

Reflecting on Our Marfa, Texas Intensive



Director Sahar Assaf leading a group voice exercise.

What happened when people with aphasia, their care partners, a veteran stage director, a leading stroke and aphasia specialist, performing arts scholars, and theatre, dance, and speech-language pathology students all gathered in the artsy, quirky desert town of Marfa, Texas, for almost two weeks at the height of the summer?

What happened was theatrical, therapeutic, inspiring, and innovative. In short, it was extraordinary. Our aphasic theatre intensive workshop created a space to learn, take risks, discover, and evolve. A seemingly disparate group of people came together with a spirit of trust and generosity to build something visionary and new.



Silk Road Rising's Jamil Khoury (left) and Malik Gillani (right)

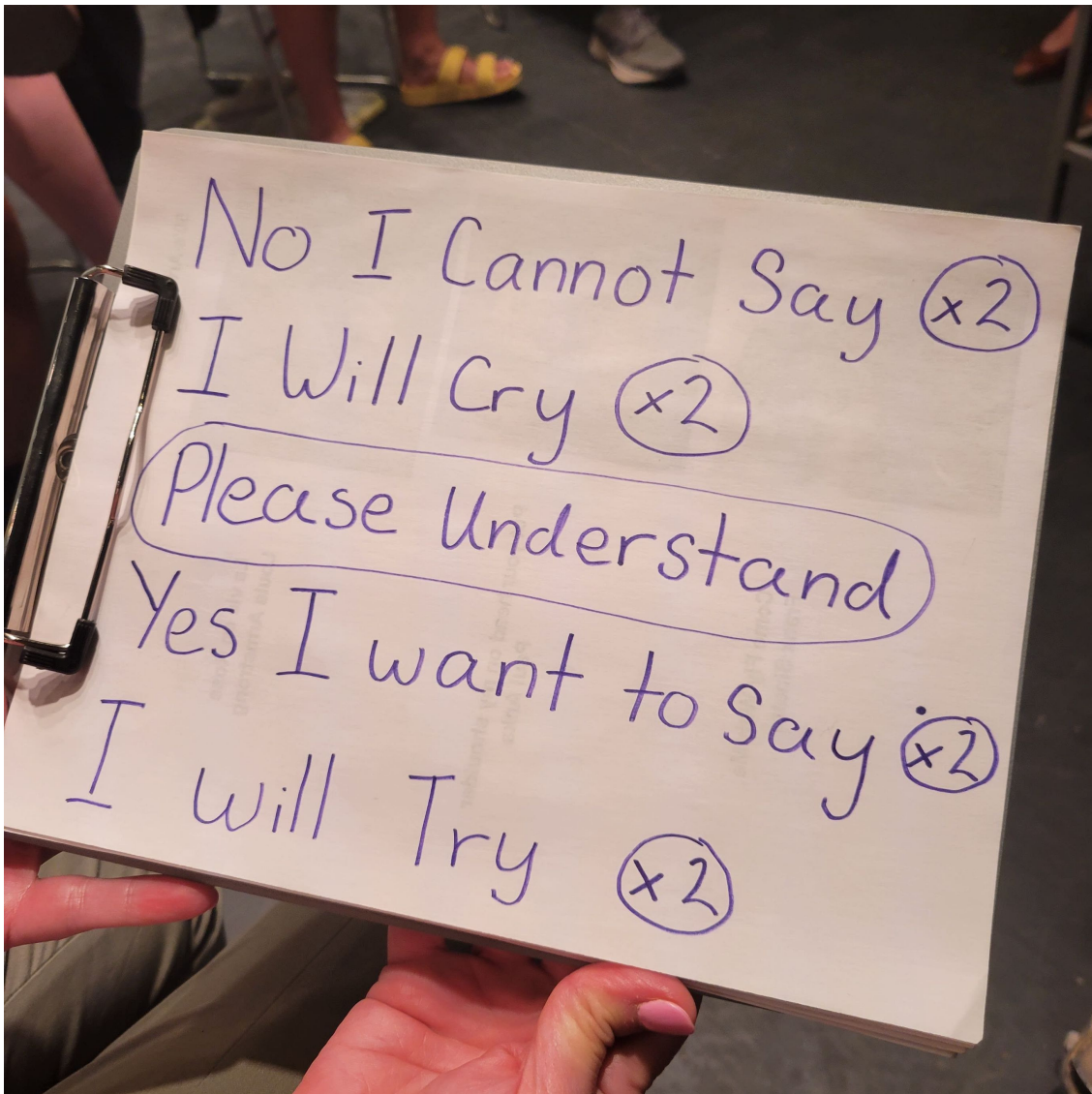
As many of you know, Silk Road Rising's Founding Co-Executive Artistic Directors, Malik Gillani and Jamil Khoury, have been living with aphasia since Malik suffered a stroke in the fall of 2019. That Malik and Jamil would turn to storytelling to bolster Malik's recovery probably comes as no surprise. But it is the relationships they've developed along the way that make their personal story relevant to so many others who are living with aphasia and the aftereffects of stroke and traumatic brain injury.

Malik and Jamil first founded this company to help expand the representation of Silk Road communities and to celebrate our myriad cultures. Throughout Malik's recovery journey, they've once again experienced an absence of diverse stories, this time within aphasia recovery circles.



Malik joins a Texas Tech University dance student (center) and a theatre student (right) in an aspirational moment.

Our partnerships with Texas Tech University's Talkington College of Visual and Performing Arts and the Stroke and Aphasia Recovery (STAR) program at TTU's Health Sciences Center have planted the seeds for an emerging new genre that we're calling Aphasic Theatre; theatre by and about people with aphasia, and for all of us confronting neurohealth and the well-being of our loved ones.



A verse from an original song composed during the workshop.

Silk Road Rising is embarking on a project that capitalizes on what we do best; we're using theatre to amplify the voices of BIPOC people living with aphasia. And we're applying our signature playwright-protagonist rule to this process, with Malik as a central character, actor, and dramaturg.

Adding to this dynamic mix, we're collaborating with Sahar Assaf (Executive Artistic Director of San Francisco's Golden Thread Productions) as director and deviser.

Our plan is to produce the World Premiere of a full-length stage play titled *The Art of Aphasia* in Chicago in 2026 and to use the coming years to explore, experiment, and construct a riveting narrative.

Who knew that theatre history and medical history would be made in Marfa, Texas in the heat of the summer?



The full group poses in front of the Crowley Theater in Marfa, Texas.

Traveling the Arab World Without Ever Leaving Your Seat



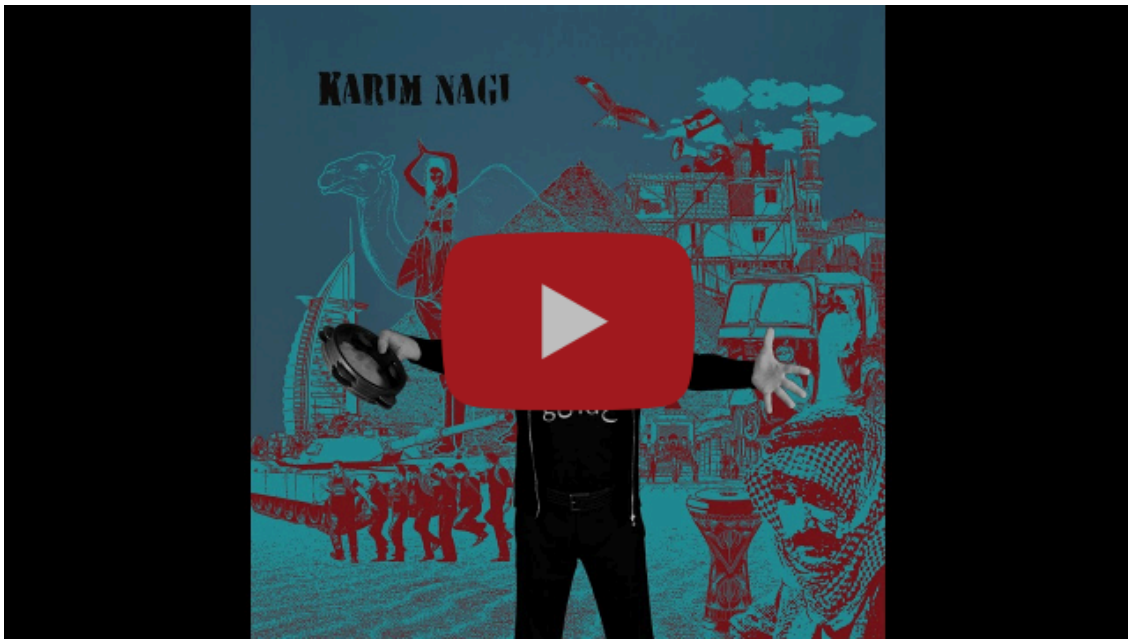
Silk Road Rising co-produced the World Premiere of Karim Nagi's *Detour Guide* in 2019 with Stage Left Theatre, directed by Anna C. Bahow.

Written and performed by Karim Nagi, *Detour Guide* was a one-man musical co-produced in 2019 with Stage Left Theatre and directed by Anna C. Bahow. The play took us on an alternative tour of the Arab World and Arab America. Using lyrics, percussion, and an urban soundscape, master storyteller and musician Karim Nagi guided us through a social and political labyrinth, extolling the virtues of revolution, immigration, and hummus along the way.



Karim continues to mesmerize audiences with *Detour Guide*, most recently in Boston this past spring.

Treat yourself to the *Detour Guide* soundtrack below!



The Thank You Corner

Thank you for accompanying us on a journey to innovate new models of artmaking so that our families and friends with disabilities can hear their stories told.

thank you
thank you
thank you



THE POLY CULTURALIST

A PUBLICATION OF POLY CULTURAL INSTITUTE

Our latest offering of *The Polyculturalist* features Mohamedreza Babae, Iranian-born Visiting Professor of History, Theory, & Literature at Indiana University, and a member of Polycultural Institute's Advisory Council.

Gaming as Culture-Making with Mohamedreza Babae

This interview was conducted on May 25, 2023, by Silk Road Rising's Dr. Tasneem Mandviwala.

Tasneem: You have experience designing digital and board games. How can the fun and entertaining aspects of gaming advance polyculturalism?



Mohamedreza: Polyculturalism takes cultures as always evolving and in an ongoing exchange with each other. These exchanges happen in a variety of contexts, and gaming is one of them. Though there's no consensus on how we can define gaming and playing, we can confidently say people play games in practically every culture. Playing a game is a wonderful opportunity to interact with a different culture and exchange values, beliefs, and skills in an entertaining way. Games are also often evolving and responding to the needs of a community, which is why we get to see different versions of the same game in different parts of the world. A good example is "Categories," a game that follows different rules in the US compared to how people play it in

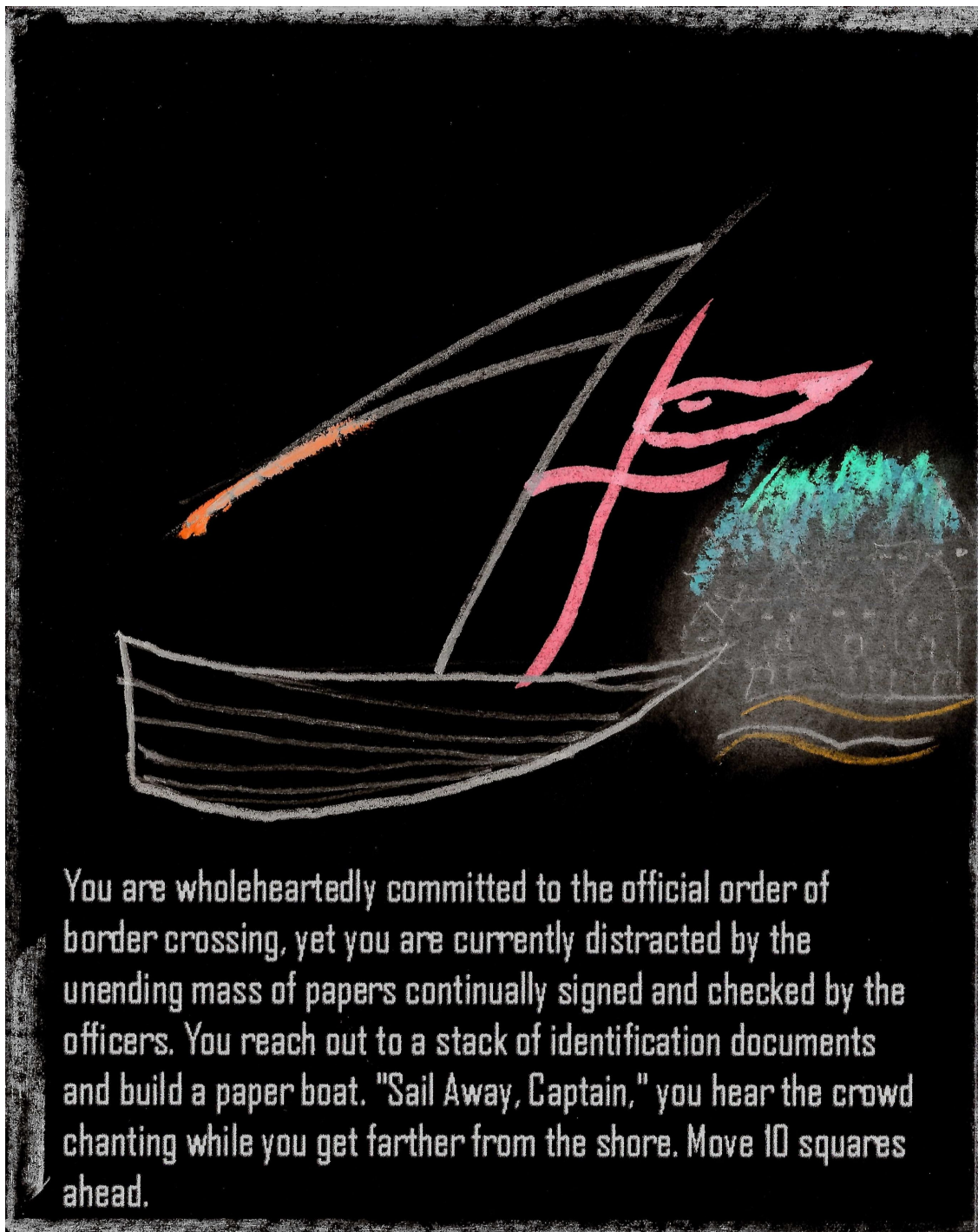
Iran. It's really fascinating to think about why specific modifications are made to game mechanics in different cultures. Not only are games products of a culture that can enter other cultures, but gaming is also a culture-making practice that refuses stagnation and rigid categorization.



Tasneem: How has your work in theatre allowed you to explore and expand your own questions pertaining to Iranian identity and diaspora?

Mohamedreza: At the heart of this question is the notion of performance. When I moved to the US from Iran and was assigned the label of "immigrant"; I had to ask myself important questions: How am I performing my immigrant identity? How are normative immigrant expectations performed on me? This led me to explore how performance studies can help make more sense of immigrant

experiences, a line of inquiry that continues to this day in my work. My adapted diasporic identity also invites self-reflection on my native identity in Iran. For instance, after living in the US, I became more aware of my Azeri ethnicity and how I suppressed it under the pressure of Persian nationalism. I was grappling with this when I designed a landscape adaptation of *Hamlet* a few years ago that gave spectators options of experiencing the production through Persian and/or English epic canons. To me, this performance was an attempt to understand and encourage others to think about where we belong in this vast world and where our belongings are accepted and canonized.



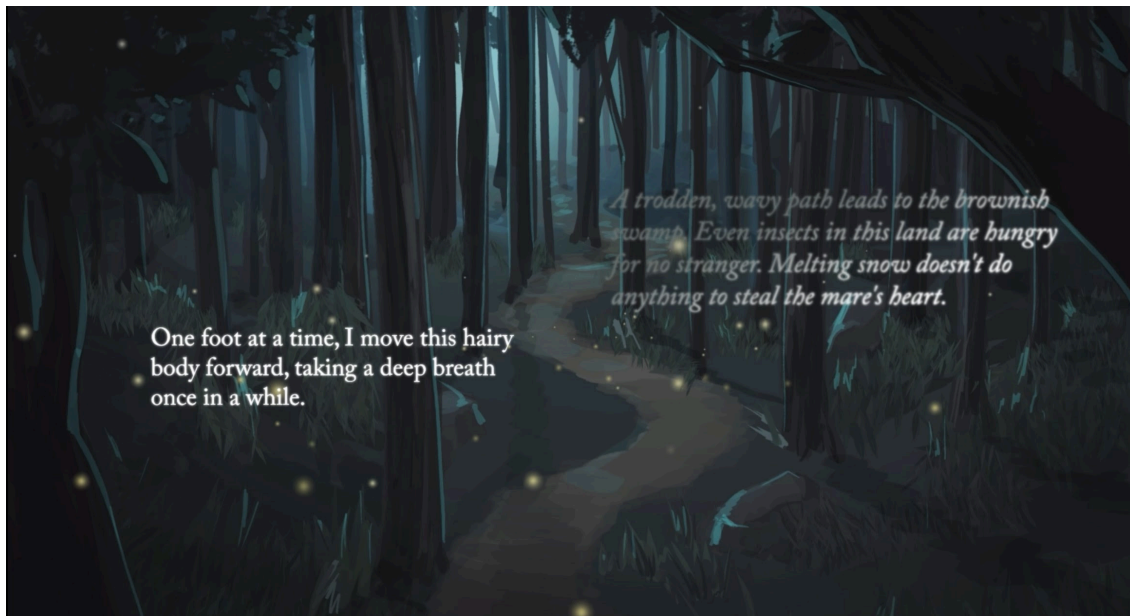
You are wholeheartedly committed to the official order of border crossing, yet you are currently distracted by the unending mass of papers continually signed and checked by the officers. You reach out to a stack of identification documents and build a paper boat. "Sail Away, Captain," you hear the crowd chanting while you get farther from the shore. Move 10 squares ahead.

A playing card in "Celestial Borders," a board game about border crossing at airports. Designed and written by Mohamadreza. Chicago, IL, 2021.

Tasneem: In what ways can a multidisciplinary artist help us examine and redefine the concept of a border?

Mohamedreza: I think terms like multidisciplinary are overused in the arts, and they often run the danger of masquerading touristic excursions in different fields as specialized training. I am guilty of this in the past, which is why I've reconsidered my stance on the topic.

However, if done correctly, approaching a subject from different angles can help produce a more nuanced image. I think honesty can go a long way here. Are we doing interdisciplinary work because that's what the market wants, or are we doing it because we're facing a problem that cannot be fully explored within a singular field? I myself moved from a traditional way of staging stories to digital artmaking because of accessibility. Many immigrants don't have the privilege of being in the same space with others. Here, borders as physical obstacles and markers of national sovereignty play a crucial role. So I took a cautious digital turn in my work to make sure that I can share my art with anyone who has internet access.

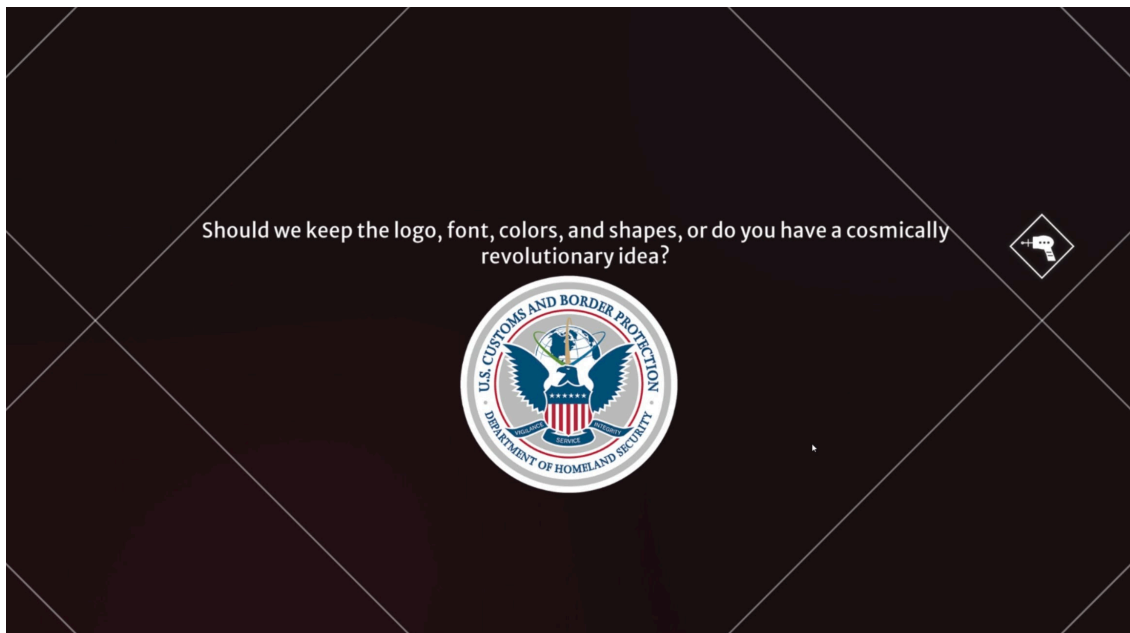


A screenshot of "Global (re)Entry," a 2D game/multimedia installation. Designed and written by Mohamadreza. Santa Cruz, CA, 2022.

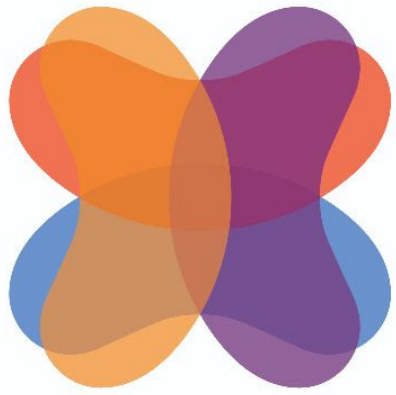
Tasneem: Please tell us a story of a time when someone surprised you because they supported you or demonstrated compassion towards you even though you expected otherwise.

Mohamedreza: In 2016, I was living in a conservative part of Ohio and had to drive to Cleveland for a conference, but my car broke down on the highway. When the tow truck arrived, I noticed that the driver wore a MAGA hat, and that made me really anxious. Here's the surprise: the driver approached me courteously, expressed his compassion about my situation, and engaged in a culturally curious but not intrusive

conversation with me on the ride to a nearby repair shop. He even told me that he knows that the mainstream media portrays Iran and the Middle East unfairly, and people should really do their own research. Suddenly, I realized I was in a car with someone who I was supposed to hate and fear, particularly because of his political affiliation, but instead, I was actually enjoying engaging in dialogue with a human being and looking beyond his politics. This was obviously a brief encounter, and I couldn't get to know this person and his entire belief system, but the entire experience reminded me that there is more to humans than their political orientation.



A scene from the cutscene that players can unlock in "Global (re)Entry."



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