

The Story of Tiles and Ropes In-Between

داستان سفال ها و طناب ها

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

The Story of Tiles and Ropes In-Between explores migration, in-betweenness, and resilience of a female body through installation, sculpture, video, poetry and performance. Using clay and jute—materials tied to memory and place—the work navigates themes of fragmentation and reconstruction. Walking is an integral focus to this body of artwork, serving as both method and metaphor in navigating identity in the diaspora. Influenced by theorists like Homi Bhabha and Gloria Anzaldúa, the work engages with the third space, where hybridity and transformation unfold. Through movement, sound, and material, the work redefines home as a fluid, evolving state rather than a fixed location.

Keywords

Migration, displacement, resilience, hybridity, third space, autotheory, walking as art, female body, materiality, sound, diaspora, home, installation, performance.

Acknowledgments

Land Acknowledgement

As an immigrant and a new settler based in Tkaronto, I begin this acknowledgment by recognizing that I live and create on the traditional territory of many nations, including the Anishinaabeg, the Haudenosaunee, the Wendat, and the Mississaugas of the Credit. Tkaronto, has been and continues to be a home, meeting place, and gathering ground for diverse Indigenous communities. It is also part of the Dish with One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, an agreement between nations to share and care for the land and its resources in peace.

I carry the weight and responsibility of this acknowledgment in my work and life. As someone shaped by displacement, I am aware that my presence here is made possible by colonial systems that continue to displace and marginalize Indigenous peoples. My own story of migration, of living “in-between”, rests within in these layered histories of land and loss.

I am committed to walking these lands with respect, care, and accountability—listening deeply and learning continuously. I understand that land acknowledgments must be more than words: they are a beginning, a gesture toward relationship, responsibility, and repair – which I am committed to.

Formal Acknowledgment

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Faculty of Fine Arts at the University of Waterloo. Thank you for providing an environment that encourages experimentation, critical thought, and personal growth. This program has been a space where my questions and contradictions were welcomed.

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To my partner, Mohammad—thank you for walking beside me with tenderness, strength, and patience. Your unwavering support has carried me through the most difficult and delicate parts of this journey. This work, in so many ways, is shaped by your presence and care.

To my sisters—thank you for your endless love, especially through long silences, time zone gaps, and distances bridged only by memory, imagination, and your unconditional kindness. To my sister Marjan—your presence has accompanied me in every step of this journey, even when we are eight hours apart.

Dedication

To my partner, Mohammad, for your unconditional love and steady presence.

To my late father, for teaching me to always be myself and to seek for freedom.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

“For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action.”

(Lorde 37)

*

Dear reader,

This is a story, a story of living in between, living between two places, living between two geographies. It is about swinging: swinging between two roofs, swinging between two gardens. It is about living between words: living between lines, living between languages. It is about the sense of belonging: belonging to a place, belonging to a geography. It is about resiliency: resilience in between, resilience in borders. It is about fragility: fragility of a roof, fragility of a memory. It is about stories: story of tiles, story of ropes.

When I immigrated to Canada ten years ago, I never imagined what living in the diaspora would truly mean. I thought it would be a fresh beginning. It took me several years, however, to realize (re)locating is more complex than I initially imagined. The galvanizing moment for me was when I understood that I belong neither *here* nor *there*. This realization led me to conceptualizing *my body* as a ‘home’. While physically a body is a limited space, emotionally and intellectually it is an expansive speculative space. In my “home” I am not *this* or *that*, but I am forever changing and transforming. In

the posthumous publication, Chicana feminist and queer cultural theorist Gloria Anzaldúa identifies the state of being as a state in transformation, or a space in-between. To her, this space-in-between, is termed *nepantla* stemming from Anzaldúa's lived experience of growing up alongside the Mexico-Texas border (Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz En Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*. 17). The word was first used by the Nahuas, one of the Indigenous people of Mexico. *Nepantla* can be understood as an awkward, uncomfortable and frustrating space to exist in because you are caught amidst transformation (Scott and Tuana 7).

This term is significant to me, as it aptly describes my experience, and has helped me put words to my experience of living two lives simultaneously. This term helps me locate how I to trudge through an uneasy, liminal, space-time, marked by the eight hours / هشت ساعت that exists between the two different time zones of Iran (my past and homeland) and Canada (my present and future). This "state" is captured in an excerpt from a letter to my sister, Marjan, in the spring of 2025 (see Appendix A for full transcription):

"It's late at night here, and early morning there. You are eight hours ahead of me. I'm sure you've been asleep for a few hours now, resting in your cozy upstairs bedroom with the large window overlooking the alley, where the red and yellow Sham-daani¹ / شمعدانی are, and probably blooming now on the balcony. In a few days it will be Eyd-e-Nowruz² / عید نوروز there, while we still have snow here on the ground. I still wear my winter coat and boots."

¹ Sham'dani (شمعدانی): Pelargonium is a genus of flowering plants that includes about 280 species of perennials, succulents, and shrubs commonly called geraniums, pelargoniums, or storks bills.

² Nowruz (نوروز) (lit: "New Day") is the Iranian New Year or Persian New Year. Historically, it has been observed by Persians and other Iranian peoples,[36] but is now celebrated by many ethnicities worldwide.

Like Anzaldúa, I realized I have “to live in the borderlands”³, a place where my body is present here (in Canada), while my head is obliged to be here and there (in Iran). I constantly switch between two languages, English and Farsi to understand where I am, and to reconnect to where I am coming from. These adjustments are laborious and confusing. This body of artwork arises during a moment of oppression of painful adjustment, but I have decided to consider this “pain as protective and productive” (Saraswati 7). Processing and harnessing pain (Anzaldúa, Interviews/Entrevistas 276) is a skill born of necessity. As someone shaped by migration and diaspora, in a perpetual state of presence and absence, I have formed a positionality of home as something that I embody rather than something that surrounds me. Additionally, my memory of home is tied to experiences that impacted my bodily autonomy, where the Islamic oppressive regime in Iran constantly polices female and queer bodies. Using my body as a process material to explore these ideas I subvert the implications of being hidden. When I refer to being *hidden*, I’m addressing a cultural reality where bodies like mine—female, queer, defiant—are required to conceal themselves under layers of clothing, in silence and in fear. Hidden is not just a physical condition; it is a survival tactic, a social expectation, and a form of enforced invisibility and compliance. In my practice, I work against this inherited erasure by making my body visible, demonstrating vulnerability as a central focus in my work. As an immigrant who has fled an oppressive regime, I use my body not only as a site of memory, but as a living archive—one that resists disappearance by asserting presence.

Existing within the *third space*⁴, I feel I am neither fully rooted in the place I left nor entirely belonging to where I have arrived. As Indian scholar and literary critic Homi K. Bhabha suggests, it is

³ To live in the borderlands is the title of a poem by Gloria E. Anzaldúa (1987) collection *Borderlands/La Frontera*.

⁴ I acknowledge that the term ‘in-between’ is a key characteristic of Homi K. Bhabha’s ‘third space’, which he refers to as the dangers of appropriation and re-historicization of peripheral identities in the context of post-colonialism. (Bhabha 37) As an immigrant I specifically want to clarify my use of the term ‘in-between’ as representative of my personal experience with feeling in-between two landscapes.

a third space that is dynamic, undefined, an in-between where experience is unstable yet generative. It's a space where hybridity, adaptation, and transformation take shape (Bhabha 19-39). The "concept of hybridity offers a framework" supporting an "open-ended analysis of cultural interactions" in conversation with a more fluid "theory of translation" (Langford 82).

I look at this current body of work to express this concept of hybridity through a series of actions that I offer as performative art pieces. In these works, the idea of home is translated from being a destination, and instead presented as the ongoing act of being a form that is constantly carrying. Part of the artwork is to reveal and explore how I access the limits of my body's ability to move. One performance, for example, demonstrates how I become entangled and encumbered with architectural materials in the form of roof and shelter. However, instead of presenting solid infrastructures that are fabricated with a roof and walls (which can hide the body or hold private moments) this architecture is loose, conceptual, and of course – mobile. It relies on intuition, adaptation, and emotion—expressed through my bodily movement—illustrating home is not a place, but rather, it's a metaphor that articulates my ongoing act of resiliency.



Figure 1: Azadeh Pirazimian, *The Roof I Carry* (performance documentation), 2025.

Chapter 2: Studio Methodology

Theoretical, Process, and Experimental Footholds

My interdisciplinary studio practice is structured by two interconnected parts: the work I create within the studio and the work that unfolds outside it. I engage in an artistic methodology that focuses on personal reflection and inquiry in ways that are consistent with tropes of autotheory, which Canadian Critical Theorist Lauren Fournier defines as a feminist practice⁵ that follows a theoretical framework combining first-person narration, personal experience with critical theory. This groundbreaking approach to scholarship is “a reflective theory which gives agents a kind of knowledge inherently productive of enlightenment and emancipation” (Geuss 3). In my writing and art practice, as stated so succinctly by Vietnamese filmmaker and scholar Trinh T. Minh-Ha, I “write in uncertainty, in necessity” (Minh-Ha 8). This aptly summarizes my approach to writing this thesis and studio methodology, which braids together self-reflective creative writing, experimentation with creative process, alongside lyrically incorporating inspirational critical theory that I have found relevant to the experiences that have shaped this work. As a result, my work centers first-person perspective alongside the theoretical frameworks that are influential in developing this body of work, which I understand as an autobiographical discourse. As such, the strategies I have incorporated into my work to express my viewpoint are central. This approach enables me to share with viewers my process of self-examination and cultural critique, sharing both personal and theoretical insights that are expressed through my work.

⁵ Autotheory is a term which I borrowed from “Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism” by Lauren Fournier.

Inside the studio, my work develops through a tactile, meditative process of exploring materials through all my senses. Drawing, collage, and sculpture serve as foundational expressions in this exploration.



Figure 2: Azadeh Pirazimian, stitching process (studio image 1), 2025.

With this body of work, a central focus has been to develop a large sculpture piece made of over two-thousands hand-formed terracotta clay-fired tiles, which I then piece / stitch together into a larger blanket form. This work exemplifies how repetition, modulation, fragmentation, and continuity are central themes that frequently surface in my studio work, which I have begun to identify as strategies that reflect the constant, layered and evolving nature of my inquiries. Moreover, the stitching process mirrors the act of walking, another significant methodology to this body of work—with each gesture accumulating over time, to form a structure that is simultaneously fragile and resilient. Singing and humming accompany my making process, serving as a means of reconnecting with presence, memory, and self. Across both studio and outdoor performance-work, my practice engages with movement, material, and sound (e.g. the sounds of my footsteps, kiln-fired clinking tiles, and the environment: wind, the studio's HVAC system, cars, voices of people, etc.), as a way to articulate the complexities of home, belonging, resilience and transformation.

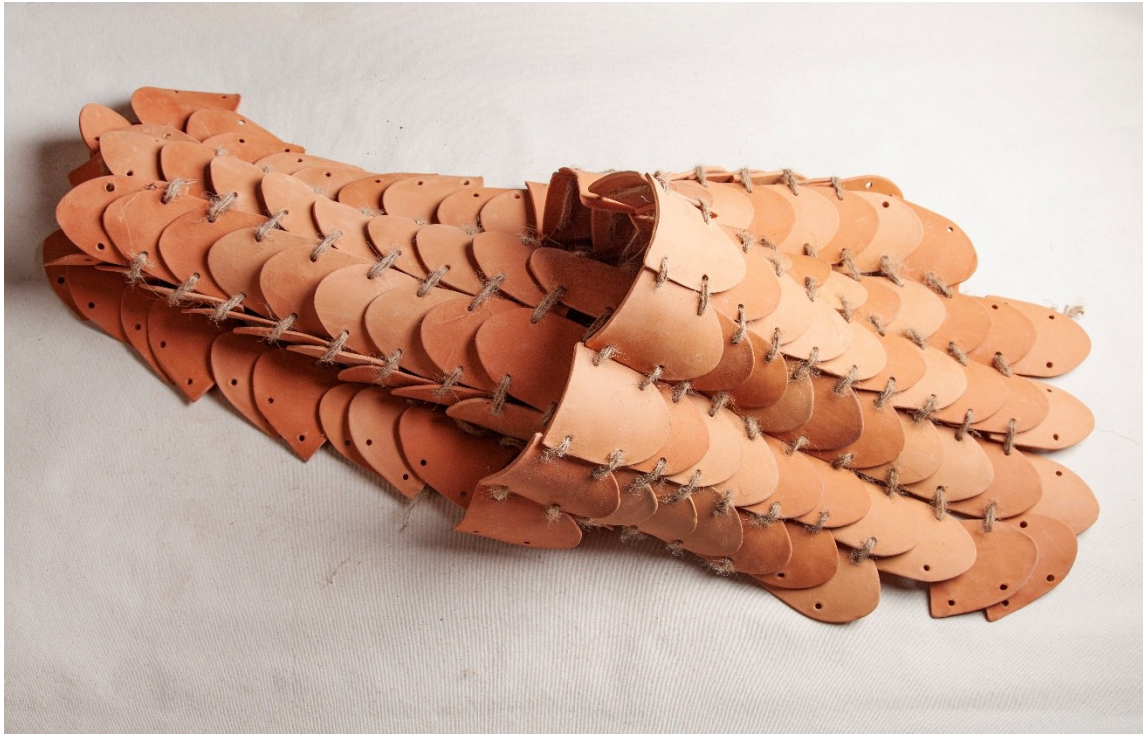


Figure 3: Azadeh Pirazimian, *The Roof I Stitch* (sculpture detail), 2025.

This everyday act of walking is often taken for granted, yet it holds layers of significance when approached intentionally: “walking is free / healthy / slow / fundamental / powerful / transgressive” (Jefferys 10). Fundamental to this body of work are performances that unfold outside my studio, which essentially consist of me walking. Notably, the performance *The Roof I Carry* (2025), which featured me carrying *The Roof I Stitch* (2024), which is a heavy sculptural piece made of over two hundreds hand-formed terracotta clay tiles threaded together into a heavy hard ceramic blanket that appears like a roof-top. I decided to incorporate this important signifier into my practice, both as a sculpture and as a component within my walking performance work as a strategy to reclaim and redefine space, as well as to ground myself within the landscape.

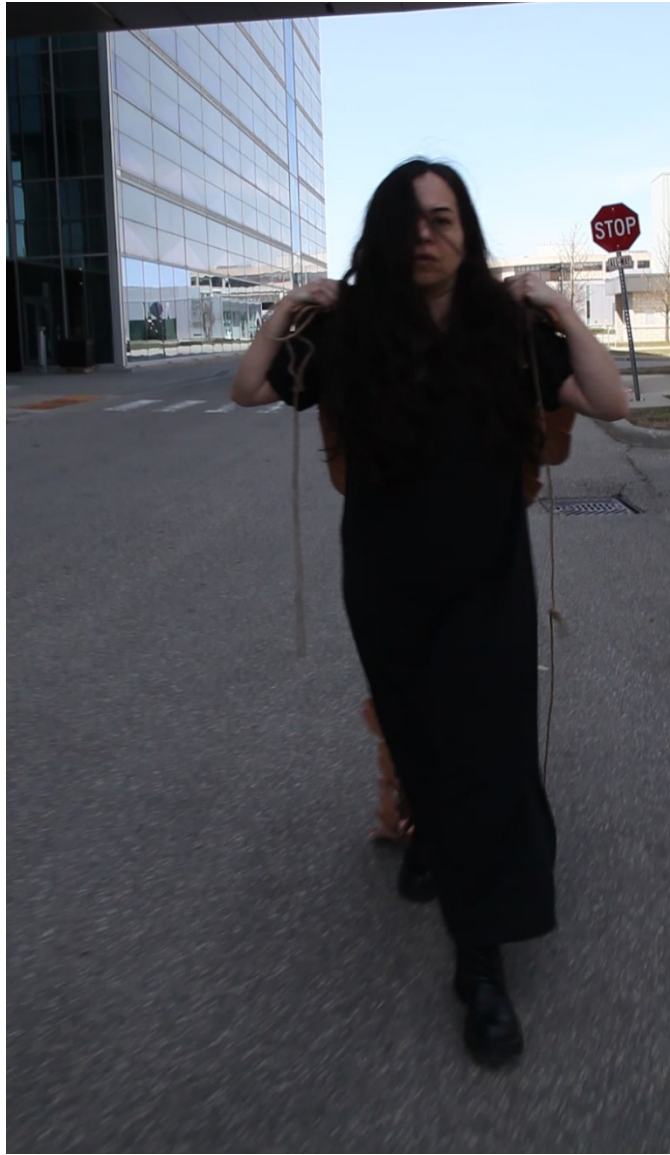


Figure 4: Azadeh Pirazimian, *The Roof I Carry* (performance documentation), 2025.

For me walking is an embodied practice of being—an act of claiming space, navigating uncertainty, and negotiating belonging. This is especially poignant as a diasporic woman, who never feels anchored to one landscape. These walks—real and imagined—have become akin to storytelling in motion. Sometimes, the sculpture / performances unfold as a narrative shaped by movement through space (i.e. the physical act holds and becomes the poetics of my story). While other times, external

conditions such as weather or other barriers encountered, along with what's happening on the periphery, can become crucial variables that change and challenge the work as it evolves. This approach to incorporating a basic human function, such as walking, into my artwork is a demonstration of how my ongoing concerns and thinking about how movement through landscapes is constant, and how this aligns with the experiences of uncertainty with being a diasporic person who has faced marginalization and immigration. French sociologist Michel de Certeau highlights the spatial nature of storytelling with his concept of "spatial stories," emphasizing that stories require a place / geography. This idea, which resonates throughout my work, serves as a framework for linking people and places, with walking as an ongoing process that creates and recreates these connections, physically and conceptually, across time and space (Rendell 222). Furthermore, the act of walking engages with both the public and the larger socio-political environment, which in my case, has allowed me to explore entanglements between the body, space, and displacement while acquiring an embodied spatial knowledge. Incorporating walking into my practice has also been strategic, enabling me opportunities to illustrate how I gain knowledge of a place by moving through it, by feeling its textures, rhythms, and atmospheric / meteorological conditions within my body. For me, walking is a nomadic gesture that resists fixed definitions of home, embracing instead a state of continual becoming, which I have carefully articulated through this body of work; walking is a "mediator between subjects and milieus" (Bisrana 3). Allowing me to sense and negotiate the dynamic relationships between my body, identity, and the environments I traverse. It becomes a method of connecting inner and outer worlds in motion.

It's has been fundamental for me as an artist developing this body of work to look at artistic practices that share similar intentions and artistic strategies. For example, with *Catalysis III* (1970) Adrian Piper incorporates walking too as a transgressive act to disrupt public expectations, provoke reflection, and expose the often-invisible operations of social norms. Her ground-breaking

performance, mediated through documentary-style black and white photography, presents her walking through New York city carrying a “Wet Paint” sign on her chest, leveraging her physical presence to confront viewers and inhabit space in a radically assertive way. This performative experiment is now looked at as a groundbreaking Conceptual and feminist artwork that has helped define both social movements. I understand this performance as a fierce and deliberate act—an embodiment of resistance that directly confronted racism and challenged systems of perception, control, and “normalcy”.



Figure 5: Adrian Piper, *Catalysis III* (performance documentation), 1970.

By comparison, in my performance piece, *The Roof I Carry*, I drag a clay roof through the landscape. I grip two braided jute ropes tied to either end of the roof and I use my body to anchor its weight and haul it behind me. The stitched clay tiles clatter and shift with each step, leaving a sonic declaration of my presence. The ropes stretch between my hands and the sculpture like taut lines, which for me speak to my ability to access vivid memories of oppression, which transmit tension through my arms and shoulders. I engage with space not only through sensory perception, but also through intuition and personal memory. I think through walking, where “a place becomes a person” (Phelan 87), allows me to enter into a dialogue with the politics of space. This becomes especially significant in my experience as an immigrant—moving between the oppressive structures of Iran and the colonial frameworks embedded in Canada. My body navigates both the physical constraints of unfamiliar terrain and the emotional terrain of displacement. The fragility of materials I work with mirrors the precarity of living in-between, and the act of walking becomes a way to process and resist these layered systems of control. In this liminal space, I begin to map a form of presence that is neither fixed nor fully claimed, but instead continually negotiated.

Materials

Clay and Jute as Memory and Meaning

In *The Story of Tiles and Ropes In-Between* (2025), I consistently incorporate clay and jute throughout the body of work, for me these two organic, sustainable materials embody environmental consciousness and intertwine with personal history. The two materials are significant in my work because they are material references to what surrounded me in the Gilan province⁶, of Iran, where I grew up, where most inhabitants were rice farmers. Now these materials serve as an artistic metaphor,

⁶ Gilan province is one of the northern provinces of Iran, in the northwest of the country. Its capital is the city of Rasht.

creating physical connection to my memories and realities of my diasporic experience. They are vessels of memory that speak to the tactile and sensory experiences of my past. Both are natural, of the earth, and environmentally sustainable, reinforcing my commitment to working with what is grounded, regenerative, and enduring.



Figure 6: Clay Roof Tile, Northern Iran, Gilan Province (where I grew up when I was a child).

Clay, in particular, as a material I've incorporated into this work, has an innate ability to respond to the complexities of my experience; conveying both the physical and emotional weight of being in-between. Its organic quality provides me with a sense of ease, comfort and familiarity. I grew up immersed in nature, often walking barefoot through the rain-soaked grass. The sensation of wet earth pressing against my skin remains deeply ingrained in my memory; it is an elemental connection that resurfaces each time I touch clay. Clay, with its rich shades of earthly reds and its malleable texture, is easily shaped by my hands. Clay's humidity traverses across my skin as I work, and its scent transports

me thousands of kilometers back to the rice fields of my childhood, where, during rainy days, I would be immersed in mud.



Figure 7: Azadeh Pirazimian, *The Soil I Touched* (performance video still), 2024.

Each tile in *The Story of Tiles and Ropes In-Between* was cut individually by hand using a wooden template and a clay tool. These wet cutouts were kept on a round-shaped rack to preserve their curved shape as they dried in preparation for the bisque fire. Clay, like my body, has memory and gestures which happen during the making process, such as slumping or curving, can reappear during firing, especially as the temperature increases.



Figure 8: Azadeh Pirazimian, tile-making process (studio image 2), 2025.



Figure 9: Azadeh Pirazimian, tile-making process (studio image 3), 2025.

Jute is another significant material that is prominent in *The Story of Tiles and Ropes In-Between*. Jute can be traced through my ancestral lineage; my grandfather used jute cloth on rice farms, covering the rice seeds to help retain moisture and encourage sprouting. Later, my father worked in a jute factory, and jute became part of our daily life—woven into jute ropes he used to fence the garden and wrap young trees with jute cloth during winter, or in the sacks he carried for grocery shopping including rice.



Figure 10: Azadeh Pirazimian, *The Knots I Made*, 2025.

The coarse organic texture of jute—its strength and flexibility—echoes the endurance of those who laboured with their hands, transforming raw fiber into something functional and resilient. Jute is a material of personal connection, both literally and metaphorically—one that binds, secures, and supports. In working with it now, I trace embed the labour, resilience, and history of those who came before me into my work. I use jute as a way to recognize how material, memory, and identity are tightly interwoven, carrying my broken pieces in process.



Figure 11: Azadeh Pirazimian, *I just Cared the Broken I*, 2025.



Figure 12: Azadeh Pirazimian, *I just Cared the Broken II*, 2025.



Figure 13: *Rasht Jute Factory where my father used to work.* Image credit: Monsieur Sorn (Aryaee Far), 1934.

My Body as a Site of Resistance

In my practice, the body is not only a material, but it is also a site of resistance—a body (my body) is shown to move, carry, and imprint itself onto space, challenging the histories and systems that have sought to control it. My migration from Iran to Canada was an act of reclaiming agency, a deliberate escape from an ideologic regime that polices and suppresses female and queer bodies. Under the Islamic Republic of Iran, the body—particularly the non-conforming body—is a battleground for power and surveillance, confined within rigid structures of gender, morality, and public visibility.

By placing my body at the center of my work, I refuse erasure through assimilation. Walking, in this context, is not just a method of exploration; it is a feminist gesture that asserts my presence in public space and discourse. For those, like me, who struggles of marginalized groups, walking can inspire new ways of thinking. It helps one imagine a different future—an image that goes beyond current realities, as if the picture of new possibilities were already taking shape (Braidotti 22). Taking cues from feminist perspectives, I am empowered by the notion that my practice engages with the body as a site of knowledge production and political resistance. My walking performances challenge these structures, making my body visible, a body that has been restricted, controlled, and silenced. By walking, I reclaim movement as my fundamental right, embodying my autonomy against imposed political boundaries. In this way, walking becomes an artistic and political strategy, where I embrace my in-betweenness, which in turn allows my movements to inscribe new narratives onto the spaces I traverse. Each step imprints my presence while simultaneously disrupting the notion of fixed belonging. As I walk, I engage in an ongoing process of transformation, where movement is an assertion of survival, autonomy, and reclamation. Here, my body does not simply exist within space, it actively reshapes and redefines it, embodying resistance, memory, and becoming.

Chapter 3: Body of Work in Pieces

The Roof I Stitch

The Roof I Stitch (2025) is an auditory clay sculpture which is also incorporated into one of my walking performances, *The Roof I Carry*. The sculpture is composed of over two hundred terracotta clay tiles stitched together with jute ropes to form one individual rectangle that is comparable to the size of my own body. The natural, unglazed terracotta clay gives the piece a warm, earthy orange tone, reminiscent of the roof tiles from my childhood in northern Iran. The backs of the tiles are grainy, textured with the imprint of the wood grain from the canvas rolling surface, while the fronts remain smoother, an invitation to touch. One edge of the tile is curved, while the other is flat. Each tile is carefully stitched together using a knitting needle and jute rope linking the tiles together through perforated holes, which are interlinked by large knots at the back of each row of tiles, securing the structure while allowing for slight movement between the tiles.



Figure 14: Azadeh Pirazimian, *The Roof I Stitch*, 2025, Photo credit: Scott Lee.

The process of connecting clay with jute symbolizes my cultural heritage and my experience as an immigrant, focusing on integration as an ongoing act, whereby I am constantly remaking myself. Each stitch is a gesture of holding together what has been separated, much like how I navigate the complexities and tensions of belonging between two places—two geographies. The repetition of stitching echoes the repetitive steps in my migration experience, each thread reinforcing a connection while also acknowledging the ruptures (i.e., the fragmented pieces I am trying to assemble). There is a kinetic element to the sculpture; in making the work, the sounds it creates from the fragmented pieces of clay, has made me realize how this work also functions as a sound sculpture. This assertion of itself through noise supports these core intentions of resistance—materially and conceptually, as a metaphorically. The sculpture is a malleable form, particularly when I wear these sculptures during my public walking performances, where the clay tiles shift and knock, producing clinking sound that registers my bodily presence in space—becoming an audible trace of movement and continuity. This rhythmic interaction between material, body, and sound transforms fragmentation amplifies the fulsome performance / act / song of my resilience.

The Roof I Carry

The Roof I Carry is a performance where I carry the woven tiled terracotta roof blanket / sculpture over my shoulders. I walk with the piece covering my back from the top to the ground, continuously dragging it, allowing it to make sounds which make my presence undeniable. For me, this performance is an act of radical visibility and being forceful with the acknowledgement of my existence. Moreover, this gesture of carrying a roof is a metaphorical means of symbolically carrying my home with me, providing myself shelter and stability. The act of carrying or dragging my home

with me presents how the act of experiencing and surviving migration is both a burden and a form of protective armor. It is heavy and fragile.



Figure 15: Azadeh Pirazimian, *The Roof I Carry*, 2025.

In a letter that I wrote to my sister I shared this moment of being in-between not simply to communicate, but to create a space where the emotional weight and physical labor of migration could be shared and recognized. It was an attempt to bridge the geographic distance between us by offering her an embodied metaphor—a piece of my performance while She is kilometers far from me hoping to be able to communicate, here is an excerpt (see Appendix A for the full transcription):

“I am holding this clay piece in my hand and wondering, isn’t its fragility exactly how you feel when you are moving from one place to another? Doesn’t that fragility make you anxious if that might break while you are carrying it? Don’t you hear its pieces cracking and tapping on

top of each other? Don't you feel its massive weight might bend your back? I do. I hear the cracks; I sense the fragility. I feel the weight. I see its massiveness but I still have to carry it. I still have to walk. I still must go further, I still should keep expanding and stitching the pieces, and I still should keep rubbing and making sounds. You know I have to be resilient in order to walk through this passage."

During the walking performance, the clay fragments shift, click and tap against one another, creating rhythmic, percussive sounds that resonate through space. The sound of the performance makes my movement more explicit, chaotic, and amplified. I like to consider these sounds as if mapping my location through sonic GPS. The sounds are both an extension of my body and a marker of absence—an echo of where I have been, a lingering imprint onto the landscape. I am inspired by this quote, which I feel speaks to the ethos of my intentions: “some may long for wings, but we have feet. Walking gives us the freedom to go wherever we choose. Moving slowly sharpens the mind, helping us notice more, feel more” (Besten). This sculpture is not simply an object but an evolving shelter—one that is carried, felt, and heard. It exists in the space between presence and longing, between the act of building and the inevitability of fragmentation. In movement, it becomes a temporary home, shifting with each step, embodying resilience in its very form. Through this work, I navigate the precarious space between belonging and uprootedness, creating a shelter that is neither fixed nor entirely lost, but always in motion—as a diasporic immigrant, this performance symbolically expresses, for me, the struggles of this ongoing experience.

The Story of Tiles and Ropes In-Between

The Story of Tiles and Ropes In-Between (2025) is an immersive installation composed of over two thousand handmade terracotta tiles and braided jute rope. Some tiles are stitched and suspended,

while others are scattered throughout the space of the gallery. Each ceramic fragment, delicately bound with braided jute ropes, varies in form—some are square, some rectangular, while others take on organic, irregular shapes. Groupings of fragments are suspended from the ceiling at varying heights, roughly aligning with my own body. As smaller hovering curtains, they move with the air and respond to interaction, mirroring the suspended pieces to form a layered, evolving landscape.



Figure 16: Azadeh Pirazimian, *The Story of Tiles and Ropes In-Between* (sculpture detail 2), 2025.

The installation resembles a fragmented yet resilient, expanding roof—a structure that is both in disarray and in the process of reassembling itself – symbolically and conceptually mirror my own experience with being someone who is constantly adapting to new environments. The suspended tiles hanging at different levels create a passageway that invites the audience to navigate their bodies, thus becoming active participants in the work. Visitors inevitably brush against the fragments, causing the clay pieces to shift, collide, chime, and clack as they walk between the fragments. The tactile nature

of the installation encourages direct engagement, transforming the act of movement into an interactive experience where presence is registered through sound and touch. At the heart of the installation lies the tension between fragility and endurance. Clay, for me, is associated with home and protection, yet within this installation it is suspended in a state of uncertainty. At the same time, the jute stitching tentatively binds these fragmented pieces together, echoing themes of connection, adaptation, and repair. This interplay between material, space, and movement allows the audience to experience the work, reinforcing the central themes of displacement, resilience, and the ongoing process of reconstituting home physically.



Figure 17: Azadeh Pirazimian, *The Story of Tiles and Ropes In-Between* (Installation view), UWAG, 2025, Photo credit: Scott Lee.

To accompany *The Story of Tiles and Ropes In-Between*, in addition to the sounds created by my live performance work, video documentation of the performance, or by gallery visitors engaging

with the hanging tile forms – this work will also include environmental field recording amplified throughout the gallery. This pre-recorded audio will present the rhythmic tapping of clay tiles colliding with one another, echoing the movement and fragility embedded in the installation. The soundscape is intended to enhance the sensory experience, immersing viewers in the materiality and resonance of the piece.

Performance for Camera

There are three video performances for camera works that are featured in this body of work, *Braiding In-Between* (2025), *Walking In-Between* (2024) and *The Soil I Touched* (2024). All three videos are single channel and center my body.

Braiding In-Between

In *Braiding In-Between*, I am situated facing the camera, methodically braiding my hair with jute fiber, creating an extended braid. There is a stark contrast between the dark strands of my hair and the coarse pale jute highlights both separation and connection – underscoring the duality I face in being a diasporic immigrant; this work symbolizes the negotiation of hybridity and becoming. As a woman who has lived under a radical religious regime that polices female bodies and mandates the covering of hair, this act carries deep political and personal significance for me. I’d like to draw attention to another excerpt in the letter I wrote to my sister, which illuminates this experience (see Appendix A for full transcription):

“Marjan, do you remember the long jute rope crossed through the happy greengage’s trees in the garden and the only naked persimmon tree that was planted by Baabaa / بابا? The persimmon tree that he planted in the garden while he himself was not around to witness its

growth? Do you remember that rope was stretched enough to make a very long bridge between two corners of the garden. A bridge that was carrying our clothes? Do you remember we had to cover our underwear? Just because it belonged to girls? It is so ridiculous when I think about it. You know Marjan I think this is what I remember as my very first encounter with gender oppression. I was only seven years old, but you know all this stuff made me eventually leave the country in order to get back my bodily autonomy. I know I always looked a little problematic for the people around me. They thought I'm being too sensitive around these issues. But I wanted a life shaped by my own terms, by my own voice. I wanted to live a life in a way that I wanted."



Figure 18: Azadeh Pirazimian, *Braiding In-Between* (performance video still), 2025.

Braiding becomes an act of reclamation, a defiant gesture against the erasure of my physical autonomy. By intertwining my hair with jute, I engage with a material linked to my family's history, reinforcing the resilience required to navigate systems of oppression. The repetitive nature of braiding echoes the continuous time and effort required to navigate my subsequent displacement, reinforcing how my identity is shaped and strengthened through movement, adaptation, and ritual. As the braid is

woven, it becomes a tangible connection between the body and space, symbolizing both rootedness and transition—an evolving link between past and present, as well as belonging and becoming.



Figure 19: Azadeh Pirazimian, *Braiding In-Between* (performance video still on jute screen), UWAG, 2025, Photo credit: Scott Lee.

Accompanying the exhibition are four live performances of *Braiding In-Between* in the gallery, where I presenting this work as a public performance by braiding my hair with jute for 30 minutes.

Walking In-Between

Walking In-Between (2024) is a performance for the camera, filmed from a point-of-view perspective by holding the camera in my hand to capture the movement of my feet walking while wearing a sculpture of jingling handmade clay beads around my ankles. This vantage point emphasizes my direct physical experience moving through the landscape. The sculpture, *Wearable No.1* (2024) appears to shift with each step, creating both weight, fragility and movement. During this performance

I walk as the beads knock against each other, scrape the ground, and roll beneath my feet, producing a rhythmic yet unpredictable sound—a fragile percussion that amplifies the act of movement.



Figure 20: Azadeh Pirazimian, *Wearable No. 1* (performance documentation), 2024.

As I walk barefoot with *Wearable No. 1* tied to my ankles, I am reminded of Mona Hatoum's *Roadworks* (1985), where she walked barefoot through Brixton, with Doc Martens boots strapped to her ankles. The boots dragging behind her feet as she made her way through the city—an artistic gesture intended to reference police brutality and systemic oppression. Though our themes differ, both of us use walking as a political act, turning the body into a site of endurance and resistance. In *Roadworks*, Hatoum's steps confront power in public space, exposing the weight of authority on the body. Whereas, in *Walking In-Between*, my steps navigate personal and historical burdens, the weight of migration pressing into my skin while carrying systematic oppression history within my experience.



Figure 21: Mona Hatoum, *Roadworks* (performance documentation). Image credit: Kunstmuseum St. Gallen, 1985.

As such, walking with these threaded cuffs is not effortless. The beads slip beneath my bare feet, pressing into my skin—sometimes causing discomfort, sometimes dragging, which in turn restricts my ability to walk with ease. Each movement requires careful negotiation, an awareness of not only the material's fragility and weight, but also the condition of the ground beneath and potential hazards, this articulates my personal experience of careful navigation in new landscapes as a form of survival perfectly, speaking to the endurance of discomfort and pain. The repetition of walking—already a meditative act—elevates the act to one of endurance, where the struggle between control and surrender comes into sharp relief. Here, sound is not merely an accompaniment but a register of presence and resistance. The sharp clicks of beads colliding signal the body's movement, while the muffled grinding of clay against earth hints at potential fracture. The uncertainty of whether I am breaking the beads

beneath my own weight mirrors the precarious experience of displacement—the unease of not knowing what might be lost in the process of moving forward.



Figure 22: Azadeh Pirazimian, *Walking In-Between* (performance video still), 2024.

Through the performance, each step carries history and fragility, each repetition a confrontation with a limitation (i.e. how long can I walk, how far will I get, and what kinds of damage will my feet endure). The act of walking is no longer neutral; it has become a burdened ritual, a record of endurance, and an assertion of presence despite the constraints. Through this interplay between performance and installation, *Wearable No. 1* is more than an object—it is a trace of my movement, a sculptural echo of my body, and a meditation on accumulated weight, along with the uncertainty of how to find grounding in an ever-shifting landscape. For me walking is also a way to orient myself within a new place, a way to begin the conversation between my body and the landscape, whether that be geographical or political, or as French scholar, Michel de Certeau has summarized: “a way of at once discovering and creating the city” (Certeau 115-122).

The Soil I Touched



Figure 23: Azadeh Pirazimian, *The Soil I Touched* (performance video still), 2024.

I remember thinking that the roof tiles were kissed by the raindrops, where the verdant wild moss on the top made the rain sound even more gentle and desirable. This tactile connection was something I felt was required in this body of work dealing with land-based memory, this is evidenced in my intimate performance work that is mediated in the gallery as a single channel video, which features a close frame of my feet walking slowly on wet clay in *The Soil I Touched*, my body once again becomes a site of negotiation, presence, and transformation. The camera captures my bare feet stepping into and walking across a mass of wet terracotta clay—a material rooted in memory, land, and touch. Each shift, crack, and indentation left in the clay registers the vulnerability of the body encountering and altering space. This simple, tactile gesture of walking barefoot over earth collapses the distance between past and present, echoing the memory of rain-soaked soil from my childhood in northern Iran. Much like in *Braiding In-Between* and *Walking In-Between*, *The Soil I Touched* uses repetitive, embodied action to explore how home is not a static place, but a constantly negotiated

passage carried within the body. The clay becomes a site of inscription, a tender yet persistent record of resilience through movement, presence, and becoming.

Conclusion

The Story of Tiles and Ropes In-Between emerges from the fractures and crossings of migration, weaving together clay, jute, movement, and sound to articulate the lived experience of in-betweenness. Rather than presenting home as a static place, this body of work frames it as a fragile, resilient process—one carried through the body's gestures of walking, stitching, and braiding. By engaging the material memory of the earth and the atmospheric weight of displacement, the work offers a poetics of presence shaped by endurance, rather than arrival.

Grounded in autotheoretical inquiry and guided by thinkers, such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Homi Bhabha, my practice embraces nepantla—the unsettled space of negotiation—as both method and subject. Here, through my work, fragmentation is not a condition to overcome, but rather, a terrain to inhabit reflexively. Through movement, sound, and material instability, the work resists assimilation into fixed identities or singular narratives, insisting instead on the generative possibilities of hybridity, vulnerability, and adaptation.

Walking, as both artistic strategy and embodied knowledge, maps new relationships between the body, landscape, and belonging. I offer a poetic way of inscribing selfhood onto shifting terrains, where every step carries the weight of memory and the uncertainty of becoming. The sounds of shifting tiles, the friction of jute, and the vulnerable movements through space transform the ephemeral into a durable form of resistance.

Ultimately, *The Story of Tiles and Ropes* does not seek to resolve my displacement, betweenness, and liminality, but attempts to present the textures, hesitations, and rhythms of the visible and sonic landscapes I traverse on this journey. The artwork proposes a living model of home—as an

evolving, contingent shelter built not from walls or borders, but from the ongoing, tender negotiations of a body in motion.

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Appendix A

Dear Marjan; A letter to my sister

It's late at night here, and early morning there. I'm sure you've been asleep for a few hours now, resting in your cozy upstairs bedroom with the large window overlooking the alley, where the red and yellow Sham'dani flowers are. and probably blooming now on the balcony. In a few days it will be (Eyd-e-Nowruz) there, while we still have snow here on the ground. I still wear my winter coat and boots. I'm sure it's different there.

You are sleeping now and I'm trying to imagine where your little gray cat sleeps—I've never seen him in person, only through our short video calls sometimes here and there while he is jumping over your kitchen counter. You also once showed him to me when he was in your kitchen sink, drinking from a dripping water tap. It was so funny.

I'm sitting in my studio here in Waterloo, thinking of you and the long distance between us. Recently I've been thinking so much about this "In-Between". I think about the time difference, long distance, language difference and me being in this "between" while not seeing you for such a long time. Can you believe it's already been ten years we have not seen each other? This May 5th, 2025, it will be exactly Ten years since I left Iran, and it is exactly Ten years that I have not seen you. and it has been exactly Ten years that I did not walk in the Mohtasham Garden⁷ / باغ محتشم Do you still go there for a walk sometimes? I miss that place and its old cobblestone pavement. You know Marjan, I think I am good at learning the language of the places and this buys me time to extend my presence in a new

⁷ Mohtasham Garden / باغ محتشم is an urban park in city of Rasht, Gilan, Iran. The history of this garden goes back to Qajar Dynasty in 19th century.

place and its many other properties. This is why I walk. Did I tell you that I walk a lot? Did I tell you this is how a “Place becomes a person”⁸ for me?

Marjan, do you know how often I dream about our house in Rasht? “I dreamt again I was home”⁸. I still think one day I will go there and walk in its garden.

I’m sitting in this studio and wrapping this jute rope around my hand, and I remember a massive cotton white curtain crossing all over our ایوان-to avoid the penetration wind and rain in our little house. Do you think ایوان means porch in English? I’m not sure how it’s being said here. Does it even matter? Isn’t that what I constantly am doing? Moving between lines? Moving between words? Moving between languages? Marjan, I am literally living between two languages. Honestly sometimes I feel trapped with the accumulation of the words. You know I think sometimes language is not capable enough. “It is a poor cartographer”⁸ but I aim to resist. I resist through writing: I resist through writing a poem.

I am holding the fired terracotta roof tile clay piece in my hand and wondering, isn’t its fragility exactly how you feel when you are moving from one place to another? Doesn’t that fragility make you anxious if that might break while you are carrying it? Don’t you hear its pieces cracking and tapping on top of each other? Don’t you feel its massive weight on your back? I do Marjan. I hear the cracks; I sense the fragility. I feel the weight. I see its massiveness but I still have to carry it. I still have to walk. I still must go further, I still should keep expanding and stitching the pieces, and I still should keep rubbing and making sounds. You know I have to be resilient in order to walk through this passage. You know me, right? You know how stubborn I can be sometimes. I know it can be annoying to have this

⁸ From “Love’s Geography” by Peggy Phelan

stubbornness around you. But you've always been so kind to me—exactly the way a sister should be. Gentle, forgiving, and always there for me when it matters.

I am sitting here at my studio and I am wrapping this rope around my hand, getting ready to do my performance. I flashback to a cold gloomy day that Baabaa / بابا wrapping an Orange / پرتقال tree with a big jute cloth and a long rope around it to protect it from the wicked cold seeping under its young wooden skin. I am wrapping this rope around my hand and remembering Baabaa's absence later, going into exile, far from us because of all those political stuffs he was caught up in that jute factory in Rasht.

Marjan, do you remember the long jute rope crossed through the happy greengage's trees in the garden and the only naked persimmon tree that was planted by Baabaa / بابا? The persimmon tree that he planted in the garden while he himself was not around to witness its growth? Do you remember that rope was stretched enough to make a very long bridge between two corners of the garden. A bridge that was carrying our clothes? Do you remember we had to cover our underwear? Just because it belonged to girls? It is so ridiculous when I think about it.

You know Marjan I think this is what I remember as my very first encounter with gender oppression. I was only seven years old, but you know all this stuff made me eventually leave the country in order to get back my bodily autonomy. I know I always looked a little problematic for the people around me. They thought I'm being too sensitive around these issues. But I wanted a life shaped by my own terms, by my own voice. I wanted to live a life in a way that I wanted.

Miss you so much
Your sister, Azadeh/آزاده