

ARTIST STATEMENT // SHAISTA LATIF// HOW I LEARNED TO SERVE TEA

This work is informed and influenced by the sharings and the continued labour of Indigenous, Black and POC communities. My work as an artist is about the margins, for the margins, accessing the center only when it serves a need for my communities. But please don't think I'm expressing some form of saintly altruism. I want to be successful at what I do; however, the parameters of how I measure/ aim/ attain success is also dependent on the successes of my marginalized communities.

My life is unsettled, messy, resilient and adaptive. My practice as an artist is the same, leaving openings for error, accountability and progress while contending with conditions that are imposed upon me and/or chosen through circumstance and sometimes attributed to by choice.

This work is about class, authorship, agency and autonomy but I am no expert. Nor do I wish to occupy a position of expertise. I have no current or future intention to take up a recognizable position of authority in the institution through this work. My role is often temporary (with and without choice) but at its core, it's to encourage stronger possibilities of socio-economic collaborations. In order to do this work, there has to be a willingness to engage with a critical approach to equity by learning how to respond to and work with the revealing paradoxes of inclusion politics. I choose to do so by asking questions.

In high school I had a geography teacher who introduced himself to us as "the benevolent dictator." He—a large white man, standing by the map of the world, sang his proclamation with a confident smirk. I—an Afghan girl, taking in his performance of dominance, recognized his unquestioned assertion. In turn, over the term, we argued and talked and talked some more, with me earning the title of "benevolent interrogator" by my classmates. At 13, I recognized that questioning became a way of seeing and being seen.

My time in the institution is intentionally and unintentionally limited. We have a year. We do not know what will come after the year is completed. We do not know what will come of the year as it is happening but that is okay because it has already begun. I've been struggling with making public the work I find to be vulnerable, confrontational and at times intangible and impossible. I've been questioning my role and function as a displaced person. I've been interrogating, I've been interrogated and welcome interrogation. I think I fuck up all the time. I think I'm a fuck-up but I am lifted by the knowledge and love of my communities. I am reminded that I am not alone and this isn't a representational role for me or a special performance engagement or residency. It's a way of living.

I have been provided a salary of 45k by Why Not Theatre, co-funded by Koffler Centre of the Arts. This salary funds the 20-30 workshops I will be leading, community consultations, the writing of

6 essays with a performance/exhibit of the process at the end of the year. Neither Koffler or Why Not has done something like this before. Neither have I. It is a direct investment that took just over a year and some months to negotiate. During this timeline, I worked minimum wage jobs and small contracts to help keep me afloat and fulfill my role as a caregiver. However, my assertion for direct investment through a salary offering was the only way I could say yes to this partnership. Having experienced countless exploitations of labour, I am no longer willing to go through the system through piecemeal labour. Nor am I going to wait for granting bodies to say yes to me—especially when there are consistent and disheartening statistics that show a severe lack of advancement for working-class people of colour.

In my time as an artist, I have come to recognize that no matter how many acknowledgments you receive, or how many successful projects you create or take part in, your progression as a marginalized artist is limited and is not based on the merit of the work. It is based on the failures of an industry that is far removed from its perfectly-worded mandates.

I respect the work of Koffler and Why Not. We have fostered meaningful relationships over the years. Each have championed my projects without exerting dominance over the ways I create and grow my work. In all relationships, it is natural to encounter some challenges while navigating a partnership, especially when dealing with not only one but two institutions. This is all part of the work too. And how we define that labour is something we have not even begun to scratch the surface of. This work will also be documented and presented through a series of essays:

- 1) The Hostile Field of Representation
- 2) Who Can Afford Metaphor?
- 3) Shaista Latif: A Bad Investment
- 4) 21st Century Proletariat
- 5) Terror to The Table
- 6) A Messy Vitality

Assessing the language of invitation and hosting, and how it translates into action is the foundation of *How I Learned to Serve Tea*. My life is my work. My work is my life. Some people can categorize and separate but most of us who are marginalized can't afford to do so. Sometimes I wonder if my work has had to evolve into critical interrogation out of necessity? If I lived in a decolonized world what would I be making? Who would I be serving? I think we are all capable and deserving of knowing and living ourselves into these answers.

It's difficult to justify certain projects especially with work that has no end product and is challenging in its nature while being led by an artist who has a hard time abiding by the rules of industry conduct. This is not what funders like to support or like to hear. They want some assurance, some certainty, those things we call 'deliverables.' It was not an easy ask on my end and not an easy task to manoeuvre from Why Not & Koffler. There were and are still many conversations about the navigation of this work. What can it do? What is it supposed to do? What does it mean to invest in this work, in this artist? And how do we evaluate its success? And how does the artist without the weight and power of the institution evaluate without the threat of offence? How do I do the work without constantly giving into the feeling of indebtedness or assumed ingratitude from the funders when they interact with me? My communities remind me that we must be indebted to the necessity of the work rather than fixating on managing funder expectations. It is not our role. I'm sorry to say but no, we shouldn't be doing everything.

I am grateful for the transparency in this process and the 'investment.' The malleability of our partnership and the courage it has taken for all of us to say yes and work with the unknowns has been eye-opening. But let us not forget the truth and the reality: I will never possess in equal the resources or the power of these institutions so the risk at the end of the day as marginalized artists will always be greater on our part than theirs. The institutions will have their spaces and their resources and we will be returned to the margins once again. I do not know what it means to be an investment and what the expectation of the return is by Koffler and Why Not. They often warmly remind me that they are here to help me do my work. I believe them. I trust the intention. Now we have to simply and complicatedly move through the actions. So I am choosing to not overtly thank Koffler and Why Not for their 'risk-taking' because I feel that is their responsibility as artistic institutions and they can afford to do so. But I can acknowledge with gratitude that they are at the forefront of pushing for and provoking a creation of new models of thinking and engagement—models necessary for the lifting of marginalized voices.

Ultimately, I hope this partnership gives me further insight into my practice and how to make this industry accessible for working-class artists of colour. I also want to acknowledge Why Not and Koffler for the immeasurable access and 'legitimacy' they have given me through this alignment. In a society that often discounts the value of critical dialogue and discourse created and shared by people of colour, this alignment is worth the 'price.'

The salary given is the minimum I had requested to help me survive as a caregiver, fulfill my civic responsibilities, be present for my communities and loved ones while acknowledging with humility that I live and strive on stolen land. At the end of the year, I may be back to bagging groceries or barbacking or hosting. This thought does not terrify me since it is the norm for artists like me who make due out of a lack of sustained opportunity.

A hyphenated existence, self-taught and community-educated without post-secondary accreditation, I bring my lived experiences to spaces through the act of testimony and analysis. My function is to disrupt with care and criticality what is often not named out of discomfort, shame and fear. Working-class, Afghan, Queer, survivor, formerly homeless, a child of activist refugees and raised in TCHC communities, I have come to accept that there is no escape or masking of the traumas we've endured as displaced peoples. However, I believe our solidarity does not come from despair and suffering but is created from our shared methods of resilience and survival. If we absent ourselves and our relationships to power, we can become perpetrators of divide and oppression...and thus an extension of the ongoing violence. *How I Learned to Serve Tea* is a call to action.