

From Protests to Pomegranates

Nedda Baba

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Abstract

This paper was written as a support for my thesis exhibition entitled *From Protests to Pomegranates*. The creation of this work is situated in a context of postcolonial diasporic life in Canada post-9/11. In this text I ruminate on origins, objects, and transformative possibilities. These objects, which consist of various fruits and drafting tools, all have ancestral ties. I engage in repetitive play with them, recalling memories along the way, in an effort to undo inclinations to belonging and to settle in diaspora, queerly. The three-day performative exhibition primarily consists of a series of large-scale photographs of playful hand gestures with these ancestral objects. The photographs are repeatedly wheat-pasted and torn off the walls. It also includes acrylic models of drafting stencils morphed after my grandfather's set of drafting tools, and conversations to be shared with gallery patrons over a bowl of freshly deseeded pomegranates.

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Definitions and Context

At times in this paper I use personal pronouns that allude to a collective body of people. *We, us, our*. It is important for me to acknowledge that I am not alone in these experiences and there is a specific audience in mind when I use these terms. Much of what I write is for anyone who comes from a similar history of trauma and dispersal and is trying to navigate life post-colonially. However, this is not to suggest that the use of these pronouns imagine us to be one community. To collectivize people, as is commonly done today, into one BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour) imaginary would be disingenuous. I wish to respect these subjectivities, and instead to leave space for the reader to decide if they feel a shared experience with what I write.

I also use names for my family that are not in English. *Baba* means “father” in several languages across Asia and Africa. *Nana* is the word I used for “grandmother” growing up, which is derived from Azerbaijani Turkish.

Often there is confusion about my ethnicity. While the specifics are not something that I place a great deal of emphasis on in my work, I would like to lay some foundation to dispel any confusion that may arise while reading. My family members have always identified as *Assyrians*, and the language I spoke growing up is referred to as *Syriac* in academic circles, or just Assyrian colloquially. I use *Syriac* to distinguish the neo-Aramaic language we speak today from the extinct language that was widespread during the ancient Assyrian empire. Those who presently refer to themselves as Assyrian are native to the former Mesopotamian region (now split between Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria) and are believed to be of similar origins to ethnic Chaldeans (who mostly come from Iraq) and Syriacs (often from Turkey, Iraq, or Syria). All three are considered ethno-religious minority groups, who belong to various sects of Christianity, and ubiquitously use Classical Syriac in ecclesiastical literature and mass. For those who were affected and able to flee, while others sadly perished, their minority status was the main cause of their dispersal during the 1915 genocide committed by the Young Turks of the Ottoman Empire. This genocide was the primary diasporizing catalyst in my ancestry.

January 21, 2018

It was exactly a year ago today that Julia and I attended the Women's March on Toronto, feverishly parading through the city streets amidst sixty-thousand other protesters. We stomped with staggering conviction, and even the mass was too quiet for us. A series of chants rose through our lungs to get the crowd going. But they didn't last, and we soon stopped out of embarrassment. The chants didn't start the rally we had hoped for.

Standing on the hill at Queen's Park just a few feet away was Vivek Shraya, a well-known Toronto-based multidisciplinary artist, along with two of her friends, Talya and Shemeena. Julia squealed out of excitement upon spotting Vivek, starstruck as ever.

"Why don't you go say hi and tell her you're a fan? I'll come with you." I knew why she was so taken by this. I gave Julia a copy of *She of the Mountains*, one of Vivek's short novels, for her birthday just a couple of months before.

"No, I can't! I don't know..."

She and I attempted to nonchalantly turn away and chat between intermittent stares, until she noticed the looks were returned. "Oh my god, they're looking at us. This is so awkward." "It'll be more awkward now if we don't approach them. Come on, let's go over there." Julia finally caved in, but we didn't get the chance to go. Talya and Shemeena walked over first, Vivek lingering a bit further back.

"Hi! We love your signs so much. Would it be okay to take a photo? We're part of *Her Collective* and we would love to share it on our social media."

Our signs were damn good. I can't take any credit. Julia spent hours mulling over slogans and catch phrases the night before, writing draft after draft. Truthfully, I'm no good at coming up with quick, smart punch lines on the spot, but I can pick out a good one from a bad one. So I either said "yes" or "no" to her suggestions. She hemmed and hawed until she got the idea for the posters.

"I know! We'll have two signs. One will say *Yes* and the other will say *No* at the top, and then the bottom one will have *Yes Means Yes* and then *No Means No*. Under each heading there will be a list of things to say yes and no to. Like, *yes to decolonization* and, *no to neoliberal*

capitalism.” Again, she created the lists while I provided support and affirmation. We both agreed that it was more important to focus on issues at home, so we tried to centre the list items on topics relevant to Canada and beyond.

Talya and Shemeena snapped the photograph, we exchanged contacts, chatted a bit, and then we parted ways. I later remembered I had been nervous about holding the Yes sign. Soon enough, other protesters approached us asking for permission to document.

I quickly turned to Julia after agreeing to another photo-op: “Can we switch signs? Just in case my mom sees...” One of the items on the list under the *Yes To* category was “*Pussies*”. To her dismay, my mother knows about my relationship. But I could only torment her so much. To give her such a direct visual of my affirmation and enthusiasm for *pussies* while standing beside my partner would have been too much for her Christian moral conservatism, I’m sure.

Though my mother would never know it, I felt her in those moments as strongly as I felt my sense of self-expression. Protest was a gift my parents wish they never gave me. My mother, a somewhat moderate leftist, was a conscious proponent of socialism as an undergraduate student, studying Marxism intently during her time at Western University. And while my own feelings on this have always been unsettled, my father’s family felt that as Iraqi citizens in the 1970s, they had truly reaped the benefits of a socialist state. My mother’s short childhood in Iraq would have similarly inspired her political views. But it was their arrival in Canada during the Pierre Trudeau era that solidified their position on the Liberal-left.

In the nineties my parents would protest. They went to several demonstrations across Hamilton and Toronto, rallying against the thirteen-year-long sanctions against Iraq and the 1996 cruise missile strike by the Clinton administration. This was when I revered them, when I watched them take charge of their presence, demand that they be seen and heard. It wasn’t simply the fact of them going somewhere, but that they actively decided to *be*

somewhere. This was the closest they ever came to working through their grief.¹ Their unhappiness with the impact of Western imperialism on their homeland was channelling itself into collective calls for a resolution and an end to suffering.

I remember indignation against the West pouring out of my grandmother as she watched us build signs together. I remember green, red, and black running out, running too thin as my small hands raced over the foam board to squeeze more out, attempting to cover every inch with colour. I remember wanting to go wherever it was that my parents were going. How did I know to be enticed by something I knew nothing about? Whatever affect was being transmitted carved itself into me in a way that I couldn't, and still can't truly comprehend. But I was compelled, and I also wasn't allowed to be. Somehow I was supposed to turn out neutral, because this "business" was trouble. *Keep quiet. Don't ever talk about politics.* As I grew older, we would fight endlessly when my family discovered that I was attending a demonstration. Coming from a country where government opposition is dangerous and peaceful protest is unheard of, they feared that I would be defenceless amidst an angry crowd, susceptible to authoritarian abuse. I wish they knew that this scenario was not likely to unfold, because Canada disingenuously flaunts a peaceful relationship with the US and the Middle East. Because there was less of a threat protesting issues that Canada had a smaller political or economical stake in, unlike many demonstrations helmed by Black and Indigenous peoples. Because though we are racialized, our racial profiling is not tantamount to that of more systemically minoritized bodies. Because it's easy for the state to brush us off.

But I didn't have to tell them because my parents soon found out what they feared they already knew. Through 9/11, the 2003 occupation, structural chaos, ongoing warfare and insurgencies, they eventually gave up. Protest no longer offered even a glimmer of hope. It regressed to an unfruitful, reckless act. I watched them sink further and further after every headline. When they lost faith in their country's future, melancholia took over, eventually leading to a loss of faith in themselves.²

¹ Dina Georgis, "Cultures of Expulsion: Memory, Longing and the Queer Space of Diaspora," in *New Dawn: The Journal of Black Canadian Studies* 1.1 (Spring 2006): 18.

² Ibid.

I too lost that spark as the years went by. It faltered in and out, fading a little more after every falter. While marching alongside Julia I was reminded that somewhere, dwelling inside me, was that desire to act on inaction, to be present against the abuse of power. How ironic, I thought, that the reminder would come from her. My white, queer lover: pure cultural and spiritual corruption in my mother's eyes, drawing me back into my fondest memories of home.

Longing

On my grandmother's last day in Iraq, she ate two fresh apricots in the final moments she had at her home in Kirkuk. She then unconsciously threw the seeds in her suitcase before leaving. They travelled with her to England, where she stayed for two years before finally settling in Canada. She found the seeds again after arriving here and planted them in a couple of pots. They began to sprout, and she found little green bursts of life emerging from the soil months later.

Today, plotted in the front yard of my family's home, are two large apricot trees, grown by my grandmother 38 years ago. They bear hundreds of fruit almost every summer, and we gather as a family to shake the tree branches until all the apricots have fallen off. Despite her age, Nana is the most energetic during the apricot cultivation, and it can be quite difficult to keep up with her. While the rest of us are dodging flying apricots to avoid head injuries, she will fill more bags and buckets than everyone else combined.

Much of what constitutes this story feels like pure luck, and all the pieces seem to have fallen in place like magic. How is it that those two apricot seeds came to fruition in a land so different from their own? Had my family moved to Toronto – a common destination for immigrants in the seventies – the trees would have grown, but tender fruit cannot be produced in or around the Greater Toronto Area. Instead, they settled in Hamilton, part of the Niagara peninsula, where soft fruit famously grows. None of this was prior knowledge, but realized serendipitously.

Fruit

Nana tried to plant me a pomegranate in the summer. I thought there was no way it wouldn't grow. She's always able to make something from nothing. I was snacking on one during a sunny afternoon visit when she grabbed a couple of seeds and shoved them in the dirt of one of her potted plants.

The seeds did not sprout. I was upset. I thought if she can't do it then I sure can't. Months passed by, and I hesitated every time I remembered that I should probably try planting some seeds again. I couldn't do it. I'm not Nana or Baba; they're both much better at this than me. They won't grow in my garden, I felt.

Once too much time passed, I thought I should really try it, and if they fail to grow then so be it. On the last day of October I scattered eighteen seeds across a small pot of soil. I experimented by popping the flesh off of some and leaving it on others. Nana didn't remove any flesh, so I thought maybe I'd see if that was why they didn't sprout.

Mine did. All of them. Research told me pomegranate seeds take about a month to sprout. A plastic bag creates a humid environment, assisting them in germinating faster. I tried this. To my surprise, five started to poke their heads through the soil after one week. Several followed soon afterwards. The arils with the flesh were the last to appear, but they made it through eventually.

How does something so small muster up the strength to lift off the earth? How does it know to search for the sun? Seeds are kernels of knowledge, holding hundreds of thousands of years of information inside them. Do they remember where they came from or the empires that stepped on their soils? Do they remember the shades of blue in the Mediterranean Sea or the Atlantic Ocean?

The dirt is packed and pressed firmly on top of the seeds and drenched with water, giving it weight. So much weight, I wonder how a little thing like that could ever escape. But days

pass and the dirt begins to float above the sprout like a fluff, a cloud in the sky. It pushes further and further. Soon it arises, gracefully to my eye, tangled in a muddy mess.

Lines

I am brought towards Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology*. Here she discusses the difference between being orientated "toward" versus "around" something. When we are orientated toward something we are facing it; it extends the body's reach and defines what we can "have" and "do". It defines our possessions and capabilities. In contrast, that which we are orientated around is at the centre of our being and action. The thing you are orientated around will consequently orientate you toward certain objects. And so, the thing you are orientated around then becomes binding; the self is constituted as *that thing*.³

I think about this in relation to the diasporic body. Ahmed gives examples of being orientated around writing, which guides us toward the table, and cartography as it guides us toward the Orient – further connecting the two etymologically and conceptually. I imagine that diaspora is also a "thing" which we can be orientated around, not just on a philosophical level, but also socially and politically, and that diasporic bodies are constituted as such, are bound by and embody diaspora. When one is orientated around diaspora, one is directed toward certain objects that become markers of diasporic identity. It could be a number of tangible things, such as the clothes one wears or the memoirs that fill one's home. The object becomes a "thing" that binds to diasporic identity. The question for me then is this: how do we ensure that this binding towards and embodiment of diaspora is not a limitation to one's identity?

I'm interested in the objects that diaspora directs my family toward. Aside from apricots, there were four other fruits that my family incessantly gathered and feasted upon throughout my childhood. Figs, sweet limes, fresh dates, and pomegranates. They are moved toward these fruits because they have come to constitute a key component of their identity as diasporic beings. These fruit function as binders for diasporic identity. Ahmed discusses

³ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 109 – 116.

binding objects through personal narratives and references Divya Tolia-Kelly. In my view, it is not only about the migration of bodies but also of fruit. For Ahmed as well, objects scatter along with the scattering of bodies into spaces. The objects are lines of connection to homes that were once inhabited, but are now no longer. Thus, the objects embody these homes in the diasporic imaginary. However, for Tolia-Kelly, the objects are not meant to take one “back” to a long lost place, but rather, shape and form new hybrid meaning and make new identities possible.⁴ I agree with Tolia-Kelly, but it is also worth noting that bringing such objects into the home can be practiced in an attempt to return to a place that one longs for. But these objects never do that. The objective fails. The body is brought to a new place of perpetual longing marked by the hybridity of the two spaces.

This complicates Ahmed’s configuration of being orientated around things and subsequently towards objects, because by being brought *back* to the space of longing, the objects redirect us toward the thing. Diaspora not only orients us towards certain objects, but those objects orient us towards diaspora. There is push and pull between thing and object. The cause and effect relationship in this orientation is circular, moving back to and between object and thing as the orientating mechanism. The ways in which we become orientated towards the space of longing are manifold.

Does the placement of a Persian rug in a Canadian home create hybridity? Homes in the diaspora can be replicated to reproduce what one’s home would have looked like before diaspora, an impulse incited by the trauma of loss and production of longing. If we are to actively understand and create hybridized versions of ourselves that allow multiple pasts to converge, a negotiation with this space of longing must occur. For how can we claim that our identity is truly hybridized if we constantly battle between the past and the present? At what point do we allow them to settle together?

⁴ Divya Tolia-Kelly, “Locating Processes of Identification: Studying the Precipitates of Re-Memory through Artefacts in the British Asian Home,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 29, Issue 3 (2004): 314-29, quoted in Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 148-150.

Fruit

My family purchases fresh golden dates when they are in season, typically for a short amount of time towards the end of the summer. Two years ago I began drying and cataloguing the date seeds by collecting them in a bag and writing which day they were consumed on. After a short while, I stopped, but kept them and thought about them every so often, letting the idea germinate.

Last winter I revisited this with a fleeting sense of curiosity. The fruit came back to me. Dates were not in season, but pomegranates certainly were, so for this exploration I used that as my fruit of choice. After deseeding the fruit, I decided to keep the discarded remains, dry them, and catalogue them – just as I had with the date seeds – still unsure why, and all the while wondering what the purpose behind this truly was.

It wasn't until I performed the deseeding that I realized I was enacting what I had tacitly learned at an affective, preconscious level. Here I was, reproducing an act that is central to the identity of many who live in the diaspora: to preserve and uphold a precious remain from the past.

There are a number of methods that can be engaged within the act of deseeding alone. Through discussions I've had while performing this action, I learned that it is possible to open a pomegranate simply by throwing it against a wall. Others use a knife to slice it all the way through, either in half or in quarters. One individual told me that as a result of their impatience, they simply smash the fruit on the counter and squeeze the juice out into a glass and drink it, rather than actually eating the seeds.

I understood how to deseed a pomegranate by watching my grandmother do it. First, the top part is scored by a knife, which is then peeled off. After that, the skin on the pomegranate is scored vertically to separate the flesh into four or five pieces, and it should crack open and separate to create a flower-like shape. Each side is then peeled off the fruit and the seeds are carefully removed from the flesh and collected in a bowl, where they can later be eaten

with a spoon – something I enjoyed thoroughly as a child, after patiently waiting for my grandmother to complete the deseeding.

In consciously examining the process of deseeding, other discoveries were made, and the repetition of this act unravelled many of the expectations that surrounded it. There is a great deal of inconsistency in the aesthetics of the pomegranate. Formally, its size, shape, and colour can vary a fair bit. A variety of Israeli pomegranates from Shoham, for example, are incredibly large, while US pomegranates tend to be quite small. Though they are all generally circular in shape, some are much more rounded out, while others are slightly flatter at the top and on the sides. The peel itself ranges from a deep red with magenta undertones to bright pink, or even a pale coral. Similarly, the seeds are often reddish, but sweeter varieties yield light pink or even white seeds. One would assume that the taste is most central to the fruit as an edible object, yet this varies on a greater level than any other aspect of the pomegranate. The only true consistency found is in the way the object sounds when the skin is scored, peeled back, and the seeds are cracked off the flesh. Their resonation as they fall into the bowl is always the same. Central to the sound is the action of deseeding itself, catalyzed by the hands that activate the sounds that echo through time.

Loss

Preservation is a way to maintain precious remains from the past. It is also a way of resisting erasure. Preservation is a way of replicating the same contained experience again and again. But it shifts and reforms itself through every repetition, against our will.

Cathy Caruth is reflecting on Freud and I'm peeling back the layers of myself as I read.⁵ Repetition happens in specific ways in the post-traumatic life. The very events surrounding the *survival* of a tragedy are the most difficult to leave behind. And that which cannot be left behind re-emerges to haunt. Sometimes repetition is masked as tradition, custom, or norm.⁶ It is passed down and inherited.

⁵ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 64-65.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 69-73.

Somehow the haunting of the traumatic memory of survival is born out of this repetition. Freud calls this traumatic neurosis, noting that those who suffer from this are more concerned with *not* thinking of the trauma.⁷ Not thinking of it isn't the same as not recalling it, but instead alludes to the fact that the loss and the events around it are not addressed, grieved, or mourned.

Survival means that the survivor has a possibility for a future, against the fact that others do not. My great-grandparents survived a war. Their stories were told endlessly. My parents then survived several more wars, while watching one after the other unfold, the events mediated by a screen, in the corner of their Hamilton living room, somehow safe and unharmed from possibilities of what could have been. Despite the fact that the voyeurism of the violence incited against these individuals functioned within the comforts and safety of a home, this echoed past and present losses of their own. Repetitive remembering and reminders can incite the inadvertent preservation of trauma, across generations.

Elsewhere, Freud writes of a repetition that can allow one's repressed memories to be worked through and brought into consciousness with the help of a psychoanalyst.⁸ But repetition has the potential to reach this point of consciousness particularly as it becomes re-inherited through subsequent generations. This is not to say that there is no new trauma, and often there is, and often it is linked to experiences from ancestral pasts. But the new distance from the initial source of trauma formed by generational gaps creates the possibility for a transformation to be undertaken. That which is so vehemently preserved slowly begins to peel away.

December 28, 2017

In 2015 I worked with a collection of Carl Beam's pieces at a summer job. Beam was a survivor of Garnier Residential School in Spanish Ontario. He never openly discussed his

⁷ Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," (1920) in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 51.

⁸ Freud, "Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through," (1914) in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 33-34.

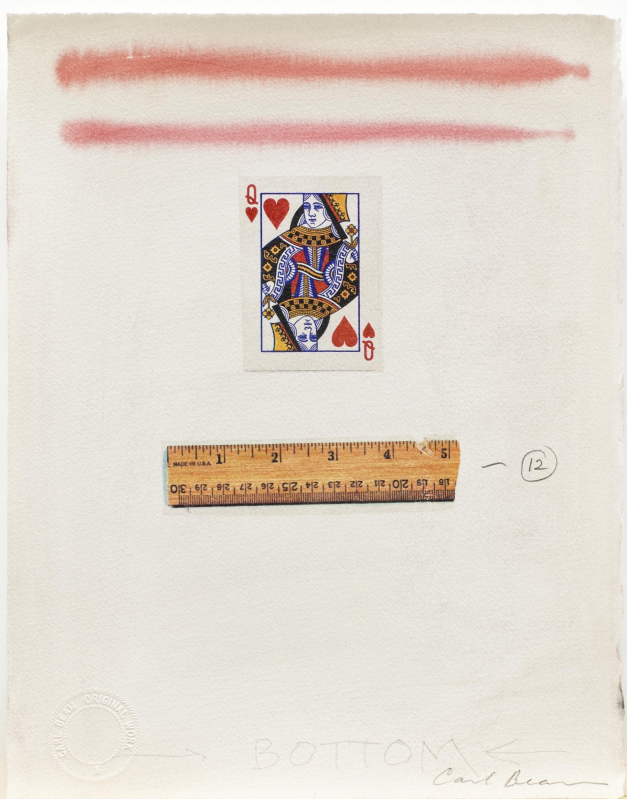
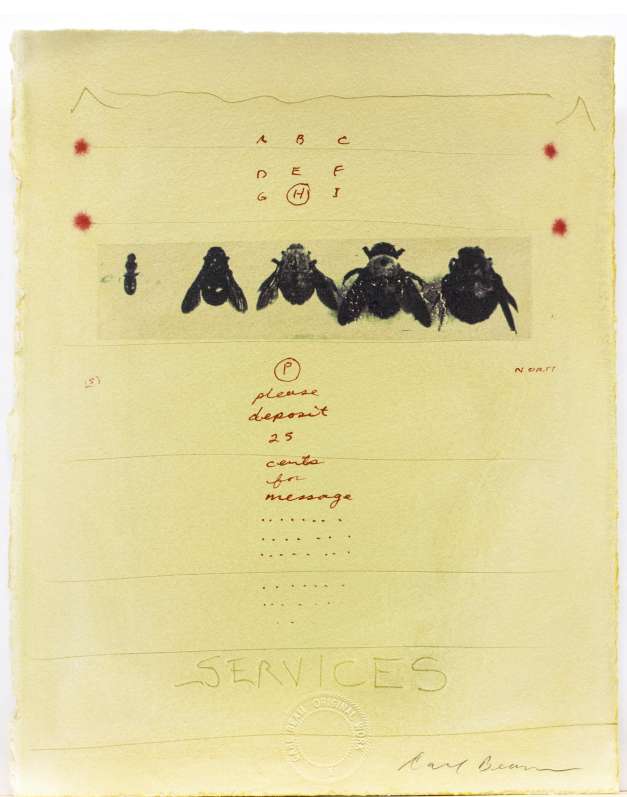
suffering in his work. Instead, one would infer it by his apt rejection of linearity and colonial narratives.⁹ I often admire the post-structuralist sentiments he conveyed.

Deciphering each work felt like an intellectual puzzle, and the layers behind every element peel back endlessly. The pastel washes on rag paper forge a mysterious dreamscape of a collection of stamps, cards, newspaper clippings, found images, and handwritten texts to coalesce, revealing a little window into his psyche (Images 1-4).

I imagine that Beam had in fact been discussing his trauma all along, but we are not used to recognizing “discussions” outside of verbal contexts. He may have been working through his grief, piece by piece, understanding how to re-present his past and underline the systemically omitted history of violence. The numerous references in his collages caused spaces and time periods to dissolve in and out of one another. It didn’t have to be explicit, because the eerie sense of his work relayed it anyway.

While viewing his pieces, my own life marked by lines and systems started to make sense under a colonial banner. I remembered the emphasized importance of drafting, designing, and engineering in the career prospects of the men in my family. Thinking further back to my ancestral origins, this hadn’t appeared to be so important prior to the colonial development sweeping across the globe. But suddenly the British came and brought their plans with them. Though I’ve heard stories of abuse inflicted upon refugees who resided in camps facilitated by the British, they still managed to whip the population into obedience. Many of those same refugees, caught in a state of tragedy, unsurprisingly took the jobs offered to them. But while Beam’s work aided my understanding of my own history, it couldn’t compare to the violence of Canadian settler-colonialism.

⁹ Ryan Rice, “States of Beam,” *Canadian Art* 23, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 121-122.



Images 1-4: Carl Beam, *Untitled* series, year unknown. Photos: Grimsby Public Art Gallery.

Fruit

Migration manifests in a myriad of ways, but what “sticks” is what defines how you will behave and function in your new society. My parents fill their shopping carts with what are commonly known as “exotic” fruits, but for them they are familiar, they hope. They are searching for that unforgettable taste they’ll never quite know again, but somehow know when it’s not the right amount of sweet, bitter, or sour. Exotic often seems to equate to expensive. Even when a sale hits, the price drop isn’t enough for most but for them the price of return is never too high.

Nana is thumbing through some flyers. “Nedda, are these figs?” Yes, they are. Nana can’t read but she remembers the visuals of grocery store signs and asks me to confirm which one it is. “Cheap! I’m going to get a couple of boxes.” She actually means I’m going to get them, or my mother, or my father, next time one of us goes out.

Sweet limes don’t make it to Canada until the new millennium, and they are found in an Arab grocery store in Mississauga called *Aswaq al-Mona*. I’m around twelve years old. I don’t understand what the big deal is because those limes aren’t actually sweet at all. They’re bitter, worse than grapefruit. And they buy so many – 30? 40? I can’t even count. They fill an entire drawer in the fridge and then some. Nana excitedly peels back a lime every day. She rushes into my room with a small bowl of sweet lime slices, hands it over to me with two words: “*Ha*, eat.” Why does it seem like I’m the only one eating them? I am sick of this fruit and cannot fathom why anyone would want to eat such a bitter citrus. I refuse. I try passing it off to my parents, but they reiterate her words. I put it back in the fridge but she catches me. I find a way around the bitterness by pulling the membrane off and only consuming the flesh. She catches me again! “Why aren’t you eating the skin? That’s where all the nutrients are.” And so she lectures me about the health benefits of bitter foods. I am a very irritated twelve year-old.

November 8, 2017

What happens when preservation is melded with transformation? When parts of something remain intact and others change?

For Basil AlZeri the pantry is a site of resistance. Preserving, pickling, and fermenting foods prolong their life and allows those with the knowledge of how to preserve food to take agency over their consumption.

I find pickling and fermentation to be interesting forms of preservation. These are processes that require a physical and chemical change so that the produce can remain edible. Several things are altered here. While the form may be similar, incision is often required for practical reasons – dividing the fruit into slices, halves, quarters – and sometimes for successful fermentation results. The colour itself loses vibrancy, usually dulling out to a yellower tone. What was once sweet, savoury or bitter is often drunk in the sour acidity of vinegar.

Basil says that he views these acts as resistance to the consumerist society we live in, constantly reliant on ready-made, store-bought foods that we could easily prepare ourselves if we knew how. Crops could be grown in our backyards, harvested, and preserved for longevity. As a Palestinian with family living in Gaza, for him this also parallels the resistance against the occupation. And for them, life under the Israeli occupation means that food scarcity is a lived reality, making food preservation a part of survival. Time is invested in the process of pickling and fermenting, locking something from the past in a preserved state to be prepared for a daunting future when it will be needed. Through preservation they find their way into the present.

I'm at a performance-lecture where he is discussing all of this, but I see more than resistance. He is sharing his ideas, cultural exchanges, and food with a group of individuals (Images 5-6). His understanding of food preservation from North American, European, and Middle Eastern perspectives is passed on to the audience. His experimentations in these

cuisines are fed to us. We are nourished. Is it empowering and inspiring others to do the same? I'm not sure. But it is a kind and generous gesture.¹⁰



Images 5-6: Basil AlZeri, *The Most Prized of All Closets*, November 8, 2017. Photos: Museum of Contemporary Art – Toronto.

Process

I score against the flesh with my knife, trying not to cut too deep but at times the pressure of the blade punctures the seeds out between the cracks and they're gasping for air, surfacing centuries of taste and texture locked away in fibrous shells. I wedge the knife this way and that way, cracking the skin apart where my past, their past, another past long passed lies. The cracks are always the same but the body is different. I peel the flesh open and hundreds of stories are waiting to fall apart.

¹⁰ Basil AlZeri, "The Most Prized of All Closets" (presentation, The Art of Propagation – Monthly Performative Speaker Series at Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, Toronto, ON, November 8, 2017).

Loss

Though the common presumption is that longing is definitive, the potential for hybridity to be born from loss is present. The space of longing is not terminal. It is liminal. But like the process of orientation, the process of hybridization is circular too. How can we instead generate a space of critical distance between ourselves and the affective objects of ancestral longing? Does repetition cultivate distance or does it steep us further into melancholy? If we come to view these objects as invitations to interact and manipulate, it is possible that through play we can understand the affects they mobilize, and by engaging deeply, create a distance from which they can be better understood.¹¹

For Ahmed, diaspora is a disorientation with regard to the larger nation-state. But perhaps a queer orientation is a disorientation within the conventional diasporic experience. These disorientations and queer orientations are often a result of the lived experience of moving through life queerly, of not subscribing to the dominant narrative. Yet queer orientations and queer desires are misaligned with conventional diasporic desires. To move through diaspora queerly would be to complicate both national and local narratives. Perhaps by playing with the affects of desire that are repudiated in diaspora we are able to explore possibilities of becoming otherwise.

Fruit

Pomegranates can't be picked off a tree in the backyard or on the street. In the West, these fruit are a commodity with a hefty price tag. But they've travelled thousands upon thousands of miles, all the way here, just to land in my mouth.

I find a parallel in the way that these fruits – colloquially deemed “exotic” – are also in a state of diaspora as a result of their migration through imports and exports. But while they are meant to serve as a reminder of a family history situated in Iraq, the fruits we consume in Canada today do not share the same country of origin. Pomegranates are often imported

¹¹ This idea is loosely derived from play theory. For more on play theory, see the work of D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005).

from Israel and Peru. It is difficult to trace anything beyond this basic information. Where exactly is the fruit grown? How is it cultivated? Who is cultivating it? What are the labour conditions surrounding its production?

The connections that are expected to exist in these fruit are not there, and the associations that I have discovered are conversely unexpected. When so many links to those memories and the way they function as a binder in diasporic identity fall apart, what remains?

(Re)turning

My family is native to northwest Iran as far back as I can trace. But the genocide and their dispersal into Iraq permanently changed our relationship to this origin.

Perhaps I've internalized some behaviour I learned from my family. They resist Iran. In the Assyrian community, they will always be "Urmians". Despite migration, the Urmi dialect of the Syriac language stuck and we still speak it today. It was difficult for Persian subjects and their children to receive Iraqi citizenship. That stuck too. When the Iran-Iraq conflict was looming, their homes were searched, despite the fact that they had no relationship to Iran anymore, lest they be spies. Resentment grew, but never toward the place they achingly wanted to belong to. Resentment grew towards Iran. They pushed back further.

Embodying her mother's fit of rage with every utterance, my grandmother recounts all the memories of her father, Youash, seated in their Habbaniya home saying, "I'm going to return to Iran." Nana Panna retorted every time. "What are you going to do there? Go. I'm not coming with you." His endless persistence was forever met with her dismissive irritation. Her head would jerk sharply from left to right, her hand slicing the air in half as she slung the rejection towards him. With only a fraction of effort his wife released, he would bemoan a simple "fine, don't come, but I'm going." He never went.

Undoing

Hands are the common thread. They make, they do. They activate. Hands that feed the mouth, hands that raise banners, hands that design and plan and construct. The sensibility and tactility is irrevocably constant.

Fruit

Collecting, preparing, and consuming fruit was often an ordeal. Stories were told and retold throughout the process. Often, this was a memory of how different the fruit looked in Iraq, how much better the taste was, how ubiquitous the trees were, and how easy it was to cultivate. Sometimes, the storytelling was much more detailed, and the fruit served as a backdrop for a multitude of memories of an irretrievable past to unfold.¹²

These fruits evoke a sense of nostalgia for my family. Some days it seems as though it's simply about the desire to eat something that is familiar and satisfying. In other moments, especially when the news is particularly bad that day, the nostalgia deepens. At one point in its etymological history, the word "nostalgia" was used to reference a serious medical condition or illness.¹³ Somehow, the homesickness never seems to find a place to rest.

But my nostalgia is muddled. I'm not sure if it's even there, and if it is, then I don't know what for.

Shapes

My grandfather was a draftsman both in Kirkuk and Hamilton. I elected myself to inherit his drafting stencils, found in a plastic bag in some forgotten corner of our basement, and used them often when doodling. The shapes seemed like fun, and a shortcut for averting my unskilled line work at the time. I was a child, my hands still unrefined.

¹² Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* (2016), 109.

¹³ George Rosen, "Nostalgia: a 'Forgotten' Psychological Disorder," in *Psychological Medicine* 5, no. 4 (1975): 340–54.

It took me years to understand the trouble contained in those formulaic lines. He worked with the British since the age of 14 for the Iraqi Petroleum Company, commonly known as the IPC. He had a good job, I was always told, and took that statement for what it was.

Behind the post-9/11 cynical remarks — “*all they want is oil*” – was a history entrenched in this idea. European colonizers suspected a great wealth of oil to be seeping under the surface under the Mesopotamian earth from the late 19th century. Once it was found, the British began to dig up and drill through the dirt, planting pipelines, extracting, exporting. Unsurprisingly, the IPC headquarters were in London, and Iraq saw very little profit from their operations. And my Grandfather aided them in this mission. And it was a good job.

In this moment I look back to Audre Lorde. *The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.*¹⁴ What victory did these tools achieve for my grandfather? He was a successor of genocide survival, rummaged out of the rubble and brought into the opportunity of a new life. He acquired the literacy of the ubiquitous English language and a trade skill. These tools helped him become a successful provider. But they could not save him from intergenerational traumas, the pressures to uproot himself, the destruction of his home, and the loss of language, family, identity, and self.

Though Lorde’s essay criticizes white feminism and the patriarchy, her words resonate elsewhere. To simply reapply the same tools would provide short-term gains and eventually repeat and reinforce their control. But I wonder how to claim the history of his tools for myself. To play with them, manipulate and transform them into something for my own undertaking. To design my own trajectories, structures, and merge those markings of pain into a recreation of something that can retain those traces while retracting their repression.

¹⁴ Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master’s House,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 110-114.

Desire

What if we don't belong to the earth? What if we are rooted in something more transient, such as a pot? Baba taught me that repotting plants is vital to their growth. If they remain in the same container forever, their roots start to grow around the edges, eventually choking themselves to death. So it is best to transfer them into something bigger where they can find more space to expand. Or, the roots can be gently snipped at the edges with a knife, stimulating regrowth.

I think it is like this for diasporic subjects. Moving with the vessel risks constriction of the self. This necessitates uprooting and rerouting.

Here I remember Rinaldo Walcott. Poetic as it may be to imagine that my origins are entrenched in some other place beckoning for my return, still, my roots do not define me. Iraq and Iran are not central to my being. They are but one moment in the production of my postcolonial self.¹⁵

(Re)turning

I am harkened back to Sara Ahmed, who theorizes about the political economy of desire in relation to othered bodies. The desire to possess and occupy others shapes them into objects of desire and they are subsequently used as resources for worldmaking. The slave trade is a good historical example of this.¹⁶ But what comes to mind for me is something closer to home. I think of the ways in which my great-grandparents were stripped of their homes during genocide and simultaneously saved yet also possessed by the British. Salvation and possession. There is a thin barrier between the two. They do not necessitate one another but they often meld into one. That is, salvation becomes contained by possession. The barrier breaks down and is rebuilt as a cage.

¹⁵ Rinaldo Walcott, "Pedagogy and Trauma: The Middle Passage, Slavery, and the Problem of Creolization," in *Between Hope and Despair: Pedagogy and the Remembrance of Historical Trauma*, ed. Roger I. Simon, Sharon Rosenberg, and Claudia Eppert (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000), 146.

¹⁶ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 115.

I don't know exactly how it happened. Nana tells me they were marched down to Habbaniya by the British. "We're going to take you back to your homeland," they said, referring to Iraq as the home of the long-before-fallen Assyrian Kingdom.

She says they didn't want to leave, but that they were forced. Forced out of persecution, but also forced by the British. I've read that the persecuted communities were given word to meet them in the Hamadan province of Persia.¹⁷ I don't know the distance but I've checked it on Google Maps. From Urmia to Hamadan they walked 319 miles and then another 384 to Habbaniya.

That direction – "to your homeland" – stuck so much that they truly believe to this day that they were taken back to their site of origins by some work of fate. They were directed at once towards their past and their future. Reorientated or returned?¹⁸ Who knows. My family is convinced that it is the latter. I am sceptical, or perhaps I just don't care. I have no pride to place in an origin.

They were used by the British as resources. Working for them under their command, enduring their systematization, patronization and unruly abuse. My great-grandparents assisted them in their colonial worldmaking. Salvation is a benefit to imperialism. Loss of indigeneity, confusion around nativity. The question becomes, *nativity to where?* Minoritized positions in new places breed weakness in a people – the diasporized – and strength in another. Dispossession makes it easier to draw out the desired cartographic lines on the map and make them adhere.

Fruit

How do these fruits create or elicit memories for me? How do they make me feel more or less connected to my family history? In the preparation and feeding of fruit, as well as the telling of stories in association with these activities, an act of transmission – of their

¹⁷ R.S. Stafford, *The Tragedy of the Assyrians* (London: George & Allen Unwin Ltd, 1935), 33.

¹⁸ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 2004.

memories, experiences, and desires – passes from my family to me.¹⁹ There was a point in the past where I felt as though we actually shared the same memories of the same place. But as my current practices in repetitive play with ancestral objects continue to undo the assumptions I had about this fruit, so too had repetition, over the years, collapsed my pseudo-nostalgia. My memories are not of a distant place, but instead, I am reminded of the Arab food marts, the vivid yellow kitchen in my Hamilton home, my grandmother's worn and tired hands, the grooves and crevices in the cutlery, and the bright pastels of the plastic bowls.

In using performance, I repeat the act of transmission outside of the home, in strange settings that subvert it as a method of sharing and relaying memory. Unlike my grandmother, I don't discuss memories as a place I wish to return to. Instead, through the creation of a setting where anyone can sit across from me and engage while I prepare a bowl of fruit with care, a conversation about the implications that this history has on the present can emerge.

I don't know how to determine the effects of this, and the answers may not reveal themselves immediately. Can it become a generative act that incites a deeper understanding amongst audience members? At the very least I see that something can be discovered in the act of sharing, and that new relationships can be formed, fleeting as they may be.

Shapes

Objects that stand in as affective placeholders for spaces of diasporic longing offer the possibility of transformation through repetitive and tactile interaction. I am reminded again of what Tolia-Kelly and Ahmed wrote about objects in diasporic homes. The shaping and forming of hybrid identity does not simply happen by situating an object from one's past within their present home. To allow something to continuously re-enter daily life in its preserved state is simply the traumatic repetition of loss. Hybridity is an active (in)conclusion that we must reach, again and again, as we continue to undo assumptions about ourselves and our origins. A process of continuous reorientation.

¹⁹ Freud, "Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through" (1914), 33.

But these objects don't have to simply sit in one spot, perched up in a corner, or remain on view in a neatly preserved fashion. For me, it is repetitive play that creates the necessary distance from ancestral objects and allows hybridity to form. Distance, not as in abandonment, but distance that is far enough to allow one to be critical of the object's binding power to identity. These tactile processes of repetition can become templates for an experience with the understanding, and undoing of the affects that these objects carry. Guides for navigating a postcolonial diaspora with a subjectivity that makes sense idiosyncratically. Guides that allow us to bend and break our paths to our liking. Guides that invite us to interact, to mould, to work with their structure as we work through melancholy. Each template exists in a multifarious network of other frameworks. They are ever shifting. Their impermanence is key. If it weren't for their deconstructable nature, they would replicate the same rigid structures that indefinitely oppress. But the tools can be appropriated and adapted for new possibilities. The objects are able to become something otherwise, or other than, through playful manipulations and re-renderings. Every template for how to transform ourselves is, in itself, mid-transformation.

Conversations

Denise, an artist from Chile, now living in Toronto, is sitting across from me while I deseed a pomegranate for her. She wants to know about my project. We get to the topic of increasing pomegranate imports from Peru and something clicks for her.

"You know, it's funny, but pomegranates grow all over Chile and nobody even notices them. They're everywhere, on streets, campuses, but I never even tried pomegranates until I came to Canada." I listened carefully, silently searching for an explanation but could not find one. It didn't make sense to either of us. People all across the Middle East and Asia see them everywhere and consume them. Why wouldn't it be the same for Chileans?

I learned later that the many South Americans have no relationship to the pomegranate outside of colonial conquest. They were first brought to Spain through the silk roads. During

the European colonial era, the Spanish would plant them in the countries they colonized as a way of marking their conquest.²⁰

Three months pass and I see Chilean pomegranates at the Food Basics on Dupont and Lansdowne. There's another market that has now been tapped into, supplying our gluttonous overconsumption of everything.

Paths

Iran betrayed them. The British saved them. Iraq welcomed them. I imagine their pale faces kissed by the stinging sun with every step along rocks, grass, mud, and sand. I imagine the earth hugging their feet, releasing aches and tensions along what was too cruel to be called a journey. This place understood that. At times the wind was too strong but it knew to dry the sweat off their backs. I imagine tree shrubs, flowers and fruits they'd never seen before or saw a hundred times in their gardens. They were not home. They were somewhere they'd always longed to be.

This is the impression I got. I grew older. I listened more intently. Most survivors died of typhus along the way. But these eight only drank tea and ate bread, realizing that even a sip of fresh, unboiled water could put them in harms way. Every fallen figure along the way traced a line of movement. The sweltering sun burned their bruises deeper into their flesh, their scars stinging against every droplet of sweat. Memories of lives lost before one's eyes pounded heavy hearts with heavy steps on thirsty, rock-hard sand with nothing to give.

June 30, 2017

On the day before Canada's 150th anniversary, we decided to take to the streets with some printouts and tape. An Anti-Canada 150 Poster Pack was being circulated on the web,

²⁰ Damien Stone, *Pomegranate: A Global History* (Islington: Reaktion Books, 2017), 83.

calling people to collective action.²¹ The author invites audiences to print a stack of readymade posters and plaster them across the walls of our respective communities, providing Canadians with an alternate view of what Canada 150 is celebrating: *Indigenous genocide, ongoing land theft, colonial violence, and white supremacy*.

Knowing that preparations for Canada Day festivities were at their height in Queens Park, Julia and I mainly postered in the park's surrounding areas. We didn't realize at the time how many police officers would be pacing the grounds. As deradicalized as public action may feel now that we are in the era of legally authorized protests, some things still retain the slightest hint of taboo. Plastering anti-colonial messages on Sir John A. Macdonald's monument was one of them. His figure, erected firmly at the front of Queens Park, stood before us as an effigy to be toyed with. We were tempted.

Julia and I looked out for the authorities, waiting until they walked in the other direction.

"Quick! People are watching..."

From the corner of College and University, we approached steadfast, hurriedly applied the flyers onto the monument's plinth, and immediately ran. I wondered how long they would last before being torn down.

Longing

The serendipity in Nana's green thumb never ceases to amaze me.

When I am curious about her habits and doings, she engages me in every way she possibly can. Upon discovering that I was taking interest in my family's plant collection, she excitedly told me all about the little garden she has been growing on the windowsill above the kitchen sink. Everything she grows tends to take her by surprise. At times, it truly seems as though she throws something in the dirt and hopes for the best. Part of the surprise is in the

²¹ Anonymous Contributor, "Anti-Canada 150 Poster Pack," *It's Going Down*. June 13, 2017. <https://itsgoingdown.org/anti-canada-150-poster-pack/>.

production of what is often, for her, an experiment. Other times, she is simply bewildered by the beauty of a sprouting seed and new life coming into being.

Not a day goes by in my grandmother's life where she is not concerning herself with grand affairs, whether it's the political conditions of the Middle East, or a Bible verse detailing the end of times. But education for women was scarce during her childhood in Iraq, and as a result, she often laments on her illiteracy and confinement in the home, wondering where she could have been in life if she had the privilege to attend school.

I can tell she's having one of those moments again, where her excitement curves down into doubt. The gardening is enjoyable, but at times, feels meaningless. She turns around suddenly, placing the pots back on the windowsill. "Ah, what do I know," she says. "I have fun with them."

Conversations

Zahra, who quickly became a new friend of mine, took the time to sit with me while I was deseeding pomegranates at the Gladstone Hotel as part of *Come Up To My Room*. I had just met her the day before and we happened to be in the same group show together. Her two-channel video work, titled *Asabi*, was centred on the word in the title: a gendered Arabic and Farsi term for a woman who is nervous or irritable.²² In one channel, she moulded the word out of clay and melded it with ink using a hammer, smashing the clay into blackened pieces. The other channel displays a visual re-enactment of the gendered act of scrubbing and washing dirt away. Only in this frame, it was the black ink that the subject attempted to remove (Image 7). I first heard about the process of play therapy from Zahra, which she built on to encompass her theorization of clay therapy, a process that is visualized in this work.

We discussed memory, belonging, diasporic grief, and the survival mechanisms our parents use to shun the pain of their loss. I found myself wondering if we knew what it was that we were grieving. Was it our own grief, or was it inherited?

²² Zahra Komeylian, *Asabi*, 2017. Video Installation.

“I remember when my family and I used to go for hikes outside of Tehran, further into the countryside. The earth felt *different*. The trees. The grass. All of it. It was so beautiful.” I was surprised that she could recall this memory so vividly, for Zahra left Iran at the age of six.

She told me she decided to live in Iran for six months to work on a new project. She didn’t know what yet, but she had thoughts stirring, and mentioned that one of her ideas was to create a piece for her father in an attempt to resolve some of his longing and pain. He hasn’t been to Iran since he left. But when I asked, “what about *your* grief?” I found that I was simultaneously asking myself the same question.

“It’s so weird, but I have a hard time thinking of it in my own terms.” And I knew what she meant. We both understood that feeling.



Image 7: Zahra Komeylian, *ASABI IV: Untitled* (Video Still), 2018. Photo: <https://zahrakomeylian.com/ASABI-IV>

March 10, 2018

I come across Jacques Villeglé’s *décollages*. As a French New Realist, his practice consists of torn posters from Parisian streets in the 1960s.²³ Villeglé would search for wheat-pasted

²³ Joseph Nechtaval, “The Poetics of Torn Posters,” *Hyperallergic*, April 21, 2016, <https://hyperallergic.com/294237/the-poetics-of-torn-posters/>.

posters on the sides of buildings that were torn by passersby. He would then appropriate collective collaging by tearing off the layered hoards of posters, framing them, and presenting them in a gallery (Image 8). These posters battle the same space for opposing reasons. On one hand, they may be advertisements, reflective of a dominant commercialized popular culture. Or, they may be political posters, a subculture of resistance infiltrating the very thing they are plastered over or beside (Images 9-10).

I wonder what those tears in the paper meant to each person who took part in this public process. Could it have been the impulse to destroy out of distaste for the poster's message? A violent refusal. Or an urge to tear apart a lifted corner, a more primal impulse towards the satisfaction of peeling back a layer. An unconscious meditation with an inviting object, begging for attention and interaction. A casual and momentary catharsis.



Left, Image 8: Photo of Jacques Villeglé by François Poivret, *Issy-les-Moulineaux*, 28 janvier 1991, 1991
Right, Image 9: Detail of Jacques Villeglé, *Rue Tourelles*, August 16, 1971, 1971.

Photos: <https://hyperallergic.com/294237/the-poetics-of-torn-posters/>



Image 10: 122 rue du temple, 1968.

Photo: https://www.moma.org/collection/works/35414?artist_id=6163

Loss

Baba doesn't garden the way he used to. I gave him my 5-week-old pomegranate seedlings to be kept under his care. I wouldn't be able to nurse them for two weeks as I was going away. All my life I would watch him take his plants into fruitful longevity, and I trusted him with my burgeoning plants.

His garden used to exude unparalleled beauty. But as time passed, twelve fig trees dwindled down to three, six tomato vines dried down to two, the cucumber vines withered down in size, the herbs vanished, the roses wilted. Now the garden is almost entirely bare.

I came back from my travels and found that some of my plants were missing. Eighteen seedlings turned to three, and even those three weren't going to make it in that thirsty pot.

"You killed my pomegranates. Why didn't you do something when you noticed them dying?"

“It wasn’t me, it was your Nana.”

“But I asked *you* to take care of them. Not Nana.”

The argument went on, but soon I realized there was no point. He was spent. I was holding up a fantasy of his expertise that he could no longer fulfill. I had to discover that my disappointment was not in him, but it was in the failure of something that I hoped would thrive. But it didn’t, and somehow I had to deal with it.

I didn’t know this until I read Rinaldo Walcott. We have to *risk failure*, he says.²⁴ There cannot be any hope to break the repetitive cycle of trauma without the risk involved in the process of moving through it. What experience was I trying to produce by growing these seeds? Perhaps this, too, was a repetition that needed disruption.²⁵

(Re)turning

The direction of the future is difficult to map. Here I remember Dionne Brand. She says *Cartography is description, not journey*.²⁶ Yet it is hard to describe when it is not yet carved out. It hasn’t been trampled with any footsteps.

Retracing footsteps isn’t always so smooth, either. Memory can be foggy. Perhaps at first the road back to a memory appears to be fairly linear. And so you try to walk back, but suddenly you’re veering off the side and the memory’s various pathways unfold. It was linear, you thought, but as you continued to revisit the line broke apart in different places. And in between those breaks grew space and each piece of the line grew further and further apart. Walking straight, you reach the point of incision and a cloud of smoke appears before you. You can’t cross yet, so you walk away.

But eventually, with repeated visits, the fog begins to clear. The path that you once thought was easily retraced is now winding through like a rollercoaster, leading you to make

²⁴ Walcott, “Pedagogy and Trauma” (2000), 150.

²⁵ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* (2016), 65.

²⁶ Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2001), 96.

unexpected discoveries about something that seemed so familiar, so knowable. A visit to the past proves itself to be more disorienting than expected.

Paths

Saturdays were for errands. My mother and grandmother always took me with them, and I begrudgingly, had no choice but to oblige. On Saturdays, I was bored out of my mind.

We hopped from store to store to ensure that the fridge was filled from a well-rounded haul. From the Farmer's Market downtown on York Boulevard to the Arab grocers on Concession Street and then back up the mountain to Fortinos on Mall Road, a short drive from where we lived. Fortinos was the most interesting. It's a grocery store for well-to-do folks, and so it was often the last stop after certain items at the other stores withered to perishability. And Fortinos was quite good at carrying the rare produce my parents wanted. Though it wasn't for us, I think, at least not deliberately. There was no hefty, welcoming, big-bellied man behind the counter to gesture and say, "we just received these dates the other day. Fresh!" But I moved through these spaces inadvertently. The clerks behind the counters were all strangers to me, regardless.

Every now and then people would tune into our speech but couldn't recognize a word of what we said. Usually an elderly person, like my grandmother, and often white, not like her. Except for the fact that she could pass as white if one were only looking and not listening. Light skin, auburn hair and hazel eyes blended in, but the tongue gave it away. I imagine this confused them more.

Eager ears and seemingly friendly faces came up closer to say, "where are you from?" My poor grandmother didn't know how embarrassed I was of her at the time, every time this happened.

"Iraq," she would respond, triumphantly.

“Oh, *Iraq*.” They were stunned, unsure of what to say. How could one word, one country, make someone so uncomfortable? It didn’t matter, anyway, that they didn’t have much to say, because Nana would just talk at anyone endlessly.

“Yeh. You see what dis Bush do, *sonomabitch*. No good. I don’ like America.” This is when I would cringe, wanting to disown myself from strings of broken English.

“Mmhmm. We don’t like America either. But Canada is great! Do you like Canada?” What smug bastards, using the American tyranny on Iraq to feel better about themselves.

“No. I don’ like. Here, why? Time come, I go in Iraq.”

That sent them off very quickly, and she caught on. “Dogs,” she would mutter in Syriac as they left, “they’re all the same.”

Conversations

Nicky, a freelance journalist and founder of the alternative media channel Creatives of Toronto, was looking for a video to record for some of the Gladstone’s promotional material when he decided to sit with me and have a bowl of pomegranates. We talked about food creating atmospheres of relationality, resistance culture, and my thesis. “What’s your thesis about?” he asked, and to my compacted, yet somehow still long-winded answer he responded with a chuckle: “sounds academic and scary.”

“Yeah, in some ways. But it’s also about those activist spaces, you know? When there’s a protest or vigil that concerns issues pertaining to people of colour, white people end up representing at least half the population present, if not more. And the people of colour who come out are usually youth.”

“That’s true, but I mean, it’s not really their responsibility to be there.” That struck me. It was the first time I had a view into what a white leftist truly thought of this lack of presence.

“You’re right, but that’s not why they don’t show up...in my experience, they’re avoiding and suppressing their emotions surrounding the event.”

Nicky acknowledged the reason I was proposing. He went on to tell me that this was why he felt it was most important to do journalist work in non-white activist spaces, to take responsibility and shoulder some of the burden that minoritized people have had to carry for

decades and centuries. In that sentiment, there was hope that the proliferation of their voices and representation would help their work to ease their own pain. Though my faith in representation isn't as strong, I hoped this was true as well.

Fruit

Growing up we would find fruit, usually rotten apples, smashed and exploded against the front door of our suburban Hamilton home.

Our next-door neighbours often held loud and rambunctious parties in the summer. The blaring sounds and belligerent, drunken howls erupted into my bedroom through the night, past midnight, nearly close to what felt like dawn, at times.

Their drinking continued throughout the day. The oldest son was in his teens and his friends seemed to always be over. Every so often we would catch their murmurs and their stares across the fence. This made me uncomfortable. Sometimes they threw slanderous comments at my grandmother. "Hey, grandma! What are you *saying*?" This, however, enraged me. This is how I stopped distancing myself from my perceived cultural otherness.

Eventually we realized that the smashing fruit probably came from our neighbours' company. *Sons of dogs*, my parents would mutter when cleaning the stains off the glass. I remember asking why we wouldn't call the police. "No! That will make it worse. They'll know we called and then harass us." They were probably right.

Lines

In my life, there were always two options for seemingly straight lines of direction, and neither felt quite right.²⁷ My conception of a "seemingly straight" line is one that appears to be right, as if it is "the way that should be followed". It is a paved path. It is accurate in some contexts but not others. That's why it seems straight, or is semi-straight, but not entirely.

²⁷ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 2004.

At home, that trajectory was supposed to look different than what culture and society at large, on a nation-wide scale, dictated it should be. The familial path instructed one to resist cultural influence from the West as much as possible, to retain as many aspects of traditional existence, as it informs gender, culture, and religion. I recall overhearing a friend of my father bragging about how “good” his daughter was, saying “she’s living just as if it’s Iraq in the 1950s.” His measure of how well she was fitting the mould he had envisioned for her was reflected against anachronistic standards of women’s obedience, unlike the values in the West, which he felt were unacceptable.

Conversely, the path of whitewashing assimilation dominates at the institutional level. Yet I still don’t believe institutional power marks acceptable normativity in this path. Though it may seem like the demand to succumb to the dominant culture holds more power politically, socially, and economically, it may not always hold the same effects socially, emotionally, and psychically at home and within minoritized communities. This micro-repulsion to the “straight” path adds a level of complexity that confuses those considering the two options, and reconsiders how we measure the acceptability of these options.

But I am not undermining the weight of the government-sanctioned, nationalist trail of absorption. It is a soft violence that subtly imposes erasure of non-Western cultures. Many will never follow it “correctly” no matter how hard they try, as a result of language barriers or physical features. For some, this trajectory is entirely inaccessible. But at this stage and in the multicultural fabric of Canada, the expected purpose for a person of colour is to be a “token minority”: visibly non-white but willing to contribute positively to the culture and economy, for the betterment and advancement of the nation. To move higher up in positions of power and parallel whiteness is acceptable insofar as it can be transformed into nationalist progress.

The problem with these two options is that neither can absolve diasporic subjects from their grief. The conventional path imparted by diasporic families is steeped in fixity, and in longing for what they wish to revive. The other skips over this altogether, attempting to naturalize the

self into the texture of the new nation. In my experience, diasporic subjects who choose to assimilate do so out of repulsion towards their previous country of citizenry. To move through diaspora queerly would be to reject these two paths and instead, form one that relinquishes the pressures and straddles their affects alongside the path of desire.

February 5, 2018

American artist Annette Lemieux's work appears before me. Her 1980s conceptual art and minimalist aesthetic still resonates, echoing into the present decades later. The contents of her pieces channel topics of great relevance to the times we live in now.

Left Right Left Right illustrates a collection of picket signs with found images of fists pumping into the air (Image 11). Originally created in 1995, this was meant to serve as a response to the divisive tensions of the Bill Clinton and Bob Dole presidential race. In 2016, the work found its way into the Whitney Museum, and upon hearing the news of the newly elected President Trump on November 9th, Lemieux requested that they flip the signs upside down (Image 12).²⁸

A year before *Left Right Left Right*, she created a visually similar piece titled *Hellos and Goodbyes*, a framed collage of hands waving greetings upon arrival and descent (Image 13). Working with appropriated images again, Lemieux flipped part of the images horizontally and inverted half of the photographs to produce a negative version of the positive image. The frames came together on a wall in an ovular shape.

²⁸ Andrea K. Scott, "New York Museums Signal Their Resistance to Trump," *The New Yorker*, February 17, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/new-york-museums-signal-their-resistance>.



Image 11: Annette Lemieux, *Left Right Left Right*, 1995. Photo: <https://hyperallergic.com/338783/in-response-to-trumps-election-artist-asked-the-whitney-museum-to-turn-her-work-upside-down/>



Image 12: *Left Right Left Right*, installed upside down, 2016. Photo: <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/new-york-museums-signal-their-resistance>

I find myself wondering: what do hands do here? How do they awaken and stir action and emotion? Maybe they gesture towards a certain movement, yet as images, they suspend a moment in time and bring it back into our present. But in attempting to connect the two pieces, grief seems to be a link. In mass demonstrations, we are protesting that which we are grieving. In *Hello and Goodbyes*, we are, in her words, grieving the greeting of 'goodbye'.²⁹ The loss of something or someone.



Image 13: *Hello and Goodbyes*, 1994.

Photo: <http://museemagazine.com/features/2017/9/25/current-feature-annette-lemieux>

Desire

There is another option. A road less traveled, traversed off the paved path. In landscape architecture, *desire lines* are the paths that form in earthly terrain after they've been crossed with enough footwork to form an impression in the landscape. This is how Sara Ahmed

²⁹ Annette Lemieux, "Annette Lemieux," interview by Steve Miller, *Musée Magazine*, no. 17 (September 2017): 148-163, <http://museemagazine.com/features/2017/9/25/current-feature-annette-lemieux>.

describes this option.³⁰ To deviate from the cemented roads is to reorient the self towards a line of desire.

I am thinking of some of Dina Georgis' writing in which I heard an echo of similar sentiments.³¹ The idiosyncratic process of moving through loss, or hatred of that loss, requires mourning. Looking at loss, rather than turning away from it. Perhaps through mourning we find a way to claim our differences. Yet the trouble is that without this, we are either marred by our differences, or we are attempting to ignore them. The trouble is that we are not troubling the conventional narratives of survival.

"We" isn't everyone, but it is a lot of us. My family. The community I grew up in. So many others who are diasporized. And when reading Judith Butler, I find this "we" extending further outwards. After 9/11, the Bush administration pushed for an end to melancholy, announced only ten days after the attack. Action was supposed to replace and erase grief.³² This is the danger of suppressing pain. It opens the door to a manifestation of violence, either towards the self or others. Strangely, this connects all too well. That same resistance to mourning can be both the cause and effect of diaspora.

Shapes

In my grandfather's collection of drafting stencils were three small metal sheets, nearly paper-thin. The difference was that though they looked like it, these were not stencils at all. Eraser shields, as they are formally known, are tools for containing erasure to one isolated spot on a larger draft, so as to avoid an eraser removing a line that is appropriately drawn. The shapes in the shield are often lines of varying thickness, sometimes curvatures or several sizes of circles.

I have thought of the ways that eraser shields parallel the systematic nature of a genocide. Targets are chosen based on aspects of their identity that interfere with the persecutor's

³⁰ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 19-20.

³¹ Georgis, "Cultures of Expulsion" (2006), 16-18.

³² Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2004), 29.

domineering vision of that space. They've been inserted into my practice – literally used to erase parts of images, and juxtaposed with textual examples of erasure.

But now I find myself wondering what they could *become*, or how they could become something *otherwise*. What if the shield is reformulated, stretching and melting downwards like rubber, losing its mechanical accuracies along the way? Could it bubble and swell outward, breathing the rigidly defined spaces in the plate further into abstraction? And this rebirthing of the shield makes it no longer a tool for erasure, it transforms into an apparatus.³³ A stencil that could carve out the crevices of desire. Can we choose to dwell in unassuming squiggles of a random order instead of a straight-edged cube? Perhaps corners can be replaced with curlicues, and walls can wash into waves.

Beginnings

To prescribe these movements to a contained circle – even that would be too dogmatic. The motion is circular. But the lines and pathways are fluid. They curve, they straighten out, they zigzag. But to imagine, construct, cut open and then tear apart. That circles back. Every time. And with every torn wound, a new possibility arises.

³³ Walcott, "Pedagogy and Trauma," (2000), 149.

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Appendix A: Installation Images

Images 14-20: *From Protests to Pomegranates*, installation shot, 2018. 187, Toronto.
Photos: Claire Harvie.







