

Don't you feel better when you wear a skirt?

Speaking with Sheida Soleimani and another dear friend, who wanted to remain anonymous, about creating degrees of freedom in life and work.



Kimi Hanauer: What is your relationship to cultural passage or immigration?

Sheida Soleimani: I don't know if I identify as an immigrant as much as a child of an immigrant, which has been a very large part of my life—feeling like I'm belonging but not belonging, being born here but not actually belonging to the community here because of a language barrier. So in that sense, I do feel like an immigrant, but I never have lived in another country. It's weird feeling like an outsider having been within the system for such a long time. I always say my parents' stories really influence me, because that is how I learn about where they lived, and where I come from.

Anonymous: Some things happened in Iran that made me not want to stay. I always wanted to go to another country to have that experience and experience other people, but the main reason I left is that 12 years ago when [Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad became president of Iran, everything changed. He cheated in his second election. It made me rethink everything for years. And then I just decided to go to another country. I didn't feel like I had the freedom that I wanted and I thought that maybe if I went to another country, I could have that freedom. I was wrong, but that was the moment that made my decision to migrate to the United States.

What makes you feel free? What is freedom to you?

It's hard to say. We have a freer freedom [in the U.S.] by being able to do what we want or being able to have the power to dictate the spaces that we live within, but so much of that comes down to governmental systems. In Iran, yeah, you could feel free on your own, inside of your own home, but do you feel free inside of your own home because that's where you get to do what you want? You know? Your freedom always comes down to the ruling powers. I don't think I'll fully ever feel free because the American governmental system isn't as free as we'd like to think it is. I mean compared to Iran it's so much better ...

It was better.

We don't have Sharia law here but still, we still have capital punishment, we still have prison systems, we still have so many injustices, and I don't think they are gonna go away. So I think freedom is kinda false, like the American dream: It's this thing that we aspire for but I don't think anyone actually knows what it fully means.

Are there moments where you have felt a degree of some kind of freedom? Even if it is a type of momentary illusion?

That illusion of freedom comes to me when I feel accomplished, when I've done something and I reward myself. Most of the time, it's doing something stupid like going on a drive and shirking all my other responsibilities. That's a moment where I'm like, "Oh, I'm free to do this right now!" and it feels good. I don't have to answer to anyone else, I don't have to answer to me, I am just doing it to do it. And that to me is the closest thing to freedom. Making choices without feeling like there has to be an endpoint or a consequence.

Well, before I came here I didn't know, but I found out that here there are some issues too. In Iran, some people are religious, so sometimes you have to pretend to believe in something when you really don't. So you don't have that freedom that you want because you have to pretend to believe in something. So when I came here, I thought I could have that kind of freedom. And I can kind of have that freedom because I don't have to pretend to be someone else, but culturally, we are different. So I can't say I have that kind of freedom that I want.

Are there cultural practices or ideas here that you ever feel like you have to go along with?

I was teaching at a university for several years—most of the universities in Iran are related to the government, so if you want to keep your job, you have to pretend you believe in the govern-

ment. If you don't have a job related to the government, maybe you can act differently, but not really.

And there are consequences for those things too.

Yeah, they can fire you. You can lose your job. They can put you in jail. They can do anything that they want.

My parents didn't pretend and there were consequences for their actions. Either you don't pretend and you're escaping or in prison, or you pretend and you hate it, but at least you get by. And I think that's the misconception Americans have about activists in Iran. People say that they aren't true activists because they are going along with the system. But people here don't understand that there isn't really a system for going against the system.

Also if you go against the system, not everyone supports you. It was eight years ago? When Ahmadinejad cheated in the election?

It was in 2009.

We were protesting for a year; I went to almost all of the protests. So many people were there, so many people there got arrested, so many people got killed. After one year, I just got tired. I didn't want to do it anymore because I didn't see any results. That's why people who live here, even Iranian people who are saying that you are going on with the government, they can't talk about Iran. They can't say anything about Iranian people because they don't have any idea of what it's like to be in that situation. All of those guards—it was so scary.

Here, the only thing we saw about it was when Neda Agha-Soltan got shot and killed, but that only lasted for one day in the media. Then, Michael Jackson died—it was the same day as the revolution—and all the media went toward covering Michael Jackson's death.

It's because they don't care. People here just ask you about Iran

Sholeh (Maman), archival pigment print, 2016, by Sheida Soleimani.



because they are curious. They don't care. They are just curious about what you are doing, what Iran looks like. But after one week, they won't even remember it. That's why I try not to talk about Iran that much anymore because when people talk to me, I can tell they don't actually care about my country. I am proud to be Iranian because of our culture. The only thing is the government that is so fucked up now. One of the reasons I don't want to talk about Iran sometimes is because people think all Iranian people agree with the government. Even in the past, we were the same people. They think the government and the people are together, but we are not.

I have that experience all the time.

I was a part of this fellowship in Chicago, and a friend that was also a fellow invited me to a party. There, the director of the program asked me where I was coming from and I said Iran. And he said, "Then why do you have these clothes?" He was so rude. I don't have time for you, and you are the director of a foundation!

"Don't you feel better when you wear a skirt? Look at yourself and your shorts!" [laughs]

People like to say that people are not racist in the United States. But that has not been my experience at all. Fifty percent or more of the people I have met have been racist toward me. They don't have any idea of other countries but they allow themselves to talk about your country. It makes me so angry.

I feel like the racism here, although with Trump the rhetoric has changed, is often coated in a type of politeness. People say things that mean other things.

It's so sad that the director of a foundation thinks like that.

It's not surprising at all.

How do you navigate moments like that?

I used to try to answer the questions, but now I just ignore people because, you know ...

It's not worth your energy.

When someone is stupid enough to ask you such questions, I don't have time for that. I would rather spend my time explaining things to people who actually care.

And there's the fascination with the exotic too, it's something that many feel, like, "Oh, you're not from here, but we know a little bit about you because you are from ____."

And for a while, when I first came to the United States, I was only working with women. Because my work is about women, all the comments that I got were, "Why do the women not have a scarf in your work?" "You're from Iran so they should have a scarf!" [laughs] So I started making work about men because I didn't want to hear that stereotype anymore.

That's what I think is so funny that the Iranian government perpetuates—or if you watch Iranian cinema, a movie just came out not too long ago called *The Salesman*. Americans love it. [Asghar] Farhadi is an amazing director but there are all these limitations that the Iranian government creates for movies. So for an example, when you are wearing hijab on the streets, it's because you have to. But when you are inside of your own home you can take it off. In privacy, not around men.

Even in public, you don't have to have a scarf. It depends what kind of public you are in. When you are in a gallery, you are fine. Only on the street. Many people think it's a big deal about Iran, but I don't see it as a big deal—there are so many other things that are important. Like when people ask me about scarves, it's not like I came here because I didn't want to wear a scarf. You don't move to another country because of your clothes. There are other issues you want to escape.

In *The Salesman*, because it is an issue in Iranian cinema—you cannot show a woman without a headscarf or hijab—so in every single scene, even when she is inside of the home, and even going to bed in the movie, she's wearing hijab.

So people think that you even sleep with a scarf.

You can't have sex scenes or men touching women ... I always think of Alfred Hitchcock, I forget what movie it is, where the train goes through the tunnel, and that becomes an allusion for a sexual act. That very much happens in Iranian cinema as well. Because you can't show anything, it becomes all about the illusionism and the symbolism. And I think those are things that get lost on a Western audience. Instead, they turn into these things where Western audiences perpetuate stereotypes because they see it in a movie but don't know how to pick it apart.

Is this part of what motivates you to make your own visual media? And do you ever feel like this dynamic affects how we are able to build community for ourselves?

Honestly, for me, it's about finding your people, like you mentioned. How do you navigate a place where there are no people of your same nationality? And do you have to be like-minded with the people that do share a nationality with you? Honestly, [Anonymous], you are the first Iranian I've met that I've enjoyed hanging out with. I enjoy your company. Many Iranians I've met that have immigrated to the United States are extremely materialistic, and I don't have anything in common with those I've met. So my community has always been others from migrant communities that feel similarly or have been tokenized. Especially having recently been this diversity hire at the school I teach at is such a tokenizing thing. I navigate that space by connecting with my students who also feel tokenized. So I guess finding a tribe through that experience.... People assume because you all come from the same place you must all think the same way. And there are so many Iranians that I've met that I'm like, we speak the same language and I love that I can communicate with you, but then that's

just it.

That's something Kearra Amaya Gopee [pages 232-233] and I were talking about: having to essentialize your own identity in order to "succeed." Do you ever feel that way?

I use it as a Trojan horse. It's a talking point because I know it's what people know about, when they don't actually know about my culture. They are aware of my culture so they are always parading their own assumptions about it, and I always ask questions back. I always try to show imagery that sparks that conversation as a way in. That begins the larger conversation, which is much harder, of decolonizing minds.

I actually really don't care anymore. [laughs] One, or maybe two years ago, I was still trying to explain to people, but now I don't give a fuck. If you are curious you can just go do some research. People sometimes, like my advisor at school, they really want to talk to help me or just want to talk, so I usually explain everything, and we can have good conversations. But most people are not like that.

How would you define your version of sanctuary?

The only space I can consider being a sanctuary is being at home with my parents. We all navigated the same experience together in the same way. They came here from Iran, they were traumatized, they navigated that with one another, and then had me. I just became part of that journey. They are my only place where I can speak my native language. Home is where I learned my native language. They are the only people who know what it's like to live in Loveland, Ohio, in a white community. So, it's either that or when I'm home alone, then I don't have to interact with people. Most times I have to interact with other people, I actually don't feel fully safe and protected whether it be queer communities—like, there are some divides within queer communities—there are so many divides between immigrant communities ... The only no-judgement zone is around my parents, and I like that

a lot. I was kind of like their therapist for a really long time. My mom would put me to bed and tell me stories of when she was in prison. My dad would take me out on drives and tell me about his time in the revolution. But on top of that there were always these rituals. We would always have tea five times a day. We would sit at home at the end of the night, we would always have dinner together. During dinner, my dad would always talk about some world political issue and then we'd have a conversation. Then after dinner, my mom would make tea and we would all sit around and watch CNN and make fun of the news. There's no one I can sit around with and feel like I have that similar perspective with. Those were the little rituals that made it feel safe. That and my mom's horticulture, wildlife rehabilitation, and the plants.

I don't have that safety here at all. My family is not here. I have a few Iranian friends that are kind of in the same situation, so sometimes you can talk about issues together but doing that is not enough because I don't see them that much. So I don't have what you feel with your family; I can't have it here.

Do you have it when you're home?

Yeah! Of course. We have experienced everything together. I think they are the only people I can trust. Here, I cannot trust anyone at all because it's just so different. In Iran, usually families are very supportive. You can live with your family until you die. I'm dying to go to Iran and see my family, but I can't.

I think our family migration experience made us really close but it's also isolating in another way. Like you mentioned, Sheida, when there isn't really anyone else of your culture around you other than family. Something else I experience is that there is still a cultural difference between my family and I sometimes. We grew up in different contexts. And then there's the thing of no one really accepting that you can be of two (or more) nationalities or cultures.

I get that. Especially with other Iranians even. When I speak in Farsi, they will be like "Oh, well you have an American accent!"

Reyhaneh, archival pigment print, 2017, by Sheida Soleimani.



and I'm like, "Oh, so I'm not Iranian enough for you? Like, I still speak the same language. Is that not enough?" That always makes me really angry. Even my family in Iran—I remember being a little kid and I would talk to my grandmother on the phone and I would wait for my dad to pick up the phone in the other room. I'm listening and my dad picks up, and for some reason I just stayed on the phone, I was a 6-year-old kid. And the first thing my grandmother said is, "Your daughter Sheida has a very American accent." And I was so sad. I started crying and crying. Like wow, even my own family doesn't—

Do you take it as something bad?

Well, everyone says it very negatively. They are discounting me, like, "Oh, your accent is American!" like they are better than me or something. I know I am different and I probably do have an American accent, but the way that people say it is stuck up. When my grandmother said it she was very negative about it. Like basically [my father] is not teaching his daughter good enough.

Grandfathers and grandmothers don't think about that. Like, they prefer their grandson or granddaughter who talks very well in their own language. And they are different, so don't take that personally.

Last year this girl I met, who was actually one of my graduate students at RISD [Rhode Island School of Design], she was first like, "Ugh, you have an American accent." And I was like, "So what?" It always makes me really angry. When I was growing up here and I learned how to speak English from my parents who had Persian accents, I spoke English with an accent. I got made fun of all the time by American kids. I worked really hard to change that, and now I sound like a valley girl. But I am OK with it. It's just who I am.

Did you work on it? Did it take you a while?

Yeah. It did. I started speaking English when I was 6, and by the

time I was 10, I had lost my accent.

How did you do it?

I talked to myself, a lot. I did that with my handwriting too. There were a group of girls I was hanging out with, or wanted to hang out with, and I would hang on to them kind of like a little leech. One of them who was the leader of the group had a really cute way of writing the letter "A" and I spent a whole summer trying to change the way I wrote, to change my letter "A" to the way she wrote hers. Same thing with my talking, I would just sit in a corner and practice the sounds and try to change, because I got made fun of so much.

How do you navigate language around race in the United States as someone who is living here, while coming from a different culture where race is also understood in different terms?

I think about that all the time. Especially because of my students and my job position. I applied for the job—knowing I was a non-American person—but I have never actually referred to myself as a person of color. And then I got the job, and I was constantly being referred to as POC, which I don't have a problem with, but I was confused by it because of my understanding of it in Ohio. I called my dad and was like, "Are we people of color?" He joked that we look pretty white but my mom is very dark and my grandfather is Black. My mother is very dark, and she calls herself *mahi dudi*, which means smoked fish. He said that people would think that my mom is a person of color, but they are not going to think that I am. And then I've gone on, and part of me has adopted feeling like a person of color. Feeling so much like an outsider all my life in American culture, I don't feel weird taking on that role. When I refer to myself in that way, some other times people are like, "Oh, you're white. Like, you look really white." So there's that juggle. So many Iranians, too, say they are white. Do you hear that a lot?

I mean the only thing that is important for me is the culture, and

I think Iranian people have a very great culture. Like a culture of 8,000 years? That's why whenever I hear something like that, I really don't care.

Maybe we can end on a positive note?

I'm not positive.

I'm pretty cynical.

Let's try. What is something that you say 100 percent yes to?

I'm happy that I'm experiencing all of these things that I didn't have any idea about, like my perspective was different. It's so sad sometimes, the things I am experiencing here, but at the same time it's good.

Bird rehabilitation. They make me very happy and that is my way of getting away from people because [birds] don't talk and need help. I had 16 birds before I left from the clinic and we released them all.

Judge, Jury, Executioner, archival pigment print, 2014, by Sheida Soleimani.

