

Artful (Un)belonging Interviews

Manahil Bandukwala

Preamble: This interview of Manahil Bandukwala was conducted by Lara El Mekau, with contributions by Veronica Austen, on Friday, April 14th, 2023, over Zoom. Lara El Mekau led 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.

Bio adapted from Bandukwala's [website](#): Manahil Bandukwala is a writer, visual artist, and editor. She was born and raised in Karachi and is currently a settler on the unceded territory of the Anishnabek, the Haudenosaunee, the Huron-Wendat and Petun First Nations, the Seneca, and most recently the Mississaugas of the Credit River (Mississauga). She holds a BA in English from Carleton University and an MA in English at the University of Waterloo. In 2023, she was selected as a Writer's Trust of Canada Rising Star by Shani Mootoo. She currently works as Coordinating Editor for *Arc Poetry Magazine* and Digital Content Editor for *Canthius*.

Lara: *It was really a pleasure researching and getting to know your work. I'll start by asking: How do your visual and digital practices inform your written practice and vice versa? Do you find your practices co-exist and stay in balance? Or do your practices ebb and flow with one dominating and then the other?*

Manahil: That's such a tricky question sometimes. To begin with, I'll say my writing practice definitely has a bit of a larger role, in part because I work with a magazine and volunteer with writing, and what that does is automatically bring it to the forefront. I do find my visual practice enters my writing in that image is very important to my work, and that's something that is quite evident in [MONUMENT](#) and in a lot of the poetry that I write, as well as in my prose. I also think it's a bit easier to track how visual practice informs writing in more obvious ways. The reverse is a bit less easy. I did find when I was touring for *MONUMENT* that the visual practice actually took over, and that was happening after a few years of being in a very writing-heavy space. I had a lot more room to explore. Maybe that was because there was so much happening when it came to writing, so it was nice to have a place to set that aside and have other forms of creativity take over.

Lara: *Sounds like there are ebbs and flows. When did you start mixing and transitioning in your practice? Or has this always been part of your method?*

Manahil: I've been doing art for as long as I can remember. So painting, drawing. Actively writing has been more recent in the last six to seven years. And when I say actively writing, it's . . . I think when you're producing visual art, the final product is a lot easier to see. Whereas with writing, you can have journals; you can write in them throughout your life, and even have drafts of writing. But what a polished and finished product of writing looks like is very different and what you do with it is very different. In terms of mixing the two, I don't think it was ever a very conscious act that I was undertaking. It was more that these are both parts of my life and ways to create. And wanting to express myself in whichever one felt right, in whatever given moment, is to go back to your first question about finding balance between the two. That's what I find works best for me instead of trying to try to force one or the other.

Veronica: *Can I add something as a follow up for the previous answer, though, because I think one of the things that you're getting at there is audience. That's kind of the finished product. The visual is imagined to have an audience; whereas you can be writing your whole life and not think about it in terms of sharing and that outward presence.*

Manahil: Audience is such an interesting thing as well because there's more formal audiences with having a book or even a chapbook out or even with a poem that's in a magazine and that has been vetted by that process. That is such a different audience from posting something on your Facebook or Instagram, which has become more of a practice for me in the last few years. With visual art, when I was young and would do a painting on canvas, my grandmother would usually just hang it up in the house, even if it wasn't necessarily polished or finished. That also gave it an audience in unintentional ways by whoever came to the house and saw it. Visual art can have a bigger reminder of its presence. Whereas again with writing, if it's in a closed book, you're not seeing it in the same way. It's a lot more intangible.

Veronica: *Yes, because with writing, it's so much about the growth before it has audience.*

Lara: *I want to connect this next question to what you've said about art belonging in your house. How do you or how does one belong through art (visual arts, literary arts, etc.)? How does art create spaces of belonging? How do you express belonging through your art?*

Manahil: In literal ways. Belonging to an arts community, to a writing community, that has always been something that's very present and even more so in my adult life in that a lot of my closest friends are writers and artists. And I think when you share that way looking at the world, there's a connection that you form. You share the same way of communication, and I think ways of communicating are a bit different across arts practices, like music or dance, and going beyond that as well. A lot of my writing and art practice emerges through this belonging in a community

with other writers from just conversations that happen as a result of this belonging that has been forged over however many years before.

Lara: *You have published collaboratively with the artistic collective VII as well as with other poets. How does collaborative work inspire you differently than independent writing and artistry? What is to be said about belonging in collaborative work and in artistic community?*

Manahil: Well, with independent work, especially something like writing that happens your head, I find it very easy to just get caught up in your own head. What collaborative work does is it forces you in a way to have a different perspective on your own writing. And when it's with my collaborative writing group, it really pushes me. Having talked about this with other members in the group, working together causes all of us to rethink things as simple as the syntax we use in our writing, the metaphors that we fall back on, the imagery that we use. A huge concern for writers is what is cliché and how do you push your craft. What you rely on is different for each person. And with collaborative writing, you have the perspective of so many other people, and you get to learn from other people in a very hands-on way, and also in a way where you're not setting out to try to learn something, you just do.

Lara: *You mentioned something like this in an interview that you did about Sprawl. Your co-poet Conyer Clayton had said something about doing the work without noticing. Something's given to you and you respond. This process fits into the idea of doing, more than just setting the intention to do.*

Manahil: You don't always have to come up with the idea from scratch, which I find is one of the hardest parts about starting any creative project. Trying to visualize what the end product will look gets you caught up in how to get there right from the beginning. And in collaboration, which is a form of play in a lot of ways, you're allowing the journey in the process of creating to inform what the final product will look like, just because you have less control over what the product will look like, and you can't just decide that from the get-go. It has to exist with the trust that you forged with the people that you're creating with and that's a very important part I think of collaborating with other artists—being able to trust the people you're working with. And I think that leads to, one, a good artistic process and, two, a good, finished product.

Veronica: *Bringing back the question about the idea of belonging and putting it together with the idea of response: How does dialogue with others function within that context? Of finding ways to belong within arts community / communities?*

Manahil: Response has been a part of creating the history of art. In the context of even being in a university setting and studying art history, each artistic movement emerged as a response to the

movement prior, to the conditions of the society, and to the other artists you were in dialogue with. With writing as well, each big writer has their influences and who they're writing from.

The poet, and my partner, Liam Burke said that in the context of poetry, you read other work and you have poetry that you want to write like. And the work that you create is between where you are and what you want to create, which I think is just such an interesting way of visualizing this legacy in a way where you're not sitting reproducing what people have done before; you are creating something that is unique, but it's not like it emerged out of nowhere, and it does have a direction.

Veronica: *I like that idea of direction, that space between the legacy and where it's going.*

Manahil: It could even be something where you have something you want to do that is absolutely the opposite of that, and you're going in the opposite direction, but that direction is still there.

Veronica: *Bhanu Kapil describes MONUMENT as "a profound evocation of unbelonging" and asks, "What is it, for example, to 'unbelong' as a mode of observing one's life from a 'vantage point'?" What is it to "unbelong"?*

Manahil: That's such a good philosophical question. And it is funny to have that said about your own writing. I spoke to how belonging is so formative to creating art, but I think that in ways, we're all sometimes in a state of unbelonging, and that can emerge in different ways, whether it's family, or maybe some of those ways of artistic belonging that aren't necessarily there or within a sense of artistic belonging, maybe cultural belonging isn't there. And especially as someone who didn't grow up in Canada, some of the cultural shorthands aren't always shared, and that can create feelings of separation and distance even within the spaces of belonging. And I think that feeling emerges for everyone in different ways whether it's in regard to sexuality, or race, or religion or any of that. Maybe that creative process is an attempt or a gesture towards belonging, or towards bridging whatever gaps there are there.

Veronica: *. . . almost as if the unbelonging is part of the belonging in a way.*

Manahil: They are wrapped up in each other.

Lara: *I found it interesting that you talked about belonging in the art scene in Ottawa. What did belonging mean before you found this collective or earlier, especially in relation to this idea of cultural unbelonging that happens in a new country?*

Manahil: In considering unbelonging, age was a big factor for me. Being an undergraduate, a very early university student accessing publishing spaces with accomplished writers, that gap was one that I think was very, very palpable, and maybe sometimes still is, just because no amount of publication really bridges that age space. I think there are some ways where if unbelonging is constructed in a certain way, changing can be very difficult, even as circumstances change, even with regards to having graduated with both a bachelor's and a master's degree and publishing a book, but that initial feeling of unbelonging, it's still just present.

Veronica: *Because in some ways, you're always at a beginning point of the next thing. So, you're always the amateur going forward, right? Which is probably a good place to be in. For myself, I don't know if I ever want to feel comfortable, fully comfortable in what I'm working on. Because then you're taking it for granted. I think about it as, you know, preparing for the first day of term. You want to have that anticipation and that excitement and that nervousness or else maybe you're not caring about it.*

Manahil: I do think that lack of surety, or lack of footing almost, is where that emerges from. With *MONUMENT*, I felt in a way that once I finished the editing and the book had been published, I don't know if I might return to the subject but in a very different way. I don't know if there are ways to rewrite if we work within the same material or parameters.

Lara: *Your project [Reth aur Reghistan](#) (Sand and Desert) facilitates workshops on folklore and visual storytelling; can you expand on how folklore comes to life through the visual as well as through the statues? How did the project develop, and how does it fit into this conversation on belonging?*

Manahil: The project started out of my sister and my realization that we just didn't know the folk stories from the area we grew up in, even though that's where we spent our childhood and teenage years. And to bring in belonging, we've been talking a lot about more intangible forms of belonging, but with this, it was really thinking about the physical because at the time our grandmother was in Karachi. Even now, we have a house there; we have a physical place that we can belong to when going back in a way that not all immigrants can. That positioned us, I think, in an integrated space to try and find and learn these stories.

And to weave in the second part of your question, folklore is such a live medium, and hearing a story is very different from reading it. That was why it was important to physically go there, and also to physically experience the landscapes where the stories take place. What that brings with that visual element and the five senses: the scent and the feel of the heat. That really elevates an understanding of what figures from the stories have experienced and why they might have made decisions they did or why descriptions and stories emerged the way that they have. So that was

where the project started, and I think folklore is very mutable. It changes based on what the values of the place are at any given time, which I think is just really interesting. There's no sense of canon in folklore. It has a purpose, which is to speak to what a society is like and what the morals are, what the ethical code is in a way, and that's what it does, and it is not afraid to change as needed.

With the sculptural aspect of the project, it was a way for us to translate these oral stories through a medium that we're familiar with and that speaks to us. The sculptures are made using found and foraged material, from our backyard in Mississauga as well as things that we found when we were in Karachi and things from our house that we grew up in. And again, that wraps up this bit of tension between belonging when it comes to our grandmother's old saris or wedding invitations that you received versus things that you are going to find in nature here, dried flowers and sticks and seeds. So, quite literally we were playing with the new home versus the old home, to bring in some of that Diaspora Theory.

Veronica: *Part of what you're saying there that I'm curious about is the idea of these objects as artifact in that you have the play between folklore as an alive medium—as you said, it's growing, it changes and evolves—and then you have these physical objects that are a moment in time. I'm curious about the play between that.*

Manahil: A very interesting thing about working with found materials, especially natural materials, is that they don't have a lot of staying power, especially with leaves. They will be brittle; they will disintegrate. I think that there is a nice, temporary aspect to that, that you don't need to etch something into permanence. When we made those sculptures, we took photographs. And the photographs of those are what is more permanent in a way. Of course, some survived better than others, but they're not necessarily rigid in the way that a monument is, to go back to *MONUMENT*, the book.

Veronica: *I was wondering about that connection.*

My other question had to do with what you said about the idea of being in place. That got me thinking about the embodiment of art because often we think about writing as voice, and maybe writing is a bit physical in that you're using your hands and things that. But then you must start to think about how even writing as a medium becomes embodied when you perform it. So, I'm curious if you have anything to say about body and how body might bring art practices—writing, painting, sculpting—together as well.

Manahil: Writing is an interesting one because the way images and scenes and characters form is through the body of experiences in the world. And this might just be the spaces you navigate naturally, which was the case with *MONUMENT*. I wasn't necessarily going and trying to just

seek out spaces. There was no travel to Agra involved in that. And in fact, the lack of that travel and access formed a pretty significant part of the distance. But I also think about novelists especially who will travel to the places where their stories are set, so that they can bring that bodily experience of being there and use that to build the world that they're creating.

Lara: *I'll move on to the next question: How do you work with and/or against colonial artistic traditions?*

Manahil: I think writing in English automatically forces work into space of colonial artistic traditions. As much as you might want to resist that. I spent a lot of my undergraduate and graduate degrees studying what postcolonial or maybe anticolonial writing would look like and studied and read a lot of that theory. And of course, in an English degree, you are reading the canon and reading the tropes and how they show up. I think working with folklore, even interpreting it through English and seeing how concerns are different is interesting. For example, *Reth aur Reghistan*, which has been the biggest space of working against what a colonial tradition would expect: whereas a lot of folklore and fairy tales from North America and Europe that we grew up hearing – Hansel and Gretel, or Cinderella – have that element of magic in the supernatural, the stories that we found and learned about from Pakistani folklore are very much embedded in realism. And the focus is a lot on the character and qualities of resilience, bravery, and greed. And those are told through different ways and don't have that same Fairy Godmother coming in or a witch. I think that's an interesting way of thinking about what folklore means. It's not necessarily just something that is supernatural or otherworldly. And even working with found and forged materials weaves in a bit of environmental and sustainability practices as well, which I think is tied up with an anticolonial arts practice, just because of the ways environment and colonialism is intertwined. And if colonialism is interested in the preservation and the longevity of an artifact or piece, then working with these materials and understanding and realizing that what we create might not be durable for the next two or five or ten years really exists in a bit of opposition.

Veronica: *Maybe in opposition beyond colonialism, since it's all tied up in colonialism AND capitalism, right? That's what the found objects do in terms of taking art outside of that market.*

Manahil: I think that's why we chose to use found materials. When we used to play together as children, we used to create with things that we found, so for this project we were removing the adult world, the adult self-entrenched in a capitalist world, and trying to bring in that element of being children and really embracing this sense of play.

Veronica: *And that's actually exactly what I was just going to say because I was starting to hear hints that we were going to talk about play. So, play must be something within your practice.*

Manahil: Not to be dramatic with the word usage, but just surviving in a colonial capitalist world, then that art making practice should be something joyful; it should be something that is playful. It shouldn't be a source of stress. I think in as many ways as we can, we should try and have it be in opposition to the expectations that colonial capitalism would have.

Veronica: *Well, even in terms of it becoming a product. Some of what you've been talking about is that idea of things in transition. So, the artwork that's on your wall that isn't necessarily finished, but it's still part of a conversation. It's more about the process than the product itself.*

Manahil: I think the product emerges as a result of the process. Rather than the product being visualized, and the process being just a way to get there.

Lara: *I'm glad you use the word "joy" because that's what I thought of when you said "play." And I wanted to ask what would you say is the affect of belonging? Describing your collective, describing what could be seen as an anti-colonial artistic tradition, where you mentioned this idea of play and joy, would you say those affects also evoke what it means to you to belong, creating this ease in space?*

Manahil: Definitely, it's just funny that capitalism and colonialism have entered the conversation, because they do have to inform our day-to-day, just in how we're going to pay rent and feed ourselves. And I had a thought about this idea of when you're a working writer or artist, you need to produce that product in order to satisfy all of these conditions. Just needing to be able to live in the world makes that reliance on the process so much more difficult. I think that poetry is in a bit of a strange space where it doesn't have that same monetary value. Very few poets will be able to make a living off of writing poetry, and you know that. And so it makes poetry something that is about the process rather than about producing books that will satisfy the conditions of capitalism.

Lara: *I think that is very informative about poetic processes. I want to ask you about this distinction between visual arts and writing. Does visual art entail the same form of control as writing? What does visual art permit or constrict in comparison to writing?*

Manahil: I think firstly, just in terms of what visual art permits is it's not using the form of language that is wrapped up with colonialism. So that gives it some kind of benefit in that sense, but I think in terms of what it constricts is – again, going back to capitalism in a way – just a physical space in which you can create visual art. Where with writing, you don't need a lot of space to be able to write, to set up a canvas, or to set up art materials, there's just a need for a lot more space. I and a lot of artists don't have dedicated studio spaces where you can really create the spaces of joy and play. When my sister and I were making the sculptures for *Reth aur Reghistan*, we did it in two batches: the first one took over our entire living room and our family

was okay with it. And the second time was very early in the 2020 lockdown; we took over the guest room, where we weren't going to have guests. And I think having even these spaces to be accessed is just very fraught. And right now, going back to the question of which medium I am creating in, it often comes down to just the available space for making art and how that influences the mediums that I'm able to use. There are projects that I might want to do, but in terms of the requirements of the physical space, it's not there in the same way that writing can permit.

Lara: *It's an interesting question of space, and the capitalist means to have space that get in the way.*

Manahil: It's like renting a studio and what means do you need for that.

Lara: *Your debut poetry collection MONUMENT plays with temporality, between the monumentalization and perhaps commemoration of a point in time and the ephemeral passage of time; how does putting yourself in conversation with a historical figure, Mughal Empress Mumtaz Mahal, impact your own sense of belonging with history, culture, and legend with Pakistan, Canada, and the world?*

Manahil: Working with Mughal Empress Mumtaz Mahal was interesting. The monument that she is associated with is in India, and the book really emerged from border conflicts between Pakistan and India and what it means to have this history that is kind of a part of you, but that you can't physically access. And again, we're talking about what it means to belong in a physical space, and what spaces you know you are not able to belong in and what questions that brings up. With *MONUMENT*, it was interesting conflating and playing with time and space and in a way rejecting them against the face of this very solid, very permanent-ish monument that is there and draws in so many people from around the world.

It's been interesting, touring with *MONUMENT* and having and doing readings and then having people come up after. And they'll say, "Oh, I've been to the Taj Mahal," and are they asking, "oh, have you been there?" And it's very strange and alienating, or a moment of unbelonging, especially when you have someone who is white Canadian. And what spaces are available to us? Even ones that are so close to you geographically but so far apart in the context of more metaphysical space.

Lara: *It's interesting. I'm Lebanese and I do a lot of research on Palestine, but as Lebanese, I'm not allowed to enter Palestinian territories, so all my research has to be from that distance. It's a strange thing to have a connected history to a place you feel belonging to but are not allowed to visit.*

Manahil: It's very jarring. There are some days where you just go about your life; you don't think about it that much. And then there are moments that will force you back into that reality of it.

Veronica: *I'm curious, and it might not be a fair question in that I supervised the project, but I am curious about how you saw your master's major research project (MRP) working with some of these ideas of temporality and monumentalization.*

Manahil: They were 100% connected because I was doing editing for *MONUMENT* while I was researching and writing for the major research project, and both of them fed into each other a lot. And that idea of ghosts and spirits: I think it was a bit unintentional that both the MRP and *MONUMENT* engage with spirits and ghostly figures in a way. Researching for the MRP gave me much better language to think through what exactly I was doing with *MONUMENT* and how to depict the historical figure of Mumtaz Mahal. In the book, I speak to her and her appearance. Editing the poems in ways where she appears a bit more starkly was really informed by these ideas of what it means to be a ghost in non-western ways or non-western ideas of understanding. Especially with how it appears in Farzana Doctor's [*All Inclusive*](#) where the ghost can't really be defined or termed in any solid ways. We have to approximate it the best we can.

Veronica: *Well, and I was even thinking beyond the connections to ghosts and such; I was thinking about what you're saying in terms of the occupation of space and that ability to be somewhere or not to be somewhere, particularly with Farzana Doctor's text where you have this figure trying to gain a sense of history but not even being positioned within Canada's relationship with that history. She's somewhere else [working at a Mexican all-inclusive resort]. I think I remember you talking about that idea of her navigating her multiple spaces.*

Manahil: That for me comes back around to when you can't access the physical space, what other methods do you use? And in some ways that idea of accessing India, this across the border country where I have family and ancestral roots and doing it through this historical figure.

Veronica: *It's interesting how our conversation has brought time and space together.*

Lara: *I am curious about your work with statues and monuments, both in writing about them and in creating statues in relation to oral storytelling and folklore. What do statues signify for you as an artist; what do monuments say about belonging?*

Manahil: Both statues and monuments, they are ways of etching history or some abstract idea of history into permanence. Whether it's a monument to a person or a monument to a specific event or a civil rights monument, they're interesting because they can be positive or negative. In my MA, in Dr. Winfried Siemerling's class, we talked about monuments a considerable amount.

When I was writing or thinking about *MONUMENT*, my book, and the Taj Mahal, there were also conversations happening in Canada and the US about removing statues of the fathers of Confederation. Even being in Ottawa, living there, and seeing protests against the statues that are on Parliament Hill, against these figures who were important in history but who were also not good people and thinking, what we are memorializing and commemorating? And why is the statue being there more important than the people who are living today? And those things are in such tension with each other, and what draws me towards monuments is that they occupy so many of our public spaces. They're very difficult to ignore in a way. There's one form of art that is sealed off behind gallery walls, for example, and then monuments and statues are open to the public and they're not hidden or gate-kept in the same way. But at the same time, they're very fraught, and you're going to have to contend and reckon with what they symbolize and also what it means for a monument to occupy a public space when it no longer serves a purpose.

Veronica: *How is a book a monument? That's the interesting space that your book occupies. It's both about a monument and yet it is named MONUMENT. So how does a book function as a monument?*

Manahil: Well, it's interesting because the way I stylized the title is with the "N" and "U" scratched out. So it also reads "MOMENT." It's a weird thing to have a book with a title that doesn't really have a way of pronouncing it that fully captures what the intention is. It really does rely on seeing it written down and maybe even reading the book and knowing the monument is a shorthand because there isn't really a way of saying the title otherwise.

In generally, I think books are time capsules in a way, and poetry definitely reflects this, especially confessional poetry, where it captures a moment in a person's life. Even by the time a book is published, that the poet could be in a completely different space, just because of how writing and editing and publishing work.

Veronica: *And also, how the self grows. I'm also curious what you're saying about monuments in terms of how they're part of the public. How does that then connect with the idea that a book too is not hidden away, as we were talking about before? It has that audience. So, in that way, also, it's there to be explored.*

Manahil: It's difficult to talk about what a book in the public is without thinking about CanLit and how small of a space it is. And again, with poetry, readers of poetry and critics of poetry are often also writers of poetry. And which is maybe different from a novel where the reader and the author are completely disconnected, and your reflection and what a book is to you might not ever reach the author. Whereas with poetry in the Canadian literary space, it's really the opposite. And it makes a book being a monument of time a bit more difficult to contend with and to separate the writing that's in front of you with the person who has written it. And I think even of literary

criticism or literary theory and how an analysis of a book also changes and morphs based on just the passage of time, different ideas, and even how an author's conception of their own work changes over time.

Veronica: *Definitely. So maybe with poetry, my saying a book is something in the public is slightly different, because people don't treat it as accessible as some other forms of media of communication.*

Manahil: No, definitely not. Novels are an example: when serving the public, even the author's intent doesn't matter as much. It really is about how it lands with its audience, whereas with poetry, the author's intent is so much easier to find in some ways. And you almost must consider that when thinking about what a book of poetry is trying to do or say.

Lara: *And with that, I'm interested in this idea that there isn't a way of saying the title of your book otherwise. And it makes me curious, what titles did you have in mind before settling on MONUMENT? And then, is the book really a monument of the moment? Is that what we're getting at?*

Manahil: I like that idea of it being a monument of a moment. I went through just a lot of titles. Trying to think of a title of a book is just so difficult. And there's a way where once you have it, it just feels right. But getting there is . . . I mean, what I did was I had the entire manuscript and I was picking out words and writing them down and trying to see and play with them and putting together different configurations. And then the epigraph of the book, that is, "[m]oments are monuments, if caught carved into stone": I just happened to be reading a Phyllis Webb book, and I saw that and I was like: "okay, that's the title!" Initially, I had brackets around the "N" and "U," and it felt a little too soft for what I was wanting to do with a monument where it is a monument with a lot of violence behind it. So, the slash, as opposed to brackets, even that has so much significance.

Veronica: *Because you're doing violence to the monument in a way, right?*

Manahil: And even on the cover, the crumbling down, the letters. It is a lot to actively say and declare that you are asking this monument, which is so famous and popular, to crumble.

Veronica: *Well, and to get at some of the visual aspects of the text: the monument isn't right side up in your collection; it's upside down. I wonder how that puts your reader in relationship with the book, particularly when you might feel the need to turn the book around. Is a reader also encouraged ask, "what's going on here?"? Does the action itself of manipulating the book become part of the story as well?*

Lara: *Now that we're talking about the visual, I'm curious about the colours of the cover. What is the significance of the colours? Because there's violence in the monument, but it's also a very soft and gentle crumbling of a monument. I'm wondering if there is significance in the chosen colours.*

Manahil: Initially, when I was going through the cover design process with my publisher and the designer, Natalie Olson, I had imagined the colour being more blue, just because it's a very local colour. So, it was this same design with blue and yellow, and it had a feeling of sinking to the bottom of an ocean. And it just didn't feel right necessarily. I sent it to some friends who thought it doesn't feel like a reflection of me, and reflecting me was important because in this book, there is so much of me there. The yellow and pink was a suggestion from friends, and I gave that to the designer who came back with these different colors. And the combination felt very right; the pink and yellow for me evokes the hazy sunset or sunrise in Karachi. And while there's this monument that's crumbling down so much of the conversation with Mumtaz Mahal, and also the wish or intention for her, is for her spirit to untether from this monument and to go skywards. So, I think that for me, the colours speak to that intention. There is a lot of violence that's occurring in the book, but to me it's not a violent book necessarily; it's trying to redress some of that violence.

Veronica: *I like what you say there about the sunset and the sunrise because there's a way in which it's about that attempt to end something and maybe to try to begin something.*

Manahil: It also is that belonging and unbelonging. Both are present.

Lara: *We're talking about illustration with your book, but you've also illustrated other books. So what's it like on the other side of this work? You have also illustrated Conyer Clayton's poetry collection [Mitosis](#) (2018); how do someone else's words inspire your art, both visually and literally, as you have also written in response to other author's poems.*

Manahil: Being a writer also helps with that visual response. But I find it's a nice way to approach and look at poetry from a completely different perspective. It's almost a forced shift in perspective. And again, it's a re-approaching of work and being aware of different aspects of a work. A lot of poetry is about sound and lyricism in a lot of ways, but when you're looking at something with the purpose of illustrating it, you are focusing on the visual aspect of it. And illustrating brings that out. It's a fun way of being involved in writing while being able to have that art play.

Lara: *And again, the evocation of play, right? Do you feel you find more of that play with the visual work?*

Manahil: I think it is more present in the visual work, just because with writing, regardless of how much play there can be, you still must think words. Whereas with art, it is a practice; there is a lot more colour and texture. It doesn't involve the brain in the same way.

Veronica: *But it involves the body perhaps. So, I'm thinking about the earrings that you did for MONUMENT, just the physicality of, of trying to do that.*

It's an interesting way to separate yourself out from your own words, your own self, and yet still be able to take words and create something. So essentially, just thinking about the idea that when you're illustrating something, you're able to take yourself outside of your written practice, perhaps, and the self that that involves, and yet, there's still a mode of expression that's going on because in creating something through the visual arts, it's still a form of expression and adding your visual words alongside someone else's. So, in that way, there's another conversation going on.

Manahil: It's not dissimilar to writing and collaboration, where, again, the stakes of the work are removed. And when you're not the primary creator, some of that pressure of the end product is removed. With illustration, it is about the support that is offered to the writing that already exists.

Veronica: . . . *which is interesting because it's a different kind of conversation. It's happening almost after-the-fact in a way, right?*

Manahil: It's in a way like being an interviewer versus being interviewed; when you're the interviewer, you are doing this research and you're coming up with questions and you are laying this groundwork. And when you're being interviewed, you're just filling that in.

Veronica: *You're creating the thing from the groundwork.*

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