

Sahar Khraibani

*The Making
and Unmaking
of Memories, or,
The Fragmenting
Force of Memory*

1.

i don't know what to tell you as you're driving down this narrow street or really wide highway and i think Nico said it best when she said "these days... i wonder if i'll see another highway" but i guess what i'm trying to say is that i dont want to acquiesce to this and i can't handle you telling me to take / it / easy / please stop expecting me to churn out quality content because i can't my therapist asked me if i've ever experienced something like this before and i'm sure she only asked because she knows where i come from and i said yes, yes and no i mean there was a 30 day war back in 2006 and i got fat because of stress eating but i was younger and had no sense of mortality but i have a sense of mortality now no not a sense a knowledge a knowledge a deep fucking fear of it and i do not want to die i do not want to be buried away from home you don't know how expensive it is to ship a body across oceans but i do so the next time you email me asking about the deadline i missed i will ask you to remember when jay z and kanye west sang "doctors say im the illest cause im suffering from realness" i will ask you to pay up first because capitalism got us here and i don't really want to facetime i want to disappear i want to not be consumed by fear i want to *not* want to be american right now because i honestly don't know which one is scarier being me or being you and i don't want to live in a comparative framework but if you know you know this is a hellofa conundrum and maybe i should just acquiesce the f down and go offline and stop answering emails.

In the morning, I wake up, and I leave.

Leaving is an act that holds within its small crevices the desire for escape—to escape is to be cast off, to hide, to run and never look back. Once perceived as final, leaving is replete with notions of "never going back," ideas of shedding: the self, the past, the beliefs that once formed this precarious idea of belonging. Leaving is an act of dismantling. Dismantling of a world, a center, a nucleus that can no longer hold itself. But it is also an act of world building, of creating new realities that can only be conceived of in a space that is different—another country, another language, another life. Leaving is the act of creating a new setting, a new point of view. Of World building, the American essayist Carmen Maria Machado writes: "places are never just places in a piece of writing. If they are, the author has failed. Setting is not inert. It is activated by point of view."

Points of view: I can write in the first, second, or third person. One provides an escape, the other, accountability, and the third, leeway.

2.

You walk down Broadway, and a Hasidic Jewish girl, about 10 years old, stops you. She asks “who are you” but you hear “how are you” and you smile, through your mask, wondering if the creasing of your eyes and forehead relayed the intensity with which you were smiling. The Hasidic community is not known to interact with passersby on the street. “Great” you say “good, how are you?” and she looks perplexed. It’s an aggressively hot Spring day in 2020 and you’ve ventured out a couple of blocks to get groceries, the girl continues to ride her scooter next to you, pausing every so often to keep with your slower pace. “The Black Lives Matter, have you seen them? We watch them from the window,” she says after a long silence, but instead you hear: “The man there in black, he’s watching.”

She asks you where you live but you miss that because you’re preoccupied with smiling through your mask and wondering if she knows. Later that day, you exchange the details of this interaction with your companion, the one who walked next to you, you both heard very different things—you heard that the girl was scared that there was a man watching her from the window and she heard that the little girl was watching the Black Lives Matter protests from her window. You look down at your arms and you realize that you’re wearing a half sleeve shirt because it’s basically summer and it’s been a while since you’ve shown your skin outside. You realize that the color of your skin is dark, something you forgot most of the time. Maybe the girl thought that you were black, maybe the girl wanted to know more about the Black Lives Matter movement, maybe she was scared because she was looking at you with her eyes piercing into your skin. She was looking at you with a question mark on her face; she was looking at you as if your body and your skin held answers. She was looking at you. She was not looking at the white person walking next to you as much as she was looking at you. You triggered something in her or maybe she’s seen you, she’s seen people like you, she’s seen people with skin color that is very much the opposite of hers. Maybe that’s why she felt the need to explain that she’s “Jew” and “not black.”

3.

In “How Not To Be Seen,” a sketch from *Monty Python’s Flying Circus*, the narrator, John Cleese, is trying to explain the importance of not being seen. Monty Python were a British surreal comedy group who created the sketch comedy show *Monty Python’s Flying Circus*, which first aired on BBC in 1969. This particular clip purports to be a British government film presented for public service. It opens with what seems to be an empty field, a still and lifeless image. The narrator goes on to state that there are forty hidden people in the landscape. He singles out one character by means of a looming voice over, and asks the said character, Mr. Bradshaw, to stand up. When Mr. Bradshaw complies, a loud gunshot sound startles the viewer and signals the character’s death. After this incident, the narrator coolly states: “this demonstrates the value of not being seen.”

In a theory she calls “the state of zero probability” artist and critic Hito Steyerl gives a semblance of an idea as to what disappearing can look like: “In the state of zero probability, whatever is impossible—like people being swallowed from the face of the earth—happens all the time and nobody thinks twice about it.”¹ This is a condition that is brought forth by a deluge of digital images, which continue to circulate and multiply while actual people either go missing, or are the victims of over-visibility and an overbearing architecture of surveillance. “The state of zero probability” could exist anywhere: in a warzone, in a museum, in data analytics, or even in a book. According to Steyerl, it is a portal that opens up whenever anyone asks:

“is this really happening?”

On disappearing: Write in a language that is foreign to you, a language that is not yours. Self impose a linguistic exile from your mother tongue. Do away with the first person on your way to being just a being. Do away with the third person on your way to becoming an image. In the opening page of his novel “Drown,” Dominican-American writer Junot Diaz quotes Cuban writer and scholar Gustavo Perez Firmat: “The fact that I am writing to you in English already falsifies what I wanted to tell you. My subject: how to explain to you that I don’t belong to English though I belong nowhere else.”

1) “Interview // Hito Steyerl: Zero Probability and the Age of Mass Art Production.” Berlin Art Link. November 19, 2013. Accessed November 04, 2018. <http://www.berlinartlink.com/2013/11/19/interview-hito-steyerl-zero-probability-and-the-age-of-mass-art-production/>.

5.

On the phone with my friend, a Libyan-born Bosnian writer, I ask: “why is western civilization infatuated with war-torn countries? What is it that they see in us that I don’t? And why aren’t they turned on by their own shortcomings, their own discomfort, their own wars, their own atrocious histories of settler-colonialism, inherent racism, and stained ancestry?”

I had been adamant about not addressing the Lebanese civil war in my writing, not falling into the traps of history, or using it as a sure-fire way to please international art markets, and as an art critic, I definitely did not want to address the works that dealt with it. I never felt it to be my own struggle, or maybe, I felt it to be too much of my own, too close to home, too related to trauma passed down by generations before me. It slipped through most of my life without me noticing, when my parents worried about me being out past a certain time, or going to “Christian” areas. It lived with us, in our household, in our move from a secular neighborhood to a more religiously specific one. It moved around seamlessly in our lives: an imperceptible, ghost-like trace of a manufactured forgetting that always worked towards rendering itself invisible. And invisible it was, safe for a couple of stories here and there, the story of actually living through the civil war in Lebanon was never told to us growing up. It was absent. No nitty-gritty details, no details of grocery runs during cease-fire hours, no stories about leaving in the middle of the night, evacuating houses, dodging snipers. I felt robbed of stories that were supposed to form my history, so I adopted new histories: ones that rejected my parent’s experiences, histories that made me relate to the West more than I related to my own culture.

I became a writer because I wanted to hide. I wanted to hide from other people’s histories and create my own. I wanted to be in control of my narrative and take it whichever way I wanted it to go. I wanted to challenge stereotypes of writing the same stories over and over again, terms such as “collective memory” and “collective traumas” never featured. [I feel this is a little unfair because it is a history still very much in flux, being contested and rewritten]². Here is where I posit the first lie: “I became a writer.” One simply doesn’t become a writer, and certainly not when one is hiding from themselves. In *Memory for Forgetfulness: August, Beirut, 1982*, Mahmoud Darkish writes: “It’s as if we were here as caretakers of fragile substances and were now preparing to absorb the operation of moving our reality, in its entirety, into the domain of memories forming within sight of us. And as we move away, we can see ourselves turning into memories.” I liken the act of seeing oneself turn into a memory as akin to the act of writing one’s story, one’s narrative—writing the things we are most afraid of. For people like me, ruled by the duplicitous nature of their multiplicity, the self becomes hard to access. I step outside of it and try to entangle it, first, second, and third person narratives; I ask questions that cause discomfort, questions such as “why is western civilization infatuated with war-torn countries?” I cringe away the thought and leave it dormant, somewhere in a chamber whose doors remain closed. [what does it mean to cringe? Second-hand embarrassment or something steeped in history? —look into “[cultural cringe](#)”]³ Perhaps I chose to write about art because it gave me an excuse to be elsewhere. The right to exist as one of many—many who have not been born into conflict, into the sly ways that torn histories shape those who are.

2) Personal notes from revision number 2.

3) Personal notes from revision number 2.

6.

In a long overdue email, I wrote: “My current temporary home overlooks the city, I can see the empire state building, flashing in emergency red.” This email chain started in September 2019 with one of my favorite authors. The subject: “From Cairo,” and in it, I am told: “New York is a hard hard place. It’s not easy to give it up, especially given this unspoken pressure of making it in NY, but sometimes it’s the best way. I think the key is assessing if the city allows you to breathe, deeply. It did me for about a year, and then I felt it was just sucking me dry. If all you want to do is write, Beirut may be the better place. Or Mexico City. Or ... you know... places that aren’t so harsh, are home, or make it affordable to live a writing life...follow your intuition.”

It is 8:37 PM and the sun is refusing to set. NYPD helicopters hover over the skies of Brooklyn and Manhattan. I pick up Toni Morrison’s *The Source of Self-Regard*. I remember the passing of Toni Morrison last year, Black folks and people of color mourning across the nation and worldwide, my friend and I huddled in a small gathering at a coffee shop in Brooklyn, listening to people as they read their favorite Toni Morrison words. I remember attending Morrison’s memorial, at The Cathedral Church of St. John The Divine in Harlem—perhaps the most beautiful place in New York City (as my first American friend told me). The queue was six blocks long, but my friend had arrived early and saved me a spot. Everything is possible in New York when you have a friend. The church where the memorial was set to take place holds around 6,000 people, but some were turned away because more than 6,000 people showed up. It was a freezing day in November, and more than 6,000 people took time out of their busy lives to queue outside of a church in Harlem and attend Morrison’s memorial, to pay their respect. Many of her close friends, family, colleagues, and mentees took turns sharing the stage to say a few words. It was Morrison, after all, that wrote: “This is when artists go to work. There is no time for despair, no place for self-pity, no need for silence, no room for fear. We speak, we write, we do language. That is how civilizations heal.” This was when they, and we, had to go to work. There is no time for despair, and no room for fear, we write and we do language, and that is how we can heal.

7.

I keep coming back to the email correspondence, and to Morrison's words, as if there was something waiting for me there. I don't know what this sunken feeling is, of words percolating at the tip of your tongue but never materializing—a crippling fear of giving them shape, a body, space. I turn to these because there is something there for me to see, perhaps, or something materializing without me realizing. I feel so estranged from my words—they are imperceptible, ghost-like traces of a manufactured forgetting that always worked towards rendering itself invisible. I entered the world of writing through the back door, and now here I find myself, unable to formulate any of my thoughts into digestible sentences, pieces of information meant to travel through webs to perhaps, if I play all my cards right, land on someone's screen.

Sahar Khraibani is a Lebanese artist, writer, and educator based in Brooklyn. She is interested in the intersection between language, artistic production, and geopolitics, as well as the reproducibility of trauma as a form of queer resilience. Her writing and work have appeared in the Brooklyn Rail, Hyperallergic, TERSE Journal, Degree Critical, The Outpost, Queen Mobs, Full Stop, and Bidayat Mag, among others. She co-runs @duriandays, a studio-collective and online platform for BIQPOC creatives, and currently serves as faculty at Pratt Institute. You can read her work here: <https://www.saharkhraibani.com/>