



A Response to Sophie Sabet's exhibition, Since We Last Spoke

Flux Gallery, 27 October – 4 November 2017

**by Christina Hajjar
January 9, 2018**

SINCE WE LAST SPOKE; AN INVITATION

Sophie Sabet's *Since We Last Spoke* is a three-channel video installation, self-described as "exploring the intricacies and tribulations of a modern Iranian-Canadian home." With its goal of representing the impact of migration, displacement, and interpersonal and cultural frictions, the tensions of this show ran high.

Sabet's parents' letters lay on top of one another, Farsi spreading over the pages from edge to edge. Protected in a vitrine in the corner of the room, their preciousness and intimacy was made evident. Engagement with the letters was limited because of their enclosure as well as the barriers of language. These letters, written between 1997-2004, are the bases of the project, and although the artist informed me that she cannot read Farsi, she has developed her own relationship with them through translation and through the making of *Since We Last Spoke*.

Two individual silent video portraits of Sabet's parents listening to one another read their letters informs a bedroom scene—part silent, part audio—which reveals her parents' subsequent argument from the reading that was initiated by the artist, their daughter.

As I walked into the gallery, I was met with the large, empty bedroom, straight on, an apparent invitation into an intimate space. An all-white, simple bed with one pillow in front of a large window juxtaposed luxury and aloneness.

To my right I was met with a video portrait of Sabet's mother, who seemed emotionally present and consumed by grief. It was evident that hearing the letters she'd written long ago, now read back to her by her husband, had stirred something too much to bear. At one point she leaves her chair and the camera remains unfocused, awaiting her return, until eventually the viewer realizes she is not coming back and the video loops again.

On my left was a video portrait of Sabet's father. He appeared more guarded and somber, as if he was agitated or restraining himself. There were moments where his softness gleamed through, where his brows furrowed. I was captivated by his facial expressions, left wondering whether his seriousness was a practice of concentration or disconnection.

HER & HIM; HERE & THERE

I wonder about Sabet's father's rigidity and her mother's more visible expression in her pout, her rising chest, and her eventual exit of the scene. These expressions could be considered gendered responses; men are socialized to not show their softness and vulnerability, women to be more emotionally open. While I think this must play a role in the responses, more is revealed in their

subsequent argument that emanates from the vacant bedroom, only fluctuating with the light shifting from darkness to lightness, and back.

The barren bed and single pillow, coupled with phrases such as, “You never unpacked your suitcase,” are poignant representations of the couple’s mixed ideations of home. At one point Sabet’s father even asserts, “If you think I like it there more than I like you then it must be so,” demonstrating his exhaustion with the conflation of his time spent visiting and working back home to the (lack of) devotion and liking for his wife and family.

Sabet’s father is rooted in his decision. The need to travel back and forth from Canada to Iran reveals an unwillingness to let go of his homeland, thus creating home in multiple sites. His actions are anti-assimilationist. Meanwhile, the consequences of these actions leave his wife longing for home, stability, and family. Although both can be said to be cultivating their own ideas of success, happiness, and the Canadian dream, their mixed expectations and miscommunications cause damage.

HYPHENATED-NATION IDENTITY; LOSS

The letters reveal an eagerness and willingness to communicate. However, years later—some letters dating 20 years back—the couple’s argument represents a lack of patience and to some extent, a failure of their Canadian dream. The letters bear the weight of this loss. What was once a representation of their fragmented hopes and desires now symbolizes consequence, tension, and interpersonal conflict.

In *Since We Last Spoke* there comes the inevitable realization that it is impossible to watch the entire scene in unison. The simultaneity of Sabet’s parent’s emotions forces the viewer to always miss something, always having to turn from one to the other. Processing the situation and disentangling the family dynamics as a whole is slow and complex.

During the argument in the bedroom, Sabet’s father says, “Some people may look and say what a fortunate life, some may look and say what an unfortunate life.” Just like the physicality of missing part of the scene, this statement by Sabet’s father captures the complexities of placing judgment on other’s families, and captures the nuances of privilege, home-making, and identity formation as people with hyphenated-nation identities.

Satisfaction, stability, and a sense of groundedness can be hard to come by for displaced and diasporic peoples. Several factors play into concepts of home and belonging; lineage/history, language, systemic privilege and oppression, willingness and ability to assimilate and participate in white supremacy, and fluctuating family dynamics. It is also important to consider that Canada is a settler nation, meaning that anyone who is non-Indigenous benefits from stolen land, and

will never truly be able to call Canada home. Many people in the Iranian community also face difficulty identifying as a race, further making identity formation a contentious subject.

HOME; FRAGMENTATION

The anthology *Food For Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists* includes many stories and much knowledge about hyphenated-nation identity.

Marilynn Rashid discusses her realizations about the impossibility of returning home:

If we could, in fact, go back where we came from, as some would like us to do, we would still not find ourselves, for those places are changed or destroyed or occupied or part of the same industrial grid we find ourselves in here. And also, some of us, many of us, would have to cut ourselves up in twos and threes and ship pieces of ourselves all over the globe. And surely that wouldn't help our sense of fragmentation. So we stay where we are, at least for now, and we know it as home. (Rashid 197)

Rashid speaks to the very important presence of fragmentation, which is also a theme in Sabet's installation, especially in the way that I make sense of Sabet's father's need to continually return to his homeland. Rashid demonstrates that home is always in flux. However, when one leaves a home, the conceptualization of it often remains static, and nostalgia for that specificity of time, space/place, and identity develops.

Sabet's father is driven by the need to actualize his concepts of home, continually engaging with the changing and sometimes clashing landscapes of east and west. He holds and balances both. The question of Sabet's mother's conceptualizations of home remains. I am left with the assumption that she contends with her sense of fragmentation as Iranian-Canadian by being rooted in one place. Perhaps her Iran is not what it still is for her husband, a place of calling. The dynamics that have been created in the family in an effort to belong and thrive create unspoken tensions and frictions.

Following the first opening of *Since We Last Spoke* at Ryerson Image Centre in Toronto, Sabet participated in an artist talk with Nahed Mansour from SAVAC (South Asian Visual Arts Centre). Sabet noted that tension is created through the discrepancy of her parents' expectations versus reality, but ultimately the creation of the work was an opportunity to reflect and pause, which Mansour suggested acts as an interesting time capsule.

DIASPORIC INQUIRY; MAKING

Since We Last Spoke is a diasporic inquiry; an attempt at communication across difference. It creates a language for her parents, first through their body language and second during their conversation thereafter. The installation creates a moment of harmony through the opportunity for expression. Despite the intense emotions, disrupted nostalgia, and tension, harmony is created nonetheless.

Sabet's work is also recreation of home space. Lebanese-Canadian scholar and editor of *Food For Our Grandmothers*, Joanna Kadi discusses the need to create sites and moments of home as a way to grapple with diaspora and reformations of home, family, and belonging.

Are we weakened by the ever-present feeling of not belonging in the west or the east, of having a foot in both worlds but no solid roots in either? Or are we stronger, more innovative and creative, able to make home in odd sites, able to survive in small hard places, plants growing out of rocks? Perhaps this is our advantage, perhaps this is what we bring to the world. Find home wherever you can make it. Make home so you can find it wherever. (Kadi xv)

In the biography accompanying her exhibition, Sabet asserts that her work “focuses on exploring identity and the influences of the diasporic experience within the domestic sphere.” Although her body is not visible in the three videos, the work is undoubtedly an attempt to make sense of her own subject position, both within her family and within her relationships to nation-state, culture, and space.

Sabet's *Since We Last Spoke* is an honouring of her parent's experiences, sacrifices, and generosity as well as a desire to reconcile difference and locate herself within their narratives. Harmony is sought through the documentation of tension, creating a new archive through the exploration of an old one, and making a home through the work of self-theorizing and creation.

Works Cited

Kadi, Joanna., editor. *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists*. South End Press, 1991.

Rashid, Marilyn. "What's not in a name." *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists*, edited by Joanna Kadi, South End Press, 1991, pp. 197-203.