



THE PERSONAL IS SPIRITUAL IS POLITICAL

**FARHEEN HAQ
WITH FRANCE TRÉPANIÉ**

A conversation on how making space for the personal and spiritual in our secular Canada is a political act, especially in the context of reconciliation and recent attacks on Muslim communities.

This collaborative exchange between Farheen HaQ and France Trépanier took place over a period of four weeks, while Farheen was travelling and working in India.

Dearest France,

You have been in my mind and heart. I hope you are well and finding spaces amongst your many commitments right now. It has been a couple weeks that we have been here in India and there has been much to take in.

I am trying to stay open to not “working hard” at this receiving thing. I sat at breakfast today watching the ocean and the horizon. Talking to the children about the great ocean here and the ocean at home on Vancouver Island – how the horizons are the same or different. I wonder what you are up to over there, across the horizon? (FH)

France Trepanier: I feel your presence. You have been in my dreams, in my consciousness and my prayers. I am happy to read that you are all doing better and that you are enjoying this life-transforming journey. Standing in front of the Salish sea, I can only imagine how different is the land that you stand on right now – the seascape, the landscape, the sounds, the smells, the colours. I like being connected like this.

Farheen Haq: Being here in India is really highlighting for me the ways that people mark the bigger world/realms we live in... temples, mosques, churches everywhere. So many roadside temples, offerings left under trees, markings and ritual traces.

FH: This is the difference here in India: spirit is manifest everywhere. In Canada, we live in a “secular” society, but really it’s not secular – it’s white dominant culture that pervades. In this bid for secularity, we lose public expressions of connecting with spirit. Spirit of course, is everywhere in Canada as well, but it’s not always visible or shared publicly.

FT: Here, spirit inhabits the land – all of the land: the forests, the oceans, the sky, the animals, the supernatural world. Spirit is manifested through our connection to the land, through a deep understanding of our relation to every living thing. The newcomers did not value this knowledge. They saw the land as something to conquer, control and exploit. Many still do.

FH: We met a man on the ferry and he loved speaking English and meeting foreigners. He asked us to come up with a “beautiful poetic sentence about Canada” that he could memorize. He had done this with many other countries and folks he had met. For eg: “Slovenia is the only country with the word love in it”.. But I could not think of one sentence that could describe Canada.

FT: My sentence would be: Canada is a country in need of its own truth.

ON LANGUAGE

FH: I feel different here. I love being able to speak Hindi and Urdu. Mostly I am recognized as a foreigner as I travel with Chris and the children. But there is a warmth and familiarity when people realize that I speak Hindi. When I say I am Canadian people say “But you look Indian!” There is still a dominant idea that being Canadian means being white.

FT: I did not know that you speak Hindi and Urdu. What a gift! Having access to a different worldview. Last week I attended the Arts Everywhere Festival in Guelph. I was the convenor/facilitator of a conversation on the ‘Complexities of Reconciliation’. As I was preparing my presentation, I was reminded that in Canada we are having this conversation about reconciliation in English, a colonial language that comes with its own structure and colonial frame. For example, the words ‘reconciliation’, ‘apology’ or ‘forgiveness’ are nouns in English. In many Indigenous languages these words, these concepts are action oriented, process oriented, based in relationality and ongoing restorative processes. I wonder how those concepts are defined in Hindi?

FH: *Maafi* (forgiveness) is something you ask for but only the person you are asking can respond and grant it or not. Unlike sorry, it awaits a response. But far more important than the words are the actions involved in a relationship. As I learned growing up in a traditional South Asian culture it was through actions that you really communicate. There is a system of protocol around communication and action—a highly evolved and sometimes very strict set of rules around interacting with elders, family, guests, hosts, etc... but the emphasis is on ways of being rather than words spoken.

FT: I like exploring these concepts from different perspectives and worldviews, outside the Western frame. And yet, we are using the English language to do it...





ART AS CONVERSATION

FT: We hosted Nishnaabeg poet Leanne Betasamosake Simpson in Victoria. I like her rebellious spirit, her presence and her dedication to her culture. She told the story of a stolen canoe being returned, by a family in England, to a canoe museum in Ontario. An Elder and Leanne were asked to perform a ceremony for the return of the canoe. Leanne was wondering what such a ceremony would be. The elder explained that they would have to improvise as traditionally canoes were not stolen, nor returned. They went into this large storage space where hundreds of canoes were hanging. They saw the stolen canoe. Leanne walked towards it asking herself: If I were a canoe, what would I want the most? Water, she thought. So the poet slowly took water from her bottle and gently wetted the spine of the canoe. Later she wrote a poem.

*FT: Trees, the skin of trees, shaped into canoes.
Canoes returned to the water world
The bark, the stones and the water
Smiling at the trees*

FH: The idea of improvising ceremony is interesting to me. Making art is an improvisational act—responding to life, the moment, being curious and asking questions. Raising a mix-culture family, being Muslim, South Asian, married to a white man I am often reconciling my hybridity and feel as though I am improvising my whole life! In the past, I have felt judgemental of not following all my own traditions and “making things up” but culture is always changing and responding to the moment, no? We are all improvising all the time. I want to improvise from a place of presence, attention and acknowledgement.

FH: The story of the stolen canoe has stayed with me France. It reminds me about other ways of communicating, a different kind of conversation. I love how Leanne asked herself “If I was a canoe what would I want the most?” It is speaking back to the world that I want to express in my own practice. From the beginning of time that’s why we have made art: to speak to our gods, to the world, to express our devotion, our experience. I used to feel self-conscious about my work being overly “spiritual” and often, because it was drawing on my Islamic identity, my work got labelled as political (especially in the early post 9/11 days). But my work has always been about spirit and having a conversation between my inner world and the outer world.

WAKING UP FROM THE DREAM

FT: You were in one of my dreams. You were in a room with lots of colourful blankets hanging (like separators). You had just done some X-rays and the result was that you did not have to hide anymore. The blankets could come down.

FH: That is powerful France. My practice is about peeling back layers of my own self. Being here in India is revealing to me that being on my ancestral land draws me closer to my relationship to Lekwungen territory. India and the subcontinent is in my blood and history, witnessing my people’s way of acknowledging land and cosmology reminds me of other ways of listening and speaking to the land I live on. Going back to my history allows me to arrive here now.

FH: You have been visiting me in various forms, France. I had a dream about mangos shaking in a tree. You were there, full and ready to give. You also came to me as a chikara boat, steady and holding. The other day I had my morning coffee sitting outside on a balcony here in Delhi, watching the trees at the park across the street and listening to the birds. I felt your presence in the trees. A grounded, outstretched listening.

FH: This has been part of the work here in India and the shift in my creative practice in general: to wake up to the world of my dreams and to be in a state of receiving.

FT: Living with the mystery of the land—the dream land—and feeling comforted by not being able to explain it. It reminds me of a quote from Cindy Baskin that I find powerful and inspiring:

“Memory comes before knowledge.” “For me, this magical, mysterious and completely sensible phrase captures the connections inherent in Aboriginal world views. It helps me to understand so many pieces of the circle that contribute to Aboriginal ways of knowing and seeing the world. It is inclusive of spirit, blood memory, respect, interconnectedness, storytelling, feelings, experiences and guidance. It also reminds me that I do not need to know or understand – in the sense of absolute certainty – everything. It reinforces the sense that it is perfectly acceptable and appropriate to believe that there is much that I am aware of, but that I cannot explain.”²

FH: On my last day in Kerala, I witnessed a family walking into the water offering rice on banana leaves to the ocean on behalf of their dead. It was in front of a large temple on the beach. It was moving to see the connection of the ocean as a body through which to send messages. I like the idea of our emails and thoughts travelling across the oceans to reach each other.

FT: In many Indigenous cultures, offerings are gestures filled with spiritual, social and political meaning. We offer a feast to the members of the community or to visitors. We offer stories. We offer songs to the plants that we harvest and to animals that feed us. We offer tobacco to the spirits. We offer to respectfully share the land. That is the spirit of Kaswhenta, the Haudenosaunee Two Row Wampum Treaty.



POLITICS

FT: Yesterday and today, hundreds of Muslim brothers and sisters were forbidden entrance into the United States - Islamophobia, racism, scapegoating. Black bodies, brown bodies, white bodies, walls, borders. On the land. Last night two words kept coming back: Reveal differences. I am not too sure what it means but it felt really important and I need to share this with you.

FT: I don't know how much of the Canadian news you are following right now, but the last week has been tragic with the shooting of six Muslim fathers praying in a mosque in Quebec City and all that followed in the public realm. It is very disturbing. Not to mention what keeps happening south of the border!

FH: I am riding on the train from Patna, Bihar to Delhi- and I have been feeling acutely the sense of history and trauma that lives in my blood. My father was a young boy during the partition of India and he told me of the terror of people being slaughtered on the train for being Muslim or Hindu. Hearing the news of the Quebec shooting made my heart break. And I immediately thought of my father. He goes to the mosque to pray—it could have been him. His family fled India because of the religious violence during partition. History echoes.

FH: On my last night in Bihar, where my parent's families are from, my relatives took me out to the river Ganga. I wanted to see her and thank her for giving life to my families' people. I listened to my cousin talking about growing up with Hindu families all around him and how he learned to swim in the Ganga. The great river was a unifying force for the Muslim and Hindu families in his neighbourhood. This is so hopeful to me: that our shared love of the land and water can bring us closer to ourselves and to each other.

Notes

1. Eber Hampton published the article «Memory Comes Before Knowledge» in the *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, Vol. 21, 1995, pp. 46-54.
2. Cindy Baskin elaborates on Hampton's phrase in «Aboriginal World Views as Challenges and Possibilities in Social Work Education.» *Critical Social Work*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2006.

All images courtesy of Farheen HaQ

Page —: *The water in Alleppey*, digital photo, 2017

Page —: *Bricks in Patna*, digital photo, 2017

Page —: *Revelation*, video still, 2016

Page —: *Drinking from my Mother's Saucer*, video stills, collaboration with France Trépanier, 2015

Farheen HaQ is a South Asian Canadian artist of Bihari ancestry who lives and works on the Coastx Salish territories of the Esquimalt and Songhees Nations in Victoria, British Columbia. She has exhibited her work in galleries and festivals across Canada and internationally including New York, Paris, Buenos Aires, Lahore and Hungary. Farheen uses video, installation, photography, and performance to explore gesture, identity, and the relationship between our inner and outer world. Farheen is interested in the intersections between indigenous knowledge and contemporary diasporic experience and art as a contemplative practice. www.farheenhaq.com

France Trépanier is a visual artist, curator and researcher of Kanien'kéha:ka and French ancestry. She is the Aboriginal Curator at Open Space Arts Society in Victoria BC. France was recently selected, by the Canada Council for the Arts, to be part of the Indigenous Curators Exchange in New Zealand and the 2017 Venice Biennale. France was the co-recipient of the 2012 Audain Aboriginal Curatorial Fellowship by the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria. She co-authored with Chris Creighton-Kelly 'Understanding Aboriginal Art in Canada Today: a Knowledge and Literature Review' for the Canada Council for the Arts. France is a grateful guest on unceded Lekwungen and WSÁNEĆ territory.