

**VOWS TO WATER: AN ARTISTIC EXPLORATION OF IRANIAN RITUAL AND
RESILIENCE**

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**A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS**

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN VISUAL ARTS

YORK UNIVERSITY

TORONTO, ONTARIO

APRIL 2026

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Abstract

This paper is written to accompany my MFA thesis exhibition, *Vows to Water: An Artistic Exploration of Iranian Ritual and Resilience*, which took place April 20 - 24, 2026 at Gales Gallery (York University). This thesis investigates the enduring legacy and contemporary significance of Iranian rain-summoning rituals through my practice-based research. As a descendant of the water guardians in Iran, I draw on my heritage to examine how these rituals have persisted through centuries of cultural, religious, and political shifts. And as an artist I explore how reimagining these rituals via installation and performance art can reveal narratives of collective memory, ecological crisis, and cultural resilience amid Iran's severe water scarcity.

Vows to Water comprises two interconnected elements: a performance that reconstructs aspects of rain-summoning ceremonies and an installation featuring seven human-figure fabrics and a tree, paired with video projections of the water's surface.

Ultimately, I argue that rain-summoning rituals represent evolving cultural strategies for responding to climate crisis. Through this artistic intervention, I aim to preserve endangered traditions while contributing to discourses on resilience, survival, and environmental justice.

Land Acknowledgement

I acknowledge that I live, study, and create on Tkaronto,¹ the traditional territory of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, Anishinaabeg, Chippewa, Haudenosaunee, and Wendat peoples, now home to diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples.² This includes York University lands, cared for by the Anishinabek Nation, Haudenosaunee Confederacy, and Huron-Wendat, under Treaty 13 with the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation.³

I extend my gratitude and respect to the Indigenous peoples who have been guardians of this land for countless generations, carrying the wisdom and teachings of those who have walked on this land before us.

As an artist living and working on this land, I commit to moving with awareness and responsibility. I honor the ongoing efforts of Indigenous communities to protect the waters, soil, and natural ecosystems. Before beginning any artistic work, I pause in reflection, grounding my practice in respect for this land and for the traditions of stewardship that continue to sustain it.

¹ Toronto itself is a word that originates from the Mohawk word “Tkaronto,” meaning “the place in the water where the trees are standing,” which is said to refer to the wooden stakes that were used as fishing weirs in the narrows of local river systems by the Haudenosaunee and Huron-Wendat. <https://www.unitedwaygt.org/issues/land-acknowledgements-uncovering-an-oral-history-of-tkaronto/#:~:text=There%20is%20a%20fascinating%20Indigenous%20oral%20history,Indigenous%20peoples%20for%20many%20thousands%20of%20years?>

² <https://www.toronto.ca/city-government/accessibility-human-rights/indigenous-affairs-office/land-acknowledgement/>

³ <https://www.yorku.ca/vpepc/indigenous-initiatives/land-acknowledgment/>

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the members of my thesis committee, Jessica Campbell, Dr. Tammer El-Sheikh, and Holly Ward, for their thoughtful guidance, critical insight, and generous support throughout the development of this research and artistic project. Their feedback and encouragement have been invaluable in shaping this work.

This research was generously supported by a Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship (CGS-M), as well as York University's Academic Excellence Fund and Graduate Funding. Additional support was provided by the CIBC Fine Arts Graduate Student Award and the Lawrence Heisey Graduate Award in Fine Arts. I gratefully acknowledge this support, which made the completion of this research possible.

Finally, I would like to thank my family for their unwavering encouragement. I am especially grateful to my partner, Aria, and my sister, Mahsa, whose patience and support sustained me throughout this process.

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INTRODUCTION

In ancient Iran, water was more than a basic need for survival. It was seen as sacred, a divine gift that people invoked through prayers during times of drought. A key myth from Zoroastrian texts describes Tištrya,⁴ the star deity, defeating Apaoša, the demon of drought, when he receives vows and prayers, and brings rain.⁵ This story highlights how rain-summoning rituals have been central to Iranian culture, persisting through time.⁶

In this artistic project, *Vows to Water*, I aim to reveal the relevance of such vows today through an artistic lens, linking ancient practices to current water issues. This study is guided by the following research questions, which examine the persistence of rain-summoning rituals and their reinterpretation through contemporary artistic practice:

- How have Iranian rain-summoning rituals endured across centuries despite cultural, religious, and political transformations, and how can their reimagined enactment in contemporary art uncover deeper collective and ecological narratives?
- Can reconstructing these rituals through installation art bridge past and present, engaging audiences in dialogue about environmental urgency and cultural resilience?

As a diasporic Iranian woman making work about my hereditary lineage from the location of cultural displacement, and as a settler of colour on colonized Indigenous territories,

⁴ Given the diverse transliterations of ancient Iranian mythological names in scholarly literature, this paper adopts Encyclopaedia Iranica's spelling conventions for the sake of consistency.

⁵ Mary Boyce, "Zoroastrians" (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), p 6-7.

⁶ Dāneshnāmeḥ-ye Farhang-e Mardom-e Irān [Encyclopedia of Iranian Folk Culture], ed. Kāẓem Mūsavī Bojnūrdī, with 'Aṣghar Karīmī and Moḥammad Ja'farī Qanāvātī (Tehran: Markaz-e Dā'erat al-Ma'āref-e Bozorg-e Eslāmī, 2012), vol. 2, "Bārān-khwāhī." p 2.

my own personal and situated identity is central to this project.

My research-creation project is grounded in a layered methodological framework that brings together creative inquiry, mythopoetic interpretation, and autoethnography. Research-creation situates sculpture, projection, and performance as modes of knowledge-making that materially engage with environmental concerns.⁷ Mythopoetic approaches read ritual practices as symbolic responses to ecological crisis, framing them as living narratives that bridge ancient myths and contemporary survival strategies. Autoethnography further anchors my project in my Mirab (water guardians), heritage through elder-shared perspectives and lived experience. (See page 23 for full explanation) These approaches aim to foster affective engagement and ethical attentiveness, supported by Indigenous paradigms that emphasize relationality and reciprocity within cultural and ecological contexts.⁸

Iran's naturally arid landscape made water a precious, sacred element, shaping myths, daily customs, and the reliance of communities on rain, rivers, and underground sources for herding and farming. Water has been tied to life and purity, and rain-summoning rituals were ways to appeal to nature. These rituals originated in pre-Islamic times and with Islam's arrival, these practices adapted, incorporating new elements yet keeping their essence.⁹

Today, Iran struggles with a severe water crisis, to the point that researchers use the term "water bankruptcy" to describe it.¹⁰ Rivers and lakes are vanishing due to poor "water-policies" and management, excessive groundwater use, and climate shifts.¹¹ Specific areas like Zayandeh

⁷ Owen, Chapman, and Kim Sawchuk. 2012. "Research-Creation: Intervention, Analysis and 'Family Resemblances.'" *Canadian Journal of Communication* 37 (1): 5–26. p 5, 19.

⁸ Shawn, Wilson. 2008. "Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods." Halifax: Fernwood Publishing. p 69- 70, 77.

⁹ Dāneshnāmeḥ-ye Farhang-e Mardom-e Irān, vol. 2, "Bārān-khwāhī," p 1.

¹⁰ Kaveh Madani, Amir AghaKouchak & Ali Mirchi (2016) Iran's Socio-economic Drought: Challenges of a Water-Bankrupt Nation, *Iranian Studies*, 49:6, 997-1016, P 997, 1007.

¹¹ Madani, AghaKouchak, and Mirchi, "Iran's Socio-economic Drought," p 997.

Rud, Urmia Lake, Hamun Lake, and Hoor al-Azim are at risk. Overuse in farming and industry, combined with weak rules for water sharing, have worsened the situation, severely affecting people's lives, the environment and bringing economic strain.¹² In my project, I see water rituals as tools for resilience, responding to environmental threats not as relics but as living responses.

As a descendant of Mirabs, I connect deeply to this topic and carry this legacy. Living in exile, I feel the tension between my heritage and Iran's ongoing water struggles. In this regard my work is autoethnographic, drawing from family stories passed down from generation to generation, in order to explore wider themes. This heritage provides direct insights into how rituals have changed in their ties to nature, emphasizing a give-and-take relationship with ecosystems.

The artistic interpretation of these rituals consists of an installation and performance. The installation uses sheer cotton fabric, symbolizing shrouds, to create seven human figures and one tree. These sculptures serve as canvases for projections of waters, highlighting fragility and evoking cultural memories. The performances re-enact rain-summoning, drawing from wish tree traditions, and was recorded during four artist residencies in Ontario. The performances attempt to bridge eras, and allow me to navigate the distance between Iran and Canada, turning displacement into a site of remembrance and continuity. I am committed to approaching the work with deep respect for Indigenous people in Canada and their territories. Before each performance, I take a moment to acknowledge the land, recognize the histories and sovereignty of the Indigenous communities who are its caretakers, and ensure that my re-enactment of these rituals is carried out with cultural sensitivity and responsibility.

Research-creation methodology guides this work, treating the art-making (sculptures,

¹² Ibid., p 1007-1008.

projections, performance) as research itself, and examining how rituals evolve amid environmental worries. The materials hold symbols, and projections recall life through memory. Mythopoetic methods view rituals as symbolic tales, unpacking them to show community reactions to crises and building awareness over time. Autoethnography adds a personal layer, using elder narratives for genuine representation. These methods combine creation and analysis to make art a means for preserving culture and pushing activism, matching my emphasis on heritage and urgency. (For an extended discussion of the methods, see page 29-33)

This project positions ritual as a dynamic form of ecological and cultural knowledge in times of crisis. The work is situated within contemporary and historical artistic practices that engage with water, ritual, and material agency, reworking these approaches through the lens of Iranian ecology and cultural memory. It explores the sacredness and persistence of water in Iranian culture, from mythological roots and rain-summoning rituals to their historical continuity and typological diversity, while addressing the urgent contemporary water crisis in Iran, including an acknowledgment of how these Indigenous peoples have long cared for and stewarded these lands and waters.

Ultimately, this project intends to position ritual as a dynamic form of ecological and cultural knowledge in times of crisis. Art serves as a bridge for preservation and action, lifting cultural voices amid global water challenges. *Vows to Water* honors my Mirab-rain summoner's roots and urges stewardship in an era of environmental awareness.

Contextualizing 'Vows to Water' in Contemporary Art History

Vows to Water, stands as a contribution to contemporary art practices concerned with ecological crisis, cultural memory, and embodied ritual. This research-creation endeavour centers on the deep historical and present-day connection between Iranians and their vulnerable water systems, channeling this relationship through a layered installation of symbolic materials, video projection, and performance. Central to the project is the performative re-enactment of ancient rain-summoning rituals, serving as a vital bridge between ancestral practices and the immediacy of the present environmental crisis. Drawing on a mythopoetic approach, the project explores the legacy of the rain-summoning rituals and Mirab. To situate *Vows to Water* within critical art-historical discourse, this chapter draws analytical parallels to the material and performative methodologies of pioneering artists, specifically; Postminimalist Eva Hesse (1936-1970), Fluxus and Performance artist Joseph Beuys (1921-1986), Multimedia artist Tony Oursler (b. 1957), Installation artist Doris Salcedo (b. 1958), Feminist artist Janine Antoni (b. 1964), and Anishinaabe Multimedia artist Maria Hupfield (b.1975). I will demonstrate how the approaches of these artists to sculpture, immateriality, political action, and ritual inform the project's position in conversations on ecological resilience and cultural trauma.

The aesthetic and conceptual framework of *Vows to Water* is deeply rooted in the artistic turn toward fragile, non-traditional materials and the elevation of processes over permanence, echoing the formal concerns of Eva Hesse, and Doris Salcedo. The choice of cotton fabric and shroud forms, meant to convey ephemerality and a state of precarious existence, resonates with Eva Hesse's mid-20th-century sculptural practice which radically employed unstable materials like rubber, polyester, and fiberglass.¹³ Hesse's material exploration often resulted in works

¹³ Michelle E. Barger, "A Delicate Balance: Packing, Handling, and Installation of Ephemeral Works by Eva

prone to active decline, such as *Aught* (1968) and *Right After* (1969) (Fig. 1), forcing institutions to grapple with conservation strategies for inherently fragile and self-destructing art.¹⁴ This essential lack of permanence in Hesse's materials parallels the fundamental fragility of the natural environment and water systems addressed in *Vows to Water*, where the cotton shrouds stand as metaphors for bodies, both human and ecological and in this context mythic characters, in a perpetual state of change and vulnerability. The sculptures in *Vows to Water* function not only as static forms but also as profound fragments, aligning closely with Doris Salcedo's engagement with "troubled materiality."¹⁵ Salcedo consistently uses damaged or modified domestic objects, simple pieces of furniture, shoes, or clothing, as "mute testimonies" to human trauma, displacement, and loss in the Colombian conflict.¹⁶ Just as Salcedo's installations often incorporate covering or suturing gestures to highlight injury and the impossibility of complete healing, as seen in the opaque animal skin covering niches containing shoes in *Atrabiliarios*,¹⁷ (Fig. 2) the cotton shrouds function as layered surfaces bearing the emotional weight of collective suffering and water shortage struggle.¹⁸ Salcedo's work, which emphasizes the non-mimetic and non-spectacular representation of violence, focusing on its hidden immediacy,¹⁹ informs the project's quiet monumentalism of mourning for the vanishing water bodies.

Furthermore, the transformation of simple, common material (cotton) into a symbolic form, a vessel for mythopoetic action, situates the project in dialogue with the works of Joseph

Hesse," *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* 47, no. 1 (2008): 27–40, <https://doi.org/10.1179/019713608806112188>, p 27.

¹⁴ Barger, "A Delicate Balance," p 28-29.

¹⁵ Laura García Moreno, "'Troubled Materiality': The Installations of Doris Salcedo," *Mosaic* (Winnipeg) 43, no. 2 (2010): 95–111, p 101-102.

¹⁶ Claudette Lauzon, "Precarious Occupations: The Fragile Figure of Home in Contemporary Art" (PhD diss., ProQuest Dissertations & Theses, 2009), p 18; Moreno, "'Troubled Materiality,'" p 96, 100.

¹⁷ Moreno, "Troubled Materiality," p 102, 104.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p 104, 106.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p 98.

Beuys's *Erweiterte Kunstbegriff* (expanded notion of art), where the creativity itself is seen as the transformative, perpetual process inherent in social and artistic life.²⁰ Beuys insisted that the process, “subject to the entropic forces of nature,” was itself the art, paralleling how *Vows to Water* defines the ecological crisis as an unfolding artistic and social process.²¹ Beuys’s artistic mission was anchored in his serious study of Rudolf Steiner’s anthroposophy, which provided a conceptual bridge to integrate his explorations of mythology, Christianity, and art.²² His work incorporated shamanistic elements, such as the use of animals as spiritual intermediaries and the persona of the “wounded healer,” the role he believed allowed the artist to foster therapeutic reconciliation within society.²³ Additionally, he employed alchemy to utilize materials like fat and honey to transform spiritual matters into creative energy.²⁴ Beuys expanded the definition of art to include these spiritual matters, thereby establishing a vital precedent for contemporary practices that seek to transform the “social organism as a work of art.”²⁵ Unlike the spiritual underpinnings of Beuys's work, which positioned art as a mystical force for societal renewal, the concerns in *Vows to Water* focus on ecological resilience and cultural trauma rooted in Iranian rituals without anthroposophical or shamanic overtones; yet Beuys remains a vital precedent for spiritually oriented contemporary art that merges mysticism with social reform.

The layering of video projection onto the three-dimensional, shrouded forms is a critical element that introduces a dynamic interplay between the material object, the ephemeral image,

²⁰ Andrea Gyorody, “The Medium and the Message: Art and Politics in the Work of Joseph Beuys,” *The Sixties* 7, no. 2 (2014): 117–37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17541328.2015.1043800>, p 121, 123; Eva Rieß, Carolin Bohlmann & Ina Hausmann (2019) From action to object. On the preservation of performance-based installations by Joseph Beuys, *Journal of the Institute of Conservation*, 42:2, 79-93, DOI: 10.1080/19455224.2019.1604397, p 88.

²¹ Gyorody, “The Medium and the Message,” p 121.

²² Mark C. Taylor. “Refiguring the Spiritual: Beuys, Barney, Turrell, Goldsworthy.” 1st ed. Vol. 9. Columbia University Press, 2012. <https://doi.org/10.7312/tayl15766>, p 29-30.

²³ Taylor, “Refiguring the Spiritual: Beuys, Barney, Turrell, Goldsworthy,” p 23, 25.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p 19, 27.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p 43.

and fragmented subjectivity. This methodology draws a parallel to the installation work of Tony Oursler, who employs video projection to animate dummies, formless blobs (Fig. 3), or architectural surfaces.²⁶ Oursler's technique creates an uncanny presence, a substitution of the material body by an immaterial image, exploring the relationship between subjectivity, embodiment, and mediation.²⁷ In Oursler's practice, the image is conceptualized as an organizing form that overlays and sticks to the sculptural substrate, challenging anthropomorphic assumptions and the boundaries of identity, for instance in *Blob* (2004).²⁸ In *Vows to Water*, the projection of endangered water bodies onto the shroud-sculptures functions similarly: the ecological crisis (the "immaterial" threat) is made manifest and uncanny by adhering to the physical form (the "material plane").²⁹ While Oursler's projections are often fragmented of human-like subject within the sculptural object, *Vows to Water* turn this by overlaying fragile, flowing water imagery onto shroud-like forms, evoking not personal embodiment but an ecological loss through cultural memory. This alignment performs a "tragedy of faciality", a Deleuzian concept applied to Oursler's work, whereby a system (ecological signification) is applied to formless or non-signifying matter (the raw cotton/sculptural shape).³⁰ This tension inherent in the application of the projected image, which simultaneously reveals the environmental body and renders it distant, echoes the duality of visibility and inaccessibility found in Salcedo's work. By projecting water onto fragile shrouds, *Vows to Water* explores how the environmental catastrophe is mediated and internalized within the human and cultural

²⁶ Johanna Malt, "The Blob and the Magic Lantern: On Subjectivity, Faciality and Projection," Paragraph (Modern Critical Theory Group) 36, no. 3 (2013): 305–23, <https://doi.org/10.3366/para.2013.0096>, p 307- 308.

²⁷ Malt, "The Blob and the Magic Lantern," p 305, 307.

²⁸ Ibid., p 307.

²⁹ Ibid., p 307.

³⁰ Ibid., p 314, 317. Johanna Malt, in *The Blob and the Magic Lantern: On Subjectivity, Faciality, and Projection*, p 320, citing Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

psyche, positioning the body, both human and material, as the contested screen of crisis.

The performative re-enactment of rain-summoning rituals, a foundational practice, places the work within a line of artists who use ritual, embodied labor, and the creation of performative relics. This systematic engagement with common gestures and repetitive, self-imposed tasks finds a compelling parallel in the work of Janine Antoni. Antoni converts basic daily activities, for instance eating, into sculptural processes, generating profound meaning through the process of making.³¹ Works like *Slumber* (1993) (Fig. 4), where Antoni slept in the museum and wove the pattern of her own EEG readings into a blanket, or *Loving Care* (1993), where she mopped the floor with her hair, emphasize embodied vulnerability, relational interaction, and the necessary relationship between the performance and the resulting relic or tracing material.³² The finished shroud-sculptures in *Vows to Water* function as performance relics, materializing the enduring effort of the ritual, much like Antoni's blanket or the gnawed cubes of *Gnaw* (1992).³³

This work also converges with the legacy of Joseph Beuys, whose monumental installations like *Richtkräfte einer neuen Gesellschaft* (1974-1977) (Fig. 5) and *Das Kapital Raum* (1970-1977) are defined as performance relics, objects that became fixed “monuments that testify to what once happened in the documentary sense”.³⁴ The performative element of *Vows to Water* extends Beuys's notion of the “social sculpture” by using performance not just to generate relics, but as a deliberate act of cultural and environmental remediation, intending to mold the social fabric through a renewed emphasis on ritual creativity.³⁵

³¹ Jennifer Fisher and Jim Drobnick, “Janine Antoni: Performance and Its Objects,” *Liminalities* 16, no. 4 (2020): 1–20, p 3.

³² *Ibid.*, p 1, 5.

³³ *Ibid.*, p 6, 16.

³⁴ Va Rieß, Carolin Bohlmann, and Ina Hausmann, “From Action to Object: On the Preservation of Performance-Based Installations by Joseph Beuys,” *Journal of the Institute of Conservation* 42, no. 2 (2019): 79–93, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19455224.2019.1604397>, p 79 85 91.

³⁵ Gyorody, “The Medium and the Message,” p 123.

This emphasis on performance as collective remediation and material activation also resonates in the practice of an Anishinaabekwe artist Maria Hupfield, a member of Wasauksing First Nation and co-founder of Native Art Department International (NADI).³⁶ Unlike the other artists discussed here, whose works engage materiality, ritual, and social transformation from varied non-Indigenous perspectives, Hupfield's collaborative and performative strategies are explicitly grounded in Indigenous land-based knowledge, resurgence, and a critique of settler colonial structures. Hupfield's collaborative work centers on an "emancipation from identity-based artwork" by adopting the structures of a "bureaucratic body" to circumvent stereotypical expectations.³⁷ It employs an "open exhibition model" that emerges from the interplay between artist instructions and participant actions, prioritizing collective art-making, cooperation, and non-competition.³⁸ Materially, she uses "clunky mimicry" with performance props, such as cardboard replicas of iconic objects, or industrial materials like fluorescent-pink acrylic to "literally interrupt" the viewer's path and subvert institutional aesthetics.³⁹ The resulting sensory environment is "messy, deeply strange, and perpetually under construction," designed to overwhelm rather than recede into the background.⁴⁰ *Vows to Water* engages in dialogue with Maria Hupfield's practice, particularly her use of materials as "communications platforms" that mediate between cultural history and contemporary crisis. Both works employ material proxies, textile figures in my installation and cardboard props in hers, to activate space through performance and ritualized action.

However, the approaches diverge significantly: Hupfield deploys mirrored acrylic and

³⁶ Maria Hupfield, "Statement," Maria Hupfield (website), <https://mariahupfield.wordpress.com/artist-statement/>.

³⁷ Gabrielle Moser, "Native Art Department International," in *Native Art Department International: Bureau of Aesthetics*, (Toronto: Mercer Union, 2020), p 180–181.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p 180.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p 181.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p 181.

industrial “construction” in clunky mimicry to subvert colonial values and aesthetics through “poor” imitation, while seeking to detour essentialist identity categories sustained within bureaucratic structures. In contrast, *Vows to Water* draws on the softness of textiles and the specific cultural lineage of Iranian rain-summoning rituals to confront the visceral, embodied reality of water scarcity, centering the body and projected light as ritualistic witnesses to ecological and spiritual loss. Despite these differences, as a land-based artist acknowledging Indigenous custodianship of Tkaronto and working with awareness of settler colonial contexts, I align politically with Hupfield's commitments to awakened solidarity, critical accountability, and non-competitive collaboration in addressing cultural and ecological crises through art.⁴¹

Vows to Water aligns with contemporary art as a post-performative sculptural installation that merges material vulnerability with animated images and ancestral practice. Ultimately, *Vows to Water* contributes to contemporary art discourse by fusing mythopoetic ritual, materially fragile forms, and mediated projections to address ecological loss and cultural memory in the Iranian context. In doing so, it creates a space for mourning vanishing water systems while simultaneously gesturing toward forms of ecological and communal resilience.

⁴¹ See Hupfield, “Statement,” as cited in note 36.”

Water in Iran: Sacred Legacy and Modern Crisis

Water (Āb, derived from the Avestan Apas) holds a profound position of cosmological, religious and cultural significance within the Iranian worldview, establishing it not merely as a resource, but as a primordial, sacred creation.⁴² This reverence stems from ancient Indo-Iranian traditions where water (aban) was esteemed as justly as fire (atar).⁴³ Within Zoroastrian cosmology water was the second of Ahura Mazdā's seven divine creations, and the source of plants, wheat for people and fodder for livestock. Consequently, water was regarded as a sacred element, establishing a universal mandate for its protection and reverence.⁴⁴ The sanctity of water was enforced through a rigorous theological imperative: the concept of cleansing, and avoiding contamination of water was deemed a fundamental religious duty, establishing a binding environmental ethic.⁴⁵

The *Arədvī Sūrā Anāhitā* is the divinity of “the Waters,” whose name means “strong, mighty and undefiled, immaculate.”⁴⁶ She was Iran's most important goddess in the pre-Islamic era, associated with fertility, healing, wisdom, and notably, the protection of righteous kings,⁴⁷ riding a chariot drawn by the forces of wind, rain, clouds, and sleet.⁴⁸

In Islamic-era Iranian culture, water is regarded with deep respect and sanctity and is understood as the foundation and origin of life. Influenced by Islamic teachings, Iranian culture regards water as the primordial source of life, essential for its continuation, a substance

⁴² Kazem Mousavi Bojnourdi, ed., “Dāneshnāmeḥ-ye Farhang-e Mardom-e Irān” [Encyclopedia of Iranian Folk Culture], vol. 1, Āb-Bārān [Water-Rain], eds. Mohammad Jafari Qanavati and Masoumeh Ebrahimi (Tehran: Center for the Great Islamic Encyclopedia, Research Center for Iranian and Islamic Studies, 2012), p 1.

⁴³ Mousavi, Bojnourdi, “Encyclopedia of Iranian Folk Culture,” p 1.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p 3.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p 3.

⁴⁶ Mary, Boyce, “Anāhīd i. Ardwišūr Anāhīd,” Encyclopædia Iranica, accessed December 22, 2025, <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/anahid-i-ardwisur-anahid/?highlight=anahita>

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

descending from the heavens. Water is associated with purity, beauty, nourishment, hygiene, and the fertility of plants, and its sanctity is so deeply embedded in Iranian-Islamic culture that it is honored, revered, and even invoked in oaths as a sacred element of everyday life, and ritual life⁴⁹ for instance the Tahārat, purity ritual, emphasis on body washing and cleansing.⁵⁰

While water has retained its sacred status across centuries of cultural and religious transformation in Iran, today this ancient reverence collides with an acute ecological crisis that threatens its very existence. Iran's current water urgency characterized by a state of "water bankruptcy," as Madani states, where water demand chronically exceeds the natural supply.⁵¹ This ecological crisis is evidenced by "drying lakes, rivers, and wetlands, alongside declining groundwater levels, land subsidence, and more frequent dust storms."⁵² While climate change and international sanctions are often blamed, the sources argue the situation is primarily a man-made "socio-economic drought" driven by rapid population growth, inefficient agricultural practices that consume up to 92% of the nation's water, and a historical "thirst for development" that prioritized aggressive hydraulic infrastructure over sustainability.⁵³ This urgency has escalated to the point that water scarcity is now recognized as a "national security problem," as visible environmental catastrophes like the desiccation of Lake Urmia indicates that Iran is on the verge of its "peak water limits."⁵⁴ To address these potentially irreversible damages, Madani suggests a fundamental paradigm shift from "nature control to proactive nature management," prioritizing "aggressive water demand reduction" over continued reliance on structural, supply-

⁴⁹ Mousavi, Bojnourdi, "Encyclopedia of Iranian Folk Culture," p 4.

⁵⁰ Floor, Willem M. & Kleiss, Wolfram. "BATHHOUSES." *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. Published December 15, 1988. <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/bathhouses/>

⁵¹ Kaveh Madani, Amir AghaKouchak & Ali Mirchi (2016) Iran's Socio-economic Drought: Challenges of a Water-Bankrupt Nation, *Iranian Studies*, 49:6, 997-1016, p 998, 1007.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p 997, 998, 1002.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p 998, 1000, 1007.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p 1001, 1006.

oriented solutions.⁵⁵ This scenario constitutes a dramatic failure to uphold the historically sacrosanct duty to manage and preserve water, the betrayal of the millennia-old traditional ethic of sustainable management.

In this project I aim to engage environmental discourse by drawing on pre-Islamic mythological concepts, and Islamic symbolism in Iranian cultural memory. Through visual forms referencing shared mythological rituals, it activates social memory and conveys pro-environmental concerns by linking water to core ideas of identity, history, and contemporary scarcity. In doing so, I frame water scarcity not merely as an environmental issue, but as a profound socio-political condition, one that exposes governance failures and the breach of a deep, religiously and culturally mandated responsibility for the continuity of collective life and national existence.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p 1008.

Relational Kinship with Water and Land: Indigenous Teachings and My Practice in Exile

Reflecting on the enduring sacredness of water and ecological crisis in Iran, I find myself far from those landscapes, living in Tkaronto, on the Indigenous territories. With profound respect for these Indigenous peoples, who have cared for these lands and waters since time immemorial, I turn to explore water stewardship here. These practices, grounded in deep reciprocity, spiritual kinship, and ceremonial respect for rivers, lakes, and all waters, offer vital teachings about stewardship of the life-sustaining element we all share.

For many Indigenous peoples of Canada, the relationship with water is not one of ownership, but of “sacred kinship and reciprocal responsibility.”⁵⁶ This connection is rooted in the foundational belief that states “water is life itself,” a sentient being, having spirit, agency, and autonomy.⁵⁷ Rather than viewing water as a static resource to be divided or managed, it is honored as a “relative” that carries the memory of the land and sustains the physical and spiritual existence of all living things.⁵⁸ To the original caretakers of these lands, water represents the “blood veins of Mother Earth,” flowing through the landscape just as it flows through the human body.⁵⁹

In many Indigenous traditions, there is a sacred relationship between women and water.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Keepers of the Water, “Indigenous Water Governance,” Keepers of the Water, <https://www.keepersofthewater.ca/indigenous-water-governance>; Kim Anderson, *Aboriginal Women, Water and Health: Reflections from Eleven First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Grandmothers* (paper commissioned by the Atlantic Centre of Excellence for Women’s Health and the Prairie Women’s Health Centre of Excellence, October 2010), p 3.

⁵⁷ Anderson, “Aboriginal Women, Water and Health,” p 7; Indigenous Climate Hub, “The Spirit of Water: Life’s Electrical Symphony,” Indigenous Climate Hub, January 15, 2025, <https://indigenousclimatehub.ca/2025/01/the-spirit-of-water-lifes-electrical-symphony/>.

⁵⁸ Keepers of the Water, “Indigenous Water Governance”; Karine Duhamel, “Water is much more than a resource: it’s a relative,” Know History, March 22, 2021, <https://www.knowhistory.ca/news/water-is-much-more-than-a-resource-its-a-relative/>.

⁵⁹ Anderson, “Aboriginal Women, Water and Health,” p 13; Karine Duhamel, “Water is much more than a resource: it’s a relative.”

⁶⁰ Ibid., p 4, 31.

As life-givers, women are recognized as the primary “Water Carriers,” holding a biological and spiritual connection to the “water vessel” of the womb that sustains new life for nine moons.⁶¹ This role carries a profound responsibility to protect and speak for the waters.⁶² Grandmothers and Elders serve as the “keepers of this knowledge,” teaching younger generations that water must be approached with respect.⁶³ This stewardship is practiced through daily acts, such as offering tobacco to the water to show gratitude and ensure a harmonious relationship, or singing water songs to welcome and nourish its spirit.⁶⁴

The perseverance of these beliefs is evident in traditional ceremonies that align with the natural cycles of the earth. For instance, the “Sweet Water Ceremony” in the spring celebrates the first flow of maple sap, viewed as a “brand new power” given by the Creator to purify and renew the spirit after the winter.⁶⁵ Indigenous people also maintain a “true standard for clean water,” the ability to “drink directly from a source” with a “peaceful heart and mind,” knowing it is safe and alive.⁶⁶ Despite historical challenges and environmental changes, Indigenous communities continue to assert their legal and spiritual authority over their traditional territories.⁶⁷

Ultimately, the Indigenous peoples of Canada teach that “water justice is achieved only when the waters themselves are well” and able to fulfill their duties to the rest of Creation. This requires a shift from a mindset of “taking” to one of “giving” and reciprocity. The care extended

⁶¹ Ibid., p 9.

⁶² Native Women’s Association of Canada, “Water Carriers,” Native Women’s Association of Canada, <https://www.nwac.ca/academics-policy/policy-development/environment/water-carriers/>.

⁶³ Anderson, “Aboriginal Women, Water and Health,” p 1, 7.

⁶⁴ Keepers of the Water, “Indigenous Water Governance.”

⁶⁵ Anderson, “Aboriginal Women, Water and Health,” p 11, 12.

⁶⁶ Keepers of the Water, “Indigenous Water Governance.”

⁶⁷ Curran, Deborah. 2019. "Indigenous Processes of Consent: Repoliticizing Water Governance through Legal Pluralism" *Water* 11, no. 3: 571. <https://doi.org/10.3390/w11030571>, p 1, 3.

to the water is a gift to the future, ensuring that the seventh generation will still be able to relate to the waters as their ancestors once did.⁶⁸ To understand this relationship is to see water as the conductor of an “electrical symphony,” where every raindrop and rushing river is a decision made by a living being to nourish the world. Just as a person thrives when given love and respect, Indigenous wisdom holds that the water “comes alive” when it is acknowledged and cared for.⁶⁹

As outlined by Shawn Wilson, in “Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods,” Indigenous research paradigms emphasize relationality and reciprocity as foundational ethical principles.⁷⁰ While this project does not claim an Indigenous methodology, it draws on Wilson’s discussion of relational accountability to guide the ethical interpretation of cultural heritage and sensitive ecological issues. This framework foregrounds awareness of power relations and encourages a research approach grounded in responsibility, reciprocity, and care.⁷¹ Such attention to relationality is particularly important when addressing the politics of interdependence during a time of global ecological crisis.⁷²

While drawing on Wilson’s Indigenous Research Paradigms as an ethical mirror, particularly its emphasis on relationality, reciprocity, and accountability, I commit to the highest standards in interpreting and representing cultural heritage amid sensitive ecological issues. This framework guides ethical conduct without serving as a direct template for my Iranian context, prompting careful attention to power dynamics and respectful engagement throughout the

⁶⁸ Deborah McGregor, “Indigenous Women, Water Justice and Zaagidowin (Love),” *Canadian Woman Studies/les cahiers de la femme* 30, no. 2/3 (2015): 71–78, Osgoode Hall Law School of York University, Osgoode Digital Commons, p 72, 76.

⁶⁹ Indigenous Climate Hub, “The Spirit of Water: Life’s Electrical Symphony.”

⁷⁰ Wilson. “Research Is Ceremony,” p 69-70, 77.

⁷¹ Wilson. “Research Is Ceremony,” p 69-70, 77; Springgay. “Introduction: Feltness.” p 137.

⁷² Springgay. “Introduction: Feltness.” p 143.

project. I honor the voices of interlocutors (rain summoners, Mirabs) and avoid appropriation or misrepresentation of other knowledge systems. As a displaced Iranian artist now in settler colonial Canada, this work bridges arid Iranian landscapes with the waters and soils of Turtle Island through my artwork. Enacted on unceded lands long stewarded by Indigenous peoples, these enactments compel reflection on transplantation and ethical responsibility. I approach this with humility: my intent is not to overlay or equate traditions but to foster quiet reciprocity and solidarity, using themes of resilience and renewal as a meditation on shared crises like water scarcity, while actively supporting Indigenous-led initiatives on land and water rights. In every performance and installation, I pause to consider the land's stories, ensuring my presence contributes to mutual care for cultures, peoples, and the earth. As an Iranian living in exile on these territories, far from my ancestral land yet present here through forced displacement, my practice engages in reflexive accounting of place as if it mattered, acknowledging the histories of dispossession that shape this land while maintaining the distinct roots of Iranian ritual.⁷³ This involves respectful adjacency to Indigenous relational ontologies of land and water, such as those emphasizing grounded accountability and reciprocity, without forced synthesis or appropriation, fostering quiet reflection on shared ecological vulnerabilities rather than direct equivalence.⁷⁴

⁷³ Eve Tuck, and Marcia McKenzie. "Relational Validity and the 'Where' of Inquiry: Place and Land in Qualitative Research. 2015, " *Qualitative Inquiry* 21 (7). p 2.

⁷⁴ Tuck and McKenzie 2015, p 4-5.

Enduring Rain Rituals: Continuity, Change, and Classification in Iranian Culture

Iran's predominantly arid climate, particularly across its central parts, coupled with the historical reliance of its people on agriculture and pastoralism, underscores the importance of rainfall and access to perennial fresh water sources. Drought and the absence of rain have long posed an enduring threat to livelihoods. Whenever communities faced water scarcity and prolonged dry spells, they turned to rain-summoning rituals as acts of communal supplication and resilience. While such ceremonies have existed across cultures worldwide, often reflected in their myths in the form of rain and water deities, the country's "geographic and climatic conditions" have made these rituals especially vital, fostering a remarkable diversity in these practices and shaping them into deeply localized expressions of hope and cultural continuity.⁷⁵

Throughout history, when droughts threatened existence, people turned to these rituals to petition supernatural forces.⁷⁶ Another reason these rituals survived significant religious changes, from pre-Zoroastrians to Islamic periods, is their "logical interaction and adaptation" with the dominant faith of the time. To ensure their stability, many ancient rituals underwent a "name change," where "religious labels" were placed upon them to align with the Islamic social order while keeping the core pre-Islamic practices intact.⁷⁷ Furthermore, these rituals persist because they are socially functional. They foster community cohesion through "collective food sharing," which mimics the ancient Iranian practice where social bonds and contracts were solidified by eating together, a concept historically linked to the deity Mithra, the god of covenants.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Mousavi, Bojnourdi, "Encyclopedia of Iranian Folk Culture," p 2.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p 2-3.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p 1.

⁷⁸ Encyclopedia of Iranian Folk Culture, vol. 2, s.v. "Rain-Summoning," p 21; "The name of the Indo-Iranian god Mitra (Vedic Mitra, Avestan Miθra, Old Persian Mitra, Miθra instead of the genuine OP form *Miça) is based on the common noun mitrá "contract" with the connotations of "covenant, agreement, treaty, alliance, promise." Hanns-Peter Schmidt, "MITHRA i. Mitra in Old Indian and Mithra in Old Iranian," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*,

Additionally, the optimism and predictive nature of these rituals provide psychological relief to agricultural communities.⁷⁹ By performing a ritual and observing “signs” (such as a specific movement of a ritual object), the community gains a sense of control over their unpredictable environment.⁸⁰

Rain summoning rituals in Iran, collectively known as “*Baran-khahi*” (requesting rain), represent an intersection of ancient mythology, religious adaptation, and environmental necessity. These rituals are often referred to as “*Tamanna-ye Baran*” (longing for rain) or “*Istisqa*” in an Islamic context. Despite the profound socio-political and religious shifts in Iran, moving from pre-Zoroastrian beliefs to Zoroastrianism and later to Islam, these practices have persisted as “living myths,” maintaining a clear continuity with ancient culture, and highlighting the water as the absolute guarantor of survival.⁸¹

The rain rituals in Iran can be categorized into several distinct forms based on their content, which includes one or more of the following:

1. Communal Prayer and Supplication

This is perhaps the oldest and most common form of rain-seeking. Historically, kings and religious leaders led these efforts. The oldest recorded instance involves the Sassanid King Pirooz, who, during a seven-year drought, led his people into the desert to pray collectively.⁸²

2. Ritual Cooking

A widespread tradition involves cooking communal food, and distributing it. The

<https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/mithra-i/>.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p 11.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p 12.

⁸¹ Ibid., p 2.

⁸² Encyclopedia of Iranian Folk Culture, vol. 2, s.v. “Rain-Summoning,” p 1-2.

ingredients are typically gathered from the community, and the cooking process is accompanied by continuous prayers. In some regions, like Fereydan, a portion of the soup is poured into a roof gutter as a symbolic gesture to “encourage” the clouds to wash the roof with rain.⁸³

3. Masquerades and Puppetry (*Kuseh-gardi*)

The ritual of *Kuseh-gardi* or *Kuseh-Galin* involves a performer dressed as a “*Kuseh*” (a person with little to no beard) who goes house-to-house. This character, often wearing an inverted sheepskin and carrying a stick, performs for the villagers, who in turn splash water on him and provide food or money. This is particularly common in Kerman and Lorestan, where the performer might be called “*Shah-e Barun*” (The Rain King).⁸⁴

4. Symbolic “Cow Theft” (*Gav-robayi*)

Predominant in Western Iran, this ritual involves a group of women “stealing” a cow from a neighboring village in a theatrical display. A fake battle happens between the women of both villages. The ritual concludes when a village elder acts as a guarantor, promising that rain will fall within a certain period for the cow to be returned. Scholar’s link this to the ancient myth of the cloud-cows being stolen by drought demons or to the functions of the deity Mithra.⁸⁵

Despite the vast diversity of rain-summoning rituals across the Iranian plateau, these rituals share a consistent structural essence that serves as a collective bridge between the community and the divine. The process typically begins with people going outside the city or village to a sacred or symbolic location, a mountain peak, an ancient shrine, or an *Imamzadeh*.⁸⁶ Once there, the ritual is characterized by acts of extreme humility and communal prayer, where

⁸³ Ibid., p 5-7.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p 13-15.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p 5-6; While other variations of these rituals exist, here most commonly practiced forms addressed.

⁸⁶ Sacred Shrine.

participants may walk barefoot and clergy may wear their cloaks inside out to signify their dire need for mercy.⁸⁷ A central, repeated component is the communal preparation of ritual food, for which ingredients are gathered through contributions from every household in the village. This cooking process is often performed collectively and accompanied by continuous chanting and prayer.⁸⁸ Finally, the food is distributed as a sacred offering, an act that functions as both a spiritual sacrifice and a social covenant (Mithraic in origin) to solidify the community's bond before the heavens.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Encyclopedia of Iranian Folk Culture, vol. 2, s.v. "Rain-Summoning," p 1, 2.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p 4, 8.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p 5, 21.

Water In the Southwest Asian and North African Context

Rain summoning is a regional necessity across the arid SWANA region, and Iranian rituals share parallels with neighboring cultures:

- **Puppet Similarities:** The Iranian *Chomcheh Gelin* puppet is mirrored in Turkey and among Iraqi Turkmen (as *Chomcheh Gelin*), in Syria (as *Umm al-Qaws* or “Mother of the Arch”), and in Central Asia among Tajiks and Uzbeks (as *Sus Khatun*).⁹⁰

- **Ancient Arab Rituals:** In the pre-Islamic period, Arabs practiced a ritual where they tied dry brush to the tails of wild cows, set the brush on fire, and pushed the animals off mountains, hoping the divine would take pity and send rain to quench the flames.⁹¹

- **Regional Variations:** In Tajikistan, a common traditional practice involved hanging a frog from a tree until it “prayed” for rain. In Armenia, historical records mention that when droughts became severe, temple servants would wash the walls of fire temples with impure water to provoke the heavens into sending clean rain to wash away the filth.⁹²

⁹⁰ Ibid., p 18, 21.

⁹¹ Ibid., p 8.

⁹² Encyclopedia of Iranian Folk Culture, vol. 2, s.v. “Rain-Summoning,” p 7, 8.

Avestan Roots: Tištrya, Anahita, and Modern Rain Rituals

In the ancient Avestan hymn the chapter known as the Tištrya Yasht (Yasht 8), the star deity Tištrya, radiant and glorious, engages in a cosmic battle against Apaoša, the demon of drought who withers the earth and denies life-giving waters. This narrative, preserved in the Zoroastrian sacred texts, unfolds as a profound allegory for the eternal struggle between abundance and drought, through divine struggle amplified by human devotion. A key chapter from the Tištrya Yasht captures the essence of this confrontation and the role of prayers and vows.

Tištrya Yasht opens with words of praise to Ahura Mazda and the radiant star Tištrya, the celestial being responsible for bringing life-giving waters to the world. The text begins by honoring the divinity “who is the seed of the waters,”⁹³ and who “makes the waters flow”⁹⁴ establishing Tištrya’s role as the cosmic source of rain and fertility.

The Yasht then describes the offerings and vows that humans must make to support Tištrya in his cosmic task. It lists the ritual acts and sacrifices expected from worshippers, saying that Tištrya is strengthened when people offer “the libations, the Haoma and meat, the Baresma, the wisdom of the tongue, the holy spells, the speech, the deeds, the libations, and the rightly spoken words.”⁹⁵ It further emphasizes the appropriate way offerings “had been invoked by my name”⁹⁶ so that Tištrya may gain full power against the forces of drought.

The text then identifies Tištrya’s duty, to rise in the sky, gather the celestial waters, and

⁹³ James Darmesteter, “The Zend-Avesta.” Part II: The Sîrôzahs, Yasts, and Nyâyis, ed. F. Max Müller, vol. 23 of The Sacred Books of the East (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1883), p 94.

⁹⁴ Darmesteter, “The Zend-Avesta.” Part II, p 96.

⁹⁵ Darmesteter, “The Zend-Avesta.” Part II, p 93.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p100.

defeat the demon of drought so that rain may fall upon the earth. His cosmic work is described as protecting creation through the release of waters that make the world grow.⁹⁷

The central narrative recounts the dramatic battle between Tištrya and Apaoša, the demon of drought. When Tištrya first arrives at the cosmic sea in the form of a radiant horse, Apaoša appears as a dark horse. They enter combat “for three days and three nights,” but Tištrya is initially weakened.⁹⁸ The Yasht explains that he turns to Ahura Mazda and says:

“Men do not worship me with sacrifice; therefore, I am weak.”⁹⁹

Because the people have not given proper offerings and prayers, Tištrya lacks the strength to defeat Apaoša. This becomes the moral and ritual center of the text: humans must actively support the star-divinity through devotion. Ahura Mazda responds by granting Tištrya immense strength, saying he will empower him and give him the strength,¹⁰⁰ Tištrya receives renewed spiritual force, empowering him to face Apaoša again. With this restored power, given through divine support and human ritual participation, Tištrya returns to battle. This time he defeats the demon.¹⁰¹

After this victory, the waters in the cosmic sea begin to churn and rise, and clouds form across the sky. Tištrya celebrates his victory: “Hail! cries the bright and glorious Tištrya. Hail unto me, O Ahura Mazda! Hail unto you, O waters and plants! Hail, O Law of the worshippers of Mazda! Hail will it be unto you, O lands! The life of the waters will flow down unrestrained to the big-seeded corn fields, to the small-seeded pasture-fields, and to the whole of the material

⁹⁷ Ibid., p 101, 105.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p 99.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p 99.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p 100.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p 100.

world!”¹⁰² From this moment, rain is released across the earth, restoring life to fields, rivers, and villages. The Yasht closes by reaffirming that Tištrya’s ability to bring rain always depends on a reciprocal relationship between humans, the divinity, and Ahura Mazda.¹⁰³

Then Tištrya gathered the waters with a great cloud and released them, and it rained in such a wondrous manner that each drop was as large as the head of an ox. During this rain-making, the yazatas (divine beings) battled Apaoša and the demons. Fire descended... For ten days and nights he brought forth rain in this manner.¹⁰⁴ The Xrafstras (evil animals)¹⁰⁵ that were upon the earth were all mixed into the waters... Then the wind drove that rain in the same manner until the end of three days toward the edges of the earth, from which three great seas and thirty smaller seas came into being.¹⁰⁶

Traditional Iranian rain rituals are rooted in Zoroastrian and pre-Zoroastrian cosmogony. Central to this is the battle between Tištrya and Apaoša. Segments of these myths appear in folk traditions, such as food offering and prayer, the use of the cows and donkey mentioned in the Bundahišn,¹⁰⁷ a mythical creature whose braying purifies the waters and helps Tištrya.¹⁰⁸ Similarly, traditional acts involving the splashing of water or the use of ritual carriages are seen

¹⁰² Darmesteter, “The Zend-Avesta.” Part II, p 101.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p 101.

¹⁰⁴ Mehrdad Bahar, *Bondaresh (Farrobagh Dādagī)* (Tehran: Tus Publications, 1991–92), chap. 8. P 64-65.

¹⁰⁵ “Xrafstar,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, last modified September 2, 2015, accessed March 8, 2026, <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/xrafstar-crossref/>.

¹⁰⁶ Bahar, *Bondaresh*, chap. 8. P 64-65.

¹⁰⁷ “BUNDAHIŠN, the name, meaning “Primal creation,” traditionally given to a major Pahlavi work of compilation, mainly a detailed cosmogony and cosmography based on the Zoroastrian scriptures but also containing a short history of the legendary Kayanids and Ērānšahr in their days.” Almut Hintze, “BUNDĀHISN — Primal Creation,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/bundahisn-primal-creation/>

¹⁰⁸ *Encyclopedia of Iranian Folk Culture*, vol. 2, s.v. “Rain-Summoning,” p 11.

as survivors of the cult of Ardwīsūr Anāhīd,¹⁰⁹ the guardian of all earth's waters.¹¹⁰ Some of the functions once attributed to Anāhīd were transferred to Fatima in the Islamic period, and visits to shrines named “Khatun” (former sites of Anāhīd Temples) reflecting this transition.¹¹¹ In the Islamic era, some of these practices were integrated into the faith through the Salat al-Istisqa (Rain Prayer), which is performed collectively outside the city, often with participants walking barefoot to show humility.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ “Ardwīsūr Anāhīd, Middle Persian name of Arədvī Sūrā Anāhitā, a popular Zoroastrian yazatā; she is celebrated in Yašt 5 (known as the Ābān Yašt)” as “she who possesses waters.”” Fereydun Vahman and Afkham Darbandi, “ANĀHID i. Ārdašīr-Anāhīd,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/anahid-i-ardwisur-anahid/>.

¹¹⁰ *Encyclopedia of Iranian Folk Culture*, vol. 2, s.v. “Rain-Summoning,” p 10.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p 21.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p 2.

From Mirabs to Rain Rituals: Family Heritage and Artistic Intervention

“My mother had just returned from a journey when for days, every conversation circled about the rains holding back. The fields were anxious, the animals uneasy, and the earth was being dug deeper each day. First three meters, then five, and soon people said, astonished, that seven meters of soil must be removed to reach water. Eyes searched the empty sky for clouds, while hands continued working in the thirsty soil.

At dawn, the call for rain gathered us. Everyone brought what they could, grain, flour, oil, small offerings carried in hope. We walked until we reached the two old plane trees standing beside a stream that was known to flow even when everything else dried, the sacred place. Fire rose, pots were placed upon it, and kachi¹¹³ was cooked as prayers were spoken, food was shared, bowl by bowl, among all who had come: neighbors, villagers, and those from surrounding lands who had arrived to join the prayer. Eyes remained watching the sky for any sign of rain. The prayer for rain was performed, as everyone waited for the downpour perhaps, for night, or for the next day.

As the gathering dispersed, my mother gave me a fabric strip and led me to the plane trees. Branches were heavy with fabric, knots tied upon knots, colours layered upon colours. “Invoke the boon of rain and to tie it to the tree,” she whispered. I tied my green cloth to a blue one, to another wish, was it for rain, abundance, or a fuller harvest? I don’t know. I knotted my wish to another, as my mother did. We returned exhausted; the journey back is a blur. In the depth of night, the sound of rain against the glass woke me up.”¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Kachi is a traditional Iranian dish made from flour, butter, sugar, and water, often flavored with rosewater, cardamom, and saffron. It's thickened to a creamy consistency and topped with nuts like almonds or pistachios. Commonly served for special occasions like recoveries or celebrations.

¹¹⁴ This account is based on a childhood memory orally transmitted to me by my grandmother as a family story,

My mother's side of the family organized rain-summoning ceremonies, a legacy that forms the spiritual foundation for my study of traditional rituals. This lineage embodies the crucial spiritual dimension of Tištrya, where humans were believed to influence water's natural forces through offerings and prayers, positioning humanity as caretakers of natural elements and demanding deep humility before nature's complexity. My performance component therefore acts as an artistic intervention to mobilize this ancestral tradition, translating ritual invocation into embodied action by weaving in ritualistic communal actions and my grandmother's oral legacy as a rain summoner, sustaining an ecological philosophy urgently relevant to today's global climate challenges.

Complementing this spiritual vocation is the practical and political heritage of the Mirabs from my father's lineage,¹¹⁵ the guardians of the waters of the Zayandeh Rood (life-giving river), responsible for equitable water distribution.¹¹⁶ The Mirabs ensured fair shares reached every farm, downstream village and town, and the natural watershed, preventing conflicts. My great-great-grandfather was shot and killed defending farmers' water rights. Drawing on this dual legacy of water stewardship, and as an Iranian in exile, I feel a deep responsibility to raise awareness about preserving water resources. Through performance and installation, I continue the ancestral tradition, translating this heritage into a visual and spatial experience that honors

shared repeatedly in domestic settings; it is presented here as part of my family's verbal heritage, passed down to me, rather than as a factual historical record.

¹¹⁵ "Mirab: the steward and overseer of water distribution, the person responsible for managing shared water sources and delivering water to homes, gardens, farms, and other areas." Mostafa Khal'atbari Limaki, *Āb, Āyinhā va Bāvarhā-ye Marbut be Ān dar Farhang-e 'Āmmeh* (Tehran: Seda va Simā-ye Jomhuri-ye Eslami, Markaz-e Tahqiqāt, 1999), p. 149.

¹¹⁶ "One method for measuring each person's share of water involved a device called a tashta: a small copper bowl with a tiny hole in its base, placed on top of a larger container filled with water. Water would slowly seep through the hole, and when the tashta filled up, it would sink into the larger vessel. The tashta was then removed, set on the water again, and the process repeated. Every nine tashtas equaled one hour of water.

Before sunrise, the mirab would stand at a high point, and as soon as the full disc of the sun appeared, he would begin the irrigation. The day's water was then delivered to those whose turn it was, and the mirab regulated the flow so that the water reached the fields of everyone who held a share." Khal'atbari Limaki, *Āb, Āyinhā va Bāvarhā*, p. 124.

the past, engages audiences with the urgency of environmental protection, and represents centuries of survival strategies.

Ethical research requires constant attention to power relations, especially when working with ancestral and marginalized cultural narratives.¹¹⁷ This project is significant for me because it connects my Iranian heritage and ancestral water stewardship to Iran's current water crisis and my position in exile. By drawing on personal history and interviews with family elders, I aim to address the tension between cultural loss and survival through material and sensory dialogue, transforming heritage into an active response to contemporary urgency. The creative exploration allows me to create a personal and meaningful engagement with the vital political and social issues surrounding water rights and climate change.

Drawing on Wilson accounts of "Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods," the project prioritizes "relationality and reciprocity."¹¹⁸ This ensures that the knowledge gathered from elders regarding the rain rituals and Mirab legacy is treated as shared, situated knowledge, rather than being extracted merely for academic content.¹¹⁹ The use of autoethnography also helps me to ensure accountability by locating my artwork within a situated subjectivity and heritage.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ Springgay. "Introduction: Feltness," p 144.

¹¹⁸ Wilson. "Research Is Ceremony," p 69-70, 77.

¹¹⁹ Springgay. "Introduction: Feltness," p 136, 150.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p 142.

Theoretical Frameworks Guiding the Work: Research-Creation as Integral Inquiry

Research-creation methodology is a foundational aspect, integrating creative processes as integral to inquiry.¹²¹ The project positions the artistic production (sculptures, projections, and performance) as a primary mode of “knowledge generation,” exploring environmental concerns through “material intervention.”¹²² The methodology employed here aligns primarily with the “Creation-as- Research” mode articulated by Chapman and Sawchuk, “where creation is required for research to emerge.”¹²³ The production of the immersive environment and the symbolic performance are not merely illustrations of a predetermined argument but are the means through which new knowledge about cultural resilience and ecological urgency is revealed and articulated.¹²⁴ My project also utilizes “creative presentations of research,” as the final recorded performance and immersive installation serve as novel means to disseminate the research findings to diverse publics.¹²⁵

In the framework of research-creation, material selection is integral to knowledge production, where artistic processes generate insights into complex themes as Owen Chapman, and Kim Sawchuk outlined in “Research-Creation: Intervention, Analysis and Family Resemblances.” I employ fabric, sound, and light as tools of inquiry into drought and rainmaking rituals, to explore vulnerability, anticipation, and ecological-cultural intersections in Iranian contexts. Fabric serves as the primary medium, with cotton chosen for its symbolic depth. This material is highly symbolic, representing shrouds as both mourning and renewal. In Iranian cultural traditions, cotton fabric also invokes the “shroud,” symbolizing that without water, life

¹²¹ Chapman, and Sawchuk. “Research-Creation: Intervention, Analysis and 'Family Resemblances,” p 5.

¹²² Ibid., p 19.

¹²³ Ibid., p 19.

¹²⁴ Ibid., p 19-21.

¹²⁵ Ibid., p 19-21.

in all its forms is endangered.¹²⁶ Furthermore, in recent water shortage protests, the same fabric is worn by some protesters as a symbol of sacrifice, signaling to be ready to risk one's life for their rights, a final demand for renewal, justice, and change. This materiality grounds my work in cultural resonance, transforming soft textiles into suspended forms that mirror drought's fragility. Building on this material inquiry, the project further draws on mythopoetic methodology to deepen symbolic and narrative dimensions.

The mythopoetic methodology is a scholarly approach that utilizes insight, visualization, and imagination in "a search for meaning and a sense of unity and wellbeing."¹²⁷ It is suggested that this methodology (the writing of a story) plays a part in the scholarly attempt to "see complexity more fully," as complexity is often a difficult thing to research.¹²⁸

This methodological lens provides a way of discovering aspects of the real world that are often "inaccessible to more rational methodologies."¹²⁹ It attempts to delve into what lies beyond the rational gaze, paying attention to what is below the surface, hidden, disguised, repressed, or invisible.¹³⁰ Fiction, as a key component of mythopoetics, has a particular capacity to gesture toward a complex world "to magnify the little moments" and hinting the unseen and inexplicable.¹³¹

Furthermore, the mythopoetic form aims to create useful affects and is intended to do something.¹³² This affective power means the methodology functions not primarily to "explain,

¹²⁶ Hamid Algar, "BURIAL iv. In Islam," *Encyclopædia Iranica* 4, no. 6 (2000): 563–565, accessed December 1, 2025, <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/burial-iv/?highlight=shroud>.

¹²⁷ Steve Shann (2015) A mythopoetic methodology: storytelling as an act of scholarship, *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 43:2, 128-142, DOI:10.1080/1359866X.2014.932334. p 10.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p 1.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p 2.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p 6.

¹³¹ Shann. 2015, p 8.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p 1-2.

but to agitate, provoke, move, seduce, disturb, and animate.”¹³³ The responses generated by the mythopoetic narrative point to its alchemic possibilities.¹³⁴

The mythopoetic approach unfolds through four interwoven movements: it agitates listeners by giving articulate voice to something deeply felt yet still unnamed, opening a resonant gap or vacuum that demands attention; it complicates understanding by weaving in subtle layers, uncovering concealed dimensions, and gently exposing the inadequacy of oversimplified answers; it animates by affective energies that drive people toward restless, creative action sparking energetic efforts to regain balance or to imagine a passage through the tangle of complexities; and it inducts by drawing participants into relation with one another, quietly forging bonds and cultivating a shared sense of community.¹³⁵

By focusing on these symbolic narratives, the mythopoetic methodology directs attention to the “invisible underbelly” and “the ordinary affects” of a studied phenomenon.¹³⁶

The mythopoetic approach, therefore, operates as a “means of knowing and a way of telling” that not only represents but also creates experience, putting meanings in motion.¹³⁷

This analytical method interprets the Iranian rituals as symbolic narratives that reveal collective responses to crises and communal adaptation. By viewing the rituals through a mythopoetic lens, my project reframes them as “entertaining myths for survival” and active, cross-cultural tools for ecological resilience. In this project, the mythopoetic methodology is applied directly to contemporary Iranian rain-summoning rituals (still performed in times of drought in Iran) by tracing them back to the ancient Avestan¹³⁸ story of Tištrya, preserved in the

¹³³ Ibid., p 6.

¹³⁴ Ibid., p 6.

¹³⁵ Ibid., p 13-14.

¹³⁶ Ibid., p 2.

¹³⁷ Ibid., p 6.

¹³⁸ Avesta, the Zoroastrian religious literature.

Tištrya Yašt (Yasht 8 in Avesta), which is not treated as historical curiosity but as a living narrative template that continues to shape communal prayer, gesture, and song during water shortage or drought.

By layering the ancient myth with present-day voices, I aim to challenge any simplistic reading of “tradition” versus “modernity,” revealing instead an unbroken chain of imaginative survival. The storytelling does not explain the crisis of climate change; it provokes thirst, unsettles comfort, and animates collective longing. I do not suggest solutions but an embodied memory of water’s absence and return, inducted into an expanded, cross-temporal community that still believes stories can, quite literally, open the sky.

Finally, autoethnography anchors these approaches in personal and intergenerational experience. Autoethnography is a distinctive qualitative research method that originates from anthropology, focusing on self-narratives that move beyond mere storytelling to engage in “cultural analysis and interpretation.”¹³⁹ At its core, autoethnography seeks to explore the interplay of the personally engaged, introspective self with cultural descriptions, consciously linking “the self and the social” or “connecting the personal to the cultural.”¹⁴⁰ Autoethnography should be ethnographic in its methodology, cultural in its interpretive focus, and autobiographical in its content.¹⁴¹ The ultimate goal is achieving a “cultural understanding” of the self and its connection to others, often through precise research processes involving data collection, analysis, interpretation, and scholarly writing.¹⁴²

Autoethnographic writing offers a profound departure from conventional scholarly

¹³⁹ Heewon Chang. (2008). “Autoethnography as Method” (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/10.4324/9781315433370>, p 43.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p 46.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p 46.

¹⁴² Chang. “Autoethnography as Method,” p 49.

writing, embracing creative and aesthetic approaches.¹⁴³ While narrative prose is common, autoethnographers are “freed from the traditional conventions of writing” and may channel their insights into various artistic and imaginative genres.¹⁴⁴ The sources classify autoethnographic writings into various styles, including “descriptive-realistic, confessional-emotive, analytical-interpretive, and imaginative-creative.”¹⁴⁵ The imaginative-creative style is considered the boldest departure from traditional academic writing, frequently utilizing formats such as “poetry, drama, and fiction.”¹⁴⁶ This approach, sometimes labeled “performative autoethnography,” allows a written text to come alive on stage.¹⁴⁷ Although these creative approaches may face criticism for blurring genres, they offer researchers the chance to express their stories in meaningful and less structured formats, actively engaging readers in interpreting the creative expression.¹⁴⁸ This method authentically connects my Mirab heritage and ancestral water stewardship to Iran’s current water crisis, ensuring the project’s exploration of ecological and cultural themes is ethically sourced and deeply situated.¹⁴⁹ This method ensures grounding in lived, intergenerational knowledge. Using personal accounts and family life histories is a common practice in autoethnography to provide “rich autobiographical narratives” and connect individual experience to broader cultural contexts.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴³ Ibid., p 142-143.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p 141, 148.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p 149.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p 148- 149.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p 143.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p 148- 149.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p 46, 49.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p 49.

Application of Methodology in Artistic Practice

My studio project, with an Artistic Exploration of Iranian Ritual and Resilience, is a multi-component endeavour, including an installation and a recorded performance. This research-creation project aims to reimagine ancient Iranian rain-summoning rituals as a dynamic response to Iran's contemporary water crises.

The creative challenge articulated by my artwork is how to transform ancient rituals, rooted in cultural, religious, and ecological shifts, into a visual narrative to bridge ancestral knowledge with urgent contemporary environmental issues.

My artwork centers on the interdisciplinary fusion of visual arts, performance, and Iranian ancient studies. It uses symbolic materials (cotton) and moving images (projections of bodies of water) to materialize memory and fragility. The performance component, implemented in diverse landscapes, functions as a form of archiving and speculation, generating knowledge through its "agitation" and physical presence, emphasizing the urgency of the subject matter.

The installation component serves as an immersive cultural spectacle. It features seven abstract human figures and one tree crafted from sheer cotton fabric. To refine the forms and proportions of the human figures, I created several small-scale clay maquettes as initial studies, allowing me to experiment with posture, volume, and gesture before translating them into suspended cotton structures. (Fig. 6) These fabric sculptures act as projection surfaces for imagery of the surface of water, thereby evoking fragility and the memory of bodies of waters once a source of life, prosperity and abundance. Light projections, using varying intensities from dim ambient to intense spotlights, evoke the ghostly presence of absent water drifting across fabric and gallery walls, illuminating moving forms to symbolize anticipation of renewal amid crisis, while natural sounds layer wind, dry leaves, and distant waves to recall everyday sensory

memories. The installation is intended to invite interactive viewing, allowing viewers to walk freely among the figures and a tree, creating an immersive, ever-shifting environment that reveals the urgency of water preservation through sensory spectacle. The goal is to engage while provoking dialogue on water scarcity, cultural continuity, and collective responsibility.

The performance component, staged and recorded during artist residencies at four different locations including Gidaaki/ Halls Island¹⁵¹ (summer 2025) (Fig. 7) and The Tree Museum¹⁵² located in Muskoka (fall 2025) (Fig. 8) reconstructs the rituals through embodied actions, combining movement and nature sound with the recorded narrative. In addition, subsequent performances in the Mount Nemo Conservation Area¹⁵³ (winter 2026) (Fig. 9) and Tsi Yonontakahrontónnyon/ Metcalfe Rock¹⁵⁴ (spring 2026) (Fig. 10) stage re-enactments amid different landscapes, emphasizing a sensory contrast between arid Iranian origins and cold, damp Canadian present. Representing the performance across four seasons allows each site to offer its own palette of colours and environmental rhythms, underscoring both the shifting moods of the

¹⁵¹ “These lands and waters of Haliburton County are the traditional homeland of the Ojibway, the Huron/Wendat, the Mohawk, the Pottawatomi and the Metis Nations of Ontario. This area known to us as the Haliburton Highlands, has always been called, “Gidaaki”, by the Anishinaabe which means upward earth or uphill. The name Kashagawigamog is an Anishnaabeg name meaning “lake of long and winding waters”. For millennia, the lake has served as an important passageway and meeting area for First Nations peoples travelling to their traditional hunting grounds.”<https://www.lko.ca/landacknowledgement/#:~:text=This%20area%20known%20to%20us,to%20their%20traditional%20hunting%20grounds>.

¹⁵² “The District Municipality of Muskoka lies on the traditional territory of the Anishinaabeg, specifically the Ojibwe. The name Muskoka is likely a corruption of Misquuckkey (or Mesqua Ukie), the name of an Ojibwe chief who was a signatory to Treaty 16 in November 1815. This treaty concerns a parcel of land south of Muskoka, near Lake Simcoe.”<https://thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/muskoka-lakes#:~:text=of%20the%20region.-,Indigenous%20Peoples,of%20Muskoka%2C%20near%20Lake%20Simcoe>.

¹⁵³ Blue Mountains Region- Mount Nemo Conservation Area (Burlington), “Blue Mountain is located within the boundary of Treaty 18 region of 1818 which is the traditional territory of the Anishnaabek, Haudenosaunee, and Wendat-Wyandot-Wyandotte peoples. Over 500 years ago, the First Nations welcomed us to share this land now called Ontario. We are grateful to explore and play at Blue Mountain and thank all those who were and are caretakers of this beautiful area.” <https://www.bluemountain.ca/mountain/history>

¹⁵⁴ “Metcalfe Rock sits on a landscape inhabited for over 10,000 years, serving as the traditional land of the Saugeen Ojibway Nation, Haudenosaunee, and Huron-Wendat. It remains spiritually connected to the nearby sacred landmark Ekarenniondi (‘the rock that stands out’).” <https://www.plentycanada.com/news/revitalizing-language-and-land-new-mohawk-language-destination-pins-added-to-the-great-niagara-escarpment-indigenous-cultural-map#:~:text=There%20are%2023%20new,Provincial%20Park%20/%20Tsi%20Tekahyonh%C3%B3:ken>

landscape and the sense of displacement embedded in this artistic exploration. This intentional juxtaposition aims to highlight global water interdependence. The recorded performance is displayed alongside the installation in the gallery space. The performance is directly drawn from a segment of the Iranian rain-summoning ritual in which participants tie strips of cloth to a tree branch while praying for rainfall. During the performance, a hand-woven rope to which numerous cloth strips have been knotted is attached to a tree; each cloth strip symbolizes a wish for rain. The cloth strips are made from images of Iran's flowing waters painted onto fabric and then cut into narrow ribbons. (Fig. 11) The narration is drawn from Iran's ancient mythic and epic literature as well as its religious texts, threading these landscapes together, grounding my artwork in a lineage of stories that have long contemplated scarcity, renewal, and the elemental struggle for life. Alongside these ancient sources, the narration also turns toward today's water crises, rendered in a poetic tone that traces the vanishing of rivers and the lives now shaped by their water shortage. Autoethnography grounds my studio practice in personal and familial narratives, drawing on longstanding family oral histories and accounts from elders who participated in rain-summoning rituals.¹⁵⁵ These insights specifically shaped my artistic interpretation, for instance; identifying the tree as sacred, using tied fabric as wishes for rain, depicting the figure as a participant in the ritual, and structuring the performance as an articulation of my inherited water stewardship, while connecting personal heritage to broader themes of resilience and ecological urgency. These oral histories highlighted the centrality of food preparation and its ritual distribution as a critical factor in the endurance of rain-summoning ceremonies. Elders repeatedly emphasized that cooking specific dishes and their deliberate sharing in a prescribed order was not merely symbolic generosity but a practical mechanism of

¹⁵⁵ Chang. "Autoethnography as Method." P 43, 49.

survival. In years of prolonged drought, when wells ran dry and fields failed, the ceremony guaranteed that every member of the community received a substantial meal, regardless of personal stores. This revealed that the rituals did not persist solely because of spiritual efficacy or cultural nostalgia. Instead, these accounts illuminated a sophisticated form of mutual aid embedded within the performance itself: the rain-summoning ritual doubled as an organized food-distribution system that ensured no one starved while waiting for the rains. This insight authenticates the continued enactment of these rituals in contemporary Iran and underscores their role as adaptive social knowledges rather than relics of superstition, grounding my project in lived, intergenerational knowledge rather than romanticization.

The research component involves a comparative study of fabric-manipulation techniques, for instance applying chemical and natural stiffeners, boning techniques and embedded or external metal wire frameworks. (Fig. 12) Achieving controlled volume and suspension proved challenging, stiffening caused cracking, and the weight of metal wires caused deformation. Ultimately, the boning technique integrating flexible yet resilient, plastic boning channels directly sewn into the cotton proved superior to other techniques, as it provided semi-seamless structural support, allowed fluid yet controlled volume retention, maintained the fabric's shroud-like softness while achieving dramatic suspension, and best embodied the paradoxical tension between fragility and hope central to my artwork.

Sound complements this, incorporating nature recordings during artist residencies in Ontario, the sound of the wind, water waves, and dry leaves addressing my displacement, layering auditory memory over visual forms for embodied empathy. The narrations (in the recorded performance) contain fragments of this story using spoken-word storytelling interwoven with the invocations of rain summoners, tying fabric strips to the sacred tree, and

calling upon rain to release the rains. These elements are orchestrated to invite moments in which the boundary between the viewer's body and the represented body of water becomes porous, light passing through sheer cotton may momentarily fall on a viewer body. In addition, the recorded nature sounds carry traces of everyday experiences, recalling moments like moving across snow or leaves and inviting a shared sensory memory.

These elements are orchestrated to create conditions of closeness and friction, forms hanging at human scale may brush against viewers, light may fall momentarily on skin, opening unpredictable moments of resonance, empathy, or even discomfort with the wounded waters and the viewer's own implication in their crisis. The work proposes new relations between human bodies, textiles, and endangered landscapes while remaining open to varied, individual responses.

Broader Implications

Vows to Water extends far beyond the studio, engaging cultural politics, ecological discourse, and research-creation practice. The project amplifies marginalized Iranian voices and heightens awareness of climate damage and loss by bringing rain-summoning rituals and Mirab water stewardship back to life as active, performative knowledge. These ancient practices enter the wider conversation on resilience, showing how communal ancestral strategies can offer real models for navigating today's ecological crises.

I model the work deliberately as an activism/art hybrid. Through immersive elements, projection, installation, spoken myth, shrouds, embodied invocation, the project turns complex climate issues into visceral, accessible experiences that keep intellectual depth. Iranian rituals shift from distant curiosities to living, cross-cultural tools for ecological resilience and valid subjects of research-creation.

Performing them in contrasting Canadian landscapes creates intentional friction between the arid origins of the rituals and the watery realities here. This contrast highlights global water interdependence and calls for shared responsibility across continents and climates.

Ultimately, the work contributes to cultural production by reconstructing and preserving my ancestral narratives, while refusing to treat them as frozen relics. Instead, I present them as dynamic, adaptable frameworks still urgently relevant for survival in a warming, drying, and increasingly unstable world.

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Figures

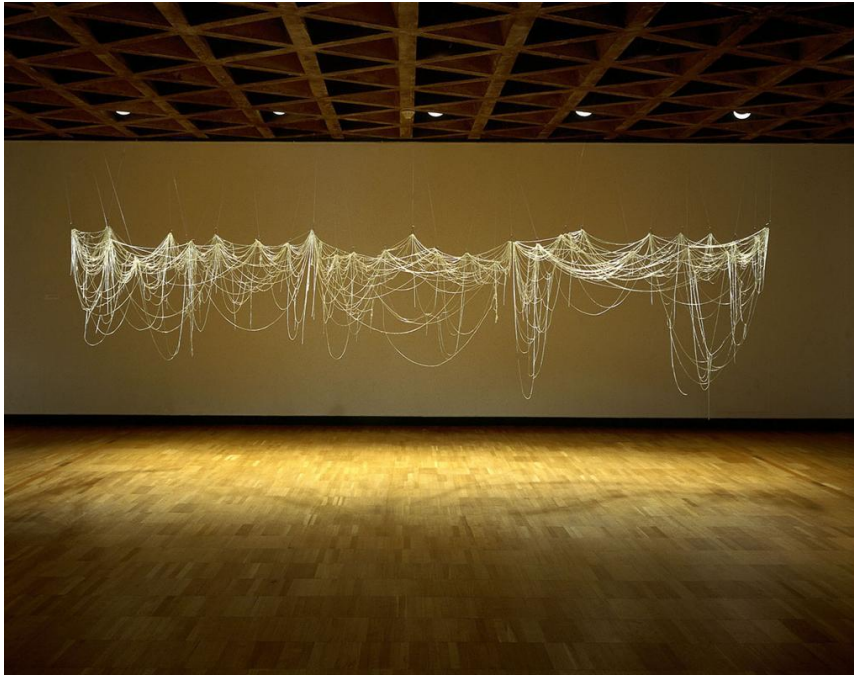


Figure 1. Right After (1969). Artwork by Eva Hesse. Page 28
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Figure 2. Atrabiliarios (1992-94). Artwork by Doris Salcedo. Page 59
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Figure 3. Underwater (Blue/Green) (1996). Artwork by Tony Oursler. Page 309
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Figure 4. Slumber (1993). Artwork by Janine Antoni. Page 1. Janine_Antoni_Performance



Figure 5. Richtkräfte einer neuen Gesellschaft (1974–77). Artwork by Joseph Beuys. Page 42
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Figure 6. Small-scale clay maquettes (approximately 30 cm)



Figure 7. Wish Tree, Gidaaki/ Halls Island. Laleh Saramiforoshani. 2025.



Figure 8. Wish Tree, The Tree Museum, Muskoka. Laleh Saramiforoshani. 2025.



Figure 9. Wish Tree, Mount Nemo Conservation Area. Laleh Saramiforoshani. 2026.



Figure 10. Wish Tree. Tsi Yonontakahrontónnyon/ Metcalfe Rock. Laleh Saramiforoshani. 2026.



Figure 11. Iran's Water Resources Painted on Fabric. Laleh Saramiforoshani. 2025.

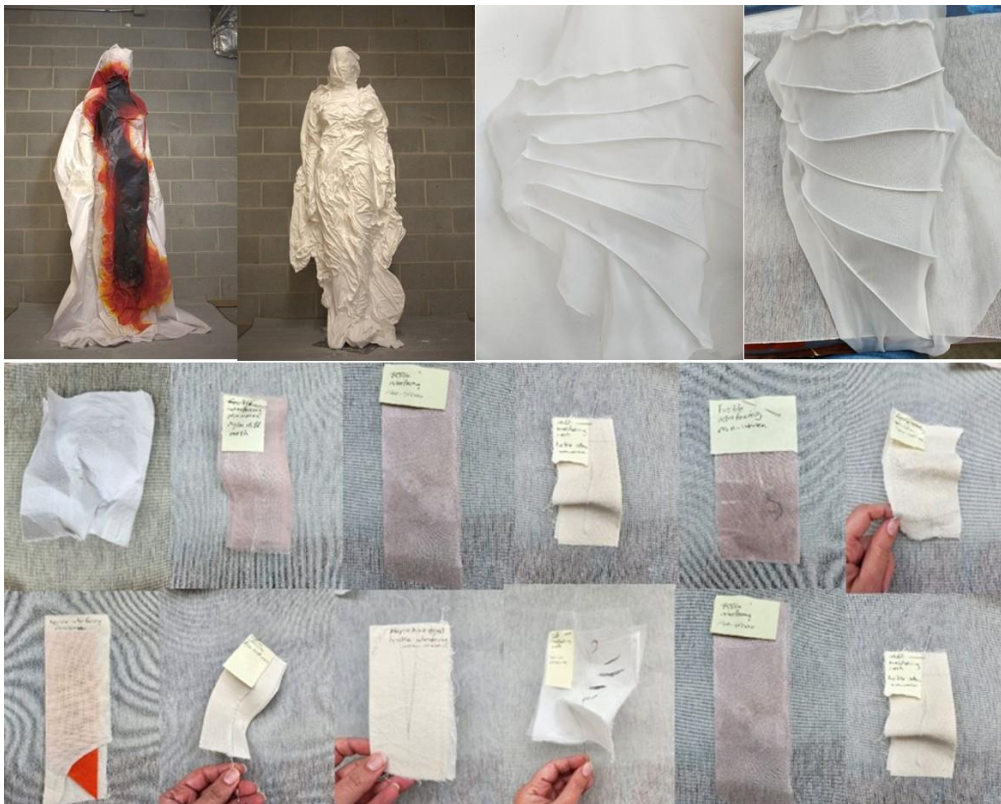


Figure 12. Study of fabric-manipulation techniques. Laleh Saramiforoshani. 2025.

Appendix A: Link to the performance: <https://vimeo.com/1184633517>

Exhibition Documentation Figures



Figure 13. Installation view of Vows to Water, Gales Gallery, York University, Laleh Saramiforoshani. 2026.



Figure 14. Detail of Installation view of Vows to Water, Gales Gallery, York University, Laleh Saramiforoshani. 2026.



Figure 15. Detail of Installation view of Vows to Water, Gales Gallery, York University, Laleh Saramiforoshani. 2026.



Figure 16. Detail of Installation view of Vows to Water, Gales Gallery, York University, Laleh Saramiforoshani. 2026.

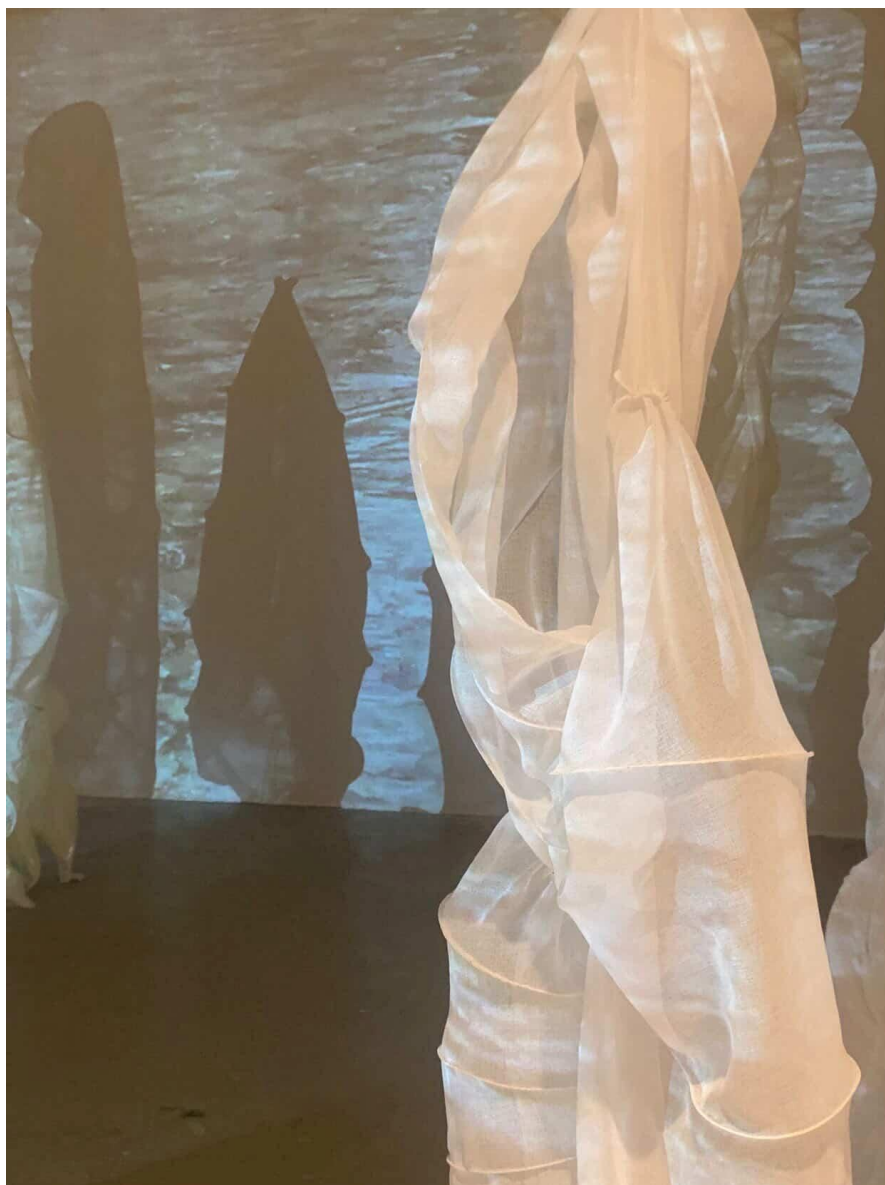


Figure 17. Detail of Installation view of Vows to Water, Gales Gallery, York University, Laleh Saramiforoshani. 2026.