolbaran*

Photo Credit: Zahra Chizari, 2020. JavanOnline.ir

Photo Credit: Sarkawt Mohammed, 2020.

Photo Credit: Sarkawt Mohammed, 2020.

Appendix D: Documentation of Making Process

Location: Sanandaj, Iran, Mehrshahr, Iran, Sackville, Canada, and Toronto, Canada

Photo Credit: Abedar Kamgari, 2022.

Photo Credit: Abedar Kamgari, 2022.

Photo Credit: Abedar Kamgari, 2022.

Photo Credit: Abedar Kamgari, 2022.

Photo Credit: Abedar Kamgari, 2022.

Photo Credit: Abedar Kamgari, 2022.

Photo Credit: Mandana Kamali. 2022.

Photo Credit: Abedar Kamgari, 2022.

Photo Credit: Abedar Kamgari, 2022.

Photo Credit: Abedar Kamgari, 2022.

Photo Credit: Mitra Kamali, 2022.

Photo Credit: Mitra Kamali, 2022.

Photo Credit: Abedar Kamgari, 2022.

Appendix E: Documentation of performance with fabric curtain, *Speaking Across the Divide*
Location: Alleyway outside of Shell. Toronto, Canada.
Duration: Approximately 45 minutes.

Video stills: Miles Rufelds, 2022.

Video stills: Miles Rufelds, 2022.

Video stills: Miles Rufelds, 2022.

Video stills: Miles Rufelds, 2022..

Photo Credit: Mitra Kamali, 2022

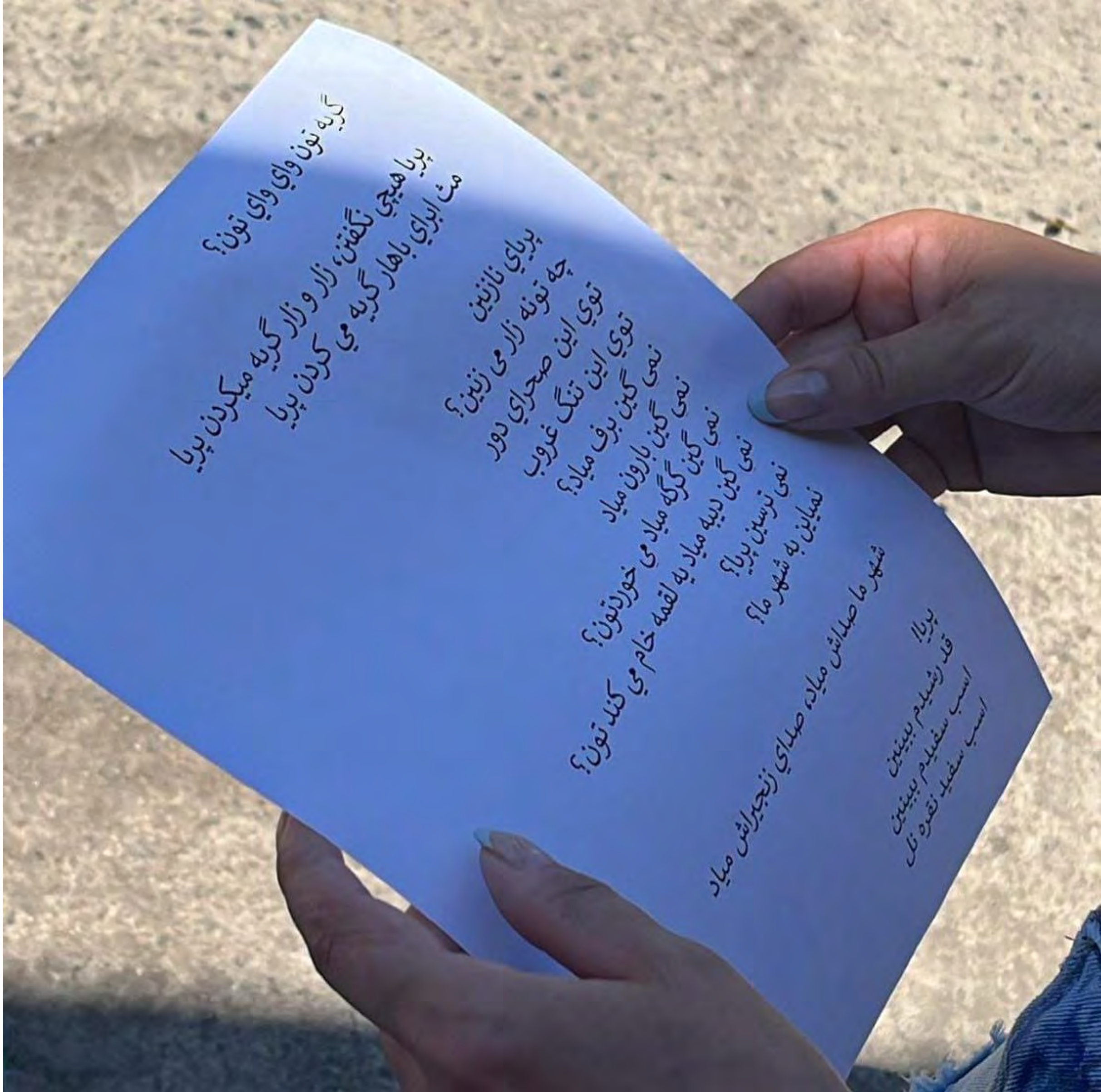

Photo Credit: Shell Curatorial Projects, 2022.

Photo Credit: Indu Vashist, 2022.

Appendix F: Archeological and historical influences.

Location: Shush (Susa), Iran and Chogha Zanbil, Iran.

Ziggurat at Chogha Zanbil, 1250 BCE. Photo Credit: Abedar Kamgari, 2022.

Glass beads used to adorn the door to the ziggurat at Chogha Zanbil, 1250 BCE. Photo Credit: Abedar Kamgari, 2022.

Ziggurat at Chogha Zanbil, 1250 BCE. Photo Credit: Abedar Kamgari, 2022.

Ziggurat at Chogha Zanbil, 1250 BCE. Photo Credit: Abedar Kamgari, 2022.

Palace of Darius at Shush, c. 500 BCE. Photo Credit: Abedar Kamgari, 2022.

Palace of Darius at Shush, c. 500 BCE. Photo Credit: Abedar Kamgari, 2022.

Shush Castle (Château de Suse), built late 1890s. Photo Credit: Abedar Kamgari, 2022.

Detail of exterior wall of Shush Castle (Château de Suse), showing glazed bricks from the adjacent ruins of Palace of Darius at Shush dating to 500 BCE. Photo Credit: Abedar Kamgari, 2022.

Detail of exterior wall of Shush Castle (Château de Suse), showing bricks with ancient writing from the ruins of Palace of Darius at Shush (dating to 500 BCE) and ziggurat at Chogha Zanbil (dating to 1250 BCE). Photo Credit: Abedar Kamgari, 2022.

Exterior wall of Shush Castle (Château de Suse), showing glazed bricks from the adjacent ruins of Palace of Darius at Shush dating to 500 BCE. Photo Credit: Abedar Kamgari, 2022.

Exterior wall of Shush Castle (Château de Suse), showing glazed illustrative bricks from the adjacent ruins of Palace of Darius at Shush dating to 500 BC. Photo Credit: Abedar Kamgari, 2022.