

Artful (Un)belonging Interviews  
**Mariam Pirbhai**

*Preamble: The interview between Veronica Austen and Mariam Pirbhai was conducted on Monday, February 21, 2022 over Zoom. Lara El Mekoui assisted with the interview and the preparation of this transcript. The transcript has been edited for ease of reading. We expect that this intellectual property will be respected and not be reproduced/redistributed without permission.*

**Mariam Pirbhai** is an award-winning creative writer and academic. Her publications include a short story collection titled [Outside People and Other Stories](#), a novel titled [Isolated Incident](#) (to be released this Fall 2022), and a book of creative nonfiction titled [Garden Inventories: Reflections on Land, Place and Belonging](#). She has also authored several academic works on diasporic, postcolonial and world literature, including [Mythologies of Migration, Vocabularies of Indenture: Novels of the South Asian Diaspora in Africa, the Caribbean, and Asia-Pacific](#). For just about a decade, Mariam has been painting for pleasure. She finds inspiration in the natural landscape of southwestern Ontario, where she also resides and works.

Mariam was born in Pakistan and lived in England, the United Arab Emirates, and the Philippines before her family immigrated to Canada in the late 1980s. She completed her Ph.D. in English at the University of Montreal, for which she received the Governor General's Gold Medal. (<http://mariampirbhai.ca/>)

**Veronica:** *Over the last few years, you seem to be moving more and more towards creative expression. You've published an award-winning collection of short stories, you have a novel on its way, and you've been painting more and more (or at least you've been sharing your painting more and more). How are these creative forms of expression part of your critical practice? Are they in-line with and/or are they an extension of your academic work? How are you seeing things go together?*

**Mariam:** The painting has been a recent activity for me, since the last 10 years. And I picked it up very randomly; quite frankly, it was therapy at a difficult period in my life. But I haven't been able to stop painting ever since. So, it's become a permanent part of my creative expression and my creative life, and one that I hope I can continue to develop. The writing, of course, is something different. I've always written creatively and then with the short story collection, it dovetailed into a more formal literary career. This year, I have my first novel coming out in the fall. I'm also working on my first creative nonfiction book project, which should be out next year, fingers crossed. I would say the creative writing and the academic work most definitely line

up, and are mutually reinforcing. As you know, I'm a postcolonialist, focused on the impact and legacies of European imperialism and questions of decolonization; I'm also interested in teasing out the gaps in representations. Perhaps the third element in those scholarly interests is diaspora and migrancy, and all of my creative writing to date has also similarly explored these issues. In fact, the short story collection came out of my academic work and teaching because I found the struggles of labour and employment for new immigrants, as well as different aspects of diasporic experience, weren't well represented in North America, especially in CanLit. And so, I thought, "well, maybe I can write some of these stories," and that's how *Outside People and Other Stories* came about. Those two elements, the creative writing life and the academic life are always in conversation with each other.

Sometimes, however, the academic life can also interfere with the creative writing life. Time—finding time when one works in other domains—is of course the most valuable entity in any creative practice I think, but as well, sometimes my training as a literature scholar can be very overbearing when I'm in the throes of writing creatively. As literary scholars, we're mired in influence and the formal language of literature, and sometimes I just find that I'm overwhelmed by that academic voice at the back of my head.

And I say this also as it relates back to questions of decolonization because more and more, I've been thinking about fiction not only from my perspective as a creative writer but also as someone who teaches creative writing, and I have come to see how we are conditioned to follow Euro-North American artistic standards.

So, I realized recently that when I teach creative writing as much as when I write creatively, I, too, am often thinking through a Eurocentric filter. When it comes to fiction, most of our literary models are North American, going back to early traditions of the 20th century icons like Hemingway, Cheever, etc. These things have been formalized in schools of creative writing that insist on certain kinds of models for good writing versus bad writing, good fiction versus bad fiction. And so, our own voices are often in conflict with or drowned out by these schools of thought.

What's really nice about painting is that it is free from all that, at least for me; I'm self-taught so I don't have to subscribe to any school or tradition, which is very freeing. However, the more invested I am in landscape painting, the more I realize that it is similarly grounded in certain kinds of ideas about land, place, and representation.

**Veronica:** *In the interview you did for [Watershed Writers](#), you talked about painting in terms of coming to a relationship with place, and I thought that was an interesting way of thinking about what painting might be offering because that seems like it intersects with some of your critical work as well.*

**Mariam:** Yes, exactly! I'm seeing that relationship between land, place, and visual art. Just to contextualize, I've lived in Canada now for quite a long time; I think it's been 35 years, so that's

a good long time. But I always felt a little bit detached from Canada, geographically speaking: the place, the climate, the geography. I have come to see that for immigrants, especially first-generation immigrants, the business of survival—fitting in, creating a social network, creating a cultural community, getting a job, etc.—is paramount. How we relate to the place itself—the land, landscape, geography, that sort of thing—is far from our minds. So thinking about questions of land and place is a bit of a privilege, I guess, that few first-generation immigrants have the time or even the means to really engage in.

Another element, I think, is also that we spend so much of our time just mourning the land left behind. I think I've been mourning a tropical climate for more years than I can remember. So we look at *this land* with some level of reproach because it's a bitter reminder of the land *lost*, and especially when we come from such radically different kinds of climates, from a very hot or a tropical climate to the Canadian climate. This instills a kind of schism in our minds, maybe like a geography of the mind. This kind of geography of the mind is an antagonistic place to be because we're always focusing on what this land *is not*, rather than *what it is*.

Then again, we talk a lot about the double-consciousness of the immigrant, the split identity of the immigrant, and sometimes that's good because it fosters a kind of comparative awareness of one's world; we don't take things for granted perhaps in quite the same way as someone who has never had the experience of leaving. This split identity can be a helpful productive state of mind because we're always thinking through multiple time frames, places, geographies, ways of being, etc. But it can also create a kind of antipodal thinking because we are positioning two geographies in antithetical terms, or in conflict with each other. And so, it's this state of discomforting conflict that we find ourselves in.

So this is just a very long preamble to say that in the painting, I've been able to focus on the land in a way that I haven't in my writing. In painting, I do have the luxury of just focusing on the land, the place, the geography that is before me. Painting provides for me a kind of stillness, a kind of reflection of the local as opposed to always being elsewhere in my mind.

The painting has moved me away from this kind of geographical schizophrenia, at least. And this has yielded what I could only describe as a kind of sustained looking wherein I'm able to see a shift within myself, perhaps within my own mind's eye, in terms of my relationship to this land and place as an immigrant artist. To give you an example, I do a lot of landscape photography which eventually dovetailed into landscape painting. Very often you can take a picture in the winter, and it really looks like a black and white photo, as if you have reduced it through a black and white filter. And I used to find that really oppressive: "Like oh my god, there's just no colour here, and I'm living in a black and white photograph!" I used to see this wintery landscape as a monochromatic one-dimensional thing. Now, through painting, and that kind of sustained looking, I'm looking without judgment, without those schisms I was talking about earlier. I see colour everywhere in the winter landscape where I used to only see black and white. And so

painting has completely transformed the way that I see place, the way that I see this land, and I hope, incrementally, my relationship to it as well

**Veronica:** *It sounds like maybe you're finding more connection. Your vision becomes fuller in a way, right? You start to see the particularities rather than the gloss.*

**Mariam:** Absolutely, you start to see the particularities, and they don't terrify you.

**Veronica:** *So I think we've kind of covered our planned second question: What is your visual arts practice offering you? Why have you taken it up? Engagement with space and place through visual expression? Were there any other things you wanted to add to that kind of focus?*

**Mariam:** No, not really. I think we've covered it; the only thing I would add is that because painting is so new for me, it's a developing practice. I'm learning as I go. I'm slowly building a language through the art; a kind of language for my relationship to this place. You do sometimes feel like a child learning the alphabet for the first time when you engage in a creative mode that's new for you, but that's a good thing. Creative writing doesn't always give me that sense of newness, that sort of openness and discovery.

**Veronica:** *Can we talk a little bit more about that idea of self-taught? What is that offering you? You say it builds a language, but are you fighting the urge to go take a class? What is the nature of the self-taught that really draws you to the practice?*

**Mariam:** I would love to develop my practice more formally; I would love to have the time to take some of that formal training. I do see that we waste a lot of time when we are self-taught, because everything is trial and error. But, then, many artists say their practice *is* about trial and error, and that there's no such thing as failure in artistic production! But having said that, it would be nice to develop this skill a little bit more formally. However, it's push and pull because the spontaneity is part of the freedom that I enjoy about the visual art. Even though I post on Facebook sometimes, painting is also largely a private endeavor for me. Creative writing and, of course, academia, are very public; so, even though very often you hear writing is a deeply private practice, it's actually not; you have to be ready to share the work in public form all the time but also public in the sense that you're always thinking about a bigger publishing industry that you're going to be a part of and in conversation with. So, in that sense, I love painting; it's just entirely for me and the pleasure it brings to me.

And in that equation, of course, nature is my prime mover; I have become really interested in the natural world and the botanical, which also relates to my academic interests because, of late, I've been thinking a lot about ecological and botanical imperialism. So, there are those little connections that are starting to happen, where more and more, there is a crossover between this part of my life, my intellectual academic life, and all of the other modes of artistic expression that I'm engaging in.

I would say there's a lack of control in both creative writing and in the visual arts that I'm coming to see, which is that both of them move toward revelation in a way. I don't mean this in a spiritual way. No matter how much training I might go out and get in the coming years to better develop myself as a painter and visual artist, I do realize that, fundamentally, there is a certain element of the organic in creative activity. No matter how much you might have an image in mind that you want to paint or a set of characters in mind that you want to develop, both writing and art take you somewhere on their own. So, there is that spontaneous quality in both. They both lead you to a beautiful surprise. Sometimes you don't really know, for instance, that your character is going to end up saying or doing such and such. It takes on a life and a voice of its own. In the same way, you don't necessarily know where your painting is going or how it's going to evolve (perhaps especially so for the novice!). And there's this kind of astonishing act of revelation to be had in the final product, which I find is part of the joy of both modes of expression.

One more thing I would say about the visual art is that it is something that lets me step away from these other activities. It's my reward in many ways; so, if I finish a book project, or I meet some publishing deadline, or mark 150 papers on *Wuthering Heights*, or something like that, I offer myself the reward of setting aside some time to paint. It's pure joy for me, in that sense.

Again, nature's the prime mover, and it's art for its own sake, and that's enough for me. I'm not aiming to be a realist painter or to tell a story. It's purely about the act itself, and whatever that yields. I think about other writers who are painters and there are many of them. Derek Walcott is one such writer-painter. He's an impressionist landscape painter, focused on St. Lucia, his place of birth and the Caribbean more generally. I like what he says about landscape painting: "but the life around me is alert, it's botanically vivid, it's there, you know, and very unpainted. So, I don't know why I want to look at a pawpaw tree and be stunned by, you know, the symmetry of it, and then decide I'm going to do something called *the essence of a pawpaw tree*," ([Walcott on Abstraction](#)). I really related to this! Basically, I interpret this as, *let the pawpaw tree be a pawpaw tree; save the symbolism of the pawpaw tree for the poet!* As a landscape painter, I don't need to delve into the symbolism of the pawpaw tree. I can enjoy that kind of freedom of expression without becoming overly analytical about it.

**Veronica:** *Because maybe that connection you're trying to have with the land, through painting disappears as soon as you're looking at the land through this lens of the symbolic. I was thinking about a similar thing: if you do go out and pursue more study about painting, does that take away the language that you yourself are making?*

**Mariam:** Again, it comes down to influence and whose traditions am I going to be schooled in and how. I'm a hybrid creature, a kind of global citizen who's lived in many places, so my influences are necessarily also various, and, at the same time, however, when it comes to Canada, and the Canadian landscape, we're very saturated with the Group of Seven and particular kinds of landscape art. So, this idea of schooling can certainly interfere with some of

that spontaneity. But I see it more as just developing certain kinds of rudimentary skills. For instance, I need to learn to free up the hand and the mind in certain ways. I'm still that kid who used to press down so hard with that HB pencil that my teachers used to tell me that when I write there are at least 10 pages below that are etched with my writing. And so, I'm trying to learn, or to teach myself, how to loosen my hand and to let the body guide the brush in more fluid ways. And so, this is what I mean by schooling; rather than art history or certain traditions, I just want the time to develop the repertoire of skills that trained painters take for granted. Those skills come in dribs and drabs when you're teaching yourself, when you're mucking through the practice on your own.

**Veronica:** *Well, maybe this is a good segue to ask: do you flex different muscles of creativity when writing vs. creating visual arts?*

*I mean that both metaphorically and perhaps physically because I know for myself—I'm more of a drawer than a painter—my drawing is more bodily than my writing and that is interesting to me, how you engage a body when you are dealing with visual arts. So, I'm wondering what you think about the muscular nature of creative writing versus the visual arts?*

**Mariam:** That's a great question. You use so much more of your body. I was recently looking at an online painting class where the artist recommended standing away from the canvas, extending your brush, and then just letting your body make the marks on the canvas. This really becomes a bodily experience, which was very new for me.

I recently tried to do work in watercolours which I find to be a particularly difficult medium because you have to work very fast, and it becomes a more instinctual process over, say, oils or acrylic. Oil painting takes time to dry, and I can't believe I started with oil because I'm fundamentally impatient! Watercolour, I think, is a really interesting medium because it forces you to flex a different kind of muscle. It's sort of allowed me to divest myself of many of those noises of self doubt or over-analysis, and to just let the body do what it needs to do. Let the subconscious part of artistic practice also have its own voice and moment, and I really enjoy that, and I think that will actually help yield the language, style, and voice in visual art for me.

In creative writing, we always talk about what is the author's voice, and it's hard to pin those things down for oneself. But you do start seeing that the more you do—that is, the more you write, the more you paint—the more you start seeing those things emerge. Sometimes, all these three hats, the academic, the visual artist, and the creative writer, are at odds. The academic is the critic. The creative writer is a bit of a chronicler—at least I'm always thinking about questions of social justice, etc., and I'm thinking about current affairs, and I write to capture something of our world as it is now. As a storyteller, you are a kind of a chronicler of your time, right? And then visual art, for me, is all about observation. The three can sometimes speak at cross-purposes. Maybe the creative writer and the visual artist in me are symbiotic in the sense that we're both observers. And that's part of the fundamental toolkit of the writer and the artist: to notice things, to observe the world around you, and to reveal what others may have taken for granted or not

bothered to look at. So, in that sense, there is a complementarity there, after all, in the creative life of the writer and the creative life of the artist.

Thinking again about your question of flexing different creative muscles, maybe the most significant thing that I've seen so far is the positive effect of painting on my creative writing. Painting now has made me a better observer, and I'm able to describe things more spontaneously. Painting makes you really look at the detail of things. And this is really good for me because as someone who's lived in many places, who has these sometimes schizophrenic or plural geographies of mind, to look closely at something without all that additional clutter (imagined or real) is a gift that the visual arts practice has provided. Let's just say I've always been a kind of macro thinker. I sort of step back and want to take it all in, but perhaps miss out on the smaller details. I've always had a sort of panoramic view because I've lived in many vastly different places throughout my life, and my sensibility is always driven by a global comparative lens, but detail of the local is just as important. It's what's been missing in my imaginative repertoire, perhaps. Looking. Looking closely. Starting with the details and zooming out, rather than starting with the panorama and getting lost in the vastness of it all.

**Veronica:** *That's interesting because I wonder if it's also a different kind of looking.*

*Thinking back to my own experience doing fine arts as part of my undergrad, one of our exercises tended to be: "well, here's your life model, and you have to use your non-dominant hand to do this," and so that led me to an awareness of how sometimes you see differently by engaging with a different bodily motion. Throughout grad school, I wrote a lot of my notes in classes and seminars with my left hand because I could hear differently. I could see things differently. I'm okay enough that my non-dominant hand works quickly enough and almost legibly enough. It made me pay attention differently, and that's similar to what you said about seeing the details. So, when we approach something with different skills, using different body motions, and things like that, there are ways in which we see differently too.*

**Mariam:** It opens up our cognitive faculties, and we also realize how fixed we are in our ways of seeing and doing. And so, perhaps it also just opens us up to other angles as well.

**Veronica:** *Well, let's move on to the question about acts of vision: bell hooks discusses art as a space of defamiliarization; that art "takes us away from the real only to bring us back to it in a new way" (hooks, "Art on My Mind" 4). What do your "acts of vision" (I'm borrowing words from Mary Lou Emery in Modernism, the Visual, and Caribbean Literature here) do to reality?*

**Mariam:** I was thinking that art in many ways is kind of a trickster; it's a disruptor. So, perhaps that's what it's doing for me as well; it's asking me to look at things in a different way. We hope that our art can invite the viewer and the reader to look at their world from a different perspective, to look at something more closely or through another perspective. And in that sense, it's all about defamiliarization, but this kind of artistic practice is doing the same thing for me. It takes me back to that idea of sustained looking as a kind of paradigm shift that I'm seeing within

myself as much as in what I might be producing, especially in terms of my own relationship to land and place as an immigrant artist. I had mentioned, for instance, the Group of Seven being such a cliché in Canada—the sacred template for what landscape painting is, and what landscape painting should be! And that’s okay. I mean I love and admire the Group of Seven, and I’ve learned so much about art, landscape painting in particular, through their work. But they do make you think a lot about erasure and absence as well. Just think of all the landscapes emblemized in their work: Algoma, Lake Superior, Algonquin Park, or wherever it may be across Ontario. We see something incredible in that representation, but I can’t also help but see the silences and the erasure; these are all areas that are heavily occupied by Indigenous peoples and certainly would have been at the time that the Group of Seven artists were doing plein air painting. So, we need to shake things up, perhaps. Disrupt and decolonize Canadian landscape painting! Defamiliarize ourselves once again to new ways of seeing this land.

And so, I think this sustained looking is also about thinking about my own place and relationship to this land: I’m an immigrant and the child of immigrants, which means I am seeing this land through a different kind of lens. At the same time, I am another kind of settler here. So, I think about what kind of immigrant-settler do I want to be? What kind of relationship to place do I wish to cultivate? Can I do so differently? Not through the lens of erasure or imitation but through other kinds of modes of interconnection and inter-subjectivity with both people and place? I guess that’s really what I’m striving to achieve with sustained looking.

**Veronica:** *M. NourbeSe Philip in “The Absence of Writing or How I Almost Became a Spy” coins the term “i-mage” as a “the irreducible essence [. . .] of creative writing” (She Tries 12). The i-mage is that which can “succeed in altering the way a society perceives itself and, eventually, its collective consciousness” (She Tries 12). Philip also casts artists of all types (e.g., painters, sculptors, writers, musicians, etc.) in the role of constructing these i-mages. What role does an artist/writer/etc. play in terms of representation?*

**Mariam:** The I-mage definitely strikes a chord because it speaks to “sustained looking.” I don’t know how Philip intended the concept, but it does get me thinking about the relationship between self and place. And how do the images stick? Or how do the terms of representation also help recast one’s relationship to place? It also reminds me of another one of Philip’s terms: that of the “I-land,” or the transformation of “islandness to I-landness” (“A Piece”).

Putting my academic hat on for a moment, I’m reminded of Caribbean poets rejecting the kind of discursive stranglehold that the European imperial regime (travel writers, colonial administrators, artists, you name it), employed when representing the Caribbean archipelago. That is, they reduced the islands and especially tropical islands, as well as the peoples and cultures of tropical islands, as everything that Europe was not. In those antithetical terms that set up one civilization against another—in this case, tropical island-cultures against Europe and continental cultures. And so, the poetics of an “I-land” identity becomes a way for the Caribbean artist to wrestle back



the terms of representation from the colonizer, from that discursive stranglehold of European imperialism and European imperial racism.

There's a sort of echo here with Philip's I-mage, perhaps. Both are acts of reclamation and decolonization. For my art, it comes down to something like this: *Look, I'm here too. I have a right to represent this place, this space, in my terms as well. And through my filter.* So, in that sense, every I-mage or every image adds to the story of this land and potentially expands its narrow view of itself. And that's what I'm working through: how does my own "looking" add to that story? And that it's a valid story.

And maybe just to flesh this out by way of another example: I recently posted an article on Facebook that piqued my interest about a contemporary Black British artist by the name of [Eugene Palmer](#). The article was basically about the way that Palmer is challenging representations of the "bucolic" English countryside—the classic pastoral England from which the Black subject has been completely erased. Alternately, Palmer wanted to illustrate how Black British peoples have been populating the rural landscape of England for a very long time. And so, in many of his paintings, he often uses family members as models; you'll see a picture of a painting of his brother, right at the front of the landscape, with the English countryside behind him, as a backdrop. And so, the person is really in your face: the body, the black body, completely front and center in that landscape, while the English countryside is rendered in much darker tones. It's that insertion of the black subject in the landscape that becomes Palmer's act of reclamation; that act of decolonization. Again, it piqued my interest because I've been thinking through these questions about space and place, both in terms of visual and literary representation. What does it mean to erase certain populations from a space? Like physically from a geography, just completely erase their presence?

So, this is as much true of Indigenous peoples in the Group of Seven paintings as I think it is in contemporary literature, where racialized people are absent in the landscape; they are absent in rural settings. We have this view of racialized peoples as being urban centered, in the big Metropolis and the "ethnic ghettos," that kind of thing, but very rarely do they populate the landscape writ large, and certainly much less in rural kinds of scenes found in Canadian visual and literary arts. And so, I think that's what my preoccupation is: what does that suggest about claims of space and identity? On the one hand, it seems to suggest that racialized peoples are always and forever condemned to their status as transients, as newcomers; they don't carry the weight of history and relationship to the land as the "pioneering" or settler peoples might; they are not seen (or shown) to be rooted to this land in the same way. I think it's important to consider the monopoly over representation when it comes to land and geography, as much as other aspects of ourselves.

**Veronica:** *So, what we're talking about is ways in which acts of looking can talk about the idea of how you are positioned in place? Do the artist and the writer have a special role in how they represent the land and represent people? What do they contribute that others don't? Is it*

*something with the imagination? What does that kind of creative practice do that maybe other practices don't?*

**Mariam:** For me, it's always been simply a question of having a voice; having a space to be heard, seen, felt, acknowledged. I've always seen literature, for instance, as holding great power in so far as it can tell a story, even serve as a kind of chronicle or archive for things that otherwise have been rendered completely invisible by History and History-making with a capital H. And so, at least for me, art and politics are inseparable. Even breathing is a political act, isn't it?

I think that's always what I've seen as the power of art: to provide a kind of record where other records may be absent. And sometimes, it's only in going back and excavating that record that we actually see the contribution that artists make, but I find that's really where the power of art lies and the kinds of spaces of belonging it can open up.

**Veronica:** *Because of some of that, it also has historically been dangerous to be artists, right? I think about Edwidge Danticat's Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work (2010): because you're trying to find a space for your voice and a space to represent your experience, being an artist can be a threatening thing to be.*

**Mariam:** Absolutely. One of my favorite literary figures is the Kenyan author, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, who wrote his famous novel, *Devil on the Cross* in the 1980s, on toilet paper that he got from a security guard in prison. He was imprisoned for writing a play titled *I Will Marry When I Want* (1970), which had both a feminist and anticolonial message, as do all of his works. For some writers, especially those writing in the era of decolonization, writing came with very real consequences: imprisonment, banishment, exile, or worse. Ironically, it is those very writers whom the State now celebrates as the producers and shapers of a national literature, a national culture—an identity that they now draw on with pride. Maybe that's the plight of the artist: to produce art in spite of those dangers. To assert and insist on a voice and a space against the darkness.

**Veronica:** *How do you or how does one belong through art (visual arts, literary arts, etc.)? How does art create spaces of belonging?*

**Mariam:** I can't speak as directly to the visual art scene but certainly in literature—it's been a very elitist domain. Spaces of belonging are hard to come by, which is why we're having all these conversations about equity and diversity right now. If we think of it in terms of, let's say BIPOC writers, or otherwise marginalized writers in a rather elite industry, certainly, opening up spaces is a step in the right direction, but perhaps, it's not enough. We've learned already that tokenism relies on old multicultural models that lead us nowhere and don't do the real work of creating spaces of belonging that are truly mutually enriching. And so, I think artists are always butting up against the gatekeepers of a particular practice or particular cultural tradition. But, when we do see it working, we know immediately that something is working right. And we, as

teachers, know this, I think, firsthand, right? There's nothing quite like a student who was assigned something to read in one of your classes, and they see themselves in that book, in that story, in that character for the very first time, and it's an absolute revelation for them, and it sort of changes immediately their relationship to you because you have provided something that speaks so directly to them and to their experience. So representation carries great power, but I think at the same time, we have to think about belonging a little differently as well. Belonging is not a static thing: it is intersectional, it is ever-changing, it is in constant flux. You may belong in some ways today, but perhaps you might be exactly the object of difference tomorrow. Belonging is fluid and fraught. In that sense, creating a space of belonging doesn't begin or end with making space.

Both consumer, practitioner, and those in art industries have to be challenged to think beyond simply quotas of diversification and representation. I think about the writer, Vivek Shraya, who started her own publishing house, VS Books (<https://vsbooks.ca/>) recently for writers squeezed out of the industry by ageism, racism, or other factors. Something that she said really stayed with me: namely, that Canadian publishers and editors have tended to view BIPOC writers as a kind of risky business—as in, who's going to want to read *xyz* stories set in Nairobi, Kenya, Pakistan, or what have you. But her argument is that Canada is inherently a diverse society whose readers are equally diverse. Bringing those voices to the stage is quite the opposite of risk; in fact, it's capitalizing on a wider audience because don't we live in diversity? Isn't that our more natural state? What's the risk in that?

I've been thinking about this a lot, both as someone who's teaching Creative Writing now, and as someone trying to get my work published. You encounter numerous kinds of obstacles about which story is a valid version of your story. In my case, I am finding that there are only certain types of stories that it is okay for a Pakistani Canadian woman such as myself to tell: I can list them here: gender oppression, Islamic male tyranny, the plight of the dispossessed from war-torn countries, etc. There are certain kinds of stories that sell here and other kinds that are likely seen as "a risk," in the way Shraya was framing it. And I think to really create spaces of belonging in Canadian artistic practice, all the various gatekeepers have to be shaken up a little bit, because we need better representation behind the scenes in our artistic industries as much as in terms of the artistic practitioner. Those who are the arbiters of culture and have great power in deciding which stories are valid versions of a given culture, a given marginalized voice or community, also need to be diversified. As long as the relationship remains hierarchical and unequal, tokenism will persist and the terms of representation or inclusion will be superficial at best.

**Veronica:** *Part of what I was thinking about in asking that question is the idea of how does representation create spaces of belonging? You made the reference of students seeing themselves in a text. There are ways in which that creates some sense of identification which might create a sense of belonging. And yet, as you say, the fact that that story comes to us, means it's gone through all of the gatekeepers.*

**Mariam:** Exactly, and as consumers, we forget just how curated art is. By the time it reaches us, the consumer, it's gone through so many hurdles. And those hurdles, invariably, are very often ideologically driven. It's a very complicated question; I really don't have the answer about how to create positive spaces of belonging. I'm not suggesting that greater diversity is not an important first step. I simply mean to suggest that it should not stop there. For instance, I've been following a Pakistani-Canadian landscape artist, [Masood Omer](#), who does a lot of plein air painting around Toronto. When I first came across his work, I had no idea he was a Pakistani-Canadian artist. But when I realized that he was, it was really inspiring. I just thought, well, there's a space of belonging. If he can put his imprint on the Canadian landscape as a visual artist, then it certainly offers a model for the rest of us so-called "outsiders" or more recent immigrants. So, he's not only claiming space but also creating a space for other artists. It's a testament to how nobody should have a monopoly on representation, and the more diversified it is, the less inclined we might be to make assumptions about those purported "others" among us.

**Veronica:** *Maybe we can conclude with where you see yourself going. Are you continuing to engage in some of these sustained acts of looking as you move towards some of your future projects, or is there anything you'd like to say about your direction forward?*

**Mariam:** Well, the novel that's coming out, *Isolated Incident* (Mawenzi 2022), is about a diverse cast of Canadian Muslims dealing with Islamophobia and the rise in hate crimes and, as such, is geared towards those questions and issues of social justice that much of my academic and creative writing explores. At the same time, water and rivers are central motifs in that novel, maybe because I've been thinking a lot about the Grand River region, where I've lived since 2005. In fact, the imagery and history of the land have come to be featured in the novel.

But maybe the closest sort of engagement with sustained looking, and where the visual art and the writing are in close conversation, is to be found in the project I'm working on right now. This is the first creative nonfiction project I've engaged in, so it's kind of a little scary. Taking on yet another genre! But I've been using a lot of my landscape photographs as the basis of inspiration for this project because it's sort of my first attempt to engage in nature writing, or a kind of literary naturalism, where I am thinking through questions of the botanical, land, and landscape in terms of my own sense of place and belonging in southern Ontario. And, more specifically, in terms of my sense of place within this land as both an émigré and another kind of settler. And so, I'm exploring the ways in which the local flora, concepts such as native versus non-native species, botany and gardening are all ways in which European colonization has created a certain image of the land (or the land after its own image), and I am trying to navigate my way through all of these matrices—of the botanical, the colonial, as well as my own geographies as someone coming from another land (or lands, in my case, given my multiple migrations). It's the first writing project where I'm really looking at this locality, the Grand River region, this town called Waterloo, and my place in it. I don't have a title as yet, but it's scheduled to come out next fall (2023), with Wolsak & Wynn. I never thought I'd be writing essays about gardening and botany

and conservation and even Waterloo history but here I am, doing all of those things. I'm sure the painting has brought me to this point!

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