

Passages, II

Inhabiting the North

A work by Gita Hashemi

with Sarah Abu-Sharar and Zainab Amadahy

Food by Salma Al Atassi, Claude Awad, Azar Masoumi, Regent Park Catering Collective, Johl Ringuette, and Nicole Tanguay

First Performance: Friday, March 27, 2015, Beit Zatoun, Toronto, hosted by e-fagia Visual and Media Arts Organization

Live webcast at <http://passages.subversivepress.org/inhabiting-the-north-webcast>

Artist's Notes

Before I left Iran in late 1984, I had lived in hiding for over two years. Many of my friends had been arrested and were scattered in the many prisons across Iran, most in Shiraz's Aadel-Abaad and in the notorious Evin. Some had disappeared and I didn't know of their fate. Those were dangerous times. Once again, like in the Shah's time, people like me – *lefties* – were liabilities for their families and friends and whoever dared to shelter them. All the dissenting voices had been eliminated from the public. The ruling Islamists were using the war with Iraq as the hammer with which to crush their domestic opposition, even those who had been their allies and supporters only a few years earlier during the revolution against the despotic Pahlavi regime. There was no hope in staying in Iran. The choices were no choices: To stay, I had either to continue living in hiding under progressively more difficult conditions and endangering myself and others who helped me, or to turn myself in which meant either becoming a repentant and informer, whether in prison or out, or walking into an execution yard. These were the years of systematic mass arrests, torture and summary executions.

Once arrested, the cost of survival was public repentance, recorded and broadcast on primetime national television. Even some of the communist leaders, including a few who had survived over two decades in the Shah's prisons, were displayed most ingloriously confessing their sins against the Omat (people) and Imam (Khomeini) and begging forgiveness. Those were bleak times. Within a few years, in the summer of 1988 (during primeministership of Mir Hossein Mousavi who led the Green Movement twenty years later) several thousands prisoners who resisted the charade were executed and buried en mass. There was no hope in staying in Iran. Yet, the decision to leave was the most difficult decision I have ever made, one that I have never fully settled with.

Over the years I have been asked, rather, I have been told time and again

that I should feel lucky for being able to leave Iran when I did. That used to be the end of the conversation for me. These days, I am a bit more benevolent and understanding toward such ignorance that, in my experience in North America, always issues from the White-privilege quarters. I still end the conversation but leave them with this: "Quite on the contrary, I would feel lucky if I hadn't had to leave Iran. Unlike your ancestors, I never thought this was my promised land."

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When Sayyida Salme bint Said (a.k.a. Emily Said Ruete, 1844-1924) published her memoirs in German in 1886, Germany was only fifteen years old and Canada was nineteen. A daughter of the king of Zanzibar and Oman, Salme had left Zanzibar of her own volition at age twenty-two following an affair with a German merchant with whom she later married and had three children.

Salme's mother was a Circassian woman who was orphaned as a young girl during an Ottoman war of expansion, separated from her siblings and brought to Zanzibar – a huge distance from her homeland – by a soldier, and sold to the king who eventually made her one of his many secondary wives. Salme grew up in the court as an Arab "princess" with equal rights to her half-siblings. When her father died, she was involved in supporting a brother's claim to the throne against another brother. When her side lost, she moved to the city where she and her sister socialized with local luminaries and European immigrants ("expats"). She developed a relationship with a merchant from Hamburg and eloped when she became pregnant. She converted to Christianity and changed her name (to Emily) in order to marry her lover (so she took his last name and became Emily Ruete). Her husband died in an accident within a few years. Without access to her paternal inheritance (it's not clear whether it was confiscated by her enthroned brother or stolen by intermediaries who were to deliver it to

her), Salme found herself in great financial difficulty. "Exhausted in body and in mind," she decided to write her memoirs so that her children would know about their mother and her culture of origin. Her memoirs also brought in necessary cash and gave her minor social platform.

When Salme left Zanzibar in 1866, only ten percent of Africa was under European control. By the time her memoirs was published, European colonizers had devised in the Berlin Conference (1884-85) the master plan for dividing (devouring) Africa. A rising industrial and naval power, the newly-formed German Empire competed with Britain for the control of east Africa, eventually settling in a bi-lateral agreement in 1890 that recognized Zanzibar as a British protectorate. Like its older European counterparts, German imperial identity was rapidly forming around the notion of "Western" superiority fed in part by accounts of travels to the "East" (*the Orient*) that were published in great numbers to great interest. In these, the "Oriental woman" featured prominently as a curiosity. Locked up in a harem in her presumed meekness (or, variously, extraordinary prowess) as a sexual toy (or manipulating mistresses), the Oriental woman was a construct that fed European male fantasies of unusual carnal pleasures. Having access to women's spaces in the "Orient," European female travel writers, among them some Germans whose writings were widely translated and circulated, provided a more nuanced account of the "Oriental woman." Their version, nevertheless, also propagated notions of European superiority, this time to bolster the position of European women in their own society.

Salme's voice is an important historical intervention as it negates the Orientalist myth (persisting even today) that the "Eastern" (Arab, Muslim, Middle Eastern, etc.) woman was (is) in need of being rescued by the "Western" (White) do-gooders. She did not buy into European "civilization" as superior to her own. From her entry into German society, Salme had been the object of much curiosity and rumour. Hers was

one of only two inter-racial marriages in the public eye. She was represented in an article in a German magazine as having been rescued from harem life by her husband (a knight in shining armour), and was held up as an example of how an “uneducated and backward Oriental woman” could be transformed into a “respectable German woman” through conversion to Christianity and European dress and education. In her memoirs, Salme counteracts these myths. Hers is not the voice of a colonized subject.

In describing her childhood and upbringing in the king’s harem (women’s quarter), she writes with comfortable intimacy without exoticizing that life and without the dismissive and critical overtones expected of her as a “rescued woman.” She describes cultural differences, and repeatedly dispels notions of European superiority and critiques their education, child-rearing, fashion, social manners and marriage practices. Even as she criticizes, for example, polygamy in Islamic law, she negates the idea that Christian monogamy is, in practice, any better for women where men carry on with their extra-marital affairs in secrecy, and sometimes even openly. Salme is no Irshad Manji, although, like her, she is oblivious to her own class and racial privileges (in Salme’s case as a light-skinned Arab colonizer in Africa). Several decades before the rise of the national independence movements in Africa and Asia, Salme criticized colonialism thus:

I question the right which Europeans take upon themselves in deploring the fate of a people as yet “unenlightened,” and their justification in forcibly imparting their civilization on the same... Civilization cannot be obtruded by force and it will only be just to concede to every nation the right of adhering without hindrance to their views and institutions, which have in the course of centuries been founded under the influence of ripened experience and practical worldly wisdom.

* * *

Inhabiting the North is the second in a series of embodied reading and writing

performances that form my larger project *Passages* exploring the literature by people from the “East” who traveled to the “West.” In the present piece, I have adapted passages from Sayyida Salme’s memoirs where we can see the critical perspective that she brought to her new society in Europe. This piece brings collaborators from a number of treaty and Indigenous communities together with an audience of women and trans women in a communal space created through sharing of stories and food. Salme’s story carries many themes that can open the space for dialogue about gender-based issues related to indigeneity and migration, colonialism and settlement, as well as East-West and North-South divisions that are rooted in colonial racial politics.

In decolonial discourse generated through a new wave of Indigenous activism on Turtle Island, the term *treaty people* encompasses both First Nations who entered into treaties with European settlers as well as those settlers and their descendants and all who came to this land after them who have benefited from the land and the foundational rights and responsibilities delineated in the treaties. All of us who live on treaty lands (let us not forget that there are also many unceded and illegally occupied territories) are treaty people. That is to emphasize our responsibilities in relation to the land and to the Indigenous nations.

As we warm up with the food that carries the flavours and histories of many cultures and peoples, and as we feel the bounty of the land and acknowledge the gracious labour of the providers, I hope we can enter into a space where we see our inter-connectedness. It is significant that we come together at Beit Zatoun, a Palestinian cultural centre, and that the women who read Sayyida Salme in the interactive performance, among their many identities, also identify as Indigenous and Palestinian. There are many similarities between the Palestinian struggle and the struggle of the Indigenous people on Turtle Island. That’s not surprising because in both cases the dynamic is that of an Indigenous people facing a settler-colonial state that has dispossessed them

and rendered them invisible to a large settler population suffering from historical amnesia.

In the Iranian culture – enriched by the many peoples who have historically lived on the land – we believe that people who eat bread and salt together (share each other’s food) earn rights and responsibilities toward one another. This event also raises funds for It Starts with Us database for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women. With this small step, I invite us all to take our responsibilities seriously and challenge the hypocrisy of the settler state of Canada that justifies its participation in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq partly by adopting the Orientalist narrative of saving Muslim women while it does so little to address systemic violence against Indigenous women here. In fact, the settler state itself is the original and biggest perpetrator of that violence. May we not be complicit in it through our silence and inaction.

* * *

Iranians celebrate the spring equinox as the beginning of the new year. We consider this time in the earth’s journey to be very special, so the first thirteen days of the year are given to family gatherings and communal feasts that include rituals of gratitude and prayers for a good year. This is a good time to eat bread and salt together and to bring our hearts closer.

I am grateful to all of my collaborators who enriched this piece with their thoughtful contributions. I have learned much from them. I also wish to acknowledge generous research support by Mansour Bonakdarian. A multi-platform piece, *Inhabiting the North* includes a series of video interviews with the food makers demonstrating the processes of making the foods they added to the feast and talking about their cultural significance. The documentation from the performance and gathering will be incorporated along with other material in a single-channel video which will be part of e-fagia’s *Decolonial Narratives* online publication. All of these videos as well as the live webcast can be accessed on *Passages* website.

Gita Hashemi, Toronto

Sarah Abu-Sharar is a social worker, storyteller and expressive art therapist with a background in theatre and creative dance. She has been featured at the Toronto Storytelling Festival, 1001 Nights of Storytelling, Boo at the Barns, Toronto Fool Festival and at the Centre Islands Franklin Garden as well as various fundraisers, galas and private events. She teaches storytelling at the Parent Child Mother Goose Program where she uses stories with at-risk families to facilitate bonding. She has also participated in a number of popular theatre performances both in Croatia and Toronto, and facilitated expressive art groups in community centers, various disability organizations, Peel Board of Education, a refugee camp in Palestine, and a juvenile detention center. Sarah is half Palestinian and half Croatian. Like many Palestinians, unable to return home, she spent her childhood in several countries. Born in Libya, she lived in Jordan and Yugoslavia before moving to Canada at age nine. She has an MA in expressive art therapy from the European Graduate School.

Of African, Cherokee and European heritage, **Zainab Amadahy** is an author, screenwriter and educator. Among her publications are speculative fiction novels *Resistance* and *Moons of Palmares*. Zainab is a frequent contributor to *Muskrat Magazine* and *Rabble.Ca*. Her non-fiction work, *Wielding the Force: The Science of Social Justice*, explores how some emerging science intersects with Indigenous knowledge and is relevant to social justice, activism and community organizing. A former director of Community Arts Ontario, Zainab has also worked for a variety of community organizations in the areas of Aboriginal services, Indigenous knowledge reclamation, women's services, immigrant settlement and community arts. <http://www.swallowsongs.com>

Salma Al Atassi is a Syrian born feminist, and Herbalist in training based in Toronto. She is completing her studies in Herbal Medicine with Medical Herbalist Diane Kent. She has worked in collaboration with local artists and healers in community events, such as the Healing Justice for Black Lives Matter fundraiser. Salma's writings have been published in feminist and youth oriented *Shameless* magazine (Toronto) and *River Rose Apothecary- Medicinal Archive HUB* (San Francisco). Salma will prepare the beverages for the feast. It is her belief that tea making and sipping is a communal ritual that helps us participate in collective awareness and empowers us to heal together. In 2014 she launched her own line of teas, *Booma's Tea*: <http://boomas.co>

Claude Awad is a Canadian feminist and peace activist of Palestinian origin. She was born and raised in Lebanon, and she immigrated to Toronto in 1991. Claude has a long history of activism around peace and justice in the Middle East. In 2008, she fundraised \$30,000 for a project to support a mental health clinic's operations in the Gaza Strip. She has also organized

concerts and silent auctions to fundraise for various women's projects, including Project Hope, and acted as a vendor to promote handicrafts from a refugee women's cooperative. Claude's other passion is cooking. For her, spending hours in the kitchen cooking for loved ones is therapy. Claude adds her famous humus to the feast.

Azar Masoumi is an immigrant, a diasporic culturally Muslim woman, born and raised in Iran. She is currently a PhD student in Sociology at York University, studying refugees, citizenship and sexuality. Besides heavy sociological topics, debates and discussions, she has an interest in making and baking all things sweet, all forms of dance, and social gatherings. She brings to our feast a highly popular and culturally significant desert in Iran called *shole zard*. She learned how to make it from her mother, Mahvash, who is a great and generous cook. She is delighted to share this treat and its recipe with our guests.

Traditional Chef, **Johl Ringuette** (of RingFire Productions and Nishdish) has been providing delectable Anishnawbe cuisine to the Toronto Native community and allies for several years. Raised in Northern Ontario, his knowledge of native food was provided by his father (a hunter), and inspired by the culinary wisdom of his mother. Yearning for the indigenous foods from his childhood such as wild game, freshwater fish, berries, and maple syrup, he set out to provide Aboriginal catering to the urban community. Chef Ringuette will bring to the feast three sisters stew, made with corn, butternut squash and green beans, three indigenous and most frequently planted crop here before the settlers arrived. Cultivated together, these plants support one another and revitalize the soil, rather than deplete it. Three sisters stew teaches us to seek strength in community. <http://nishdish.com>

Regent Park Catering Collective started through Centre for Community Learning & Development as a community initiative involving a number of organizational partners. The Collective includes members from culturally diverse backgrounds including Sri Lanka, Somalia, Ethiopia, Spain, Kenya, China, Zanzibar and other countries. Its mission is to empower its members to gain financial security by doing what they love to do. Active since 2013, the Collective has made it possible for 31 Regent Park residents to receive their Food Handlers Certification, and has catered events for Regent Park Film Festival, Storytelling Toronto, Parents for Better Beginnings among others. The Collective will provide the feast with a surprise menu of rich African and Middle Eastern flavours. <http://ryan.camphireproject.com/>

Nicole Tanguay is a poet, musician, activist and community organizer of Cree and French heritage. She began cooking as soon as she could reach the stove. She believes food and cooking are about love

and nurturing and taking care of each other. Feeding a family, a friend or a nation are the same: Love goes into it. She combines food, music and thought into every day. She enriches our feast with baked spelt bannock.

Gita Hashemi's transmedia practice spans nearly thirty years and encompasses works that draw on visual, media, performance, site-specific and live art strategies. Most recently she exhibited *Time Lapsed* at A Space Gallery in Toronto and *The Idea of Freedom* at Le MAI in Montreal. She staged *Passages I: Wonders of the Sea* in October 2014 at Toronto's Triangle Gallery. Focusing on historical and contemporary issues, Hashemi's work explores social relations and the interconnections of embodied language with cultural imaginary and politics. Other recent projects include *Headquarters; Pathology of an Ouster*, focused on the 1953 US-UK coup d'etat 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, in Canada, the US, Italy, Bulgaria, Switzerland, Germany, Argentina, Mexico, Palestine, Poland and France. 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.

Research, script, direction, videography, edit
Gita Hashemi

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