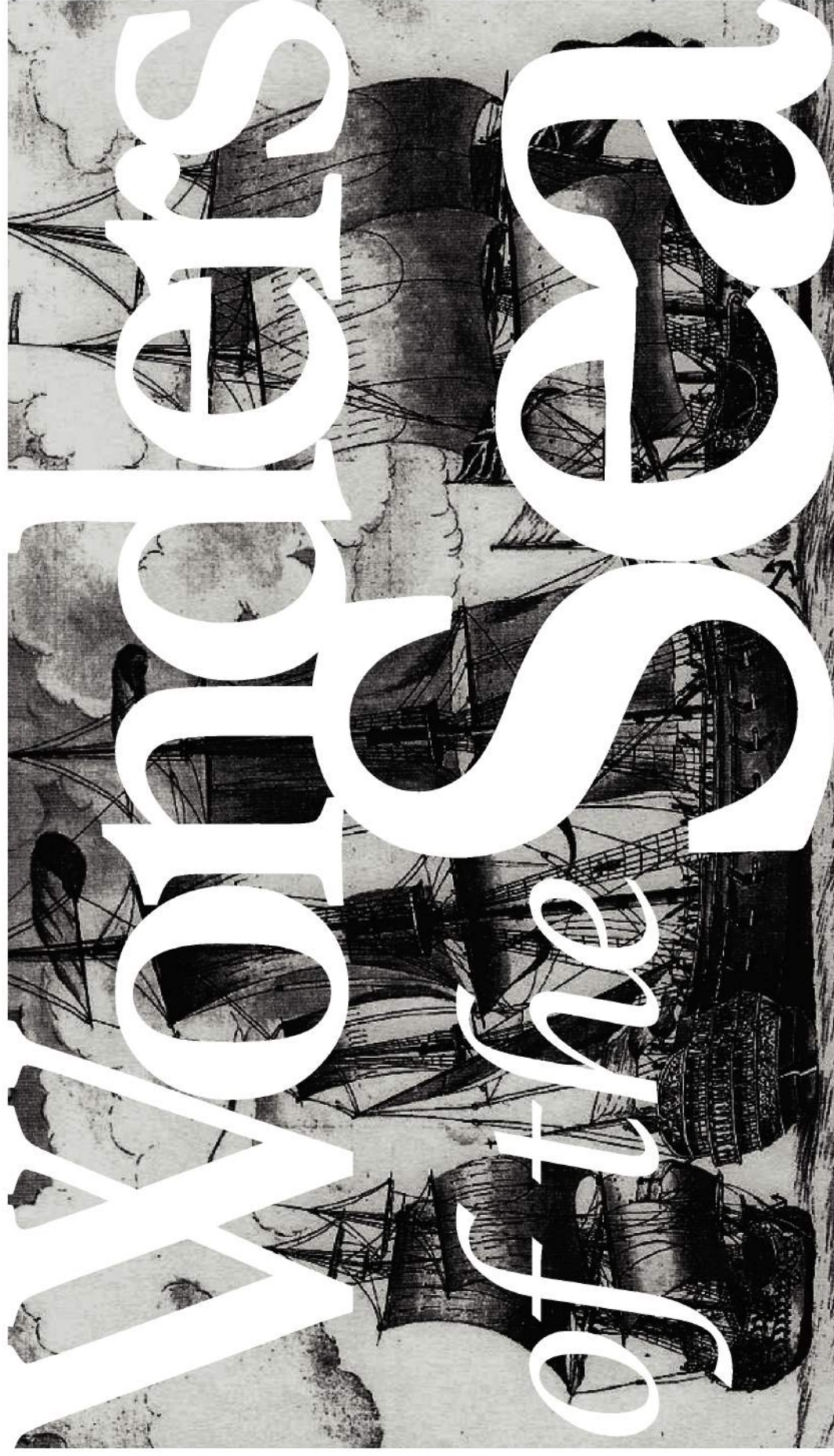


Passages, I



A work in progress by Gita Hashemi

with guest artist Heather Hermant

First Performance: Thursday, October 9, 2014, 4 - 7:30 PM - Hosted by LeLabo at Artscape Triangle Gallery, Toronto

Artist's Notes

Still in my pre-teens, I used to stand on the balcony of our house on the outskirts of Shiraz and, glancing over treetops in the surrounding orchards, fantasize about *jahangardi* (literally globe-trotting). I only knew of two kinds of travel abroad: One was *haj* pilgrimage to Mecca that older people undertook if they had the money, the other was travel for the purpose of studying in the West that young people undertook if their families could afford it. Both were privileged undertakings, and neither was an open-ended project. These journeys always brought the traveler home because they were supported by and intended for the

and location in the "Third World," the only way I could imagine myself as a *jahangard* was through identification with a white British man. I wanted to be him, to have his freedom to move, and more: I wanted the wisdom that he had gathered through his travels, his simultaneous existence as the one who could be anywhere he wanted but chose not to stay for more than a breath, a pause; perhaps to fill his canteen, or to visit an old friend or a former travel companion to impart some of his wisdom to, and then leave again.

In my early teens, the dream of *jahangardi* was replaced with a radically different dream. In the increasing heat

shortly before Black Friday, my parents wanted to send me to the US. Some of my classmates had already been sent abroad by their parents who foresaw a turn for the worse. But many others who had been studying abroad, including my brother, were now returning home to participate in the revolution. I resisted the pressure to leave. Five years later, when I did have to leave, travel was not a choice. It was a matter of survival not Larry's kind of travel. It was a marathon of border crossings in search of a place I could stay at, not one that I could visit for leisure or curiosity. Without a passport and required visas, and bearing an Iranian Muslim identity that was already associated with terrorism, my journey to the West was a passage through the gates of hell not at all resembling my



**BRITISH TRADE ROUTES
AS SHOWN BY SHIP LOGS
1750-1800**

benefit of a community. But I imagined a different kind of travel. My role model was Larry Darrell, the central character in W. Somerset Maugham's *The Razor's Edge*, which, in my love for that other kind of travel across and through printed passages, I had read a few times (in Farsi translation). Restricted as I was by my age, gender

of the pre-revolutionary years, I fantasized about *staying*. One would only dream of *elsewhere* if *home* was not a desirable place. Joining ranks with many others in my generation, I dreamt of making home the utopia that fictional travelers were always in search of and never found (or found and lost). On the eve of the 1979 Revolution in Iran,

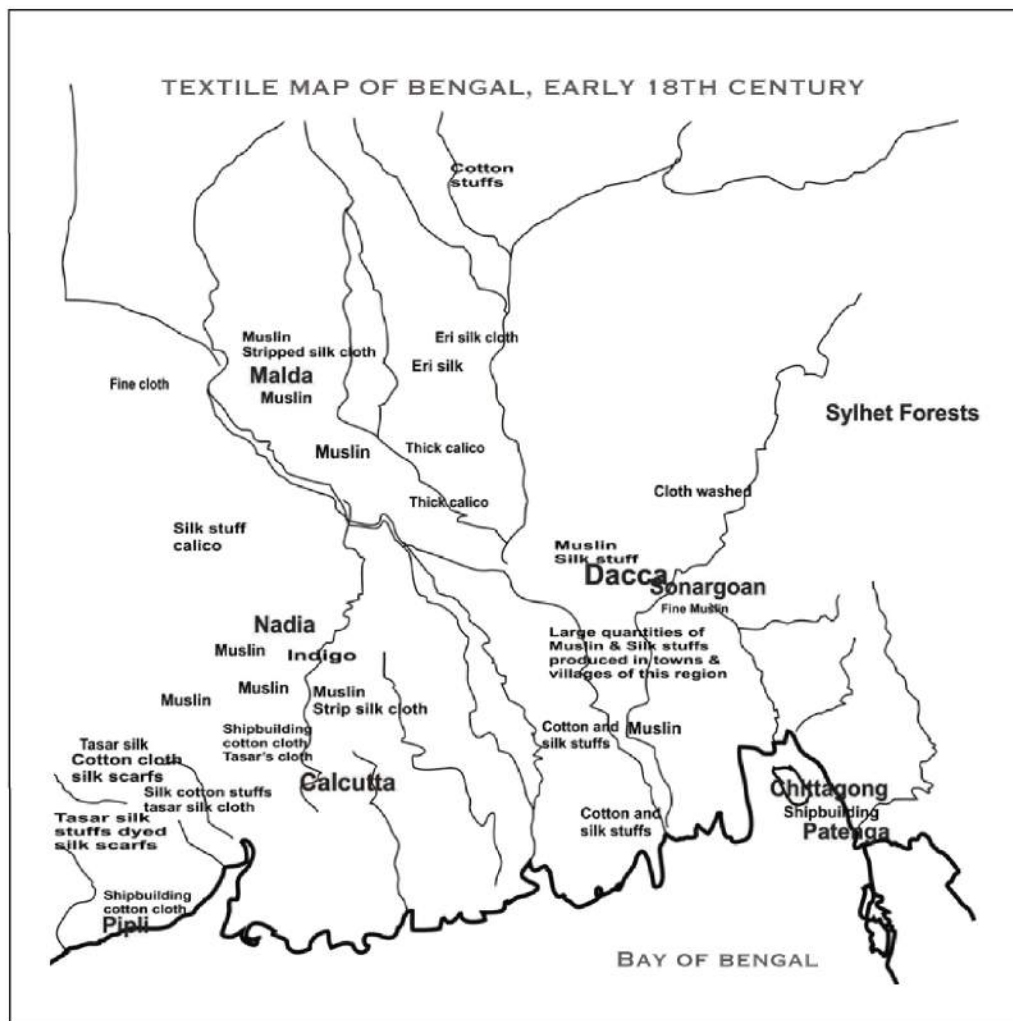
youthful dreams of *jahangardi*.

* * *

"I had gone there to see the spectacle and I became the spectacle myself."

[*Shigarfnamah Vilayat*, Mirza P'tesam al-Din, 1784]

That reversal, the curiosity and desire that animated it, and its historical contexts and implications are at the



core of this project. *Passages* draws from travelogues and memoirs written during 18th and 19th centuries by travelers from the “East,” focused mostly on Persianate travelers though not limited to them. Contact between the Persianate world (ethno-culturally diverse societies in south, west and central Asia and parts of north and southeast Africa, where, for several centuries, Farsi was the shared language of communication and/or cultural production) and the “West” increased exponentially in this period and deeply influenced both sides.

Wonders of the Sea is the first in the series of embodied reading and writing performances that form the core of my project. It is based on the as-yet unpublished (in original Farsi) travelogue of Mirza I’tesam al-Din (1730-1800), an Indian *munshi* (scholar/secretary) of Persian heritage who worked in the service of the English East India Company for many years. He traveled to England in 1765 on a mission from the Mughal Emperor, Shah Alam II, to translate

and explicate the Emperor’s letter in which he sought his British counterpart’s support against his domestic enemies. The commander of British forces, “Clive of India,” who was firmly loyal to the East India Company, suppressed the letter. He then presented the 100,000 gold rupees sent with the letter as a gift by the Indian Emperor to King George III on his own behalf and that of the Company. His mission betrayed, Mirza I’tesam al-Din returned to Bengal to witness the rapidly expanding British colonization of Mughal India that had been unleashed by the East India Company in 1757 in the Bengal province of the Mughal Empire.

I’tesam al-Din wrote a travelogue in 1784, titled *Shigarfnamah Vilayet* (Wondrous Accounts of Vilayet, vilayet variously means province or land, a term commonly used then to refer to England). The original Farsi was not published but an incomplete and inaccurate English translation appeared in London in 1827. For this performance, I selected and translated

passages from the original text made available to me courtesy of the Toronto Initiative for Iranian Studies that will soon publish the work. The performance script is an adaptation: I have re-ordered some segments, and condensed or simplified others. I did not attempt to translate I’tesam al-Din’s rhetorical devices and discursive embellishments that characterized the writing style of his time and its cultural ethos. Although these devices and embellishments carry much of the emotional coloring of the writing and the beauty of its craft, they were impossible to translate accurately for they are deeply rooted in a linguistic and cultural tradition that is remote not only to contemporary English but also to contemporary Farsi. What was omitted from the passages that are read in English during the performance is brought into the embodied writing of select key phrases and constructs in Farsi. The simultaneous performance of these two layers will create, I hope, a path for accessing Mirza’s times while staying clear from voyeurizing, appropriating or colonizing his world.

We are used to images of Western travelers roaming the historical East, collecting prized artifacts, studying native customs, and, upon returning home, publishing a book or two about their travels and findings that would establish them as Orientalist experts. (As Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi established in *Refashioning Iran*, many of these books were based on appropriated content, or originally written on commission by native scholars. By his own account, during his passage to England Mirza I’tesam al-Din translated a grammar of the Persian language which became the basis of Orientalist Sir William Jones’ *A Grammar of Persian Language* that “made him a great deal of money and fame.”) In reversing the gaze in *Passages*, I am interested in exploring both the processes of modernity as a global exchange amongst cultures and peoples, as well as the development of Western modernity as the cultural/ideological

corollary of European expansion, simultaneously in terms of expanded trade and acts of conquest. (The reproduction of *The Bull Romanus Pontifex* of 1454 that is used in the installation component of *Wonders of the Sea* presents an early ideological ground of these missions of "discovery.")

How have textual transmissions, past encounters and intercultural gaze shaped (and continue to animate) our contemporary perceptions and sense/sentiment of being? What roles did/do curiosity and desire (and envy and animosity) play in inter-cultural encounters and the construction and projection of identities and manifold alterities? How did/does travel construct/transform spectators/spectacles? How do we conceive of and engage with (or even learn about/discover) repressed histories of modernity? Where in our contemporary culture(s) would we find their traces and manifestations? These questions inspire and animate my work.

* * *

Passages, like traveling, is fundamentally a space for collaboration. In each performance I invite a guest artist to work with me as reader/performer. Their engagement and our collaboration open broader possibilities for reading the material and the histories that they relate. I am grateful to Heather Hermant for joining me in *Wonders of the Sea*. I am also grateful to Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi for making the Farsi text of *Shigarfnamah* available to me, to Elena Basile for research support, to Don Sinclair for writing an elegant video capture software, to Roberta Buiani for technical and moral support, and specially to Mansour Bonakdarian for generous research advice, patient counsel, and editing the present text. Many others have supported and/or continue to aid this journey in multiple ways. They have my deep gratitude.

My research is blogged on the project's website where documentation of the performances will be archived and upcoming performances announced.

Gita Hashemi, Toronto

Heather Hermant is a Toronto-based poet and performer, curator and scholar who has worked in spoken word, video installation, "new" media, physical theatre, sound, social practice and intersections thereof. Her interdisciplinary theatre work *ribcage: this wide passage*, based on the story of an eighteenth century Jewish woman who passed as a Christian man to arrive to Quebec and was deported, has been translated to French by Nadine Desrochers as *thorax : use cage en éclats*. Both are upcoming at Vancouver's Firehall Arts Centre in March 2015. *ribcage* premiered at Le MAI, Montreal. Heather's one-to-one performance *Aujourd'hui / This Day, 1738*, which stages an eighteenth century interrogation with audience as participant, has been presented at Rhubarb Festival, and in Budapest, Hungary. Heather's installation and curation collaborations with Melina Young have been presented at Gardiner Museum, Toronto (Nuit Blanche 2010) and by Shanghai LGBT, Shanghai, China. Heather is currently completing a PhD in Gender Studies at Utrecht University, The Netherlands, and she teaches Community Arts Practice at York University, Toronto.

Gita Hashemi's transmedia practice spans nearly thirty years and encompasses works that draw on visual, media, performance, site specific and live art strategies. In 2013, her solo exhibitions included *Time Lapsed* at A Space Gallery in Toronto and *The Idea of Freedom* at Le MAI in Montreal, and she participated in *The Third Space* exhibition at Toronto's Harbourfront Centre. Focusing on historical and contemporary issues, Hashemi's work explores social relations and the interconnections of embodied language with cultural imaginary and politics. Her most recent projects include *Headquarters; Pathology of an Ouster*, focused on the 1953 US-UK coup d'état in Iran; *Utopias In-Progress*, about the effects of capitalism on the arts; *Ephemeral Monument*, based on the literature of resistance in Iran; and *The Book of Illuminations*, a commentary on repetitive political and cultural patterns. Her work has been exhibited nationally and internationally, including at Interaccess Electronic Media Arts Centre (Toronto), Yerba Buena Centre for the Arts (San Francisco), SIGGRAPH (Los Angeles), Casoria Museum of Contemporary Art (Napels), Museo de Arte Contemporaneo de Rosario (Argentina), Plug In (Basel), Al Kahf Art Gallery (Bethlehem), Museo de Arte Contemporaneo de Yucatan (Merida), Red House Centre (Sofia) and Electrochoc (Lyon). Hashemi is a recipient of Baddek International New Media Award for the CD-R *Of Shifting Shadows*, Toronto Community Foundation Award for the sound installation *The War Primer*, and American Ad Federation's award for the book *Locating Afghanistan*. She taught time-based art, "new media," and cultural studies at York, Ryerson and University of Toronto, 1998-2009.

Passages is a **Subversive Press** project
Produced by **exisle creations**
Website and publication design: **Gita Hashemi**

Wonders of the Sea
Video producer: **Nicole Stamp**
Computer programmer: **Don Sinclair**
Public relations: **Farrah Miranda**

With support from **Charles Street Video**

To view performance videos, link to event's streaming archive, and for information on upcoming performances visit:
<http://passages.subversivepress.org>

To get on the project email list, please contact:
info@subversivepress.org

Produced with generous support from public art funders



CELEBRATING 40 YEARS



Canada Council
for the Arts
Conseil des arts
du Canada