

BEFORE YOU GO

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ABSTRACT

Before You Go is a 13-minute essay film exploring the relationship between immigration, memory, personal identity, and how it relates to a larger Canadian narrative.

Approaching this film using a hybrid process, *Before You Go* uses home video, old family correspondences, and actors to re-create and interact with moments that are written about in the letters.

While working to interrogate an often homogenized representation in the media of what it means to be Canadian, this film borrows its experimental form from the inherently fragmented, dispersed, and hybrid identities of immigrants.

DEDICATION

Dedicated to my family in Iran and in Canada.

To my father, for his unwavering support.

To my aunt, who lent me use of her letters.

And to my mother, who encouraged me to keep going when I wanted to give up.

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INTRODUCTION

What tethers me to my parents is the unspoken dialogue we share about how much of my character is built on the connection I feel to the world they were raised in but that I've only experienced through photos, visits, food. It's not mine and yet, I get it. First-generation kids, I've always thought, are the personification of *déjà vu*.

— Durga Chew-Bose, *Too Much and Not the Mood*

I've always been good at throwing things away. I've thrown out so many old pictures, so many passed notes, birthday cards, and artwork. In what is perhaps my only real life's regret, when I was twelve, I threw out all my diaries I had kept throughout elementary school.

And my memory betrays me all the time. I can't remember so much of the past. Things are blurry if they're there at all. I sometimes make jokes about it, like, thank god for my horrible memory. Details about ex-boyfriends are gone, or names of people I don't like. In some ways, forgetting is a blessing. But I also lose things I want to hold on to: my cousins' names, where my parents were born, my own language.

In "We Are All Third Generation", Margaret Mead writes that the second-generation immigrant in the United States:

. . . eats American, talks American, dresses American, he will be American or nothing. In making this way of life consistent, he inevitably makes it thin; the overtones of the family meal on which strange, delicious rejected European dishes were set, and about which low words in a foreign tongue wove the atmosphere of home, must all be dropped out. His speech has a certain emptiness: he rejects the roots of words — roots lead back and he is going forward — and comes to handle language in terms of surfaces and clichés. He rejects half of his life in order to make the other half self-consistent and complete. (227)

This is what I did for most of my life. I rejected my Iranian side. When my parents would get phone calls from Iran and my relatives would ask to speak to me, I would refuse. When my parents spoke to me in Farsi, I responded in English. I idolized my white friends and their families, wished for my nose to be smaller and skin to be lighter. I berated my mother for picking such a foreign name for me. In other words, I assimilated into Western culture. As Neda Maghbooleh suggests, “assimilation is a second-generation immigrant’s natural, reactionary response to being caught between conflicting familial and societal surroundings” (5).

In my mid-twenties I finally woke up. I didn’t know anything about my family. I didn’t know the names of uncles, or aunts; I didn’t know the year my parents were born. Or, everything I used to know I had forgotten. I felt an urgent need to remember, to learn, to document. I didn’t know how it happened that I knew so little. Did they never tell me? Did I never ask? Do other people know more about their parents and about their own families? Have they told me before and I’ve just forgotten? Did I throw this away as well? In fairness to myself, my parents never pushed the importance of knowing my own culture or language. They seemed happier to keep charging forward. All the stories about our family started after we left Iran. What is it about immigrant parents being so resistant to speak about their old lives?

This hybrid film is part of my journey of trying to unearth and gather the stories of my family, and in turn finding out more about myself. My choice to tell this story as a hybrid essay film is inspired by the hybrid identities of immigrants. In his article “The Queen’s English, Too: Queer Hybridity and the Autoethnographic Performance”, José Muñoz writes that “hybrid cultural works help make visible the mediations that attempt to render hybridity invisible and unthinkable” (5). This film documents my efforts to piece together an already fragmented and unreliable narrative—glued together by the memories of people who would rather forget.

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August 19, 2018

I'm in Iran right now. I've been here since the fifteenth. Today I'm going to Karaj to see dad's family. I'm spending the night.

It's been good so far but also emotional and taxing. My uncles keep talking about my weight the last time I was here.

I'm wondering why I wanted to come so much. I have this idea that meeting family and connecting with my roots is important but maybe it's just a fantasy I'm chasing. I wish I had known them all while growing up. I wish I didn't wait until my late twenties to stop rejecting my culture. I wish my Farsi was better.

Last night I had thoughts about leaving the MFA program. I feel better today. I'm worried none of the footage I get here will be any good. I won't have a thesis.

My uncles ask me barely anything about myself. All they talk about is themselves and old family dramas.

I'm getting along with my cousins though. I wish I had grown up around them instead of isolated from them.

**

DEFINITIONS OF THE ESSAY FILM

Working on *Before You Go* has made me reflect not only on the definitions of the essay film, but also about the concept of truth, the ethics of documentary filmmaking, and how this relates to my own work as I try to make an essayistic documentary about my family.

In the first chapter of Timothy Corrigan's *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker*, he writes that "the essayistic acts out a performative presentation of self as a kind of self-negation in which narrative or experimental structures are subsumed within the process of thinking through a public experience" (3). While editing my film I was resistant to add my own body or voice. It didn't feel fair, asking my family to be vulnerable on camera, but refusing to do the same. I didn't want to include my thoughts because I didn't think they were meaningful enough. I felt pressure to have already arrived at profound conclusions without navigating the messiness of thinking through.

In her piece "The Essay Film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitment", Laura Rascaroli writes that "the definition of essay film is problematic, and suggests it is a hybrid form that crosses boundaries and rests somewhere in-between fact and fiction" (24). The in-betweenness of memory complements the essay film perfectly. One would think we know our own authentic truths when, in fact, we are the unreliable narrators of our own lives. Memories are at once both hard facts and ever-shifting and slippery. Quoting Arthur Giannetti, Rascaroli continues her explanation, "One way to think about the essay film is as a meeting ground between documentary, avant-garde, and art film impulses" (24). In other words, the essay film sits in the intersections of its different identities, producing work from places and perspectives that don't often meet, and perhaps aren't often explored.

The essay film can be seen as a new type of language for experiences yet to be articulated. Essay films are made to express and work through thoughts that are perhaps experimental, and reborn out of the weaving together of documentary, avant-garde, and art film. Essay films blend fiction and reality and live within hybrid identities, between different intersections.

Perhaps this is why I chose to make an essay film. In *The Essay Film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments*, Laura Rascaroli writes that, “most of the existing scholarly contributions acknowledge that the definition of essay film is problematic, and suggest it is a hybrid form that crosses boundaries and rests somewhere in between fiction and nonfiction cinema.” Like an unreliable memory, my film sits somewhere in-between documentary and fiction.

BRIEF HISTORY OF IRANIANS IN CANADA



Image 1: A photo of myself at my Canadian citizenship ceremony

In his article “Iranians in Canada: A Statistical Analysis”, Vahid Gariusi reports that “compared to other immigrant groups, the Iranians are relative newcomers to Canada. As late as the end of World War II, there were only a dozen Iranians living in Canada . . . Throughout the 1950s and ’60s, the numbers ranged from 10 to one hundred annually” (8).

However, in the late '80s and early '90s, after the Iranian Revolution and during the Iran/Iraq War, millions of Iranians were uprooted and forced into the diaspora. Gariusi goes on to write that “the rate of immigration [to Canada] accelerated to several thousand per year. This level was sustained throughout the Iran/Iraq war and throughout the 1990s” (9).

Some fled to escape persecution and others left because they no longer believed that Iran offered the same rights and opportunities that they could find somewhere else. Some believed that Canada could offer them and their children a better future. At this time, North Vancouver, B.C., saw an increase in its Iranian immigrant population. My own family made their move from Iran to North Vancouver during this time. This influx of Iranians changed North Vancouver's demographic, which, “up to this point . . . was a municipality primarily composed of white Anglo Canadian middle-class neighbourhoods” (Yazdi 31). The arrival of Iranian immigrants literally changed the landscape of North Vancouver, as Farsi script filled the storefronts on Lonsdale Street, one of the main streets of North Vancouver.

THE FIRST TIME I WENT TO IRAN



Image 2: Passport photo from my first trip to Iran

I think I was seven or eight years old. Maybe I was nine. I don't actually remember. It was a time in my life where I was experiencing a lot of trauma. My parents were going through a horrible divorce. The situation between them was often violent. Even now, sometimes the pain feels almost as raw as it did back then.

Recently, my mom told me that when I took that first trip to Iran, she was scared she would never see me again. My mom was worried my dad would take me and never bring me back. She changed her mind a few times. She would call my dad in the middle of the night to tell him, “No. You can’t take her.” Then she would call him back a few moments later to tell him, “Okay. Take her.”

She told me that my dad had gotten the time of our flight wrong and we had to quickly leave through the gates. My mom hadn’t arrived yet. It was before everyone had cell phones, so there was no way to tell her what was going on. When she arrived at the airport, we were already at our flight gate. When my brother broke the news that we were gone, she thought he was joking. She remembers she sat down on a chair and started to cry. One of our family friends (the first friend we made in Canada) appeared almost out of nowhere. He said he saw her crying and got a flight attendant to call me at my gate. We said goodbye over the airport phone. She remembers I said, “It’s okay, mom. I’m okay,” over and over again. I remember it differently. In my memories, our plane is about to leave and I don’t see my mom. I’m crying for her and then she appears and we say goodbye and I don’t want to leave.

My mom also told me I had to see a counsellor when I got back from this trip, though I don’t remember any of this. I wasn’t talking and I cried all the time. Apparently, I told the counsellor when I had first left, I was scared I wouldn’t see my mom again. And now that I was back, I was scared I’d never see my dad again. When my dad left Iran he was working for the army, and he didn’t tell anyone that he was going to leave the country. At some point, both of our passports were taken away. I was kept in Iran a month longer than planned, and he was kept for several more months. I returned to Canada without him. I remember calling his answering machine just to hear the sound of his voice.

I also don't remember much of my time in Iran. I remember on the flight over I ate too much chocolate and felt sick. I remember once we were in the car, driving to my grandma's house, and some of my other family members drove in another car beside us, playing music, leaning out of the windows and dancing. Everything scared me. The story I tell people is that I didn't say one word for a whole month. I don't know if that's true, but it's how I remember it.

I remember once we got to my grandma's house (I think it was her house, I'm not quite sure), they chopped the head off of a lamb and the head touched my foot. When I got back home, I would tell my friends this story — "Can you believe it?" It felt so barbaric to me.

I remember calling home to speak to my mom, but my brother answered the phone. He was unkind and I felt self-conscious in front of everyone and hung up. I remember sleeping on my grandma's floor and cockroaches running past my head. I remember my cousins hiding in my closet, trying to spy on me while I changed. I remember my girl cousins buying matching dresses and I couldn't get the same one because I was too big.

I remember going to an amusement park and the ride guy saying I was too big to go on a ride with my cousins. I remember trying to go outside not wearing a rousari (a head cover) or monteau (a long coat) and a man yelling at me. I remember riding in cars and feeling so hot with all those clothes on. The story is I fell asleep during a long car ride and the Morality Police pulled us over and yelled at me. I don't remember the actual event, I only remember the story I used to tell my friends about it.

My dad's family got me a baby chick as a pet. I sang songs and danced with my cousins. I watched *The Exorcist* on TV dubbed in Farsi. The water I would drink tasted funny.

I remember going to my aunt's house, my mom's sister. She tells me I slept with a picture of my mom by my side, though I don't remember this at all. I remember I liked my aunt a lot. She was nice to me and she was funny. We hitchhiked and got rides around Tehran in the back of strangers' cars (this was common practice at the time), we got pizza with ketchup on it, she made me spaghetti, and she had comic books in English at her house.

I only remember meeting one of my uncles on my mom's side, though apparently I met all of them.

When I left, I remember that I was sad. I wanted to stay. I was speaking Farsi fluently again, I was having fun with my cousins. But as soon as I got back home, I started to say that I never wanted to go back again. And I didn't, for almost twenty-two years. In many ways, it was a traumatic trip. I understand the desire to never go back.

However, I now regret that choice. I wish my parents had forced me to return once every few years so I could feel some kind of connection with my culture and my family. Now that everyone is older, my family on both sides organize family reunions, but I can't help but feel disconnected from everyone. Sometimes I feel like I was adopted and I'm trying to connect with a biological family. We can be nice to each other, but that unconditional love is not there. We're family, but more than that, we're strangers.

MY SECOND TRIP TO IRAN



Image 3: Self-portrait, from my second trip to Iran

After months of begging my mom to come with me to Iran, she finally agreed. This would be my first time back in more than twenty years, and the second time I had ever visited. I felt a sense of hopefulness that my trip to Iran would fill whatever void growing up in the diaspora had left, but at the same time, I knew that it was a foolish kind of hopefulness. Hamid Naficy writes, in his paper “The Poetics and Practice of Iranian Nostalgia in Exile”:

Although the lost mother is structurally irretrievable, the lost homeland is potentially recoverable and it is this potentiality — however imaginary — that drives exiles’ multifaceted desire to return . . . The disavowal of loss and separation is supplanted by an impulse to return, to reunite with the object of the fetish, the (m)otherland; to regress into the prelapsarian narcissism of childhood. (286)

While I am not an exile, the lack of access to my own culture and histories has left me with an unrecoverable separation from family and culture. Naficy goes on to write that “this disruption inclines humans forever after to seek to recover wholeness, to identify and to become one with the Imaginary” (287).

The dislocation when I was in Iran got in the way of my creative process. I didn’t want to go outside and bring my camera. I felt envious of my Iranian friends at home who have such effortless relationships with their Iranian side. They know the language, they know their families, and in turn they know themselves in a deeper way than I do. They are authentically Iranian — a title that I am so desperately trying to claim as well.

I start to worry if, by making the film, I’m exploiting my family. I have a right to my own history, I know that. Even while in Iran I think to myself constantly, what do they think about all the filming I’m doing? Am I making them uncomfortable? I want to remember this trip. I want to document it. I want this to mean something.

**

August 25, 2018

My trip is halfway done. It went by both fast and slow.

Karaj was so overwhelming. I knew it would be. I cried a lot. I got to my uncle Golum's house and there were maybe twenty or more people there. I kept wondering why they were there to see me. I'm a stranger to them. I can barely talk to them. Just wishing the whole time that they'd known me as I grew.

The last time I came to Iran I was in the middle (or maybe the beginning) of the worst years of my life. The trip, parts of it, were traumatic. Maybe parts of that are resurfacing.

I think my dad's family likes me more than my mom's family.

Part of me feels like my thesis is going horribly. I'm playing with the idea of dropping out. I want to believe I'm on the right path but I don't know if I am. I want to believe I'm a good filmmaker but I don't know if I am.

Every time the family gets together like this (not many times) my mom tells the story about when we were in Baku and I came downstairs with my own coffee and didn't offer any to anyone else and my uncle Behrooz made fun of me. I hate it when she tells that story. It embarrasses me but I also like being included in a family memory.

When my cousins said a word that I didn't understand, I would say, "Ye joouri degah begoo," which means "Say it in another way," and they would try to express the word differently. Like when I didn't know the word for garden they said, "Where fruits and vegetables grow," and when I didn't know the word for paradise, "Somewhere you never want to leave. Somewhere beautiful." Not fully able to say what we want to say, we get to know these translated versions of each other.

While I stumbled over my Farsi and had trouble remembering the names of family members, I recalled a poem by Solmaz Sharif called "The End of Exile". In the poem, the speaker returns to their hometown of Shiraz but feels disconnected and out of place:

As the dead, so I come
to the city I am of.
Am without.

To watch play out around me
as theater —

audience as the dead are audience

to the life that is not mine.
Is as not
as never.

Turning down Shiraz's streets
it turns out to be such

a faraway thing.

A without which
I have learned to be.

I carried around a piece of paper with all the names of my aunts and uncles and their children written down in hopes of getting to know them better. The first step seems to be at least knowing their names. They all know my name. When I got to Karaj, my cousin's daughter hugged me tightly and said she'd been waiting years to meet me.

Ashraf - Hammid	Bahram: Mehregan
Bahareh	Behrad
Saieed	
Ehsan	Behrooz: Bijan
Milad	
Mahdi	Behzad: Parisa
Afsonah	Pedram
Batool - Reza	
Ali	Babak: Behnam
Golum - Anahita	
Azara Khsh	
Azarang	
Artmis	
Akhtar - Hossein	
Ali Reza	
Zahra	
Fahtemeh	
Shanaz	
Bahman - Mehdi	
Ryan	

Image 4: Re-creation of a list of relatives' names I wrote

WHAT I LEARNED THROUGH MAKING THE FILM

There are deeper strata of truth in cinema and there is such a thing as poetic, ecstatic truth. It is mysterious and elusive, and can be reached only through fabrication and imagination and stylization.

— Werner Herzog, *Minnesota Manifesto*

**

August 29, 2018

Some things I want to remember about this trip:

Me and my cousin Azarakhsh starting to cry at the same time while talking about how we wish we grew up together.

Azarakhsh talking about techno, trance, and metal, and playing it for me while he drives me around Karaj.

The way my uncle Golum looks and sounds, how he said I have a nice sounding talking voice and I should pursue singing.

Golum's wife, Zahra, hugging me goodbye, saying she feels like she's seen both me and her daughter Artmis, who lives in the U.K. now.

My mom being so helpful and supportive.

**

I showed my film to some of my cohort. One of them is from Iran. She left Iran only a few years ago, so Farsi is her first language. My Farsi is terrible. She tells me that my mom keeps starting and stopping. She's editing the letters. Skipping past much of what's been written. I had no idea until my friend pointed this out because I can't understand a lot of what my mom was reading. "She's keeping something from you," my friend informs me. What is she hiding? Passages about despair? Letters sent to her about the war? Patricia Holland writes in "History, Memory and the Family Album", that it is the mothers who often become the ones who preserve family history — be it correspondences, official documents, family albums, recipes, stories. Holland argues that it's mothers who are "the historians, the guardians of memory, selecting and preserving the family archive" (2). My mom acts as the gateway to the letters. I can't read them without her translating them for me. I'm not getting the whole story, I'm getting the story in the way she wishes to tell it. What I glean from my mom about my family's history is both literal and imaginary, and I'm learning this through the process of making my film.

It doesn't help that my parents are so guarded about their lives before they came to Canada. My dad gets upset at me for even wanting to learn Farsi, for wanting to return to Iran, for learning about the history of our family. He tells me I'm going backwards. My dad wants nothing to do with a country that treats their own people like caged animals and gets angry at me for showing interest. However, I think not knowing about my own history has hurt me. They allowed me to be fully assimilated into Canadian culture. I lost an important part of who I could have been, and relationships I could have had with family and land.

When I was younger and I would ask to see pictures from Iran, they would respond that there was nothing to show. They left everything behind. Cut off from my past in more ways than one. My parents didn't care if I learned Farsi or not, even though that means I can't communicate with most of my family. They never taught me the language, the customs, the culture, or the history. They didn't take me with them when they visited Iran, so our families never got to grow up together. Did they do that on purpose to make the separation easier? I imagine it's like cutting off a dead limb. They were too busy just trying to survive.

If I do manage to squeeze out a story from their old lives, it's told with an almost bored breeziness. When I ask my mom about living in Iran during the Iran/Iraq War she answers about running to the basement when bombs would explode near her apartment building with the same casualness one would speak about what they had for breakfast.

My decision to re-create family memories was inspired, in part, by Guy Maddin's *My Winnipeg*. In this dreamy and elusive hybrid documentary, Maddin returns to his childhood home and hires actors to play his family in hopes to re-create his own memories from childhood. Cynthia Sugars writes that this decision was "...motivated as a therapeutic reenactment of his childhood, conducted as a way of locating an 'originary' traumatic moment or event that he has been unable to pin down..." (173) While Maddin re-imagines memories of a time he lived through, my re-creations are from moments where I was absent. My choice to use tableau images, with actors frozen in time, points to my own distance from the moment. I was never really there. For both Maddin and myself, the attempt at re-creating moments is an exercise in searching for a truth that will release us from the apparent hold of the past.

I wanted to make this film to learn more about my family and in turn, feel a deeper connection. But I'm realizing that my film is a desperate attempt at capturing something as ephemeral as memory, and in some instances in my film, second-hand memory. This need to turn memory into a recorded narrative stems out of knowing that one can never go back. Filmmaking does not make up for lost time or lost history. Making this film didn't make me feel any more authentically Iranian, whatever that means. It actually made me feel predatory, and like I was fetishizing my own family. I am on the outside, looking at a group of people I am not a part of, trying to create some kind of narrative I can place myself into.

A while ago, I asked my mom if her thoughts still come to her in Farsi. She looked almost surprised when she answered that they come to her in English now. She spent years trying to forget the pain of missing home. And now I wonder which one is more painful—the missing or the forgetting?

INSPIRATIONS

Along with *My Winnipeg*, I also found inspiration in Chantal Akerman's *News From Home*. In this minimalist essay film, long still shots of New York City are accompanied by a voice over of a mother in Belgium reading letters sent to her daughter in New York City. Timothy Corrigan writes that *News From Home* is "...one of numerous essay films made by women directors that locate their voice and shifting identities in the dense public life of a city..." (106) There is a coldness found in the static images of New York's urban backdrop, juxtaposed with the intimacy of a mother's letters to her daughter. Both Akerman and I create moments of subjectivity through the travel of spaces that aren't home. Intimate meditations while in public settings allow for a feeling of being "between home and elsewhere" (106).

Similar to *News From Home*, I was also inspired by Mona Hatoum's *Measures of Distance*. In this piece, images of Hatoum's mother bathing herself are shown overlaid with transparent letters in Arabic alphabet. In the background Hatoum and her mother converse in untranslated Arabic. Overtop of all this, Hatoum, who is living in exile, is then heard, in English, reading letters her mother has sent to her. Her mother writes both about private memories and the politics of Palestine and Lebanon and how it's keeping them apart.

Both my film and *Measures of Distance* attempt to create a sense of intimacy while dealing with significant separations. Our films try to show the politics of identity that Eliza Waterhouse has coined as "Diasporic geographies". Waterhouse writes, "Hatoum exists in this liminal zone, between her home, her mother's home and her birthplace so that home for the exile is the distance between places." (52) While I try to find meaning and place-making through visiting the homeland, family letters and re-creating memories, Hatoum attempts the same through exposing the connection between private identity and public discourse.

As in both these films, I have tried to depict a closeness: the viewer is let in to intimate and private moments. But all the while there is a distance, the foreignness of being in unfamiliar land, the searching for a home that might not exist. It's from this place that I attempt to expose the fragmented sense of identity one experiences when placed into the diaspora and the delicate relationship between memory, place, and sense of self—thought out in public for all to see.

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