

Do You Think in Arabic?

Identity-Construction, Passive Bilingualism and Longing
in Contemporary Middle Eastern Diasporic Art

by

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A thesis exhibition presented to OCAD University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Criticism and Curatorial Practice

Graduate Gallery, 205 Richmond St W, OCAD University, March 3rd – 9th

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2026

Abstract

This thesis takes the form of a curated exhibition accompanied by a critical essay, bringing together contemporary artists from Middle Eastern diasporas whose practices reflect on intergenerational inheritance, relationships to land, language loss and diasporic identity. Attending closely to the ways language manifests in diasporic contexts, the works negotiate questions of belonging, inheritance, linguistic loss or adaptation and the emotional residues of displacement. Grounded in feminist and queer theoretical frameworks, this project examines how artists from Middle Eastern diasporas navigate cultural hybridity and the complexities of self-construction in the West. Domestic spaces, everyday objects and embodied experience emerge as key themes through which the artists grapple with belonging and remembering, offering resonant reflections on diasporic life. This curatorial project emerges from both personal and academic research into what it means to create from and within a diasporic condition. By centring lived experience alongside critical theory, the exhibition positions curating as an act of storytelling, foregrounding vulnerability, care and relationality.

Acknowledgement

This writing and research was developed in Tkarón:to – the traditional territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishinaabe, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat peoples. As someone from a diasporic background, I am eternally grateful to live and share my work on this land, and I continue to reflect on what it means to make a home here.

The research I have done is inextricably connected to and everlastingly intertwined with my mother, Dalia – who I dedicate this work to and feel endless gratitude for the life she has given me in Canada where I have chased passion and followed my dreams. Borrowing anecdotes, translations, and stories from her grounds my research in immigrant embodied experience and intergenerational inheritance, connecting us forever. To my sister who sees me completely and to whom I feel an unparalleled sameness – our story is in the heart of all my writing. To my friends who have created an impermeable support system. To my cohort for sharing this experience and ideating with me. To my partner who has wholly uplifted me.

Thank you.

A special thank you to my advisors Dr. Andrew Gayed and Dr. Maria-Belén Ordóñez whose support and guidance has made this research possible. To Andrew, you are the representation I've always lacked in institutional academia. To see someone like me doing such vital and brilliant work has irrevocably inspired me to do the same and share my story - it has been truly a pleasure. To Maria-Belén, thank you for challenging me, and for supporting me in thinking laterally. You are an epistemological star.

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Part I

These days I am able to appreciate my grandmother's very remarkable and very ordinary beauty. I do wish I could talk to her; I have so many questions. Do transplants ever find a home? Are we weakened by the ever-present feeling of not belonging in the West or the East, of having a foot in both worlds but no solid roots in either? Or are we stronger, more innovative, and creative, able to make home in odd sites, able to survive in small, hard places, plants growing out of rocks? Perhaps this is our advantage, perhaps this is what we bring to the world. Find home wherever you can make it. Make home so you can find it wherever.

- Joanna Kadi ¹

Introduction – On Homesickness, Language, Diaspora.

To exist in the margins of multiple identities is not to be fragmented - but to be expansive and resourceful, nuanced even. It is to carry generations of multiple languages, memories, histories, and contradictions all at once. It is also to carry fractured tongues – a mother language which becomes buried beneath the surface, aching to be expressed. Passive bilingualism suggests the ability to understand a second language without being able to speak it. One can comprehend conversations, media, and text in a language but may struggle to produce it verbally. This concept becomes a metaphor for diaspora itself: knowing but not always able to speak, belonging but never entirely at home in either language or land. It is to carry pieces of home through story, food, music and tradition while being indescribably far from it. It is a dichotomy of being seen and unseen,

¹ Kadi, Joanna. "Introduction." *Food for our grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian feminists*. South End Press, 1999.

present yet absent. Similarly, queer diasporic subjects navigate the tension of visibility and silence, where intimacy, desire, and identity are often untranslatable across cultures. It is precisely in this in-between state of having a foot in both worlds but no solid roots in either, as Kadi has expressed in the quote above, that diasporic Arab art becomes a way of sense-making and home-finding. The heart of much of this writing centres on an ideal of *belonging*. To situate this notion, I draw on migration and multiculturalism scholar Karolina Nikielska-Sekula, who conceptualizes embodied transnational belonging as a dynamic, bodily felt materialization of social, cultural, political, economic and affective processes. These processes support the emplacement of mobile people in new localities, while also extending across borders of nation states.² This definition firmly states the factors of the dynamic *belonging* explored in this writing, opposing “assimilative” ideas of belonging which suggest that inclusion and social acceptance are achieved when individuals adopt the dominant culture’s norms, language and behaviour – ultimately shedding their own.

With this ideal of belonging in mind, how do feminist and queer Arab artists in the diaspora navigate this multitude of identities? Much of mainstream diasporic Middle Eastern art is framed by external curatorial lenses - often male, Western and conflict-focused.³ Feminist artists can push back against these notions by insisting on self-authored narratives. As Arab feminist artists navigate intersections of gender, sexuality, race, religion and displacement simultaneously, the idea of “Otherness” becomes more complex, offering a layered exploration of diasporic Arab identity. Author and Director of the Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality at NYU Gayatri

² Nikielska-Sekula, Karolina. "Embodied Transnational Belonging." *International Migration Review*, (2026).. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01979183231222233>.

³ Gayed, Andrew. “Trauma and the Single Narrative: Reading Arab Art and Photography.” *Queer World Making: Contemporary Middle Eastern Diasporic Art*. University of Washington Press, Seattle. Feb 2024 (Chapter 2, pages 55-84).

Gopinath describes a way of “reading” queerness in her book, *Impossible Desires*.⁴ She writes, “Queerness names a mode of reading, of rendering intelligible that which is unintelligible and indeed impossible within dominant diasporic and nationalist logic.”⁵ Just as queerness offers a mode of reading what dominant frameworks deem unintelligible, in this research, language too carries this potential. The fragmentation of languages in multi-language households also becomes a form of resistance to intelligibility and translation.

Looking at the works of female artists in the Arab diaspora - Larissa Sansour, Zineb Sedira and Sherin Guirguis- this research explores how feminist art practices expand dominant, Western narratives of diasporic identity by offering intimate, embodied and lived representations of belonging, memory, hybridity and home-finding in Middle Eastern immigrant and migrant communities. The writings of Arab Canadian and Arab American Feminists⁶ foreground the structure of this research.

⁴*Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*. Duke University Press, 2005.

⁵Gopinath, Gayatri. “Queer Homes in Diaspora.” Chapter 7. In *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*, 187–94. Duke University Press, 2005.

⁶ *Food for our grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian feminists*. South End Press, 1999.

Beyond Myopic Arab Art

Transnational, diasporic lived experience of Arab-Canadians are ubiquitous, but less frequently discerned in art through the specific lens of belonging and home-finding. Looking at diasporic Arab art in international institutions, we are often met with work that explores sociopolitical themes and depictions of war, violence and gender inequality. Australian-Lebanese artist and professor Cherine Fahd discusses the great achievements of diasporic Middle Eastern artists such as Walid Raad, Sherine Neshat, Emily Jacir and Ghada Amer and their participation in major international exhibitions and biennales. She writes, “...the institutional appetite for artists from the Middle Eastern diaspora has been significant. Their work is often characterized by strong political stances, frequently aligned with curatorial briefs addressing global political conflicts, divisions between Eastern and Western ideologies, and postcolonial agendas.”⁷ While many diasporic Arab artists engage with frameworks shaped by racial, religious, and gender politics - as well as geopolitical conflict - the notion of belonging often remains a more peripheral theme. This research turns its focus toward that very idea, examining how artists use memory as a means of negotiating identity and home. Fahd writes, “Australian artists from the Middle Eastern diaspora are largely making and exhibiting work that is concerned with sociopolitical issues impacting Australia and its peoples, issues that straddle cross-cultural identity, race and religion, conflict and war, gender stereotyping, nationhood and displacement...”⁸ Rather than centering violence or direct representations of trauma, I explore how these artists engage with the emotional and

⁷ Fahd, Cherine. “Contemporary Australian Artists from the Middle Eastern Diaspora.” *Mashriq & Mahjar: Journal of Middle East & North African Migration Studies* 6, no. 1 (March 14, 2019): 24–61. <https://doi.org/10.24847/66i2019.223>.

⁸ Fahd, Cherine. “Contemporary Australian Artists from the Middle Eastern Diaspora.”

symbolic residues of displacement, using personal and collective memory as a tool to articulate what it means to belong within a diasporic context. Just as there is a risk in losing nuance in linguistic translation, there is a risk of the distortion of Arab art when it is filtered through external, Western curatorial frameworks. This results in a cultural mistranslation, mirroring that of diasporic language. For queer and feminist Arab artists - for example Larissa Sansour, Christina Hajjar and Alize Zorlutuna ⁹ - importance lies on self-authored intimate work that can combat these mistranslations and act as a reclamation of culture and identity.

Is it possible for diasporic Middle Eastern art to represent a transnational lived experience, a hybridized identity of East and West, as opposed to the primary focus of responses to political injustices and the politics of Other? While these themes are undeniably interconnected - tumultuous experiences and forced displacement often fuel political expression - I aim to consider other ways of expression. By examining trauma and cultural hybridity through a lens that highlights the emotional and cultural residues of displacement, we can explore how artists articulate their experiences of loss and longing in ways that transcend representations of pain and suffering. This approach allows a more dynamic understanding of what it means to belong or not belong, challenging the dominant narratives of Arab art often presented in media and international institutions. Egyptian-Canadian professor and art historian Andrew Gayed discusses the notion of the *singular narrative* in response to the tunnel-vision focus on Arab artists' practices, a myopic lens of analysis which reduces the full understanding of art produced by artists of colour. ¹⁰ He writes, "This association between conflict and the Middle East affects the making of art itself, as

⁹ See "Curatorial Essay in...translation the language of my mother"

¹⁰ Gayed, Andrew. "Trauma and The Single Narrative: Reading Arab Art and Photography." Chapter. In *Queer World Making: Contemporary Middle Eastern Diasporic Art*, 55–84. University of Washington Press, 2024. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/ji.18654755.8>.

Arab artists are conditioned to produce war photography in order to be viable in the international market.”¹¹ While in this specific chapter Gayed is discussing Arab art and photography and the West’s consumption of Arab trauma, the same notions are seen in the works of diasporic artists, whose practices are often shaped by the expectation to perform pain or political urgency, as the only understandable way to situate themselves in a Western world. By focusing on other landscapes of diasporic life - longing, hybridity, language, cultural navigation and homemaking - there can be space for new modes of representation to emerge as well as expand beyond a Western, singular narrative of Arab art.

What does it mean to uproot your life for the promise of the West, only to arrive and be cast in the shadow of Other? How do artists navigate this lived experience? Egyptian-Australian contemporary artist Hany Armanious discusses this rhetoric by saying, “Being both Egyptian and Australian, and at the same time neither, is quite liberating. For me, art’s true privilege and power is in its non-location.”¹² Perhaps this can be a regenerative pursuit for Arab diasporic artists to make home not only despite displacement but *through* it. This way, diasporic art becomes more than a response to loss or injustice - but a means of possibility - a radical act of making space for oneself and others in the Arab diaspora.

Vera Eccarius-Kelly’s research on Kurdish diaspora artists and their vision for a National Kurdistan Museum offers a reflective lens through which to consider the themes and content of Middle Eastern diasporic art. When plans for the museum excluded diasporic Kurdish voices, a

¹¹ Gayed, Andrew. “Trauma and The Single Narrative: Reading Arab Art and Photography.” Chapter. In *Queer World Making: Contemporary Middle Eastern Diasporic Art*, 55–84. University of Washington Press, 2024.<http://www.jstor.org/stable/ji.18654755.8>.

¹² Fahd, Cherine. “Australian Artists from the Middle Eastern Diaspora.” 24–61.

group of artists and activists shared their own exhibitionary visions through interviews.¹³ One participant responded, “We already see so much violence and how difficult it is for Kurds. We know Kurds are suffering and dying. I need to listen to beautiful songs and learn about life stories through music.”¹⁴ This response reveals a longing for healing, connection and community-rooted expressions of identity and memory, suggesting ways in which diasporic artistic practices can serve as acts of reclamation.

Memories of Home - Larissa Sansour’s *Familiar Phantoms* (2023)

Going home is what some of us try to do throughout our lives - although many of us are already home, a chosen place where we live and relate to family and friends. Yet always, that other, almost mythical home wraps us in memory, hints at who or what we are - and sometimes points the way. It’s that other home that we must occasionally return to and, despite our former rebellions, learn to embrace. Only then will the splinters of our many selves merge into a single strand.

- May Mansoor Munn¹⁵

This sense of navigating multiple notions of home is echoed in the practices of several Arab women and feminist artists working in the diaspora. The artworks selected respond to lived

¹³ Eccarius-Kelly, Vera. “Do I Even Exist?’ Kurdish Diaspora Artists Reflect on Imaginary Exhibits in a Kurdistan Museum.” In *The Art of Minorities: Cultural Representation in Museums of the Middle East and North Africa*, 2020. <https://research-ebSCO-com.ocadu.idm.oclc.org/linkprocessor/plink?id=84ff1658-9c03-33a3-a027-baa48cc6bceb>.

¹⁴ Eccarius-Kelly, Vera. “Do I Even Exist?’ Kurdish Diaspora Artists Reflect on Imaginary Exhibits in a Kurdistan Museum.”

¹⁵ Mansoor Munn, May. “Homecoming.” *Food for our grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian feminists*. South End Press, 1999.

experiences of memory and displacement, complicating dominant narratives and offering perspectives on what it means to *belong*. The tension between where we are and where we come from, this “other home” that Munn describes, becomes a conceptual space that Arab women and artists return to in their practices. One artist who engages with the notion of identity-finding in this conceptual, in-between space of cultures is Larissa Sansour. Born in East Jerusalem to a Palestinian father and a Russian mother, Sansour lives and works in London, England. Her multidisciplinary practice spans film, photography and installation, often weaving together elements of science fiction, popular culture and speculative futures to reflect on themes of memory, displacement, and history. While her work is undoubtedly political - frequently informed by and referencing the occupation of Palestine - Sansour’s approach does not rely on direct representations of violence. Instead, she shifts focus to the emotional and speculative resonances of exile with a foregrounded focus on memories and nostalgia to represent diasporic lived experience and generational traumas. Sansour utilizes storytelling as a method to experiment and depict themes of memory, history, and trauma while working mainly with short films, documentaries, and installations. The short film titled *Familiar Phantoms* (2023) (Figure 1.0) is an experimental documentary short film that explores the impact of fiction on the creation and reinterpretation of memory.¹⁶

¹⁶ Sansour, Larissa. “Familiar Phantoms (2023).” Larissa Sansour. <https://larissasansour.com/Familiar-Phantoms-2023>.



Figure 1.0 *Familiar Phantoms* (2023) by Larissa Sansour. Experimental documentary short film.

Inspired by anecdotes from family history and her childhood in Bethlehem, Sansour describes this film as her most personal to date. ¹⁷ *Familiar Phantoms* was shot in a derelict mansion and a black studio, with scenes that oscillate between slow sequences and fast-paced collages of objects, mementos, family photos and Super 8 footage. ¹⁸ Through a fluid and non-linear editing style that mimics the fragmentary and cyclical nature of memory itself, Sansour explores how stories - whether told, imagined or remembered - construct meanings generationally. The film documentary opens with an Arabic narration: “I know far too well that memory is a rogue agent, operating above the law of verifiability.” ¹⁹ This confession sets the tone for a film that embraces instability and the fleetingness of remembering. The decision to use Arabic narration while providing English subtitles is significant as it mirrors the lived experience of passive bilingualism, perhaps as

¹⁷ Sansour, Larissa. “Familiar Phantoms (2023).”

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

carrying language as a memory rather than a tool. There is a sort of linguistic haunting of diaspora in the film as much as there is a visual one.

The second shot depicts a pile of *kahk* - small biscuits that are typically eaten across Arab regions to celebrate Eid al-Fitr - being dusted with powdered sugar. These visual motifs operate as codes, referencing a shared cultural identifier that may only be fully legible to other Middle Eastern viewers, reclaiming agency over the work and who it speaks to. Of course, this is coupled with the fact that the film is narrated entirely in a Palestinian dialect of Arabic, with English subtitles as a secondary reference. The presence of familiar iconography that may no longer be accessible - food, family photos, mementos - evokes a nostalgia resonant in diasporic communities. Childhood memories of play and gathering in Bethlehem are juxtaposed by this under-saturated, melancholic switch to what can be presumed as a temporal jump to the present or imagined future. Gesturing towards the relationship between rootedness and displacement, the present and future become haunted. Is this a diasporic experience? To romanticize a past or distant home while living in a state of detachment? Caught between the longing for return and the impossibility of arrival?

In one of the film's slower scenes, the camera lingers on a teenage girl seated at the bottom of an abandoned staircase. The hallway is barren, lacking warmth, with muted paint-chipped walls and worn floors. The girl, dressed entirely in black and expressionless, is surrounded by starkly contrasting, vibrant green and red watermelons, halved and baring flesh. Watermelons function as a coded visual representation for pro-Palestinian movements, particularly in situations where flags are restricted or banned. As she gazes down at the watermelons, Sansour narrates: "I remember stories, those that came with laughter, and those that remain untold. I remember details left out depending on who was telling the stories and who was listening."²⁰ This visual reads as a

²⁰ Sansour, Larissa. "Familiar Phantoms (2023)."

mourning, a memorial - an attempt to recall and remember a home that can no longer be inhabited. Whether exiled, displaced, or diasporically distanced, this home - Palestine - exists in fragments: in residual symbology, in taste, in stories. As Iraqi-Palestinian artist Sama Alshaibi writes, “For one exiled and unable to have a living connection with a homeland, any representations connected to that homeland are also representations of death: a homeland from which one is long ‘unhoused’ means that one’s memory of it remain mummified.”²¹ In her black attire, the girl metaphorically stands vigil for the home she once lived in, a home that can never return to the form it takes in her memories. While everything around her seems dreary and desaturated, the watermelons - bright and sweet - are a defiant ode to memory, history and cultural identity that persist even when place is lost.

Lost in Translation - Zineb Sedira’s *Mother Tongue* (2002)

Though I learned “kitchen Arabic” quite early, and could speak with my grandmother on an elementary level, I never became proficient in the language that should have been mine from childhood. This lack resulted in my isolation from the culture in which I lived. I was unable to follow conversations in family gatherings when people did not speak English. I could not understand Arabic television shows or news broadcasts, was unable to speak to storekeepers or passersby, or to develop friendships with Arab children. As a result, I remained trapped in a cultural insularity - articulated through the American school, American church, and American friends constituting my world - which now mortifies me.

²¹ Alshaibi, Sama “Memory Work in the Palestinian Diaspora (Personal Essay and Art).” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 27, no. 2 (2006): 30–53. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4137421>.

- Lisa Suhair Majaj ²²

Through a focus on language, Franco-Algerian feminist photographer and video artist Zineb Sedira captures the dance of connection and disconnection that exists in Arab diasporic communities. The three-channel video titled *Mother Tongue* (2002) (Figure 1.1) includes several generations of her family - including herself, her mother and her daughter. Each woman converses with the other about their childhood memories in their native tongues: French, Arabic and English. By the time the grandmother and the granddaughter are in conversation, they are lost in translation. This diasporic exchange of languages attempts to track down the broken narrative between Sedira's mother and daughter, who do not understand the respective spoken languages of English and Arabic. ²³ This exchange of languages attempts to navigate the complexities of a fragmented lineage, revealing how cultural and linguistic ties can dissipate across generations in the diaspora. Arab-American linguist Aleya Roushdy, writing on language conflict and identity, observes: "Most studies of minority languages or ethnic languages are consistent in their conclusions that the use of ethnic language gradually decreases with successive generations due to a process of assimilation." ²⁴ While this is true of Arab diasporic communities who continue their lineage in the West, it resonates particularly in the case of Sedira's family dynamic. Speaking on *Mother Tongue*, Sedira reflects on her familial history as Algerians in the French diaspora and the impact it has had on languages:

"My mother never learned French properly because she wanted to show her rejection of the French language and behaviour after the war of independence, even though she and my father lived in France for

²² Majaj Suhair, Lisa. "Boundaries: Arab/American." *Food for our grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian feminists*. South End Press, 1999.

²³ "Mother Tongue, 2002, Zineb Sedira." Zineb Sedira.

²⁴ Roushdy, Aleya. "Language Conflict and Identity: Arabic in the American Diaspora." *Language Contact and Language Conflict in Arabic*, May 13, 2013, 151–66. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203037218-15>.

economic reasons - North African immigrants were used as cheap labour. They experienced a lot of racism, and my parents felt a sense of failure that they had to bring up their children in that culture. They were angry that the French had managed to divide their Arab identity too...”²⁵

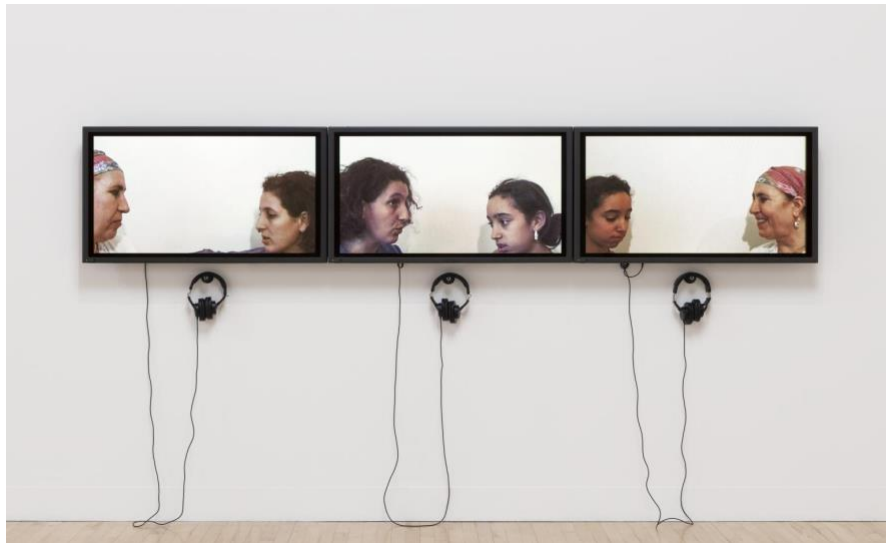


Figure 1.1 *Mother Tongue* (2002) by Zineb Sedira. Three-channel video.

This language barrier becomes another form of displacement, varying from the aforementioned notions of exile explored in Sansour’s *Familiar Phantoms*. Where Sansour grapples with physical and emotional exile from her homeland, Sedira’s exploration of language reflects yet another aspect of displacement - one marked by cultural and linguistic fragmentation as the result of the socio-political trauma of colonialism. Her parents’ immigrating from Algeria to France necessitated learning French to navigate a new, foreign environment. Not long after, Sedira moved to England to pursue her artistic practice, where she was required to learn yet another language - English. Now, her daughter, raised in the UK, speaks English as her mother tongue.

In the first channel of *Mother Tongue*, Sedira asks her mother questions in French while her mother replies in Arabic. They discuss childhood memories and the lost yet unforgotten stories of home. This multilingual, conversational back-and-forth is familiar to many Arab diasporic

²⁵ “Mother Tongue, 2002, Zineb Sedira.”

households, where language often mirrors generational shifts. Children raised in the West tend to absorb the dominant language more efficiently than their parents, resulting in a form of cultural asymmetry and sometimes unconscious assimilation. Roushdy references Marcus L. Hansen's article entitled *The Third Generation in America* which points out that ethnic identity takes place throughout three generations: "The ethnic heritage, including the ethnic mother tongue, usually ceases to play any viable role in the life of the third generation."²⁶ In the case of *Mother Tongue*, the third generation - Sedira's daughter - has lost the Arabic language, her grandmother's and, at one point, mother's mother tongue. *Mother Tongue* becomes not only a meditation on what is lost but a way of showcasing the multiplicity of language in the diaspora. The multilingual dialogues between mother, daughter and grandmother gesture towards a receptive, or passive, bilingualism - a phenomenon where individuals have an aural, native-like comprehension of a language due to exposure in childhood but find it difficult to utilize the language verbally.

A few years back, I remember asking my mother, who immigrated from Egypt to Canada two decades ago, "Do you think in Arabic? Because I haven't in a very long time." Though we speak in different tongues - my English and her Arabic - we communicate effortlessly. It is second nature to me, defining my everyday reality in diaspora. This question - *Do you think in Arabic?* - haunted me. The emotional residue of linguistic displacement and the estrangement that can arise within the self, even amongst family and others in the community, is another factor in diasporic longing and in-betweenness. Language loss can quietly fracture identity across generations. Will my children understand Arabic? This intergenerational language gap can also be understood as a form of queer temporality, where time, like language refuses linear inheritance. The unspoken words across three generations showcase a disruption of normative continuity, much like how

²⁶ Roushdy, Aleya. "Language Conflict and Identity." 151-66.

queerness can resist the expectation of lineage and reproduction. In contrast to Sansour's meditation on national exile, Sedira's *Mother Tongue* speaks to different forms of dislocation that accompany diasporic life, where this erasure of language becomes both a personal and collective wound.

Placelessness/Tracelessness - Sherin Guirguis' *El Beit El Kabir (Large House)* (2015)

Grapevines grow throughout the Arab world. While the grapes are picked for eating and wine-making, the leaves are also pickled; stuffed with rice, herbs, lemon and oil; and cooked. Since grapes also grow in North America, many of us went grapeleaf-picking with our grandmothers. The image of that plant, a tenacious survivor, tangling and weaving its way wherever it finds an opening, fits well with this section, since our identities are not clear-cut or easily defined. They are complex and layered, tangled and contradictory.

- Therese Saliba ²⁷

Like the grapevines in the Middle East and the grapevines in North America, taking root wherever they can, Sherin Guirguis's *El Beit El Kabir (Large House)* (2015) (Figure 1.2) traces the tangled nature of diasporic identity. Guirguis is an Egyptian-American visual artist and academic who uses site, text and lost or recovered histories at the core of each series. ²⁸ The series *El Beit El Kabir* is also informed by those three concepts, depicting her Egyptian heritage and experience as an Egyptian-American immigrant.

²⁷ Saliba, Therese. "Grapeleaves. Tangled Identities: Claiming Ourselves" *Food for our grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian feminists*. South End Press, 1999

²⁸ "About." Sherin Guirguis Studio. <https://www.sheringuirguis.com/about>.



Figure 1.2 *El Beit El Kabir* (2015) by Sherin Guirguis. Sculpture and collage.

The Third Line art gallery in Dubai, UAE, presented this series in 2016 as Guirguis' second solo show, framed through the lens of her diasporic identity: "The exhibition recreates the last vestiges of a connection with her homeland."²⁹ This installation work combines sculptural forms, paintings and works on paper to explore an interplay of personal and public histories. The *site* is the last connection with her birthplace, the *text* is a Rumi poem on placelessness/tracelessness embodying the immigrant/nomadic experience, and the *lost history* is the narrative of immigrants that leave behind their home, living in a permanent liminal space of otherness.³⁰

First, the *site* represents the Guirguis family house, which was demolished by the local government in Luxor, Egypt, in 2007 to widen the road in an attempt to mitigate city growth and

²⁹ "El Beit El Kabir: 2 November - 10 December 2016." The Third Line. <https://thethirdline.com/exhibitions/42-el-beit-el-kabir-sherin-guirguis/>.

³⁰ "El Beit El Kabir: 2 November - 10 December 2016."

accommodate the tourist industry.³¹ For Guirguis, this severed the last remaining ties to her home and homeland. The response is an amalgamation of traditional shapes of Arabic architecture with California minimal twists - paper *mashrabeyas* (Figure 1.3), or lattice-work screens made of wood to regulate light and air flow. The porousness of the latticework is simultaneously visible yet veiled, reminding me of diasporic and queer identity which often questions what can be revealed and what needs to be protected. Through this work, Guirguis situates herself as both Egyptian and American, offering an ode to her childhood home. This duality is echoed by Egyptian-American artist Hamdi Attia, who discusses the need to position himself within the Egyptian art system, even though he lives in the United States and has accepted citizenship. He writes, “Accepting citizenship does not guarantee entry to a new practice fully positioned in the art market, not does it guarantee that such a practice will replace an old, more nationally rooted practice.”³² This reflection underscores the dichotomy of navigating multiple identities, specifically in the art world. What place do you represent? This is a notion that Guirguis embodies. The paper *mashrabeyas* titled *beitana*, meaning *our home* in Arabic, act as a bridge between her past and present, embodying both her cultural roots and contemporary diasporic experience in America.

³¹ Ibid

³² Deebi, Aissa H. “Who I Am, Where I Come From, and Where I Am Going: A Critical Study of Arab Diaspora as Creative Space.” Winchester School of Art, 2011.



Figure 1.3 *Untitled (Leil)* (2012) by Sherin Guirguis. Media on hand-cut paper, foil, paint.

The *text* portion of this series explores what it means to identify with an idea of belonging and identity. Guirguis situates Rumi's poem on placelessness and tracelessness to convey the embodied, diasporic experience:

...I am not of the East, nor of the West, nor of the land, nor of the sea;

I am not of this world, nor of the next, nor of Paradise, nor of Hell;

I am not of Adam, nor of Eve, nor of Eden and Rizwan.

My place is the Placeless, my trace is the Traceless;

'Tis neither body nor soul, for I belong to the soul of the Beloved.

I have put duality away, I have seen that the two worlds are one;

One I seek, One I know, One I see, One I call.³³

For Guirguis, being a part of the diaspora means living in the margins, her work deals directly with the attempt to “find a language that describes the state of otherness that follows you wherever you are. I’m always home, and I’m never home.”³⁴ The acknowledgement of duality, championed by the writings of Rumi, explores grappling with the sense of otherness in diasporic spaces.

The final portion of this series is sculptural works that speak to the *lost history* of Egyptian-American immigrants. These small sculptures recreate *ollal* (Figure 1.4), a traditional water vessel often found in older households in the south of Egypt.³⁵ Utilizing laser cutting methods on aluminum panels, Guirguis creates vessels composed of geometric patterns, which, contradictory to their purpose of holding water, do not have an opening, essentially leaving the *ollals* useless. The sculptural work monumentalizes Guirguis’ heritage, appearing as ghosts of the objects they reference.³⁶ In an attempt to convey what it means to *lose history*, Guirguis recreates a traditional Egyptian household item that serves no function. We - Egyptian-Canadians - don’t need *ollals* in the West. By living in a perpetual state of diaspora, daily items we grew up with become obsolete in our Western-placed homes. These hollow vessels mirror cultural erosion, but in their uselessness, they somehow also acquire power; they speak the silence of loss yet the persistence of identity despite erasure. This simple act is a deeply resonant representation of the reality of

³³ “El Beit El Kabir: 2 November - 10 December 2016.” The Third Line. <https://thethirdline.com/exhibitions/42-el-beit-el-kabir-sherin-guirguis/>.

³⁴ The Offing. “Art Spotlight: Sherin Guirguis.” The Offing, April 23, 2016. <https://theoffingmag.com/art/art-spotlight-sherin-guirguis/>.

³⁵ “El Beit El Kabir: 2 November - 10 December 2016.” The Third Line.

³⁶ Ibid

living between worlds. Must we always shed our cultural tradition and histories to live in the present diaspora?



Figure 1.4 *Untitled (Olla A)* (2015) by Sherin Guirguis. Laser cut aluminum, wooden base

Conclusion

In my mind, home is a place where I can be whole and bring all of myself. Even in the United States, I often feel that in order to connect, I must leave some part of myself behind. This feeling was exacerbated during my travels. When I felt powerless, I forgot I had a choice regarding what parts of myself I could express. However, sometimes I intentionally left parts of myself behind. I did this when I felt that acknowledging all of myself would endanger me; when I didn't care enough about my companions to share all of myself with them; when I couldn't spend enough time with someone to give meaning to my identity.

- Mary Salome ³⁷

In this research, I have foregrounded the writings of Arab-American and Canadian feminists to initiate a self-authored, voiced narrative on how we experience both connection and disconnection within the diaspora. By exploring the theme of *Beyond a Myopic Arab Art*, the mainstream narratives that often frame Arab diasporic art through a lens of trauma and conflict have been re-examined to offer a multiplicity of identities within migrant and immigrant communities. The works of artists Larissa Sansour, Zineb Sedira and Sherin Guirguis exemplify the varying experiences of longing, loss, displacement, and memory for Arab women living in the diaspora. The artists utilize diverse approaches to portray the grappling of identity-finding, homemaking and the recalling of memory in the West. Their work encourages a deeper, plural narrative ³⁸ of how identity is continuously shifted and fragmented in response to cultural,

³⁷ Salome, Mary. "Wherever I Am." *Food for our grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian feminists*. South End Press, 1999

³⁸ To move beyond the singular-narrative of Arab art's limited and reductive lens of analysis in Western contexts. Gayed, Andrew. "Trauma and The Single Narrative: Reading Arab Art and Photography." Chapter. In *Queer World Making: Contemporary Middle Eastern Diasporic Art*, 55–84. University of Washington Press, 2024. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/ji.18654755.8>.

linguistic and historical contexts. As Arabs in the West, do feelings of homesickness ever truly fade? Will we remain forever in this in-between space, never fully belonging to one place or the other? I believe the answer is yes. However, when diasporic communities embrace both differences and sameness in shared migrant experiences, we can begin to recognize and possibly heal traumas of disconnection through an understanding of Sameness³⁹. These traumas can often be carried in language through what is unspoken, untranslated, or misunderstood. Yet within these gaps, a possibility of productive ambiguity both in the passive bilingual and queer diasporic subject emerge. As Vietnamese theorist and filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-Ha suggests, there is opportunity for a Third Space in influencing identity. She writes, “Identity is largely constituted through the process of othering...Here, Third is not merely derivative of First and Second. It is a space of its own. Such a space allows for the emergence of new subjectivities that resist letting themselves be settled in the movement across First and Second.”⁴⁰ Language, like queerness, is one such Third Space, one which is fluid, shifting and resistant to containment. There is not a “resolution” to my aforementioned question on belonging and homesickness, so what emerges is a becoming, a Third⁴¹ identity rooted in a shared and embodied diasporic experience.

³⁹ An opposition of “Otherness”, contrasting the marginalized characteristics of an “other” or out-group.

⁴⁰ Trinh, T. Minh-Ha. *Elsewhere, within here: Immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*. London: Routledge, 2011.

⁴¹Trinh, T. Minh-Ha. *Elsewhere, within here*.

Part II

Bluefrog

Building on the themes of language and Third identities, I draw on Trinh T. Minh-ha's Blue Frog Theory ⁴². In *Elsewhere, Within Here: Immigration, Refugeeism and the Boundary Event*, Minh-Ha recounts Elaine K. Chang's blue frog story - an anecdote shaped by years of mistranslations between Chang and her mother. What begins as a small linguistic slip in Korean evolves into an intimate, improvised expression that belongs fully to neither language. Chang writes:

“Within the North American ‘Asian community,’ I am sometimes called a banana; it is said that I may have a yellow skin, but I am white on the inside...I apparently aspire to master the language, culture and ideology of white people. *Banyukja* is a Korean translation of the Spanish *Vendida* - the Korean who has forgotten, or never known, her heritage, her language...I cannot properly answer to these names, especially to and in a language I have lost.” ⁴³

This moment reveals the negotiation of Chang's identity in the space between languages. Her inability to “answer” to these names reflects the emergence of what Minh-ha would call a Third identity. Chang continues the story by writing:

“..If I could rename myself...I think I would have to select a figure not female, not divine, not even human: the blue frog. My mother's story about the blue frog was my favourite childhood story. The blue frog never does anything his mother tells him to do; in fact, he does precisely the opposite... knowing she is about to die, the frog-mother makes the last request: that her son bury her in the river- of course, thinking her son, due to his contrary nature, will bury her in the ground. When his mother dies, however, the blue frog is so remorseful for his lifelong disobedience that he chooses to observe her final wishes. So every time it rains, the blue frog cries, thinking that his mother's body is washing away in the river.” ⁴⁴

⁴² Trinh, T. Minh-Ha. *The Blue Frog* in *Elsewhere, within here: Immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*. London: Routledge, 2011.

⁴³ Trinh, T. Minh-Ha. *The Blue Frog* in *Elsewhere, within here: Immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

The blue frog becomes a figure in which Chang articulates mistranslations. As an adult, Chang asked her mother if she remembered the blue frog story, which led to the revelation that the frog was never blue. Her mother had yet to master colours in English when this story was first told. Chang disappointingly realized that the frog was an ordinary green. While doing some research, in modern Korean there are specific words for green 녹색의(nogsaeg), and blue 파란색 (paransaek), yet in native Korean there is also an adjective 푸르다 (pureuda) / 푸른색 (pureunsaek) that can refer to both blue and green at the same time. This explains the natural mistranslation of the English colour green. This blue frog becomes a distinguishing factor of the experience of being a Westernized child with immigrant parents. Chang concludes her story by saying:

“What had compelled me about this particular frog - this frog whose story quite accurately...resembles the story of my relationship with my mother - was his blueness...I would invoke the blue frog as my inspiration because of this coding and recoding of the color of his skin; the ambiguity of his color registers the sorts of small but significant ironies that distinguish my experience as a Westernized child of immigrant parents. My mother shared with me a Korean folktale that acquired something new in its translation into English...The blue frog is a (by-) product of cultural and linguistic cross-fertilization - a small and mundane one, to be sure, but one that I would take as my emblem.”⁴⁵

As mentioned in my introduction, each new generation experiences a different relationship to their heritage language – often marked by partial fluency, translation and untranslatability – rather than a straightforward narrative of loss or degradation. For Chang and her family, the reality of diaspora results in linguistic and cultural ambiguity, which I believe is a significant marker of the diasporic condition. Yet it is through this ambiguity that Chang is able to find identity and a resonance with the blue frog. As Minh-ha writes, “The boundaries of identity and difference are continually repositioned in relation to varying points of reference. The meanings of here and there, home and abroad, third and first, margin and centre keep being displaced according to how one positions

⁴⁵ Ibid.

oneself.”⁴⁶ To *position oneself* suggests that although feelings of Other or misunderstanding or mistranslation can be alienating, it can also suggest another way to be, carrying contradictions and varying identities all at once.

I have known many *blue frogs* in my life as a Westernized child with Egyptian immigrant parents. I often find myself translating Arabic expressions I’ve heard my mother say throughout the years into English ones that would make little sense to anyone who doesn’t understand both languages. In Arabic, countless words and expressions resist direct translation. The phrase *na’eeman* نعيما, is often used when someone takes a shower, gets a new haircut, or a clean shave - roughly meaning “congratulations on your cleanliness”. Similarly, *dam khafeef/ta’qeel* دم خفيف-دم ثقيل, literally translates into light or heavy blood, but of course, it has absolutely nothing to do with blood. It is used to describe someone’s personality: someone with “light blood” is funny, charismatic and silly, while someone with “heavy blood” is annoying, unfunny and can’t take a joke.

One day, my mother is driving, and I’m sitting in the passenger seat. There seems to be no traffic, and the cars are moving steadily in all lanes except for the one in front of us. My mother is annoyed by the driver in front of us as they’re driving 10 km under the speed limit. She turns to me and says, “العربية اللي قدامنا بتزحف”/ el a’rabeya el odamna betes’haf.” I laugh. Translated into English, the expression is “the car in front of us is crawling” - like a baby, on all fours, moving at the slowest of speeds. Later that week, I’m on the 506 streetcar, coming home from class around 3:30 pm, stuck in heavy traffic on College Street going East. I think to myself in English, “This streetcar is crawling.”

⁴⁶ Ibid.

It's a Sunday afternoon, and I'm home for the weekend. I tagged along to my mother's doctor appointment. The waiting room is stuffy and crowded. Every seat is occupied with coughing kids and parents with masks on. My mother sits down on the only other chair that was unoccupied. I stand next to her, waiting. It's been an hour and a half. I can see that she is starting to get irritated with the long wait. She turns to me and exclaims "أنا خللت فين الدكتور؟" / ana khalelt, feyn el doctor?" Translated into English, she said: I've pickled! Where's the doctor? A humorous hyperbole equating the long wait to the duration needed for cucumbers to pickle. I find myself saying "I've pickled" whenever I endure a prolonged wait.

My Mother's Tongue

Research led at Georgetown University's Round Table on Language and Linguistics indicates that "Among the children of immigrant parents, this conflict between assimilation and heritage maintenance is played out in various ways at different stages of life."⁴⁷ In this survey, the author uses around 250 linguistic autobiographies of Asian American college students at the University of California at Berkley to understand the loss of language in the second or third generations of immigrants. The study shows that despite efforts made by families to keep the heritage language strong; language retention is usually doomed to failure.⁴⁸ Some of the factors leading to this failure are characterized by societal pressure to assimilate, generational

⁴⁷ Hinton, Leanne. "Involuntary Language Loss among Immigrants: Asian-American Linguistic Autobiographies." Essay. In Georgetown University Round Table on Language and Linguistics, 464. Georgetown University Press, 2001.

⁴⁸Hinton, Leanne. "Involuntary Language Loss among Immigrants: Asian-American Linguistic Autobiographies." Essay. In Georgetown University Round Table on Language and Linguistics, 464. Georgetown University Press, 2001.

communication gaps, identity negotiation and limited community. To borrow from Chang's writing, many second-generation children become *banyukja* - ones who have forgotten.

To situate this research within a broader, publicly shared experience, I turn to *My Mother's Tongue*, an exhibition at the Art Gallery of Mississauga (2025) which explores the silencing of different cultures through varying artistic mediums. Shown from April 26 - July 13, 2025, *My Mother's Tongue* explores how artists from South Korea, Canada, South Africa and Pakistan navigate loss, disconnection, anger, and pain after their mother tongue has been silenced as a result of centuries of colonial aggression.⁴⁹ Curated by Musha Neluheni, the exhibition text states: "Losing the language means losing the culture...The Oxford Dictionary describes the 'mother tongue' as the language that a person has grown up speaking from early childhood. This language is passed down through generations of a culture's history, ensuring its survival."⁵⁰ In foregrounding the lineage of the mother tongue, this exhibition stresses how linguistic loss reverberates beyond speech and vocabulary, having the ability to destabilize memory, lineage, and one's sense of rootedness/rootlessness. The works presented grapple with this rupture and showcase a collective intergenerational wound. The exhibition featured works by Joi T. Arcand, Insoon Ha, Mohau Modisakeng, Baljit Singh and James Webb - offering a platform to the voices that once were silenced, and giving them a chance to reawaken through art.⁵¹

Joi T. Arcand's installation titled *Forgive Me* (2025) reflects on the artist's relationship with language textbooks and the written word. Arcand is an artist from Muskeg Lake Cree Nation, Saskatchewan, Treaty 6 Territory, currently residing in Ottawa, Ontario. Her practice includes

⁴⁹ "My Mother's Tongue." Art Gallery Mississauga, July 16, 2025. <https://www.artgalleryofmississauga.com/events/my-mothers-tongue/>.

⁵⁰ "My Mother's Tongue." Art Gallery Mississauga, July 16, 2025.

⁵¹ Ibid.

installation, photography and design - characterized by a reclamation and indigenization of public spaces through the use of Cree language and syllabics. ⁵² *Forgive Me* (Figure 2.0) is an installation composed of 532 laser-cut clear acrylic syllabics, suspended from the ceiling on fishing line to create a constellation-like arrangement. In English, the phrase “forgive me” is cut out in vinyl and placed on the back wall behind the installation. Each strand of the installation is weighed down by the many language textbooks scattered on the floor. One of the textbooks in the work is *Meet Cree: A Guide to the Cree Language* by Wolfart H. Christoph. ⁵³ This work is a manifestation of the burden carried by second language learners, showcasing the emotional, mental, and systemic challenges of reclaiming a language that was once forcibly taken. ⁵⁴ The clear material chosen for the syllabics emphasizes the fragile nature of trying to decipher a language that was meant to be yours. While the English phrasing is much more tangible and prominent, it creates a dichotomy between an assimilated language and an ancestral one. The phrase “forgive me” is interpreted as a cry to the heritage, the culture and the ancestral language that have become eroded and forcefully taken through colonial aggression. Similarly, in *Arab and Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence and Belonging*, author Suheir Hammad’s poem accepts her inherent dependency on language for expression after witnessing the saturation of images out of Abu Ghraib as the Israeli Defence Forces entered nearly destroyed the Gaza Strip town of Rafah. ⁵⁵ In 2003, photos of

⁵² Arcand, Joi T. “Bio.” Joi T. Arcand. <https://www.joitarcand.comarrangement/bio>.

⁵³ “My Mother’s Tongue.” Art Gallery Mississauga, July 16, 2025. <https://www.artgalleryofmississauga.com/events/my-mothers-tongue/>.

⁵⁴ “My Mother’s Tongue.” Art Gallery Mississauga, July 16, 2025.

⁵⁵ *Arab & Arab American Feminisms : Gender, Violence, & Belonging /*. Syracuse, New York : Syracuse University Press, n.d.

imprisoned Iraqis suffering abuse at the hands of US prison guards started to surface.⁵⁶ In response, Hammad’s poem titled *Beyond Words* starts with:

“Where has my language gone?

The poet searches for words to wrap around these times

Make them sense Make them pretty Make them useful

Words from the past haunt our conversations

Empire and Crusade

Plans and Centuries

All these words cleared understanding before

Fall heavy now

And weightless into this abyss of bad news”⁵⁷

The tension between longing, guilt, and linguistic fragmentation in *Forgive Me* finds a powerful parallel in Hammad’s *Beyond Words*. The installation visualizes the literal and metaphorical weight of reclaiming a language that has been eroded through systems of colonial aggression, while Hammad’s writing exposes the rupture that occurs when language fails under the pressure of trauma and displacement. The aching question of “Where has my language gone?” echoes the ungraspable syllabics in the installation. Both works explore the impossibility of articulating inherited pain. The acrylic syllabics, which hang, transparent and elusive in front of writing on the wall that reads “forgive me,” and Hammad’s words “fall heavy now/ and weightless into the abyss of bad news” showcase how language becomes burdened and emptied. The struggle to hold onto

⁵⁶ Shamim, Sarah. “What Happened in Abu Ghraib and Why Did a US Court Award Damages?” Al Jazeera, November 14, 2024. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/11/14/what-happened-in-abu-ghraib-and-why-did-a-us-court-award-damages>.

⁵⁷ Arab & Arab American Feminisms : Gender, Violence, & Belonging

a mother tongue or use it to decipher feelings of trauma and pain – whether Cree, Arabic or any other language – is a negotiation with history, violence and a yearning to reclaim what was taken. Situating this negotiation with queer diaspora theory, I think with ideas from Gayed on sexuality and culture/religion. He writes, “These dichotomies create violence, trauma and a severe non-belonging that continue to have lasting effects on the queer diaspora...there is something to be said for isolation and how isolation can be weaponized and used against the queer diaspora by their families and communities.”⁵⁸ Gayed’s discussion on queer diaspora highlights how systems of power – colonialism, heteronormativity and cultural policing – produce conditions of non-belonging, often through enforced separation from family, community and cultural ties. This isolation is not only social, but also linguistic and affective, shaping how one can articulate identity and trauma. Gayed touches on this by writing “When a queer radicalized subject is isolated from community of native-language speakers, where will they continue to practice their language and continue speaking their mother-tongue? When members of the queer diaspora are isolated from their families and communities, how do they learn to cook the traditional food and recipes they grew up with?”⁵⁹ Gayed describes the emotional trauma and displacement of the queer radicalized subject from culture and language due to the Western coming out narrative. The dominant culture views queerness in a lens of “whiteness” resulting in “internal identity conflict, anticipation of loss, and opposing communities of belonging being rooted in white supremacy.”⁶⁰ Arcand’s

⁵⁸ Gayed, Andrew. “Conclusion: Queer World Making, Diaspora Consciousness, and futurity.” In *Queer World Making: Contemporary Middle Eastern Diasporic Art*, 208–18. University of Washington Press, 2024. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.18654755.15>.

⁵⁹ Gayed, Andrew. “Conclusion: Queer World Making, Diaspora Consciousness, and futurity.” In *Queer World Making: Contemporary Middle Eastern Diasporic Art*, 208–18. University of Washington Press, 2024. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.18654755.15>.

⁶⁰ Gayed, Andrew. “Conclusion: Queer World making, Diaspora Consciousness, and Futurity.” In *Queer World Making: Contemporary Middle Eastern Diasporic Art*, 208–18. University of Washington Press, 2024. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.18654755.15>.

Forgive Me can be analyzed as a parallel condition, where Western assimilation and language erasure forcibly remove the Indigenous subject outside of a cultural knowing and mother tongue on the colonial term, rooted in white supremacy. Lorena Sekwan Fontaine and Adam Muller's writing in *The Erasure and Revitalization of Indigenous Cultures and Languages* describes that identities, sovereignties and knowledges of Indigenous peoples are inextricably woven into the languages they speak, emerging from and giving voice to relationships with land, ancestors and family. They state, "As a vital maker of cultural identity and Indigenous presence, languages are inherently political and serve as a core instrument of sovereignty...for this reason, language is targeted by settler colonial regimes."⁶¹ State-sanctioned policies within educational frameworks in Canada, the United States and Australia have punished Indigenous children for speaking their ancestral languages, deliberately obstructing the transmission of linguistic knowledge across generations.⁶² Fontaine and Muller write,

"According to UNESCO, the majority of the world's approximately 7,000 languages are endangered, and a vast number of these are Indigenous languages. This loss is not incidental or accidental. It is the result of deliberate systematic processes of settler colonialism, forced assimilation, and state-sponsored acts of cultural and physical violence. Language erasure, or *linguicide*, is not merely a side effect of colonization, it is a principal tool."⁶³

⁶¹ Sekwan Fontaine, Lorena, and Adam Fuller. Special issue: The erasure and revitalization of indigenous cultures and languages | Genocide Studies International, University of Toronto Press. September 30, 2025. <https://utppublishing.com/doi/10.3138/GSI-2025-1602>.

⁶² Sekwan Fontaine, Lorena, and Adam Fuller. Special issue: The erasure and revitalization of indigenous cultures and languages.

⁶³ Ibid.

Read together, these frameworks reveal that the loss and inaccessibility of community, cultural ties and language – whether through queer diasporic isolation or settler-colonial violence – is not incidental, but a strategic production of non-belonging. The severing of one’s mother tongue produces a shared condition of disorientation, where the inability to fully embody one’s language mirrors the difficulty of locating oneself within structures that have sought to erase it.



Figure 2.0 *Forgive Me* (2025) by Joi T. Arcand. Laser cut acrylic, textbooks.

Part III

Curatorial Essay in translation...the language of my mother

احنا في الهوا سوا. (eHna fil hawa sawa.)

We are in the same air

الجايات أحسن من الرايات. (il-gayyaat aHsan min il-rayHHaat.)

What is coming is better than what is gone

كلنا عيش وملح مع بعض (kalna ma'a ba'ad eish w malh)

We have eaten bread and salt together

I remember sitting at the kitchen table, trying to find the right word in English, for something that only made sense in my mother's language. The poetics of Egyptian Arabic proverbs, untranslatable.

in translation...the language of my mother, is an exhibition that brings together contemporary artists from Middle Eastern and North African diasporas whose practices reflect on intergenerational inheritance, relationships to land, diasporic identity, and domesticity. Through a range of mixed-media works, the artists trace how cultural knowledge and memory are carried and transformed across generations and geographies. Attending closely to the ways language manifests in diaspora, the works negotiate questions of belonging, inheritance and diasporic identity. The exhibition features works by Alize Zorlutuna, Amina Boufennara, Christina Hajjar, Elsa Hashemi and Soheila Esfahani – artists of Middle Eastern and North African backgrounds living within the Canadian diaspora, with cultural ties spanning Turkey, Algeria, Lebanon and Iran. Through their distinct yet resonant practices, the exhibition offers a space to reflect on the emotional and cultural

residues of displacement, and the ways in which language, memory and home are continuously reimagined. The guiding question for this exhibition is *What happens after the mother tongue?* Posed to the children of the diaspora explored through MENA diasporic artists whose work contend with cultural hybridity and the complexities of self-construction in the West. Domestic spaces, everyday objects and embodied experiences emerge as key themes through which the artists grapple with belonging and remembering, offering resonant reflections on diasporic life.

The assemblage of Alize Zorlutuna's *Re-membering how to hold what we carry* (2024) considers what we carry in migration, and how we honour what we carry while living on Indigenous land. The sculptural installation is composed of dried okra, peppers, ceramic and nazar beads, cotton string, ancestral scarves, a hammam bowl, water, buoy, staghorn sumac, Anatolian roses, eucalyptus, bay leaves, Uzbek chamomile, and rue. The salt water of sea sits alongside fresh water used for cleansing; a headscarf cradles plants from here and there. Strung vegetables and protective beads form an umbilical line, connecting the body across space and time to ancestral ways of knowing.⁶⁴ The work traces a continued thread of care, where objects are carried forward and adapted through an embodied experience of migration with crucial attention to the fruition of Indigenous land. Focusing on what we carry in migration, I stress a focal point on Zorlutuna's use of water. The juxtaposition of situating salt water next to fresh water is a powerful representation of diaspora, foregrounding an embodied continuity between places. For Zorlutuna, moving between Tkarón:to and Anatolia (Turkey) throughout their life has shaped an attentiveness to spaces of encounter.⁶⁵ Anatolia is surrounded by three main seas: the Black Sea to the north, the Aegean Sea to the west, and the Mediterranean Sea to the south. While Tkarón:to is primarily

⁶⁴ Zorlutuna, Alize. *Re-membering how to hold what we carry*, 2024. Artist statement

⁶⁵ Alize Zorlutuna. <https://alizezorlutuna.com/>.

surrounded to the south by Lake Ontario, a 46-kilometere shoreline of fresh water. By positioning salt water alongside fresh water, the work connects Anatolia with Tkarón:to, situating a claim of diasporic identity and an ongoing relationship between the two places. I turn to Cherokee Nation interdisciplinary artist Kade L. Twist's rich prose in *Marginal Equity* on land and water:

there is no end

the way
**the sun rises
over rivers**
is no different
**than the way
the sun sets over oceans**

there is only earth
without mediation
of one horizon
or another

there is
only trust
and respons
ibility
loss and *re*
membrance ⁶⁶

Together, the materials in *Re-membering what we carry* form a continuum of relation, where water, plants and ancestral objects carry memory and care across and between places.

There are many ways to open (2022) is a video where Dürsiye Doğan, Günsu, and Özen abla demonstrate rolling dough for su böreği and baklava. A show of skill and camaraderie, the women tease each other and compare styles, offering advice and insight about how the dough should feel, and what it needs. Their practiced gestures and embodied wisdom, offer a guide for

⁶⁶ Twist, L. Kade. *Marginal Equity*. Musagetes and PS Guelph. 2017.

remembering and cultural continuance.⁶⁷ The video shows a domestic setting of women sharing their skills and tips for “opening dough,” a translation from the Turkish word aç: to open, which is the word used to describe the rolling action. In the background, we can hear the mundane conversation and laughs between the women, reminiscent of a memory, and a familiar one at that of the kitchen conversations one would have with their family, with their *teta* (grandmother) perhaps. The text accompanying the video describe the actions seen in the video, as well as the terminology for the tools and sentiments heard in the background audio, translating from Turkish to English. But of course, direct translations are imperfect. On direct translations, author Kevin Gary Smith writes, “No two languages share their intrinsic properties so closely as to permit a direct transfer of structures and forms.”⁶⁸ In this work, Zorlutuna chose to foreground the Turkish action aç: to open, with a direct translation rather than reconfiguring the translation to its English counterpart: to roll. The feeling that the work evokes is warm and familial, an ode to how recipes and cultural traditions are passed down orally, through instruction and demonstration by a loved one in the kitchen. That this practice is not one you can find an exact recipe for in a cookbook or online. Perhaps you only like the way your mother or grandmother opens the dough. The work is a memorialization of this practice, and one that can be passed down to generations for time immemorial.

Amina Boufennara’s work *Khamsa* (2021) is an homage to stories passed down by her ancestors of Amazigh heritage. Labelled as a form of black magic, the envious eye is often seen as the symbol of evil, with the ability to engender negative energy, and one that Boufennara grew

⁶⁷ Zorlutuna, Alize. *There are many ways to open*, 2022. Artist statement

⁶⁸ Smith, Kevin Gary. "Direct translation: striving for complete resemblance." *Conspectus: The Journal of the South African Theological Seminary* 5, no. 03 (2008): 169-184.

up with and warned to use as protection.⁶⁹ In this work, the hand creates the effect of a mirror, reflecting the negative effects back towards the sender. The evil eye known as *'ayn* in Arabic is a deeply rooted belief in many Middle Eastern cultures that an envious gaze causes misfortune, illness or even death. It is also sometimes called *nahs* in Egyptian Arabic, referring to bad luck or a jinx. In cultural contexts it can even be considered malicious to compliment someone on their appearance, home, or new job without saying *mashallah* - roughly meaning “what God has willed” - after. The superstition is that if someone compliments your thick long hair, or perfect glass skin with ill-intention, it will become cursed and you will lose the qualities that you have been complimented on; for example, your hair could start falling out and your skin could break-out in blemishes. A response to a compliment that does not end in *mashallah*, is the *khamisa*, an action where one shows the sender their hand in a “stop” motion, warding off the negative energy, or alternatively, possessing *nazar* (evil eye) jewelry, beads, or keychains. This work contains Middle Eastern and North African motifs that are instantly recognizable for those who have grown up with this philosophy and superstition. It creates an atmosphere with cultural codes that are immediately resonant to those who have practiced it in their lives, showcasing a signifier of Arab identity, and memories of the motifs that one would find in their family’s home, in their mom’s car or on a friend’s bracelet.

Embroidered Travel (2021) aligns with similar themes of identity, capturing the vibrant essence and energy of the artist being born in Algeria. Through the patterns and fabrics, there is an exploration of traditional wear, rugs, and pottery motifs from North Africa. Boufennara recalls

⁶⁹ Boufennara, Amina. *Khamisa*. 2021. Artist statement.

memories of going to traditional weddings and cultural events, adorned with patterns, colours, music, and conversation. The colours incorporated in this piece are of the Amazigh flag – yellow, red, blue and green – symbolizing the land, desert, sea and mountains as well as the blood of the martyrs who fought for freedom from the colonization of culture and language of Amazigh people.

⁷⁰ Boufennara’s work explores themes of self-identity, ancestry, immigration, and folklore stories. She traverses a balance amidst her art to find a middle ground between two cultures, and to be authentic in telling the stories of her ancestors. ⁷¹ The title of the work *Embroidered Travel* conveys the artist’s diasporic identity due to the context of the work. As the tapestry is a representation of the feelings and customs of growing up in Algeria, *Embroidered Travel* suggests a farness between the lived place - Toronto - and *home*. The work showcases a homeland and memories of song, dance and those who sacrificed their lives to free the colonization of Amazigh culture and language, mixing embodied experience with history and folklore. Yet, the title of the work suggests an implied distance, that to be home, to experience the colours, the sounds, the smells; necessitates travel. That family is an ocean away. It is a recollection of memory and a signifier of Amazigh culture while living in diaspora.

Christina Hajjar’s *Don’t Forget the Water* (2021) is an experimental short film where a phone conversation sets the diasporic table as a disembodied figure prepares Qahwah Arabi / Arabic Coffee. Here, the contradictions inherent in Google Translate’s instant camera feature are made visible through glitched mistranslations. Using these flaws as a prompt, the communication

⁷⁰ Boufennara, Amina. *Embroidered Travel*. 2021. Artist statement.

⁷¹ Boufennara, Amina. “About.” 3asel. <https://3asel.format.com/about>.

between a mother and a daughter considers ambiguity as a source of embodied knowledge.⁷² Similar to Zorlutuna's *There are many ways to open*, this work shows the passing down of cultural traditions, with themes of translation and intergenerational inheritance, embodied knowledge and wisdom. The setting of this work is intimate and domestic, curated in the gallery on a TV monitor and a phone headset receiver as an interactive aural element. The video is displayed in a seating area where there is a large Afghan rug on the floor for a comfortable textural element, and a couch for viewers to sit and watch the video for as long as desired. The setting is intimate and domestic, mirroring the intimacy seen in Hajjar's *Don't Forget the Water*, a phone call where mom teaches you how to make something. The Google Translate mistranslations layered digitally on top of the tablecloth evoke a resonance amidst diasporic subjects. As well as the conversation had over the phone being in English. This suggests a loss of language in the diaspora. Growing up in an English-speaking country can falter Arabic language production greatly and is a common diasporic experience amongst young first-generation and second-generation children. Arab-American linguist Aleya Roushdy, writing on language conflict and identity, observes: "Most studies of minority languages or ethnic languages are consistent in their conclusions that the use of ethnic language gradually decreases with successive generations due to a process of assimilation."⁷³ Hajjar states that the unreliability of a stable and objective translation posits the Google Translate app as producing ephemeral data, creating a new language - also noting that the interface has been updated since initial recording, evidently making the translation feel even more questionable.⁷⁴

⁷² Hajjar, Christina. *Don't Forget the Water*. 2021. Artist statement

⁷³ Roushdy, Aleya. "Language Conflict and Identity: Arabic in the American Diaspora." *Language Contact and Language Conflict in Arabic*, May 13, 2013, 151–66. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203037218-15>.

⁷⁴ Hajjar, Christina. *Don't Forget the Water*. 2021

تقبرني (*Ta'burni*) (2020) is a photograph/collage expressing a Lebanese sentiment which means “bury me.” It is the ultimate expression of love, communicated to someone to express that you hope you die before them, because you could not bear to live life without them. Having grown up hearing the phrase from her mother, she passes it—alongside food rituals—to her lover, as roses, cinnamon, and parsley intertwine in a fluid assembly evoking diaspora, pleasure, and cultural transference.⁷⁵ As a queer femme and first-generation subject, Hajjar is invested in poetics of process, translation and collaborative labour.⁷⁶ In this work, the sentiment is reshaped through its movement - from mother to daughter, transforming familial tenderness into queer intimacy – dancing between inheritance and offering. The sensorial presence of roses, cinnamon, and parsley – symbolic to Lebanon – extends the written text beyond language and speech, evoking smell, taste and touch in viewers who know exactly what to expect from these ingredients, whether they can read Arabic or not.

Elsa Hashemi’s *What the Sea Keeps* reflects on the quiet erosion and transformation of language in diaspora. As distance grows between speaker and mother tongue, words begin to loosen, fragment and drift. In this work, letters move like waves – no longer fixed grammar or speech but carried by memory and migration. Stripped of stable syntax, they become visual gestures rather than verbal units. The painting proposes that when language falters, form remains; that rhythm, movement and repetition can hold meaning even when words cannot.⁷⁷ In Hashemi’s

⁷⁵ Hajjar, Christina. تقبرني (*Ta'burni*). 2021. Artist statement.

⁷⁶ “About.” Christina Hajjar, February 11, 2026. <https://christinahajjar.com/about/>.

⁷⁷ Hashemi, Elsa. *What the Sea Keeps*. 2025. Artist statement.

work we revisit key themes in the exhibition, seen in other works, of migration, language loss and the diasporic memory. The text in the painting is undecipherable, the background textured but blacked out, suggesting a concealment, as if the language has been submerged rather than completely erased. In the foreground, there are wave-like movements that carry more unreadable text, transforming into gestures and further stressing the instability of the mother tongue in diaspora. The illegibility of the text doesn't necessarily signal absence but instead points to a quieter forgetting. Like the sea, language carries fragments and continues to move and shift, resurfacing in new forms. In a way, the work resists translation altogether, asking the viewer to relinquish their desire to read, translate or decipher. This marks a contrast to other works in the exhibition such as *There are many ways to open* and *Don't Forget the Water* that play with imperfect direct translation and mistranslations wholly, asking us to encounter the notion of language in the diaspora as an unresolved condition.

“Where are you from?” is a common question that many immigrants are often asked. The response is explored in Soheila Esfahani's *The Canadians* (2022-ongoing), a series of collected ceramic ducks, mallards and loons - stereotypical symbols associated with Canadiana - reframed through a diasporic perspective. The work questions displacement and reinsertion of culture through the repetitive nature of stereotypical Canadian references with Iranian cultural motifs. In doing so, the gallery becomes a third space that dissolves boundaries between both Iranian and Canadian cultures.⁷⁸ The repetition in this work is key. By multiplying this symbol, Esfahani explores how national identity is constructed through circulation and recognition, creating a visual language that resists a singular narrative. It suggests that identity is not located in a fixed place,

⁷⁸ Esfahani, Soheila. *The Canadians*. 2022. Artist statement.

but is shaped through overlapping, complex factors that make space for inhabiting both Eastern and Western ways of being simultaneously – making space for a Third identity. Esfahani returns to Homi Bhabha's Third Space theory in a lot of her work, wherein a space of cultural encounter in which the colonizer and the colonized negotiate, produces hybridity of culture. Bhabha posits a Third space which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meanings and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew.⁷⁹ *The Canadians* is an amusing play on diasporic identity, where cultural symbols are neither singular nor fixed, allowing for cultural hybridity.

As Judith Miller describes, *Mapping of a quest* (2008) by Esfahani, constructs labyrinths in several dimensions. Within, the search for meaning expands across cultures and archetypes. In this work, the script shifts and dances as light and seasons change – creating a map that becomes many-dimensional – where nothing and everything are to be found.⁸⁰ In a similar vein to themes explored in *The Canadians*, this map enacts a hybridized diasporic identity, weaving Iranian motifs into a fluid form. Similar to Hashemi's *What the Sea Keeps*, the work contains undecipherable script, with several dimensions which invite wandering, without a particular destination or purpose other than simply to be in the space, to be with it. This is another work that resists a translation or a decoding, with a scale that engulfs you and draws you in to all the intricate twists and turns. Perhaps this map is for an imagined place. Perhaps it is documenting a journey from one place to another. Or perhaps it is something else entirely, meant to capture and distort.

⁷⁹ Bhabha, Homi K. "The Commitment to Theory." Essay. In *The Location of Culture*, 19–39. New York, New York: Routledge, 1994.

⁸⁰ Esfahani, Soheila. *Mapping of a quest*. 2008. Artist statement.

The works in this exhibition trace the multiplicity of Middle Eastern and North African diasporic experience, emphasizing how memory, language and cultural traditions are carried and reimagined across generations and geographies. From Zorlutuna's tactile assemblages and domestic gestures to Hajjar's linguistic poetics, from Hashemi's visual abstraction of language and Esfahani's playful and labyrinthine hybridizations and Boufennara's textile and symbolic practices, each work stresses the tension between continuity and adaptation in diasporic life. Together, these works reaffirm that identity is not fixed or necessarily place-based, but rather a hybridization of embodied experience and intergenerational inheritance across land. By resisting legibility, translation or singular narratives, *in translation...the language of my mother* creates space for resonance, intimacy and reflection, offering a multidimensional exploration of self-identification and openings onto belonging.

This thesis has explored the notion of belonging, homesickness and language within Middle Eastern Diaspora, questioning what it means to make a *home*. Through analyses of artworks by Middle Eastern artists living in diaspora, it challenges reductive understandings of "Arab art" by foregrounding intimate lived experiences. Implementing storytelling as both method and practice, this thesis weaves research and curatorial practice through the lived narratives of diaspora. The curatorial portion of this research visualized the narratives of diasporic experience in relation to intergenerational inheritance and language – what is kept, what is lost, and what is left. Many questions remain in the ether: is there another condition transcending the binaries of belonging and not-belonging? Does the Third space itself become a position of confinement - bounded and rigid? Is it still a method of identification in which Third identities and hybridity are quietly policed – where the fluidity it promises becomes constrained by new hierarchies? The nature of these questions resist linear answers; yet they are productive; opening further lines of

inquiry and opportunities for additional research. The Third space is often offered as a sure-fire solution to the tensions of belonging/not-belonging; however, if seen as a stepping stone rather than a destination, it can offer more fulsome discourse for the negotiation of boundaries within identity politics.

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