

APPENDIX: Statement of Methodology

My thesis project *Seeking for Story* consists of two works: an artist's film and an experimental essay, both sharing the same title. This methodological statement aims to provide orientation around the relationship between the practical and written components of the thesis, as the two works intentionally do not reference one another in a direct manner.

The oblique interlocution between film and essay is a decisive overall characteristic of the project. As the essay states in its introduction, my thesis attempts "to translate history into mystery." Practically, this means a conscientious process of undoing the seduction of expert knowledge, whose representational, demonstrative, and expository conventions lend scholarly argumentation its formal legibility and legitimacy. I have been particularly vigilant against the ways in which these orthodoxies inform (and potentially deform) practice through academic objectivity in writing or artistic transparency in making. Instead, in both form and content my project makes an epistemic wager with the opaque, occluded, and aporetic as modalities I propose can take on the challenge of articulating a queer diaspora aesthetics.

At play in the project is a *methodological desire* to be known in the subject's unknowability. The question of *the subject* and its relation to knowledge is a core concern of both essay and film. My methodology is deeply influenced by psychoanalysis as a clinical-critical practice as well as an (anti-)theoretical apparatus. Most importantly to the project's output, I deploy the psychoanalytic as a practice of speaking and seeing. *Subjectivization* is at stake throughout.

The psychoanalytic operates in the essay as an attentiveness to the movement of speech along a signifying chain, in which words are played with to emphasise the entanglement of the knowing-subject (the "I"-function of the text) with the subject-of-knowledge (the enunciation of History). In the film, the remainder of what cannot be said, the subject's inevitable half-saying, is approached as a dream of "a discourse without words" that attempts to stage the mystery of the speaking-body.

Thus, the project posits subjectivization as an irresolvable problem of *translation*: a movement between and beyond languages, spoken and unspoken, that never completely carries over or fulfils the formal congruence of meanings. There is an incongruous difference that lingers in-between words and bodies, text and image, language and gesture, a difference that marks the subject's self-alienation. Untranslatability prevails and unsayability pleases. "It" enjoys and does not want *to know*.

A foundational wordplay propelling the essay's discursive drive and informing the film's phenomenal quality is that between "history-mystery" and "his story/my story." *Storying* is what the two works have in common, or rather, what they both attempt to practice while maintaining a difference proper to their respective forms. The subject, split between queer and Iranian, English and Persian, desires its history through the act of reading. Two stories - Larry Mitchell's *The Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions* and Ali Mirdrekvandi's *Nurafkan* archive - are read together to form a prism through which the subject may translate itself into being.

The essay is structured around a philological distinction, moving between the English word 'faggot' and the Persian word 'Luti' to bridge the histories of

the text and re-inscribe its signifiers within "my story." The writing works out of the historical towards the mysterious. The film enacts this process in reverse, mirroring and flipping it upside-down. The mystery that infuses the moving image occludes the *apparent* historical, which is to say that "his story" appears in its visual concealment, in the care taken towards sensuously embedding, enacting, and embodying history in its stead. "My story" in the film takes shape as the signs, sounds, gestures, and symbols that opaquely hint toward the *incorporation* of intertextual histories.

The film was made before the essay was written, thus methodologically establishing how a doing-without-knowing creates the possibility for a saying-that-eventually-knows. Practice generates discourse. Crucially, both essay and film propose the *embodiment of research*. The preparation for receiving knowledge – akin to the reception of the Other – involves surrendering to the irreversibility of the subject's transformation. An unknowing doing-thinking guides the performance of the film and shapes the writing of the essay. In this sense, ritual, or more precisely *ceremony* as an autopoietic instantiation of knowledge, operates in the project via the act of reading. Words are touched and touching, they lead the subject to seek out the Other through a ceaselessness of practice – striving, enduring, longing, and letting go – that eventually leads to ecstasy, a standing-outside of the self.

In this light, the film traces how an encounter with the Other opens the subject towards the unexpected. The subject shifts between differing appearances of a so-called "self," a fragmented image of who or what "I" am. The Other shifts, too, displacing itself tirelessly from books to bodies to the landscape and back, a narrative movement. Thinking the Other involves doing-with-others. There is the subject encountering a scholar – Mariam Motamedi-

Fraser. There is the subject encountering a dancer – Cecilia Macfarlane. There is the subject becoming and unbecoming the Other of itself – Luti. There is the celebrant subject with the friends as well as the labouring subject with the faggots. How do intimacies move and shift between modes of play, study, and work? Each of these stories is narrated progressively across the essay. The film, however, relates them simultaneously in their unrelatedness, insisting upon a coherent incoherence as if in a dream, where contradictions reign.

Thus, from the outset of the film's editing, *the dreamlike* became a basic narrative principle. Images are layered to appear and disappear, mirror and mask, mutate and morph, evoking the differentiation of beings, times, and places. Indeed, the colourful fragmentation and dense fluctuation expressed by the film's editorial style present a *diasporic form*, a lenticular mode of sight and sensation that embraces scattering, simultaneity, hybridity, and transformation. The constant superimposition of images suggests entangled spatio-temporalities and multi-directional memories, while the lens-based distortions of shape and the pulsating chromatic excess create a surface impression of the subject's inner world, where real and imaginary, familiar and uncanny, sacred and profane are inextricably intermingled – *inter-culturated*, even.

The essay problematises the figure of Ali Mirdrekvandi by putting my desire to know “on the couch,” thus drawing out the phantasmagorical conditions constituting the subject's history. Consequentially, the film chooses *to not reveal* his story. The more time I spent with the *Nurafkan* archive, the more I realised there was no way to do the work right, to repair or resolve or represent it “properly.” Inspired by Sergei Parajanov's statement at the beginning of his cinematic masterpiece *The Colour of Pomegranates* (1969) – a

film *not about* the poet Sayat Nova, rather an associative exploration of the subject's interiority, a poetic mood – my film decisively portrays the fantasy of a subject leaving a language, carrying a weight, and embarking on a sacred journey. With this decision, I reflect on the mediating role of fantasy vis-a-vis the archive. My practice, then, involves reading history *to the letter* in order to select signifiers able to carry a performance of mystery.

By choosing fantasy over exposition, I emphasise how “his story” is inevitably filtered through another's story. The Other exists as an invisible yet undeniable presence between one and another, a silent witness or residual haunting. $1 + 1 = 3$. What else is in the space with us, inside each of us? What is the Other in the self? This *third presence* takes numerous forms in the film: the dog witnessing archival play, the melancholic doubling of Luti and its self-effacement, the dance of the masked creatures, the body-branch that temporarily fuses faggot and crone. Each expresses different ways of embodying the unrepresentable *aftermath* of Ali's story. Where is he now? Is he in Hell? Where is Hell? As I reflect in the essay, Ali's final words bespeak a self-conscious damnation that indirectly voices his alienation from the Other. Despite the dehumanising operations of coloniality he has been subject(ed) to, the film fantasises Ali's presence-absence – *savage, creaturely, demonic* – as a “return of the repressed” able to reclaim its rightful beauty and dignity.

If the subject can only speak the Other in its lack, then how does the Other undo speech? Originally, I had planned to narrate a voiceover that would inscribe “his story” onto “my story.” As my collaboration with the film's soundtrack composers Dalia Neis and Susannah Stark progressed, this was placed under intensive scrutiny. Responding to the initial rough cut, the composers delivered a score that left little room to imagine a voiceover's additional

weight. They were responding to a brief I had shared in which I suggested their work consider how sound might express an emergent attempt to “say something” somewhere before or after speech, a kind of *babble*. I wanted to evoke the sensation I had in the library while reading the archive, how I was overcome with a somatic impulse to mumble and murmur.

I had found myself deeply moved by the legend of Ali burning his writing and the vow he had made to his Creator, “waiting to be worthy of speaking.” In his story I could sense my own grappling with broken tongues and language in the ruins. The composers' provocation of a film with no dialogue exposed how the subject-supposed-to-know still wavered in my methodology. In choosing to let go of the voiceover, I also chose to offer the viewer a challenge: that perhaps the story may need *not be known*. Rather, the film allows for a freedom of association and interpretation that, in the spirit of diaspora, risks “getting it wrong” and, in doing so, supposes *an other knowledge*.

By sacrificing speech, the Other returns as an unspeakable gift. The subject moves towards the thickness of language-as-such. The resulting score embraces the polyphony of other sounds: the outdoors, birds, trains, fire, paper, breath, children playing, animals jeering. The dense composition draws on original music, field recordings, experimental mouth sounds, samples from Parviz Kimiavi's films, and documentation of Zoroastrian mantras, a sonic mixture of the historical and the contemporary that fills a seeming speechlessness with secret meaning.

The film's staging of the subject's familiar, domestic surroundings in Oxford reflects the essay's engagement with Diana Taylor's work on “post-Conquest” performance. An archive from over-there and back-then is re-situated within a

repertoire of the here and now. The film celebrates diasporic *here-ness*. As a technological reflection on survivance under Empire, the use of a 360-camera to document movement in the land re-appropriates imperial omnivoyance, with its desire for exposure and surveillance, through an ocular disorientation that transforms the English environs into a suddenly strange site. By positioning the camera in the centre of a tree circle, for example, there is a redistribution of the gaze and a displacement of views. The image scatters bodies along the border, while the centre becomes a blind spot that refracts and mutates whatever approaches it. Perspective becomes unstable and mythopoetic.

Thus, the "I" conceals and reveals an "eye," like the visionary opening and closing of the peepholes that begin the film and mark its chapters, or the editorial rhythm of a looping or spiralling around, within, and underneath the image. The in-camera effect of corporeal mutability, a growing and shrinking, stretching and twisting, blurring and brightening inside a picture plane accounts for the fantastical morphing quality of power and presence that characterises intimacies structured around difference. What does unexpected togetherness look like? With these experiments in technique and applications of method, my project's original contribution to research in fine art lies in how it holds an unfinished story, repeating and varying it ceaselessly, embracing its interruption and deviation, and, ultimately, maintaining history in its *potential*.