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Saramifar, Younes

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# Chasing some bodies: Tracing the embodiment of female refugees in *transnational* settings and reading tales of their bodies

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**Younes Saramifar**

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, The Netherlands

**Abstract**

The way individuals embody their homeland has been addressed by several scholars. However, this article questions how female refugees embody transnational settings while seeking a new home and homeland. The tales of bodies are traced through the writings of three Iranian female refugees living in Europe. The article analyses their autobiographies through a critical reading of Thomas Csordas's phenomenology of body–world relations and then diverges from him to draw inspiration from Deleuzian becoming. The study attempts to offer an anthropology of becoming to highlight how corporeality is the realm of *bodies* becoming.

**Keywords**

Anthropology of body, becoming, embodiment, female refugees, home, subjectivity

The sound of my fingers pressing the letters on the keyboard merges with the symphony of my thoughts, reminding me that I am drafting sentences to knit together an idea of embodiment; an idea to trace embodiment neither in the confines of the flesh nor in the spheres of cultures but rather in the trajectories of their encounter. This encounter sustains fluidity while bodies take flight toward different journeys. Therefore, I have chosen the writings of three female refugees to trace their corporeality in transnational settings. I aim to elucidate notions of embodiment narrated in the writings to highlight how female refugees navigate across experiences and seek new homes and homelands.

**Corresponding author:**

Younes Saramifar, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, FSW, Main Building, Boelelaan, Amsterdam, 1081 HV, The Netherlands.

Email: y.saramifar@vu.nl

These writings share how new corporealities are constituted, despite everyday hindrances and discriminations.

Iranian life-writings in exile have been matter of curiosity for scholars. Nanquette draws examples from both French and Iranian literary texts to suggest 'a systematic analysis of Franco-Iranian relations' (2013: 1). Earlier, she also traced the 'construction of [a] polarized vision of the world and ... [a] preference for the West' (2009: 269) in the writings of French authors of Iranian origin. Literary production by the Iranian diaspora has attracted sufficient attention for Fotouhi to 'highlight its importance as a new category of writing in world literature' (2015: 2). She detects similarities between this production and 'other diasporic and post-colonial writings' (2015). Dossa pays less attention to literary value and instead explores the modes of 'social suffering' (2004) in narratives by Iranian women. However, I explore the three autobiographies to place authors within their tales rather than to identify any 'hybridity' (Ghorashi, 2003) in corporealities or to situate women in larger social, communal, or even global contexts. My approach follows tales of bodies and embodiment to highlight their subjectivities in limitations of micro-histories that are shared in the form of autobiography. *A Beginner's Guide to Acting English* by Shappi Khorsandi (hereafter BGA, 2010), *The Last Living Slut: Born in Iran, Bred Backstage* by Roxana Shirazi (hereafter LLS, 2010) and *Aziz's Notebook* by Chowra Makaremi (hereafter AN, 2013) are the three selected autobiographies. I have chosen authors who focus on themselves, regardless of the politics of their time, and reflect on personal experiences. This is not to imply that the personal is not political; rather it is to show how the personal *becomes* political, or informs politics. These authors have pursued personal interests by sharing their stories rather than conveying their political manifestos. Khorsandi used her autobiography as part of her professional development; Shirazi sought recognition and revenge against those who mistreated her; and finally, Makaremi needed to ease the burden of her past and the trauma of loss after maturing into an established anthropologist.

First I critique Thomas Csordas's 'paradigm of embodiment' (1990: 5) in conversation with Deleuze while 'reading' (Felman, 1977) the writings of these three Iranian female refugees. I examine them to find out how their Deleuzian becomings and fragmented selves portray embodiment. I explicitly diverge from Csordas's phenomenological framework to be able to see embodiment during the influence of subjectivity and inflows of becoming-a-woman and the forming of a 'narrative-I'. The first section critiques Csordas to make tangible the theoretical transition from the phenomenology of the body to post-structuralism's approach to the body. The critical examination of the 'paradigm of embodiment' highlights why such a shift is required rather than ignoring one school of thought for the benefit of another. My critique addresses how embodiment can be seen by standing along the phenomenon rather than ahead of it. Then, I explore the books in separate sections. However, at the conclusion of the article I connect the closures related by the authors instead of assessing each book individually.

My reading of these tales brings together modes of articulation *as* narrated rather than sharing my take on these tales. I do this to ground my critique of Csordas's notion and method of approaching bodies and culture. I stand along the authors by describing the ways that they have narrated themselves across frames of remembrance and displacement. I share their narrative-I according to their voices rather than breaking the flow of the narratives and appropriating their tales.

The autobiographies remain connected through notions of body and home in transnational settings despite the diversity of experiences. However, each book is traced in its own section, rather than through comparisons between all three texts in unison, so as to maintain each text's narrative integrity. Therefore, my intervention in each tale remains unobtrusive and the narratives remain within the authors' ontological authority. Through this style, the tales that bear marks of pain, pleasure and vulnerabilities remain intact rather than splintering under the weight of excessive analysis and intervention. Such a reading of autobiographies does not consider embodiment to trace the politics of the body but rather to find the poiesis of the body<sup>1</sup> and the differences within the narratives. The poiesis of the body explores the sensory and affective registers the authors employ to narrate their corporeality beyond their homelands while in pursuit of new home(land)s. I define an anthropological idea of becoming and draw the poiesis of the body while crawling in between lines of these books. The most important attitude in such a style of investigation (not method!) is its attempt at 'making a contribution' (Deleuze, 1987: 28). This statement overarches my manner of reading these autobiographies. I offer a cartographic contribution which is not about finding any truth, revealing a hidden transcript, or achieving a symbolic closure. To the contrary, the aim of my contribution is to find 'the interesting, the remarkable and the important' (Deleuze, 1987: 13) for each of the authors, and readers of this article may connect the intersections further with their own queries. I trace the important by seeking themes and articulations that have been stressed more often across these books. The interesting is sought after by way of following in the footsteps of each author as she introduces her tale. And finally, the remarkable is addressed through the details that distinguish each book and present the authors beyond the categories of refugee or disempowered. The amalgamation of the three elements may permit us to see a 'communicating world' (Deleuze, 1987: 280) among these three female refugees who rushed to Europe in the aftermath of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran.

### **One step beside rather than ahead**

I work in a Deleuzian approach to examine Csordas's paradigm of embodiment. Csordas approaches the 'body as the subject of culture' (Csordas, 1990: 5) through psychological anthropology. His paradigm of embodiment explains the body as culturally constituted and treats it as 'the existential ground of culture' (Csordas, 1990: 5). He develops Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu but he remains within the framework of phenomenology. He grounds the theory in his research and ethnography of 'healing and ritual language in a contemporary Christian religious movement' (Csordas, 1990: 8). In a subsequent edited volume, he develops his theory further, stating that embodiment is a matter of 'perceptual experience and modes of engagement in the world' (Csordas, 1994: 12). His paradigm of embodiment brought the body to the centre of anthropologists' discussions. His notion advocates bracketing bodies and peeling away the symbolic meanings imposed on them across everyday experiences. Thus, he pursues bodies through direct manifestations, such as language and physical movements. He attempts to find bodies from their 'beginning' (Csordas, 1990) before semiotic or symbolic emergence. Three undercurrents of Csordas's notion of embodiment unsettle me. *First*, his paradigm assumes a static being (point of origin) exists that transforms to a symbolic existence. *Second*, modes of engagement with

embodiment and its manifestation are restrained in the objectification of the body. And *third*, culture is structured in the form of tyrannical impositions.

Csordas attempts an approach that collapses subject–object dualities. He moves toward a body which ‘must itself be nondualistic’ (Csordas, 1990: 8). Therefore, he deems it necessary to study the embodied process of perception ‘from beginning to end instead of in reverse’ (Csordas, 1990: 9). He summarises his intention as follows:

If our perception ‘ends in objects,’ the goal of a phenomenological anthropology of perception is to capture that moment of transcendence in which perception begins and, in the midst of arbitrariness and indeterminacy, constitutes and is constituted by culture. (Csordas, 1990: 9)

He is attempting to introduce a body which is not an object of culture but a *subject* which is constituted culturally. However, he further deepens the categories of subject and object by insisting on beginning and end. It seems social process, be it embodiment or whatever, begins somewhere in order to reach a destination. He does not actually avoid subject–object but he just changes their location. He advocates for the body as the object that is subjected to culture and social processes instead of seeing the outside-world as objects to be reached by our bodies. His observation turns phenomenology into a plausible approach for cultural anthropologists but it fails to address a fundamental concern of anthropological theories which is collapsing the subject–object duality.

This method limits scholarly study of corporeality and bodily experiences. Csordas examines how the body produces ‘somatic images’ that ‘embody dispositions of characteristic [*sic*] of the religious milieu’ (Csordas, 1990: 20) in examples of crying, laughing and falling during the healing rituals. Hence, embodiment becomes a set of practices and representations; a process of self-objectification that is reduced in certain qualities. Csordas disregards the fact that certain features of a believer’s body become manifest when the believer comes into contact with the healer. There is no single total body that experiences embodiment. A believer who makes her body available to an evangelical healer possesses *bodies*: a body that she brought from home, a body that she went to work in before coming to church, a body that indulged in pleasures, a body that observes the healer during rituals and a body that remembers all these multiple bodies.

The last undercurrent that I find difficult to reconcile is Csordas’s account of culture. His embodiment is restricted to a culture which *he* has read over the shoulders of healers and participants. He, the ethnographer, evokes a culture embedded in notions of control as *he* sees it in the ‘North American cultural context of [the] healing system’ (Csordas, 1990: 16). His notion of culture is fixed and structured; leaving no room for shadows or silences. All the identified components seemingly react to and interact with each other in an orderly fashion. Despite this, he agrees that there is a history of each body by quoting Caroline Bynum but he never identifies the author of that history. Is it he, the ethnographer, who authors that history or do *bodies* tell their own stories?

Culture, in Csordas’s paradigm of embodiment, seems to be a thing, or an ‘out-there-ness’ (Latour and Woolgar, 1979: 120–128) which apparently can be explored and discovered through manifestations of language and perceptual experiences. He quotes Merleau-Ponty to argue that the body is the ‘setting of the world’ and ‘being-in-the-world’ that is defined in relation to culture. However, he does not tell us how a body

senses, feels and recognises for itself without being *subject to* that world! So, I ask, is culture – regardless of its academic definition – a sovereign constitutive element of that world or does some cultural self also lend a hand in developing that world by just being there?

In Csordas's world, evangelical preachers dictate and the flock follows, with no possibility of reappropriating inspirations and practices. Tyranny and cultural impositions are tangible in his account because he sees the people rather than trying to see *with* them. Therefore, I hope to find the tales of embodiment while standing alongside the authors rather than postulating from a distance in the manner that I explained earlier. I treat embodiment within frames of 'becoming' (Deleuze, 1994) to show how its endoconsistency (internal consistency) and exoconsistency (consistency in relation with outside elements) are both self-referential. In other words, I explore embodiment in itself rather than defining it through representations and perceptions. Csordas sees embodiment in the form of 'another "myself" tearing away from a being simply a phenomenon in *my* perceptual field' (Csordas, 1990: 37, emphasis added). His paradigm of embodiment treats the bodies of those he studies as having a static origin that multiplies and transcends to some form of beyond. I will highlight, through the examples of the three autobiographies, how bodies convey no sense of origin but rather remain fragmented stories-in-making. Deleuze crafts his concept of becoming to demonstrate how 'becoming is the affirmation of being' (1983: 24) rather than beings intrinsically being without having to first become. Indeed, humans are not really beings at all, Ingold explains, but becomings whenever you find them human are 'humaning' (Ingold and Pálsson, 2013: 20) emerging from micro-processes with uncharted subjectivities.

The following sections portray how bodies emerge through different poiesis across the three autobiographies. I specifically follow tales of the body according to the becoming each narrative exposes without indicating an origin for it. Deleuzian becoming seems, to me, to be the step after Csordas's paradigm of embodiment. Such an approach enables us to trace bodies without wondering about origin and to avoid unifying the body into a singular formation. Instead, becoming exposes fragmentations of corporealities across intersecting lives and encountering of subjectivities.

## Cummings of a becoming

I start with the more tantalising of the three tales, which literally and figuratively is the 'field of action and significance – *leaking* out on all sides – mediated by power and knowledge' (Biehl and Locke, 2010: 317, emphasis added). It consists of tales of the carnal pleasures of Roxana Shirazi, a self-proclaimed Rock & Roll groupie. Her tale is the journey of self-realisation of a young girl who witnessed the violence of the Iranian Revolution. Her experience of violence made her a refugee in England at the age of 10, but she prefers to begin with the stories of her life as an adventurous groupie rather than a refugee in Britain. Roxana builds a bridge to despair and displacement for her readers by way of her sexual adventures and embodiment to dismiss her past as her origin. The book does not start with words but a photo. Roxana stark naked stares at me while she is in the tattooed arms of Dizzy Reed of Guns N' Roses. The publisher states that Roxana is 'a woman who was not a victim, but who made rock bands her victim' (LLS,

introduction). Roxana may not agree fully with this but she let it be the opening of her book. Her autobiography is yet to start. Numbers don't appear on pages till she has professed her idea of slut. I won't dwell on what she makes obvious. She displays comfort and ease in talking about her sexual encounters. I let the representations alone but I explore how she represents 'in this book ... the last living "slut" *embodying* the negative meaning of the word and the first living "slut" *embodying* a new, positive and celebrated meaning of the word' (LLS, a few thoughts, emphasis added). Therefore, I look for the 'slut' between the lines and words. Roxana delays the beginning by *force* of two footnotes written in fonts as big as the main text to show that she is educated and well versed in feminist jargon and not merely a Rock & Roll groupie. She leads the narrative by acknowledging 'how the concepts of masculine and feminine are merely *performances*' (LLS, a few thoughts, emphasis in original).

The tale begins nine days after the first of June of a year not given. She narrates her life in the frame of a Bergsonian time. Time is whole-form and un-detailed in her narrative. It seems 'not conceived on the series of passing moments but rather as a whole, as a pure duration in which each instant has its own place' (May, 2003: 145). However, she mentions three specific dates marked by their years and details in her tale. These three instances reverberate more than others and they establish their own flow of existence in her life. The distinguished time flows are: the day of departure from war-torn Iran with her grandmother to take refuge in the UK (LLS: 62); the day she learned enough English to write to her mother about the 'toys, Barbie and the rich people who can buy them' (LLS: 73); and finally the day she started her MA in 'English Studies' (LLS: 152).

The time may be whole-form in her narrative but her body seems fragmented as she 'sways between them [the band Mötley Crüe] ... *eyes* glistening with liquid warm honey, *mouth* parted like *meat* ... needing to be double-penetrated' (LLS: 4). She describes the scene as if all the fragments can become a single body through the force of double-penetration by two rock legends. Meanwhile she imagines Nikki Sixx's 'rasping gasoline voice that fucks [her] in the cunt' (LLS: 5) in-between the happening desire and spectacular. It is one desire which unfolds another, a body in need which is teased by some other curiosity. Roxana is all about 'cunt' and 'pussy' till some threshold pops out of hiding and her vagina becomes 'my flower' (LLS: 5) or 'where it was dirty' (LLS: 264). Her tale attempts to break innocence, pornographic, erotic, sexual, childlike, or feminine but instead it just oscillates between them.

Constantly, some fluid leaks from her in the narrative; she tries to be 'civilized and not spontaneously lactate as [her] femininity begins to open up' (LLS: 6) in the presence of Nikki Sixx. She has an embodied sexual reaction to the one who states just at the top of the same page – exactly at the beginning of the same conversation – 'you sound so angelic' (LLS: 6). Roxana narrates an urge which needs neither a vibrator nor an acting sexual organ to seek the phallic. She shows rather an embodiment of 'stable identities [which] are dissolved in creative acts [of desire]' (Deleuze, 1987: 238). However, sometimes the text tries too hard to turn the body into an 'important' theme (Deleuze, 1987) by repeating anecdotes of sexual adventures. Now, I address where and when Roxana's experience of transnational settings emerged, then I return to embodiments and all the 'dirty' words.

She has a home, she tells us *of* this home only after she expresses how Rock & Roll consumes her. Roxana remembers her 'first childhood home' as a place that 'belonged to [her] grandmother ... [where Roxana] remained, basked in pure love and happiness' (LLS: 16); a home that was engulfed by the terror of the 1979 Revolution and Islamic law. Her notion of home is an 'assemblage' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1989) of contingent mother figures, political turmoil and constraints over her sexuality. The assemblage leads to 'concretization of power of desire, of territoriality or reterritorialization regulated by the abstraction of a transcendental law' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1989: 86). Her mother and grandmother are the two major markers of the assemblage. Her experience of home is marked at first by a mother who is serious, quiet and an active revolutionary. Then, there is her loving grandmother who is unlike the mother and a distant father who leaves her behind. She cherishes this home even though it is invaded by the Shah's secret police. Roxana experiences prison in her childhood because of her mother's political activism. She narrates the horror of imprisonment along with her mother. Then, there is a jarring shift – in the same paragraph – to the fairy-tale experience of playing in 'sunshine-soaked dusty alleys' (LLS: 18). She shifts to experiences which make us realise her space of *belonging* is not the place where tumultuous events transform into screams and terror. She prefers to be seen where she can imagine her grandmother's food and kitchen and a 'raw Persian sky' (LLS: 18).

The little Roxana at home is defined as the one 'who wanted to be free' (LLS: 28). She was the little one who did not listen to the kind scolding of her grandmother to 'put some panties on' (LLS: 28). She remembers this story to mention that this is a habit, not wearing panties, which she still embodies (LLS: 5). Childhood fades away as Roxana discovers her body through her mother's make-up accessories and watching her mother waxing her legs. This is an example of the formation of a body which is bordering another body, the embodiment of a body through recognition of the Other's bodily fragments. Roxana recognises her own body partly through her mother's corporeality. She recognises she needs to be 'beautiful' through observing another body existing by her side.

Roxana's home also portrays an absentee father. She delays his introduction until the end of the sixth chapter. Roxana, forsaken by her father, becomes determined to become one of 'most beautiful girls' (LLS: 32) and seeks 'attention from other males' (LLS: 32). At this point, she immediately starts the seventh chapter to jump from paternal rejection to the tale of her first masturbation at the age of five. She exposes an embodiment that was impacted by a lack of paternal attention but found the warmth of self-recognition by seeking sexual adventures. She guides readers to link the early manifestation of her sexual desires to paternal rejection. I think here Freud would be really proud and Foucault, whom Roxana reads, would be pouting in the corner. Her home is a bundle of contradictions which conveys a Freudian construct that lacks the archaeology of power. There is no trace in her narrative of how representatives of power, such as her father, revolutions and soldiers, impacted her constant search for male-attention and different sexual adventures. The tale of desire appears within the frames of violence of revolution while she is sexually abused by a religious man, and yet the epitome of pure love 'protects' her fragmented existence. First, 'her grandmother who [remained] a ray of sunshine' (LLS: 40), second, 'the delicious dark thrill that hit [her] in [her] gut' (LLS: 33) while she masturbated at the



image of *soldiers* parading on TV and third, Mr Karimi (the tenant) who 'love[d] her' as they were 'doing something bad together' (LLS: 36).

Part two, titled 'Lost', is her journey to the UK as a 10-year-old refugee. However, she introduces the UK of her imagination before any tale of despair and tears. She remembers a jubilant self who imagined the UK before actually travelling there. She imagined 'England a symbol of freedom and abandon, where I could walk around in public without an Islamic head scarf' (LLS: 63). It seems the 10-year-old girl had already sent away her body from post-revolutionary Iran to a transnational setting before the journey began. She had started her travel before arriving in a land where she could unbecome her subjected body. So she flies with her grandmother to 'where every woman had the demeanour of Mary Poppins' (LLS: 63) to find 'only gray' (LLS: 64). Her imagined image of Britain shatters as her grandmother's body ails in the cold humidity. She is stranded with her grandmother in the middle of the airport with no knowledge of the language, wearing a summer dress. Roxana uses this first instance to establish a trend of how her personality and body did not ever fit in the new setting as she forces summer and winter into one sentence (LLS: 65). She writes to show the worlds that cannot contain her. She portrays an embodiment larger than her physical body. She sustains the style not only about the new land but also when she gets fed up with the hypocrisies of Rock & Roll. She despises Rock & Roll's backstage because it cannot comprehend her 'wilder' (LLS: 310) than groupie subjectivity.

Roxana's tale of embodiment becomes more vibrant while transitioning into a language different from her mother tongue. Thus, allow me a moment of 'violent gesture' (Felman, 1977) in my reading to raise an unanswered curiosity. I am not convinced by a Roxana who graphically *articulates* the details of her sexual abuse – and even she slides in adjectives about it with ease – but goes almost blank into 'nothingness' (LLS: 66) or 'cannot remember[ness]' (LLS: 67) in the case of almost losing her grandmother. She forgets, or decides to forget, the story of her grandmother who she mentions as the epitome of pure love. My curiosity emerges from the fact that she is writing many years after the trauma when she has acquired a new language. The new language enables her to communicate in English and also contains her education in gender studies.

I wonder about her very first experience in an alien land where she did *not* know the language: Could it be that the trauma which emerged at that time has faded the memory into mere traces of memory because she was not able to ask for help in English? How does she remember the event happened in Farsi while writing about it in English? Could it be that her education has enabled her to speak of the moments of sexual abuse with confidence rather than like a victim? The operation and acquisition of language seem to be the threshold of embodying a new setting for Roxana. She projects herself as alienated as long as she was unable to speak English. She associates the language with being different in the UK and even thinks knowing it 'gave her a higher rank in the family' compared to her stepfather (LLS: 79).

The seventeenth chapter is saturated with memories of an exotic and picturesque Iran. She remembers how the young Roxana put on her new 'red dress which made her feel lively' walking around Manchester. She roamed around in the new place while remembering the 'patterns of carpets in [her] house in Iran' (LLS: 68). At this point the Roxana of *now* – who speaks English like a Brit and has walked backstage with the Rock & Roll

royalty of the UK and America – longs for those memories through the Roxana of the past. That is why Deleuze follows Bergsonian time, as May explains: ‘picture this past as a cone, where the cone’s point is the present with the past enlarging itself behind it’ (2003: 145). Roxana’s becoming exposes another fold of her embodiment when the ‘virtual’ (Deleuze, 1994) past tags along with her ‘actual’ (Deleuze, 1994) existing present; an actual where the experience of misery, poverty and the despair of ‘finding something to eat’ (LLS: 68) made her to dream about Iran.

English becomes the medium which she chooses to connect to herself, but the new language emerges as her grandmother fades away. She is sent away from her ailing grandmother to live with ‘old-school hippies’ (LLS: 70). She chastises them by writing how they ‘came to gawk at Me [*sic*] ... [at her] sweaty [body] with the aroma of exotic spices ... [at her] fabulous olive skin and traumatized soul’ (LLS: 71). These are the notions imposed by the grown-up Roxana who has now graduated from a university and has been studying at Oxford since 2014. She has acquired another way of perceiving while studying post-colonialism and transposes the new imaginaries onto her memories of past discomfort. There is a constant shuttling in the narrative between the Roxana who did not know English, the Roxana ‘an Iranian girl with a moustache’ who was called ‘Fuckin Paki’ (LLS: 71) and the Roxana who questions her holy temple of Rock & Roll as ‘dangerously romanticized’ (LLS: 313). This shuttling is the experience of embodiment within the process of becoming or what Ingold calls ‘humaning’.

The narrative of embodiment demonstrates how one trajectory overshadows another or one becomes silent to the benefit of the other. Roxana’s language becomes devoid of all sexuality while she tells tales of discrimination, being bullied at school and being in pain. She narrates the pain within an archive of the acquired language. The language of her book manifests the process of embodiment which is solidified with her painful memories of transnational settings. She reaches a point when she exhaustedly confesses ‘I was different’ (LLS: 72) and asks ‘had we given up love for this?’ (LLS: 73).

## Talks and cries of echoes

Chowra Makaremi, an anthropologist at *École des hautes études en sciences sociales*, Paris, translated *Aziz’s Notebook* from Farsi. It is her grandfather’s notebook whose voice narrates the central part of the book. Chowra leads readers with concise and subtle footnotes to be able to hear her grandfather as he narrates his two daughters’ suffering in post-revolution Iran. The second part of the book is a window into Makaremi’s own journey. She narrates fragmented memories of childhood, the absence of her parents, the questions she had while growing up in Paris and an anxious reunion with Aziz when he came to visit them abroad. ‘We get a sense that only after his [Aziz’s] death and with the discovery of the notebook does Chowra see the inner workings of a man who had for so long been troubled by the violent deaths of two of his daughters’ (Shafafi, 2013: 55).

My reading of her attempt is not just ‘the cognitive observation of the text’s pluralistic meaning but its “acting out”’ (Felman, 1977: 115). This is because of her own performative presence and her highlighting of some anecdotes more than others within someone else’s notes and writings. The book begins with a low resolution photo of her mother smiling while covered in a black hijab and Aziz’s writing is placed between a foreword

and an ending written by Chowra. She talks through Aziz's voice but sometimes she cannot hold back. Her becoming erupts as she unleashes it through the pages of the book. Chowra's becoming happens through the 'creation of an ontology that privileges the temporal moments over substance and self-identity' (Grosz, 2005: 12). The temporal moments are embodied by suffering bodies who shadow her till her *becoming* matures in the form of a finished manuscript. Her own body – in the text – appears much after the 'broken teeth, lashed, tortured' body of her mother (AN: i). Chowra takes us to her journey following the apparitions of her departed grandfather and a dead mother whose funeral had to be silent and whose death could not even be announced publicly (AN: x). These are the apparitions through which we see how Chowra embodies her pain and others' suffering.

Fatemeh Zarei, Chowra's mother and the daughter of Aziz, was imprisoned and accused of treason. She was finally executed in the summer of 1988, like many other leftist activists who supported the 1979 Revolution. Chowra finds her grandfather's writing 'a memory that interweaves the family's genealogy with the country's history' (AN: xi). I follow how the trajectories of one's life shine over the dead. I trace the Chowra who lives *now* in France as an EU citizen, an academic and a first generation refugee. I do so to find out how she borrows Aziz's words to speak of her embodiment through stories-of-bodies' suffering. This Chowra talks of herself while her mother was 'a pregnant daughter paraded around in different prisons' (AN: i). She articulates her embodiment beyond the threshold of biological corporeality. She designs her rebirth within this book as she gives life and body to herself while she grows 'both young and old at once' (Deleuze, 1995: 170).

Shoshana Felman helps me to ask 'how does the meaning of the story, whatever it may be, rhetorically take place through permanent displacement?' (1977: 119). It seems Chowra places herself within her mother's 'living skeleton' who had become a 'haggard looking' 'frozen statue' with 'bulging eyes' (AN: xi) through Aziz's micro-history. Thus, the stories of suffering-bodies become the flux of her embodiment. Chowra ends the foreword with two words from her grandfather: to 'remain *unspoken*' (AN: xiv, emphasis added) and then delivers to us the world of despair of a mother, a father-figure and a daughter. The poesis of the narrative avoids pretence thus laying bare the constant horrors of power, institutions and forces at work against the struggles of desire. Then, there are the silent eruptions of subjectivity like a volcano that exhales ashes rather than lava.

The writings of Aziz run for 84 pages and then Chowra speaks of her own memories. Her embodiment evolves within the frames of her memories, despite some being clear while some 'fade' (AN: 93) away. For instance, she gradually forgets her mother's memory in between the oubliette of everyday routines at school, home and occasional letters from Aziz. She first tells how her travel did not start from a home but just a space where she was trying to imagine. She articulates during her departure what *is* happening now at the grandfather's home. She remembers Shiraz, where the home is, while she is at Tehran airport and still in the territory of the homeland, Iran. This example may provoke us to look at the ontology of embodiment in a trans-home setting rather than a transnational setting because the national can end where home ends. Chowra-the-author yoyos not only between different forms of herself, she moves between different forms of the present. She lives and narrates multiple now(s). I find her between the Chowra who dwelled

in Shiraz and the young Chowra at the airport who watched her grandmother bringing out the hidden cash from the heels of her shoes. She also remembers the suffocation and panic of how the car ‘shrunk’ (AN: 86) around her body on the way to the airport.

Chowra begins her ‘crossing’ by rifling through the ‘virtual’ in order to regress to a past that is *passed by* but it is not a past. Chowra does not maintain a time-structure within her frames of remembrance; rather she exposes her embodiment through a theme that she follows. She begins with remembering the airport, then sensations of the journey to one airport and arrival at another where she did not speak the language – French (AN: 86). Finally, the flight of memory jumps forward 20 years when she returns to the arrived-arriving airport for her research. Chowra studied a ‘waiting zone ... a zone [in the airport] that is not quite France yet’ (AN: 87). Chowra ‘survey[s] the area’ and articulates refugees through forms of fragmented body adjectives. Just as Aziz had described his daughter. She articulates the adjectives as if seeking her reflection in them; as if their ‘dark circles’ are around her eyes while she emits the ‘vagrant air’ that they exhale (AN: 86). This idea may seem speculative but when she describes breaking down in her later visit I become assured.

Chowra’s embodiment is the accumulation of the painful memories and finding the reflection of that pain in others. She absorbs the corporeal symptoms of the Others who she studies. She breaks down while sitting next to a Congolese asylum seeker in the waiting zone. She is overwhelmed and articulates feelings and sensations by calling them ‘uncontrollable ... throat tighten[ing], jaw grow[ing] heavier, tears burst[ing] forth with *surprising violence*’ (AN: 87, emphasis added). The body, who can bear no more, forces her to snap out of prolonged affectivity. The prolongation happens as her corporeality becomes the embodiment of imaginaries of others’ suffering-bodies. However, her corporeality is challenged by the ‘surprising violence’ and she unbecomes her body. This is what Deleuze recognises as the intervention of life. Grosz aptly explains that ‘the becoming of life is the unbecoming of matter, which is not its transformation into (inert) being but its placement in a different trajectory of becoming’ (2005: 11).

Chowra continues with the Chowra who connects her thinking and dreaming in French to the oubliette of everyday life and tells of being ‘a foreigner’ who is ‘waiting with other foreigners’ (AN: 88). She abruptly turns from the ‘not quite France yet’ (AN: 87) to remember the ‘Adel-Abad prison, where [Aziz and her] had to wait for hours’ (AN: 88). This is the grown up Chowra remembering herself playing, in-waiting, for her imprisoned mother. Meanwhile, she hears how her grandmother stopped taking her to the prison to be breast fed because the milk that Fatemeh’s tortured body produced was ‘not doing her any good’ (AN: 105). All these Chowras echo into one another. Now, the Chowra whose corporeality had begun in separation from her mother takes a new trajectory in a space where is becoming a place for her. Her subjectivity erupts at the place which is nowhere but the trans of the transnational; a rough, tiny chipped piece from the smooth edge of a fragile teacup, just a fragment fallen from the surface.

## The chuckle of laughter

Shappi Khorsandi’s book is about a witty little girl whose path to becoming a refugee is quite unlike that of Roxana or Chowra. She leaves Iran at the age of three as the

revolution brewed in the corners, four years before the days when blood flowed in the streets. She travels with her family because her father assumes the post of an Iranian journalist in the United Kingdom. The book is an autobiography of a stand-up comedian who mercilessly drags modernity, Occidentalism, Orientalism, race and ethnicity through the mud and shames them with satirical stabs. She begins with anecdotes of horror that little Shappi endured in a British school. Her writing is an assemblage of adjectives from a politically incorrect stand-up comedian: the Brits were the foreigners for her and they spoke 'gobbledegook' (BGA:1), London that was not 'red, white and blue but grey' (BGA: 37), becoming a 'little poppet' for 'Englisee' people instead of 'jaan' (the Farsi equivalent of 'darling') (BGA: 4) and Brits are 'funny looking people who did not smile' (BGA: 44). Shappi's central theme is language and later shifts to cultural differences; she says the tale of a girl 'who understood made up language better' (BGA: 4, 108), a father 'who could not be funny in English because he did not know enough words' (BGA: 8) or reminded her 'we are here to learn English not to forget Farsi' (BGA: 218). She remembers how her father ridiculed Iranians who try to be cool by pretending to not know Farsi after learning English.

I trace how Shappi embodies displacements while yoyo-ing between ideas of home and language. Deleuze suggests thinking like a cartographer and investigating a phenomenon much like one would read a map. This is not a 'matter of searching for an origin but rather evaluating displacements' (Deleuze, 1997: 61). Approaching language by way of her 'displacement' enables me to provide the cartography of her embodiment in transnational settings. Shappi struggles with English and her struggle intersects with the other uncertainties of her new life, such as forming a sensory understanding of the new environment, finding new friends, or adjusting to cultural differences. Six-year-old Shappi goes to a new school and still thinks 'English is all "shshshshsh," "aar" and "ow" '. So she asks her friend 'shoosharaarsh?' when she means to ask 'do you want to play?' (BGA: 108). She was taught Farsi at home and English in the 'Englisee' school. The confusion haunted her so much that she 'carried on throughout school knowing that if [she] made a guess, there was a fifty percent chance of getting it right' (BGA: 110). Yoyo-ing between home where a different set of ideas operate and school where she is overwhelmed by a new language and cultural codes, brings me to the question of where home is in her writings.

Shappi is aware home is somewhere special rather than spatial. She makes that clear in a story of how she and her mother were other-ed by some 'punks' (BGA: 45). She narrates how her mother was embarrassed by the sight of two 'punks' kissing in public who told her to 'go home, uptight Bitch'. The little Shappi wondered 'why did they tell us go home? ... we were going to the museum there *then* go[ing] home' (BGA: 47, emphasis original). At that moment she does not distinguish between homes because they evolve around the imaginaries which constitute her territory of embodiment: family, other 'Ironies', languages and school (BGA: 88). The home in this anecdote is the flat that they bought in England as 'a commitment to our *new* life' (BGA: 83).

The homes (a flat in the UK, her father's home in Iran, her grandmother's home in Tehran) across Shappi's childhood are places where her sense of home emerges. However, that sense is fulfilled in proximity with familiar bodies and their affective embrace. Iranian expatriates all around her family make her feel at home in the UK as reoccurring

parties become part of her embodiment in the transnational setting. She states ‘these parties were part of our lives the way milk and biscuits were part of our lives too’ (BGA: 54). Her life becomes a network of homes next to each other while she struggles to comprehend her displacement in-between them. She embodies home through sensorial and cognitive experiences, such as the pleasure of milk and biscuits, or becoming a bilingual who begins to register *anew* even while still she oscillates between past-present.

Shappi discovers her body while becoming an exotic object for the Brits. She realises her own image through the other who thought she was a ‘Paki’ or fussed over her and her brother’s ‘beautiful brown skin, curly shiny hair’ (BGA: 85). Shappi’s embodiment explicates the attempts of an other-ed body within *the* bodies. She wants to acquire the same things as blond white girls in her school. She insisted on playing the same roles as the blond white girls in the nativity play instead of accepting being cast as a shepherd because she is ‘nice and dark’ (BGA: 205). Her body becomes the mark of coming from somewhere else when she discovers she is different through exclusion, and because she could only talk to an Indian schoolmate. She found herself connecting to Rana, the Indian schoolmate, because she was ‘much browner than’ her and ‘could talk to her about coming from Iran’ (BGA: 251). These markers are evidence of the process of embodiment in one’s becoming. There are times when she rejects her own realisation by disliking that her mother wore a scarf and ‘appeared religious’ (BGA: 221). ‘Acting like an English’ becomes an intensified fold in her becoming, as Shappi despises her mother and her ‘bloody foreignness’ (BGA: 233). She does not want to be an Iranian anymore because of their open emotions and their concerns about her stress eating disorder (BGA: 292). The process of embodiment in the transnational settings makes Shappi aware of her corporeality. These challenges manifest the subject who is trying to arrive but is ‘stuck in the middle and never exactly an English’ (BGA: 252).

The book ends with Shappi and her family officially labelled refugees. The revolution burned bridges to Iran because her father was labelled an enemy of the revolution. He was rejected by the revolution despite the fact that he wrote about the injustice of the Shah’s regime and supported Khomeini. The patriarchal foundation of her home beyond the homeland becomes obvious when they cannot go back to Iran because of the Father. He cannot return there and her transnational experience reaches new intensities and one more fold than before. And why, she asks, couldn’t ‘Baba’ ‘be normal’ (BGA: 269)?

## **Becoming, the silent motor of desire**

I left Roxana in despair of the discrimination at school, Chowra in the midst of tears in the waiting zone and Shappi in distress over burned bridges. I shared their tales with the intention not to render their bodies transparent and reduce embodiment to an idealising eclectic concept. I demonstrated the opaque operation and incoherent mechanism of embodiment by articulating it as a Deleuzian becoming. Roxana reconciles with belonging to somewhere after being consumed by the world of Rock & Roll and the indulgence of being a groupie. She states close to the end: ‘I was full of heart ... full of the sunshine, my mother and grandmother had fed me every morning, noon and night in Iran’ (LLS: 303). Chowra becomes aware of her body within an inescapable closed system of sufferings that she portrays as traumatised memories. They bring her to ‘the end that sounds

like a beginning. It is the strange and raw intensity of the words torn from death that certainty took shape: [thus] Aziz's notebook had to be published' (AN: 115). Shappi finds her remarkable moment of unbecoming when the nurse asks what ethnicity should be recorded for her newborn child. She concludes that 'despite his English father ... my son is "other" like me. There is something liberating about this. We the other are not defined by the colour we are or by the place we happen to have been born' (BGA: 307). Embodiment of transnational settings emerges while 'life brings new virtuality to matter which already harboured in itself the impetus of becoming' (Grosz, 2005: 11). Life intervenes and people forge flights to face differences without abandoning their journey of intensification of affects, cognisant and percept. They seek the 'necessarily communicating world' (Deleuze, 1987: 280) in their own reality and flight of fancy while the body is the constant companion of their becomings.

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### Note

1. Poiesis of body is the emergence of poetics of body and tracing its process exposes how poetics of body reconciles the contradictions, differences and changes. The poiesis of body differs from poetics of body, which refers to speaking about the body within the matrix of emotions, feelings, sensations and subjectivity. The poetics of body considers the ontological trajectory of body rather than seeking its epistemology, however I broaden this notion by pointing to the poiesis of body and the ontic emergence of its poetics.

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