

**TAPE/TALK: ACTS OF ENGAGEMENT
DERYA AKAY AND TAIRONE BASTIEN**

[Music swells: twinkling sounds build.]

DERYA AKAY [DA]: I've been wanting to kind of bring in this like conversation to my family about like what kind of things I want to access which is like matriarchal knowledge and making it work to kind of like solidify it in some ways, because I don't really know how else to like have conversations. I just have to turn them into an artwork.

[Low notes linger and pulse in the background.]

TAIRONE BASTIEN [TB]: This is the 2022 Toronto Biennial of Art Podcast Series: "Tape/Talk: Acts of Engagement".

My name is Tairone Bastien. I'm one of the curators for the 2019 and 2022 editions of the Toronto Biennial of Art. For the last instalment, in 2022, I had the pleasure of working with Turkish-born and Vancouver-based artist Derya Akay, who was commissioned to produce a new work for the exhibition.

Derya is a diasporic trans Turkish person and a first-generation settler in Canada. They trace their ancestry to Adana, Anatolia, where for generations, their family has farmed and manufactured textiles and clothing.

[Low sizzling sound.] Food is an important part of Derya's practice. And so when I met up with them in Vancouver in early January, three months before the opening of the Biennial, we decided to record a conversation over a home cooked meal.

[Low chattering, sound of spoon hitting bowl, egg cracking, and rustling.] When I arrived at Derya's home on a cold, rainy Sunday morning, I encountered a kitchen table overflowing with food stuffs. Our meal that day would consist of Anatolian delicacies. Sarımsaklı Köft: button-sized dumplings made of bulgar, semolina, and garlic tomato sauce. Börek: a delicate feta pastry. And Atom: a deceptively simple yet delicious dessert of persimmons, bananas, honey, and walnuts.

TB: So the table is laid out with tomatoes. You've got flour in there. What is this?

DA: Flour, semolina, and pepper paste. And I'm adding bulgar to it, which is basically just like three types of wheat. Lots of wheat. ***[Clattering and mixing, spoon hitting the bowl repeatedly.]***

TB: Lots of wheat.

DA: It's wheat culture! ***[Clattering increases. Low grinding and crinkling.]***

TB: Do...do you have a hard time finding ingredients for Turkish food in Vancouver?

DA: Not anymore, really. It's been getting really better. And there's a lot of Turkish people opening food import businesses. **(TB: Yeah.)**

It feels like a recent kind of...**[clunking of dishes]** endeavour. People have figured out that that makes some money. **(TB: Right.) [faucet running]** I would say like 15 years ago: yes. But... my biggest can't-find was like yufka, which is the type of dough this is. Since a month ago, i've been seeing it places **[whisper]** and i'm like oh my fucking god yes. Like before you could—I was just able to use phyllo, phyllo dough.

TB: You would make do with something else.

DA: Yeah! And that worked but it was really thin. So that's better for baklava and stuff, **(TB: Right)** where you want it to be extra thin. **(TB: Right)** With börek you want it to be a bit bigger so that it like absorbs the juices and is a bit more meaty in your mouth. **(TB: Yeah, yeah.)**

[Rustling and breaking of garlic peels.]

TB: So who is the best cook in your family amongst your relatives? Or is that political—is that a political? **[chuckle]**

DA: It is political. **(TB: [laughs])** I think...my auntie...I mean, I don't know. Or they each made something... It's like, I can't. I'll just say my auntie but I won't say which one. **[laughs]**

TB: Everyone probably makes one thing or a couple of things that are great—

DA: It's—It's almost more about like...like the food is good at everybody's, but how you host is different. **(TB: Ohhhhh)**

I think that's maybe a thing that I can kind of pick favourites of. Like, I mean also like giving respect to the eldest, like my great grandmother, who was my mom's mom's mom. Up until I was like 16 or 17 when I moved here, I was going to her house like—I don't know—at least once a week. And during the religious celebrations especially, you go to the eldest first. And her kitchen, her house, I mean, there was like a whole team of people that cooked in her kitchen. She just sat on a chair and like smoked cigarettes all day. And she wasn't mobile by the last ten years.

[Low warbling sound growing and reverberating.]

TB: Derya's artwork often explores their matriarchal lineages. Weaving together personal memories and familial histories with larger cultural and geopolitical narratives. For the 2022 Biennial, Derya produced *Queer Dowry*, a deeply researched and personal work that emerges from Derya's interest in matriarchal ancestry and the knowledge is passed down through material practices—weaving together stories of textiles, family bonds, food, and shifting geographies.

Installed at the Small Arms Inspection Building—a former munitions factory active in World War II, and now a community arts center—*Queer Dowry* consists of pattern textiles and clothes hung on laundry lines in the gallery. On one wall is a large wooden cabinet, its doors left open and decorated with painted flowers. The shells of the cabinet are bursting with cookware and food stuffs which Derya used during the exhibition for communal meals, programmed with local queer and Muslim community groups. In another corner of the installation sits a large blue mobile seller's cart on three wheels. The kind of cart a street seller uses to collect materials and resell them. A kind of donation box and recycle centre inside of it is piled a sack of fresh cotton bags of wheat, dried flowers and books.

**TORONTO
BIENNIAL
OF ART**

[Punchy and whimsical piano number playing, quiets.]

TB: The title of the work refers to the practice of dowry giving, which in Anatolia tradition, usually consists of textiles, towels, sheets, blankets, and tablecloths, either handmade by mothers and the women in a family, or more often nowadays purchased and gifted to a future bride. In collecting the materials for this work, Derya has essentially created their own dowry, querying, a heteronormative tradition and ceremony that reinforces gender binaries. While we continued prepping food for our meal, Derya shared stories of the dowry practice in their own family **[low whisking sound emerges]** and the significance of the knowledge and things they collected for this work.

DA: We went through a lot of things with my mom, like things that she owns that were a part of her dowry, because this project is called Queer Dowry. **(TB: Right.)**

I've been wanting to kind of bring in this like conversation to my family about like what kind of things I want to access which is like matriarchal knowledge and making it work to kind of like solidify it in some ways, because I don't really know how else to like have conversations. I just have to turn them into an artwork. **(TB: Sure.)**

But in the same way that like I wanted to like learn how to make the food, of my family and how without making it, if they could see me as their daughter. Then it would, I think be very different from childhood on...then I would have access to different kinds of—of knowledge. But, because it's not like that, I had found the need to kind of like professionalise it. **(TB: Mm-hmm)**

So that I kind of avoid having the conversation of telling them I'm trans and also like telling them that I'm interested in—in that knowledge. **(TB: Yeah.)**

So in some ways, art is—

TB: A conduit?

DA: Or some sort of like a symbolizer of something or like its a beard also [laughs] in some ways.

TB: But can you tell me like the dowry system, like, what is that in Turkey? **[low hum]**

DA: A lot of like textiles. **(TB: Okay.)** So there's things that are gifted and there's things that are bought. So it's about making a home. As far as the traditional dowry that like comes in a box—like in a chest—is like lots of towels. Like things you need in your home...it's about like making a home. So in some ways it's similar to like a bridal shower or something. **(TB: Yeah.)**

So I think maybe now here it's kind of...people are choosing things and like having a good wishlist or something. But from what I understand, what was in my mom's was...she was like, it's a lot of tacky stuff that you don't want, like polyester lace curtains and like towels with like lots of over embroidery. So if you have a certain kind of taste, sometimes it doesn't fit.

TB: Yeah. So it's not inherited heirlooms?

**TORONTO
BIENNIAL
OF ART**

DA: Some of it is. (**TB:** Okay.) So it depends, it depends. I think about what your family can access. (**TB:** Okay.)

There are things in my mother's dowry that were from my grandmother's dowry. So like, porcelain wear for example, things that were kind of harder to obtain in Turkey that were before a kind of more disposable economy. Essentially so it would be like silverware and porcelain ware. That would be from great grandmother to grandmother if somebody was like able to purchase it at one point, then it would kind of be passed down because it's—it's valuable and it's durable. Yeah. As long as you take good care of it. So there's tableware like literally porcelain. But like sets of—of porcelain things and there is silverware of forks and knives, et cetera. And then there's a lot of textiles for domestic use and also kind of like rugs, but there's like certain things that are like...yeah. More heirlooms. Like one rug in my family that I know is from my...just mom's mom's mom's mom, basically like this rug that's been...finally to my mom I could be—I wanted to be like...I want that rug [laughs].

[Low warbling sound growing and reverberating.]

TB: As Derya and I continued prepping the food crumbling, feta, and shaping the kofta with our hands. They shared stories of their family's business in manufacturing, cotton textiles, and its connection to a larger narrative of industrialised farming in Anatolia. Which has played an outsized role in the global economy since the 19th century. Derya's parents were textile manufacturers and their mother is an artist. Their family has worked in the Turkish textile industry for generations. As we finished preparing the meal, Derya reflected on their regular trips back to their family and the evidence they saw of changes to local cultures and landscapes.

[Music fades.]

DA: I didn't really know when the cotton harvest was. The fields were mostly already harvested. When we would go on these drives to like look at the, cotton fields, all the ground, like all around the roads were just like scattered cotton from the trucks and stuff—

TB: Like it had blown across? Oh wow—

DA: Yeah, exactly. And you would see it on the trucks too...like just like cotton was blowing. And I mean, I kind of knew this and my grandma kind of reminded me that it's also another economy of like, it's the gleaners essentially. So there is a second kind of economy of like picking all of the cotton that's like accumulated on the thorns of different roadsides essentially. (**TB:** Really. Wow.) and then like processing that and—

TB: So nothing really goes to waste. It's like even the stuff that blows away gets caught up.

DA: I mean, it's because the economy is pretty bad.

DA: I think people have been growing cotton since like the 15th century in Anatolia or like maybe even longer, but even maybe people can look at examples of it in the 15th century. Right.

TB: It's kinda the beginnings of globalization.

DA: Yeah. But that's about like personal use as far as I understand, it's not on kind of like an industrial-capital scale, I would say.

TB: So cotton starts to be grown and then, but cotton being used in like textiles and stuff like that, does that start around this time as well? Or does that begin before industrialization or farm?

DA: I mean, I think there is always, the history of textile, I think wool is used more.

TB: More wool. The right. Cause it would've been herders—

DA: Yeah, exactly. And lots of weavers and lots of, kind of like spinning from—from wool. But from what I—people were also using cotton maybe. Okay. Cotton...it's a bit less versatile essentially and like wool is stronger and it's also—it's warmer. Yeah, and it absorbs way more water and like it doesn't get you sick, essentially. I think wool can absorb up to 50% of its weight of—of water. And when you're wearing wool, if you get wet, it still keeps you warm. Whereas with cotton, if you are wearing cotton and you get wet, it will make you cold. So wool socks. In the rainy days, they...it will always like...even if it gets wet, it's still warm. Yeah. But as far as I think there is kind of a long history of textiles. But cotton, from what I understand is industrialized easier. And I mean, it requires a lot of labour.

TB: It's crazy that cotton, which it's so—it's so difficult if they think about like how it's harvested. Yeah. But it was because of slave labor that it was possible.

DA: Yeah, from what I understand it just makes a lot of people rich.

[Music wells with melodic synthesised hum.]

TB: As Derya and I finished the prep work and were clearing and setting the table to eat, they remembered their grandmother's kitchen and commented on how these recipes and others like them require many hands. It is the passing on of knowledge, through shared labour of how to feed and provide for a family and a community.

Derya's work seeks to not only examine these materials and cultural traditions and weave them into their artwork, but to also upend and question them. To find in them the ability to nurture and find meaning within chosen families that are integral to the survivors of Queer and Trans people today.

[Musical chanting rises then fades into the sound of low sizzling on a frying pan. Background chatter: DA: Do you want to peel some garlic? / TB: Sure. / DA: It's just over there...]

TBA: Thank you for tuning into this episode of Tape/Talk: Acts of Engagement. To learn more about the artists, works, and sites mentioned in this episode, and to access a transcript, visit torontobiennial.org.

Tape/Talk: Acts of Engagement was produced for the Toronto Biennial of Art by Roxanne Fernandes in collaboration with Katie Jensen and Ren Bangert of Vocal Fry Studios. Music is by Rosina Kazi and Nicolas Murray of LAL.

[Musical chanting and sounds fade.]

**TORONTO
BIENNIAL
OF ART**