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# “Let me LOOK at you:” Post-9/11 Representational Imperative & Muslim* Refusal

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

by

Misha Choudhry

June 2024

Dissertation Committee:
Dr. David Lloyd, Chairperson
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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

"Let me LOOK at you:" Post-9/11 Representational Imperative
& Muslim* Refusal

by

Misha Choudhry

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in English
University of California, Riverside, June 2024
Dr. David Lloyd, Chairperson

*"Let Me LOOK at You:" The Post-9/11 Representational Imperative & Muslim* Refusal* argues that the War on Terror produces hegemonic notions of Muslim American identity in order to contain anti-imperialist critique. My dissertation makes an intervention in Critical Muslim Studies by articulating how gendered racialization works to depoliticize "the Muslim" within US imperial ideology. In addition to demonstrating how the post-9/11 representational imperative functions, I consider how Muslim women and queer Muslim poets and performance artists mobilize form to reject recognition by the settler-imperialist state. By looking at the work of poets and performance artists Naomi Shihab-Nye, Solmaz Sharif, Safia Elhillo, Fatimah Asghar, Andrea Abi-Karam, Arshia Fatima Haq, and more, my project asks: what kind of ethics of care emerges when Muslim poets and performance artists betray the impulse for representation? *Post-9/11 Representational Imperative & Muslim* Refusal* works alongside the poetry and performance of women and queer people caught under the post-9/11 spotlight of "the Muslim" to understand how they language a world beyond coloniality and the US imperial project it engenders.

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## Introduction

In early September 2001, I was a child living in a New Jersey suburb about twenty-five miles from Lower Manhattan. I never thought about what it meant to be Muslim in the United States until my parents responded to the paranoid Islamophobia of the days immediately after 9/11 by instructing me to say I was "Indian if anyone asked." On top of my already tenuous understanding of how being Pakistani made us different from our Indian neighbors, I was presented with what felt like a new way I was not the same as my classmates. My parents, counting on what they assumed was the ignorance of the Americans around us, responded by making sure I kept my head down.

While I suddenly felt out of place in school, most of the people at the mosque my sister and I were shuffled off to for religious classes every Sunday were also Pakistani. One day, when a Black girl joined the small group of seven year olds I was placed in, I watched as other kids asked her if her family were converts all day. By the time the afternoon prayer rolled around, she was exasperated at having to explain that no, they were not converts, and that she's been Muslim for her entire life.

I start with these anecdotes in an effort to demonstrate the slipperiness of Muslim identity in the United States. In *Orientalism,* Edward Said describes his study of Orientalism as "an attempt to inventory the traces upon me."[1] In a similar vein, *"Let me LOOK at you:" Post-9/11 Representational Imperative and Muslim** *Refusal* is an

[1] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Pantheon Books, 1978), 25.

attempt to inventory the traces of empire that punctuate Muslim literary and cultural production in the US after the War on Terror.

By close reading lyric poetry, historicizing the formation of the "Muslim American" via anthologies, and collecting an oral history of the queer SWANA/South Asian LA-based performance and party space Discostan, I inventory the traces of empire evident through the post-9/11 imperative to represent a coherent and stable Muslim American identity. Moreover, I explore the potential of thinking beyond the limitations of Western legibility and the pressure to be a good citizen of the settler-imperialist state. The first part of this dissertation's title, "Let me LOOK at you," comes from the titular poem of Solmaz Sharif's first poetry collection, *Look.* In this quote, the speaker demands to flip the imperialist gaze on its head and *look* at empire while rejecting the need for its recognition. By tracing Muslim* literature, performance art, and media that insists upon this critical distance from Western legibility, I hope to demonstrate the potential of what is made possible when we — here as in Muslims who refuse the West as savior or cop — reject the terms of engagement that deny us dignity.

**Race & Islam in the United States**

Often, the reality of the largely Black history of Islam in the so-called United States is obscured by the racialization of Muslims as ambiguously brown, especially after 9/11. This contradiction reminds us that "the Muslim" is a slippery figure in the US.

Thus, this project understands the figure of the "Muslim American" as an ever-evolving religio-racial formation.

My understanding of this religio-racial formation in and in relation to the United States is informed by scholarship that addresses a wide range of concerns, including the longue durée of religion and racial formation in the West, the primarily Black history of Islam in the United States, the emergence of the "Muslim terrorist" in the US imagination in the 1970s, the increased surveillance of Muslim communities and those with perceived proximity to terrorism post-9/11, and the gendered racialization of Muslims that is reified through the imperialist myth that the War on Terror is in part a war against Muslim misogyny and homophobia.

I begin with the understanding that the racialization of Islam in the West finds its roots in Medieval Christendom. As Sophia Arjana writes in her genealogy of Muslim monsters, Muslims were positioned as Medieval Europe's constitutive other to demarcate the boundaries of Christendom.[2] However, as Arjana explains, Muslim monsters in Medieval art were often depicted with dark skin, reflecting European anxieties around Muslims and Africans. Thus, in the earliest European depictions of Muslims, racial taxonomies come second to religious differences. Arjana goes on to explain that with the rise of the Ottoman Empire, the "Turk" emerges as a figure distinct from Black Muslims, although both are figured as enemies to European Christendom.[3] While Arjana's work focuses on Europe, her genealogy of Muslims as monstrous, and therefore, non-human is

[2] Sophia Arjana, *Muslims in the Western Imagination* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 21.
[3] Arjana, 58-67.

an instructive precursor to Sylvia Wynter's theorization of the overrepresentation of "Man." As Wynter notes, race subsumes religion as the defining characteristic of Man in the "New World," as the colonization of the Americas transforms the Man from the religious subject of the Church to "the political subject of the state."[4] Wynter also writes that Blackness is made to occupy the "nadir" rung of humanity, which legitimizes the subordination of the land and non-white people via colonization.[5] Thus, as anti-Blackness becomes foundational to the modern state, "the Muslim" remains an intentionally slippery category in the West.

Junaid Rana further demonstrates this slipperiness when he writes about how Catholic missionaries from Spain articulated an anti-Black racism that associated Islam with North and West Africans, or Moors. He writes that this configuration, along with racial differences being encapsulated through religious differences, led to a conflation of Indigenous peoples in the Americas with Muslims, as both were non-Christian, and therefore considered, "barbaric, depraved, immoral, and sexually deviant."[6] In tracing the figure of "the Indian Queen," Shaista Patel addresses this explicitly by arguing that the Moor, as "Europe's Muslim Other," functions as "a map of often willfully imprecise associations" that were projected onto Indigenous peoples in the "New World."[7] In recounting these various histories of religion and racialization, my goal is not to map out

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[4] Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation--An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 265.
[5] Wynter, 267.
[6] Junaid Rana, *Terrifying Muslims: Race and Labor in the South Asian Diaspora* (Duke University Press, 2011), 38.
[7] Shaista Patel, "The 'Indian Queen' of the four continents: tracing the 'undifferentiated Indian' through Europe's encounters with Muslims, anti-Blackness, and the conquest of the 'New World,'" *Cultural Studies* 33, no.3 (2019): 417.

a precise history of "the Muslim" in the West. Instead, it is to demonstrate how the slipperiness of who is considered "the Muslim other" has a long history. Moreover, this slipperiness is further complicated by the colonization of the Americas.

With respect to the history of Islam in the United States, the vast majority of Muslims before the 1960s were Black. As Richard Brent Turner writes, the first Muslims in North America were enslaved Africans. Turner explains that for these enslaved Muslims, preserving their faith practices meant defying the brutality of chattel slavery, which sought to destroy their ability to practice Islam or engage in any cultural practices.[8] While the histories of enslaved Muslims are often lost in the archives of chattel slavery, Ashon Crawley speaks to their enduring legacy when he links shouting traditions in Black Pentecostalism to enslaved Muslims on the Georgia and South Carolinian seacoasts; Crawley argues that enslaved Black Muslims articulated faith as a practice of sociality.[9] This collective orientation to faith practices echoes Sherman Jackson's theorization of Black Religion, which he argues is "a pragmatic, folk-oriented, holy protest against anti-black racism." Jackson argues that Black Muslim movements in the United States, from the Moorish Science Temple of America to the Nation of Islam, conferred a sense of ownership of Islam to Blackamericans, to use his term.[10] However, the influx of Arab and South Asian Muslims after the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 led to immigrant Muslims having a "virtual monopoly" on Islam in the United States, consequently

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[8] Richard Brent Turner, *Islam and the African-American Experience* (Indiana University Press, 1997), 25.
[9] Ashon Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (Fordham University Press, 2016), 97.
[10] Sherman Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking Toward the Third Resurrection* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 5.

marginalizing Black Muslims within Muslim American communities.[11] This marginalization, as Su'ad Abdul Khabeer writes, also comes in the form of non-Black Muslim youth appropriating Blackness to construct their identities as Muslim Americans.[12] In short, as Arab and South Asian Muslims immigrate to the United States in greater numbers, they engage in the same practice that Sylvia Wynter notes of non-Black and non-white immigrants: creating "visible distance" between themselves and Black people.[13]

Simultaneously, the "Muslim terrorist" emerges as an existential threat to the United States in the 1970s. In *Covering Islam,* Edward Said argues that the notion of the Islamic extremist as an ambiguously brown and foreign threat begins in the 1970s as several Muslim states' and their "capacity to cause trouble" become news-worthy in the United States. Said continues to write that Islam crystallizes as a supposed threat in 1979 with the Iranian hostage crisis.[14] This rhetoric of Muslims as an existential threat to the United States and the West more broadly continues to fuel anti-Palestinian sentiment and also persists through the Gulf War. Thus, by 9/11, the "Muslim terrorist" that comes from the "Muslim World" is already a well-established trope in US media. As Zareena Grewal writes, the idea of the "Muslim World" is a "moral geography," or an imagined geography "constituted by a set of ethical and political assertions about a piece of land." Grewal names the Orient as another moral geography that the US inherits; she argues that when

[11] Jackson, 152.
[12] Su'ad Abdul Khabeer, *Muslim Cool: Race, Religion, and Hip Hop in the United States* (NYU Press, 2016), 110.
[13] Wynter, 261
[14] Edward Said, *Covering Islam,* 2nd ed. (Vintage Books, 1997), 41.

USians refer to the "Muslim World," they "reproduce, amend, and complicate Colonial Europe's moral geography of the Orient."[15]

In taking these overlapping histories into account, my project understands that the religio-racial formation that calcifies as a stand-in for Muslims in the United States is fueled by Orientalism while simultaneously being inseparable from histories of policing Black Muslim communities in the US. In other words, the colonial logics of the state are at work with rendering Arab and South Asians Muslims hypervisible, as well as obscuring Black Muslims. Moreover, when considering the way that "Muslim American" identity calcifies post-9/11, one must contend with the anti-Blackness of hegemonic Arab and South Asian-led organizations and spaces claiming ownership of a depoliticized and non-threatening Muslim American identity. The history of the Muslim Students Association's founders, who were largely SWANA and South Asian immigrants, smearing the Nation of Islam in the 1970s to distance themselves from Black Muslims is just one precursor to this War on Terror-era effort to reconfigure Muslim Americans as "middle class and mostly mainstream."[16]

## "Muslim Americans" and Gendered Racialization

As the scholarship of Black Feminist and Queer Studies scholars like Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, and Jasbir Puar elucidates,

[15] Zareena Grewal, *Islam is a Foreign Country: Muslim Americans and the Global Crisis of Authority,* (NYU Press, 2013), 5.
[16] Pew Research Center, "Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream," (2007), https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2007/05/22/muslim-americans-middle-class-and-mostly-mainstream2/.

racialization is always a gendered process. Thus, in critiquing the hegemonic formation of "Muslim American" identity, my project puts the racialization of Islam in sustained conversation with how gender operates as its own colonial taxonomy.

Sylvia Chan-Malik writes about the dialectical relationship between anti-Black erasure and Orientalism through her concept of the "Poor Muslim Woman" trope, which she argues arises with the Iranian Revolution and the mainstream feminist understanding of Iranian women as needing saving. She posits that the Poor Muslim Woman trope is mobilized by both Islamophobic notions of the perpetual victimhood and servility of Muslim women and a disavowal of the legacies of Black women who "engage Islam as acts of racial and gendered insurgency."[17] Chan-Malik goes on to say that "the notion that 'Islam' and 'feminist' are mutually opposed and competing ideologies, has become a preeminent logic against which U.S. Muslim women must construct their identities."[18]

Of course, the Poor Muslim Woman trope is mobilized as justification for invading Afghanistan and Iraq in the early years of the War on Terror. As Jasbir Puar argues, a similar dynamic occurs through pinkwashing when the United States is positioned as a beacon of LGBTQ rights, in opposition to the sexually backwards "Muslim world."[19] Puar's conceptualization of Muslim men being positioned as sexually backwards "Islamic monster-terrorist-fag"[20] points to the gendered racialization of the Muslim other. Still, if the Muslim American must be constructed as "middle class and

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[17] Sylvia Chan-Malik, *Being Muslim: A Cultural History of Women of Color in American Islam* (NYU Press, 2018), 181

[18] Ibid.

[19] Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Duke University, 2007), 38.

[20] Ibid.

mostly mainstream" to assimilate into a US body politic, where does this leave Muslim women post-9/11?

Evelyn Alsultany's writing on gender and Muslim representation in the media post-9/11 begins to answer this question. Alsultany argues that the heteronormative nuclear Muslim family becomes central to mainstream US conceptualizations of the respectable, and therefore, assimilable, Muslim American.[21]

Thus, within the context of Muslim American identity formation post-9/11, the question of gendered racialization is pivotal because it functions as one of the fault lines through which the "Muslim American" is formed. Crucially, to be a respectable Muslim American is to adhere to hegemonic notions of gender and sexuality. This project is deeply concerned with the implications of this gendered racialization of the Muslim American because it is central to the hegemonic understandings of US Muslims that are formed in opposition to the trope of the Muslim terrorist. When critiquing the way anti-imperialist scholars in the West ignore the reality of misogyny (and as I am arguing, cis-heteronormativity) in Muslim spaces, Sadia Abbas writes "The project of producing (or preserving) a substantive concomitant critique of misogyny and patriarchy becomes a casualty of an anti-imperialist anxiety. Empire and racism, pretty much as usual, get to call the shots."[22]

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[21] Evelyn Alsultany, *Arabs Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation After 9/11* (NYU Press, 2012), 16.
[22] Sadia Abbas, *At Freedom's Limit: Islam and the Postcolonial Predicament* (Modern Language Initiative, 2014), 57.

By centering the writing, art, and thought of Muslim* women and queers, *"Let me Look at You"* refuses to let empire and racism call the shots. Instead, I center work that emerges in opposition to hegemonic forces within Muslim communities in the United States. Of course, this entails a wide swath of marginalized people, including and not limited to those who are kept out of hegemonic Muslim American discourses and spaces via race, sect, national origin, ethnicity, caste, gender, sexuality, class, immigration status, political views, and more. While accounting for the pluralistic reality of Muslim communities in the United States is far beyond the scope of a project like this one, my intention is to maintain a generative tension with hegemonic Muslim American literary and cultural production.

**Post-9/11 & the Long War on Terror**

This is a post-9/11 project. Still, as many scholars have noted, the architecture of American Islamophobia long predates the War on Terror and its parts are recycled from COINTELPRO, continental imperialism, imperialism in the Philippines, Japanese internment, etc., not to mention US involvement in the so-called Muslim World in the decades following the Cold War. Thus, this dissertation's timeline, which encompasses 2001 to 2024, is not meant to reify the totalizing understanding of 9/11 as the event that started anti-Muslim sentiment and policies in the United States. Instead, it is meant to grapple with the reality of how the shockwaves caused by post-9/11 political repression are still rippling through Muslim* communities in the West. New York-based Afghan

artist Mariam Ghani said it best when she referred to the post-9/11 era as "an accumulation of afters."[23] It's not that all the state and military violence of the War on Terror was novel; it's that there is no going back to a place that is not post-9/11.

Moreover, by post-9/11, I do not simply mean after the attacks of September 11, 2001. Throughout this dissertation, post-9/11 operates within what Erica Edwards calls the long war on terror, which she defines as "the assault on radicalism that escalated during the late Cold War period, against the rise of Black Power, student movements around the world, and resistance movements in Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and extended, in accelerated fashion, through the first post-9/11 decade."[24] As Edwards argues, the surveillance infrastructure used to criminalize Muslims after 9/11 was created to suppress Black radicalism first and foremost. Also, as Jodi Byrd writes, the United States has always exercised settler-imperialist violence to secure its borders frontiers against the terrorists of the moment, whether it be the Indian savage or the Muslim terrorist.[25]

By focusing on the post-9/11 representational imperative of Muslims*, this project maintains a critical view of how hegemonic discourses about Muslim Americans serve a neoliberal multiculturalism throughout the War on Terror.

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[23] Anjula Raza Kolb, interview with Mariam Ghani and Chitra Ganesh, "Mourning the unmournable: a forum on 9/11," *The East is a Podcast,* September 2021.
[24] Erica Edwards, *The Other Side of Terror: Black Women and the Culture of US Empire* (New York University Press, 2021), 22.
[25] Jodi Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Empire* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011), xxvi.

**Key Terms**

*"Let Me Look at You:" Post-9/11 Representational Imperative & Muslim* Refusal* oscillates around three key terms, the first of which is representational imperative. I argue that in the aftermath of 9/11, a representational imperative grows for Muslims (and people from the so-called Muslim World) to articulate their innocence publicly to demonstrate Muslim Americans' ability to assimilate into a respectable notion of US citizenship. My conceptualization and critique of the post-9/11 representational imperative hinges upon Jodi Melamed's critique of neoliberal multiculturalism as a form of state-sponsored anti-racism, as well as Steven Salaita's concept of a post-9/11 imperative patriotism. In *Represent and Destroy,* Melamed argues that neoliberal multiculturalism has "provided the ideological codes and narrative structure" for texts to participate in a representational project[26] that ultimately works to recuperate the settler-imperialist state. Within the context of the post-9/11 representational imperative, this means that in order to contain accusations of Islamophobia, the state must prop up examples of Muslim American "representation." While Melamed's argument focuses on literary studies, I expand this to include state-sponsored forms of cultural engagement. The "imperative" in representational imperative expands on Steven Salaita's concept of "patriotic imperative," or the imperative to perform being a good US citizen to bypass the

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[26] Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 35.

state's scrutiny.[27] Salaita writes about imperative patriotism as a dominant component of Muslim and Arab life in the United States post-9/11.

Through the term representational imperative, I grapple with the specific ways in which Muslims in the United States must portray themselves as docile citizens of the settler-imperialist state in order to evade suspicion. Moreover, representational imperative serves to describe the limitations placed on Muslim* literary and cultural production after 9/11 by this larger political context.

The second key term used throughout this project is Muslim*. By using an asterisk after Muslim, I trouble the presumptions that come with hegemonic Muslim American identity. In other words, Muslim* is meant to include practicing Muslims, along with those who are racialized as Muslim. By using Muslim*, I work to unsettle the religio-racial formation of the Muslim American. In a sense, Muslim* includes everyone who must negotiate the post-9/11 representational imperative in their work.

The third key term used in my theorization of the post-9/11 representational imperative is refusal. Indigenous Studies scholars, including Audra Simpson and Glen Coulthard, conceptualize refusal as a strategy through which Indigenous peoples reject the always incomplete recognition and reconciliation of settler-states. As Coulthard argues, the Canadian state's efforts to recognize and reconcile with Indigenous peoples still stem from a relationship that is foundationally colonial.[28] By taking heed of

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[27] Salaita, Steven, "Ethnic Identity and Imperative Patriotism: Arab Americans Before and After 9/11," *College Literature* 32, no. 2 (2005): 154.
[28] Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (University of Minnesota Press: 2014), 6.

Indigenous scholars' critiques of colonial recognition, I hope to carve out space to understand the discursive possibilities that are created when Muslims* refuse to produce work that is reconcilable with the settler-imperialist state.

## Methodology

The primary methodology of this project is literary analysis. While the majority of the work discussed in this dissertation is poetry, *"Let Me Look at You"* also engages with anthology and performance. By thinking alongside the poetry and performance art of Muslim* women and queer people, my project follows their lead in unsettling the hegemonic formation of Muslim American identity that becomes culturally ubiquitous as a result of the post-9/11 representational imperative.

I focus on lyric poetry and performance art for several reasons. Firstly, both forms evade coherent narrative structures and in doing so, lend themselves to a betrayal of the neoliberal imperative to represent Muslims Americans. While the post-9/11 representational imperative relies on narratives of Muslim Americans who neatly occupy a Western liberal humanist subjectivity, lyric poetry and performance art do not adhere to coherent narratives. Also, both lyric poetry and performance art are concerned with the intimate; in poetry, the lyric subject is met with the expectation to speak intimately to an imagined "you," while in performance art, the spectators and their reactions to the performance are pivotal to the piece.

Thus, I am interested in how women and queer people mobilize the intimacy of poetry and performance art to carve out discursive space beyond an assimilationist and hegemonic Muslim American identity. Ultimately, the poets and artists I discuss in my dissertation reject the Western state as a savior and in doing so, engage in what Wynter refers to as "the struggle against this overrepresentation [of Man]"[29] by refusing to position themselves as good Muslim American citizens.

I use two main theoretical frameworks to approach my objects of study. The first puts lyric personhood in conversation with legal personhood. As Sara Dowling explains in her theorization of translingual poetics, the "distinction between persons and nonpersons [is encoded] at the level of form."[30] While the poems in my dissertation do not always neatly fall into what Dowling names translingual poetics, they do utilize lyric poetry's attention to the intimate to play with the notion of legal personhood. Specifically, they mobilize the intimate to critique surveillance. Thus, in putting new lyric studies in conversation with surveillance studies, I use a theoretical framework that gestures towards a poetics of counter-surveillance. Additionally, I utilize a Queer of Color critique approach to performance art, which is informed by the work of scholars like Amber Musser, Ronak Kapadia, and Fatima El-Tayeb. This theoretical framework speaks to queer Muslim performance's potential to disrupt imperial discourses of gendered racialization.

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[29] Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom," 261.
[30] Sara Dowling, *Translingual Poetics: Writing Personhood Under Settler Colonialism* (University of Iowa Press, 2018), 7.

**Chapter Outline**

In Chapter 1, I explicitly contend with the problems of post-9/11 framing by examining the relationship between the representation of Muslims in the US and anti-imperialist critique as it unfolds in post-9/11 poetry. Starting with Naomi Shihab Nye's *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East,* which works explicitly to represent "Muslims" and the "Middle East," I argue that an imperative to represent the humanity of Muslims and their ability to assimilate into an American public emerges after September 11. Then, by working my way through *You & Yours,* Nye's second post-9/11 poetry collection, and Solmaz Sharif's poem "Look," I look at how both poets, when met with the impetus to grapple with rhetoric post-9/11, reject the terms of engagement set by US empire through the War on Terror. Chapter 2 turns to anthologization as a site through which national discourses are first reified (particularly by early Muslim American anthologies in the 2000s) and then challenged by more interventionist anthologies, such as *Halal If You Hear Me, Reconstructed Magazine, New Moons,* and more. I refer to these texts which take an interventionist approach to the representational imperative as catalyst anthologies and situate them within a women of color feminist tradition that begins with *This Bridge Called My Back* and *The Forbidden Stitch: An Asian American Women's Anthology.* In doing so, I demonstrate the potential for catalyst anthologies to breathe life into the lacunae created by the post-9/11 representational imperative.

Chapter 3 returns to Solmaz Sharif's work to look at how she mobilizes rage in her second poetry collection, *Customs.* It also looks at queer and trans Arab poet Andrea

Abi-Karam's *Villainy,* which declares to an imperialist gaze, "A nation built up against a simple villain/ I am the villain./ But how dare u think me to be simple."[31] These texts indicate a sharp departure from the assimilationist Muslim* literature of the 2000s and its anxiety around being perceived as "anti-American." In explicitly expressing anger at the settler-imperialist state, these poets open up new possibilities for Muslim* literary and cultural production in the United States. Since Abi-Karam's *Villainy* is heavily influenced by punk aesthetics, this chapter also explores the relationship between Muslim* lyric poetry and punk music with respect to how they evade a Western liberal humanism through the lyric subject.

*Post-9/11 Representational Imperative & Muslim* Refusal* ends with an oral history of Discostan, Arshia Fatima Haq's LA-based performance and party space born out of her extensive archive of rare vinyl from South Asia and the larger SWANA world. I interview Arshia Fatima Haq, her collaborators, and longtime Discostan attendees to understand how the space lends itself to queer Muslim* embodiment, while rejecting the pressures of Western legibility. Discostan insists on an opacity that allows queer SWANA, South Asian, and Muslim* artists to create installation, visual, and new media art without having to explain themselves to American viewers. In eschewing neoliberal expectations of identification and Western legibility, Discostan becomes a space in which a wide range of Muslims* build community and work towards a world beyond the limits of coloniality.

[31] Andrea Abi-Karam, *Villainy* (Nightboat Books, 2021), 36.

**A Note on Form**

The first three chapters of this dissertation contain poems in their margins. Cree poet Billy Ray Belcourt refers to poems as "geopolitical coordinates" to "enact [a] grounding of 'freedom-oriented knowledge.'"[32] I am often reminded of this while struggling to write about texts that enact this liberatory knowledge. Compared to poems that feel like living and breathing texts, it is difficult for academic prose to not feel cloistered. This discontentment serves as a reminder that scholarship makes it difficult to speak. By incorporating poems into the margins of my dissertation, I make space for what is pushed out of my project or made difficult to say by the conventions of academic writing.

[32] Billy-Ray Belcourt, "Preface," *This Wound is World* (University of Minnesota Press, 2019): x.

## **Chapter 1:** Refusal as Caretaking: Lyric Poetry & the War on Terror

Iranian-American poet Solmaz Sharif's 2016 poetry collection, *Look,* takes its title from the United States' Department of Defense's *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms.*[33] Terminology from the DoD's dictionary is scattered throughout the book and marked by capital letters. The first definition readers are given, however, is for "look." Before the first and titular poem, readers are met with an otherwise blank page that reads:

> **look** – (*) In mine warfare, a period during which a mine circuit is receptive of an influence.
>
> *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* United States Department of Defense

This definition looms over each poem that follows it; for the US military, a look is the moment after a person, animal, or vehicle moves on top of a landmine and the moment before the landmine detonates. Thus, readers begin Sharif's *Look* with a reminder that for those caught in the crosshairs of the United States' War on Terror, recognition is deadly.

While the post-9/11 era and its seemingly endless War on Terror are far from unique in their focus on surveillance and counter-insurgency in the name of national security, Sharif's *Look* points to how the restructuring of US imperialism's architecture

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[33] Since the Department of Defense updates this dictionary regularly, *Look* utilizes the version as amended through October 17th, 2007. Sharif notes that words are often erased if they have "fully entered English vernacular," such as drone. Notably, "look" is no longer included in the version amended as of August 2021 and there is no word that functions in the same way.

gives rise to a new politics (and poetics) of looking. As surveillance technology permeates everyday life, this increase in the manifold ways the state "looks" at people, particularly Muslims*[34], exacerbates the ways that Muslims are criminalized, and consequently, forecloses the possibility of the state understanding Muslims beyond an inherent Other. Edward Said explains that the West relies on obscuring the specificities of the Orient in order to sustain an image of the Other that serves colonial interests, whether it be an image of indecipherable violence and instability or immeasurable excess.[35] In other words, the very mechanisms through which the United States "looks" at Muslims* can only ever reinscribe their status as a problem to be managed by the settler-imperialist state. Taking into account critiques of neoliberalism's emphasis on multicultural representation to absolve the settler-imperialist state of the material realities of white supremacy and Western imperialism, I argue that the imperative for Muslims* to represent their humanity is itself a method of counter-insurgent management that emerges in literary and cultural production.

Thus, this chapter unfolds the contradictions of what it means to be seen, recognized, and represented in the United States for people with imagined proximity to terror post-9/11: Muslims and people from the so-called Middle East, which in the rhetoric of the War on Terror becomes indistinguishable from the notion of a "Muslim

[34] I use an asterisk after "Muslims" throughout this article to indicate that I am referring to both Muslims and people with perceived proximity to Islam as a result of its racialization in the West.
[35] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Pantheon Books, 1978), 34.

World."[36] In particular, this chapter  is concerned with how questions of recognition and representation are handled in post-9/11 poetry, given the fraught nature of recognition by settler-imperialist states. According to Indigenous Studies scholar Glen Coulthard, Canada's efforts to recognize and reconcile with Indigenous peoples still stem from a relationship that is foundationally colonial.[37] Crucially, in reconciling with the settler-imperialist state, the ongoing reality of settler-colonialism is left unquestioned. While the context of post-9/11 poetry in the United States by people with proximity to the so-called Muslim World differs vastly from the context of Indigenous struggle against Canadian settler-colonialism, my intention here is to take heed of Coulthard's critiques of recognition by settler-imperialist states. In doing so, I hope to carve out space to understand the discursive possibilities that are collapsed when Muslim communities in the United States are tasked with producing coherent representations of themselves post-9/11. What happens when a national spotlight necessitates one coherent Muslim American community and this community must be compatible with US empire? What does this say about representation within US empire for the communities caught in the crossfire of the War on Terror? This chapter considers these questions and how they appear in lyric poetry by SWANA and/or Muslim women writing about the War on Terror

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[36] As Zareena Grewal writes in *Islam is a Foreign Country,* the "Muslim World" is not a factual location. It is a moral geography through which Americans "reproduce, amend, and complicate" Colonial Europe's Orient (5).  When I refer to the so-called Muslim World throughout this essay, I am referring to this moral geography and the material ways in which it structures US imperialism.

[37] Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (University of Minnesota Press: 2014), 6.

since 9/11.  As a site for what Solmaz Sharif refers to as the "caretaking of language,"[38] poetry becomes tasked with untangling the complexities of identification.

In order to think through how lyric poetry figures into this discursive landscape, I put the post-9/11 work of Naomi Shihab Nye, a Palestinian-American poet, in conversation with Solmaz Sharif's *Look.* By zeroing in on the poetic, and more specifically, Nye and Sharif's engagements with lyric poetry, I hope to articulate how both poets mobilize a form traditionally reserved for the expression of intimacy, particularly within Western epistemologies of the lyric subject as a stand-in for the liberal human subject,[39] to critique the fraught relationship between the speaker of the poems and an imagined American "you." Here, the intimate does not have the option of existing without the political.

I begin with Naomi Shihab Nye's 2002 edition of *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East* and examine how her work shifts in her subsequent collection, *You & Yours*, and later return to Sharif's "LOOK," to identify a shifting terrain of SWANA/Muslim* women poets who critique the War on Terror and, by extension, US empire, through their failure to inhabit a normative poetic subject, and thus fail/refuse to articulate a normative liberal human subjectivity which locates itself within the normative logics of the settler-imperialist state. Within the context of a post-9/11 United States, these normative logics entail SWANA/Muslim* people performing their assimilability,

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[38] Solmaz Sharif, "A Poetry of Proximity," *Kenyon Review,* https://kenyonreview.org/kr-online-issue/kenyon-review-credos/selections/sharif-credo/.

[39] Sara Dowling, *Translingual Poetics: Writing Personhood Under Settler Colonialism* (University of Iowa Press, 2018), 7.

from heteronormative nuclear families to a lack of anti-imperialist politics. In other words, to borrow the title of Pew Research Center's first survey of Muslim Americans, SWANA and Muslim* people are expected to be "mostly middle class and mainstream."[40] Thus, the shift between Nye's *19 Varieties of Gazelle* and Sharif's *Look* is critical because it is reflective of a larger sentiment in Muslim* communities, particularly amongst youth, feminists, and queers, in which dissent becomes possible.

**Post-9/11 Representational Imperative & *19 Varieties of Gazelle***

Naomi Shihab Nye's first post-9/11 book was a revised edition of her 1994 book, *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East.* While the book was originally published in 1994, it garnered a great deal more attention in 2002, including being named a finalist for the National Book Award and Nye being interviewed on the PBS talk-show *NOW with Bill Moyers*. This renewed attention in 2002 is telling because it reflects US readers' appetite for a representation of Muslims and people from the so-called Muslim World; as a collection, Nye's *19 Varieties of Gazelle* specifically seeks to represent the so-called Middle East. Nye's decision to release the book in 2002 with a new introduction and some new poems is indicative of the representational imperative that was placed on Muslims*.

As Evelyn Alsultany writes in her analysis of post-9/11 media, a great deal of Muslim representation post-9/11 was of Muslim-Americans being patriotic citizens,

[40] Pew Research Center, "Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream," (2007).

seemingly to counteract accusations of racial profiling.[41] Furthermore, Alsultany explains that after the culture wars of the 1990s, institutions have an impetus to be inclusive. As a result, television and movies started churning out a plethora of what Alsultany refers to as "simplified complex representations." These characters, who are meant to be good Muslims, tend to follow a formulaic trope that relies on their allegiance to the United States and by extension, their lack of anti-imperialist politics.[42]

Thinking through this characterization of post-9/11 media alongside Jodi Melamed's critique of literary multiculturalism and neoliberalism[43], I suggest that in the aftermath of 9/11, a representational imperative grows for Muslims (and people from the so-called Muslim World) to articulate their innocence and humanity[44] publicly. Naomi Shihab Nye's prose introduction to *19 Varieties of Gazelle* speaks directly to this demand, but before the prose introduction, she starts with a poem entitled "Flinn, on the Bus."

"Flinn, On the Bus," which is dated "September 11, 2001," recounts an interaction the speaker has on a bus with Flinn, a man who has just been released from prison on 9/11. The poem begins, "Three hours after the buildings fell,/ he took a seat beside me./ Fresh out of prison, after 24 months,/ *You're my first hello!*"[45] Immediately, readers are met with the enormity of 9/11 as well as Flinn's life, which unfolds in spite of

[41] Evelyn Alsultany, *Arabs Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation After 9/11* (NYU Press, 2012), 16.
[42] Alsultany, *Arabs Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation After 9/11,* 71.
[43] Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 35.
[44] Here, "humanity" refers to a liberal human subjectivity that neatly folds into the settler-imperialist state. (expand)
[45] Naomi Shihab Nye, "Flinn, On the Bus," lines 1-4, *19 Varieties of Gazelle* (Greenwillow Books, 2002), x-xi.

the events surrounding it. Flinn continues to tell the speaker about what he plans to do with his newfound freedom; he was going home to his mom and was determined to take responsibility for his life, despite being wronged by lawyers "and women too." Flinn tells the speaker he briefly considered revenge but concluded, "*I'm in charge. I'll think/ before I act. I don't ever/ want to go there again./ Two wrongs don't make a right.*"[46] To this, the speaker responds, "Somehow, in his mouth, that day/ it sounded new."[47] Here, Flinn's story begins to mirror the American public in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 in the sense that he is faced with the possibility of revenge after a grave injustice. However, Flinn weighs his options and chooses peace as a way to protect his freedom. After describing the speaker's conversation with Flinn, as well as his physical presence, the speaker finally confirms what readers could have guessed by now: "A man who had not seen TV in weeks,/ secluding in his cell so colleagues/ wouldn't trip him up,/ extend his stay./ *Who had not heard the news.*"[48] Here, the weight of September 11th casts a shadow over Flinn's hopefulness. Readers meet Flinn during a new beginning and are prompted to empathize with him not having "heard the news." A mere three hours after the Twin Towers fell, Flinn's optimism feels out of sync with reality. He continues, "*no snap judgements, no quick angers,/ I'll stand back, look at what happens,/ think calmly what my next step should be.*"[49] Here, Nye seems to be referencing Barbara Lee's comments prior to her "no" vote for going to war in Afghanistan. Lee said:

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[46] Nye, "Flinn, On the Bus," lines 15-18.
[47] Ibid., lines 19-20.
[48] Ibid., lines 27-31.
[49] Ibid., lines 38-40.

> However difficult this vote may be, some of us must urge the use of restraint. Our country is in a state of mourning. Some of us must say, let's step back for a moment. Let's just pause, just for a minute and think through the implications of our actions today, so that this does not spiral out of control.[50]

As the only member of Congress to vote no, Lee faced immense backlash for cautioning the rest of Congress against acting out of anger and failing to think through the consequences of a War on Terror. Flinn's words echo Lee's through his commitment to acting slowly and with intention, just as Lee urges for restraint before things "spiral out of control."

Through this nod to Barbara Lee, Nye weaves antiwar sentiments into the poem, and specifically, into Flinn's words. Upon hearing this, the speaker says:

> It was not hard to nod,
> to wish him well. But could I tell
> what had happened in the world
> on his long-awaited day,
> what twists of rage greater
> than we could ever guess
> had savaged skylines, thousands of lives?
> I could not. He'd find out
> soon enough. Flinn, take it easy.
> Peace is rough.[51]

Here, the speaker's impulse is to protect Flinn from what is described as incomprehensible violence. Nye writes that the events of 9/11 were "twists of rage greater/ than we could ever guess." The rage here is not located within a particular group of people or housed by a certain ideology; instead, the rage exists as a contorted anger

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[50] Barbara Lee, "Speech on 9/14/01," Rep. Barbara Lee, February 15, 2007, Congressional speech recording, 2:33, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mvnLtMKzX6Y.
[51] Nye, "Flinn, On the Bus," lines 41-50.

that knocks over anything in its path. She also describes these "twists" as being "greater/ than we could ever guess," which mirrors how the general public in the United States understood 9/11 as being entirely unpredictable and unexplainable,[52] so much so that the enormity of the rage could not be guessed. Moreover, "could I tell" also suggests that the speaker herself shares this sentiment and finds herself struggling to explain the events of 9/11. On this bus with Flinn, the speaker seems to be met with the limits of what is articulable. In this way, Nye's speaker in "Flinn, On the Bus" is reflective of a hegemonic US perspective, since discursive hegemony in the settler-imperialist state understands the United States as a beacon of global freedom as opposed to a global power of racial capitalism and imperialism. Lastly, Nye describes the falling of the Twin Towers themselves as twists of rage having "savaged skylines, thousands of lives."[53] The rhetoric of skylines being savaged is particularly loaded with anti-Indigeneity and settler-colonial ideologies. The implication is that the modern and civilized skyline was destroyed by an inherently backward force that is incompatible with US notions of "freedom."

After that description of 9/11, Nye simply ends the poem with, "Flinn, take it easy./ Peace is rough." Several resonances are at play here; first, the poem brings the reader into a space where 9/11 does not yet exist. In 2002, when this edition of *19 Varieties of Gazelle* was released, 9/11 was understood as a universally traumatic event in the United States. The shock of such a large-scale attack was swiftly followed by the

[52] This is not to say that 9/11 was incomprehensible. Here, I am identifying a pattern in literary and cultural production in the United States in the years immediately after 9/11. *19 Varieties of Gazelle* is a particularly salient example of this.
[53] Nye, "Flinn, On the Bus," line 47.

mobilization of a security state, which resulted in as many as 1,182 people – largely Arab or Muslim men – being detained as soon as November 2001.[54] By the following year, twenty-two agencies were placed under the newly formed Department of Homeland Security, which was the largest structural change to the United States government since the 1947 formation of the Department of Defense.[55] To paraphrase Agamben, this state of exception born out of perceived crisis becomes the engine of totalitarianism.[56] While all the mechanisms that drive the War on Terror were in place well before September 11, 2001, the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon shifted the United States into even further militarization. Needless to say, in US discourse, a clear line is drawn before and after 9/11. Thus, when Nye begins *19 Varieties of Gazelle* with Flinn, who is unaware of this swiftly deepening line, she brings readers into a past where peace is an option, particularly as the poem takes place on September 11, 2001, before the War on Terror was officially declared. In this way, "Flinn, On the Bus" participates in an almost nostalgic recollection of the September 11, 2001, before the War on Terror was a reality.

Still, obscured in the logic of "Flinn, On the Bus" are the processes by which this supposed "peace" is maintained. As Rey Chow theorizes, war and peace are two sides of the same coin that make up Western knowledge production[57]; similarly, Samera Esmeir writes that for the United States, violence in the War on Terror functions to achieve an

[54] Mariam Ghani and Chitra Ganesh, "Introduction to an Index," 2011, https://www.mariamghani.com/docs/RHR_spread_w_intro_e.pdf.
[55] "History," Department of Homeland Security, https://www.dhs.gov/history.
[56] Giorgio Agamben, State of Exception (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 3.
[57] Rey Chow, *The Age of the World Target: Self-Referentiality in War, Theory, and Comparative Work* (Duke
University Press, 2006), 18.

imagined non-violence, which is actually the maintenance of US global power.[58] In other words, the peace Nye mentions is a fraught concept that hinges upon the forgetting of US empire. Additionally, the premise of the poem relies on the idea of 9/11 as a universally traumatic event. The large-scale violence of "savaged skylines" is shocking because it happened in the United States and specifically, in New York, as opposed to Beirut, Kabul, or Baghdad. The loss of innocent lives in New York is beyond comprehension, unlike the loss of innocent lives across the so-called Muslim World as a result of US global power.

Still, in letting Flinn sit with the possibility of peace, Nye gestures towards an antiwar sentiment. She also suspends the poem within a moment that is not yet "post-9/11" by beginning it with "Three hours after the buildings fell."[59] This line places the poem at between 12:00pm and 1:00Ppm EST; considering the way in which the news on September 11th was developing at such a rapid speed, the specificity of this timeline brings readers into a past where the ongoing War on Terror is not yet a foregone conclusion. Additionally, *19 Varieties of Gazelle* begins at a point of no return; with "Flinn, On the Bus," being suspended within 9/11, Nye emphasizes the rest of the book's post-9/11 position. Finally, in starting the 2002 edition of *19 Varieties of Gazelle* with "Flinn, On the Bus," Nye recontextualizes readers' relationship to the speaker. Instead of beginning the collection with a poem about Palestine or even the Levant more broadly, Nye begins by talking to Flinn, who functions as a stand-in for an American readership. Reading "Flinn, On the Bus" within the politically charged context it was written in

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[58] Samera Esmeir. "The Violence of Non-Violence: Law and War in Iraq." *Journal of Law and Society* 34, no. 1 (2007): 99–115. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4129583.
[59] Nye, "Flinn, On the Bus," line 1.

underscores its almost diplomatic nature; Flinn provides US readers with an affective pathway into the rest of the book.

With each of these contradictions in tow, the prose introduction of the book begins with Nye writing about her family's quiet pride in their Palestinian heritage, the hospitality of Arabs, and her grandmother's stories. Then, she writes about the tragedy of 9/11 and how "a huge shadow had been cast across the lives of so many innocent people and an ancient culture's pride."[60] Nye's focus on this Arab loss of pride emerges from an ahistorical understanding of 9/11, in which the United States is not culpable for its ongoing imperial exploits. In this understanding of 9/11, the Taliban and al-Qaeda seem to emerge from a nondescript desert full of "camel-riding, terroristic, hook-nosed, venal lechers," to use Edward Said's words.[61] This framing of 9/11 as an utterly incomprehensible event works to decontextualize it from its larger history of the Cold War and Operation Cyclone, in which the CIA funded the mujahideen. As Bannah alGhadbanah argues, framing tragedies related to the so-called Middle East as "perpetually chaotic, unknowable" and "indecipherable catastrophes" obscures the processes by which imperialism maintains conditions of crisis and begets further violence.[62] By implicitly reiterating this framing, Nye creates a rhetorical conundrum in which 9/11 remains a decontextualized random act of violence by ambiguously brown

[60] Nye, "Introduction" *19 Varieties of Gazelle,* xv.
[61] Said, *Orientalism,* 108.
[62] Bannah alGhadbanah, "We Still Need to Talk about the Murder of Halla and Orouba Barakat," September 18, 2020,
https://banahghadbanah.medium.com/we-still-need-to-talk-about-the-murder-of-halla-and-orouba-barakat-51cf83d124ed.

Muslim men. She even goes as far as to say that, "Perhaps Arab Americans must say, twice as clearly as anyone else, that we deplore the unbelievable, senseless sorrow caused by people from the Middle East."[63] This move to signal that Arab Americans are patriotic citizens who feel the grief of 9/11 is not surprising, particularly in an atmosphere that reverberates with Bush's statement that, "Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists."[64] In the weeks, months, and years following 9/11, Muslims and anyone perceived as Muslim grew hypervisible. Thus, when Nye says that Arab Americans must denounce terrorism "twice as clearly as anyone else," she is speaking from a position of hypervisibility. In many ways, the "shadow" she refers to being cast over "an ancient culture's pride" is in fact a spotlight. A generous reading of this introduction, which goes to great lengths both to reify 9/11 as a universally traumatic and singular event, and to "humanize" Arabs and Muslims for US readers, could argue that Nye engages in strategic essentialism within this moment of hypervisibility. However true that may be, particularly when considering the virulence of anti-Muslim and anti-Arab sentiment in 2002 and the position Nye suddenly found herself in as a widely known Palestinian-American poet, it remains true that as a collection, *19 Varieties of Gazelle* ultimately reiterates the terms of engagement set by US imperial interests.

[63] Nye, "Introduction," xvi.
[64] "President Bush's address to a joint session of Congress and the nation," *The Washington Post,* September 20, 2001, https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushaddress_092001.html.

At the very end of the introduction, Nye returns to the subject of her grandmother. Nye explains that after having written countless essays, poems, a picture book, and a novel about her, she thought she was done writing about her, "but since September 11, 2001, she has swarmed into my consciousness, poking my sleep, saying, 'It's your job. Speak for me too. Say how much I hate it. Say this is not who we are.'"[65] Thus, the project of *19 Varieties of Gazelle* becomes to show Americans who Arabs and presumably Muslims "really are." What follows the introduction is a collection of lyric poetry that explores themes of family, land, religion, Palestine, language, and war. While not all of these poems were written with the intent of "representing" the Middle East, their anthologization in this collection binds them to Nye's immediate poetic response to 9/11, which ultimately, is a response to the neoliberal imperative to represent the humanity of Muslims, which for Nye, means writing about the humanity of Arabs.

**Languaging Anti-War Critique in *You & Yours***

By the publication of her 2005 collection, *You & Yours,* however, the representative project seems to get in its own way. Instead, this second post 9/11 poetry collection, which posits itself as a poetic response to the War on Terror, seems to grapple explicitly with the call to "represent" Muslims or the Middle East. This grappling is made manifest in the structure of the collection itself; the first half of the book, entitled "You," includes lyric poetry that looks at the personal, with the subject matter ranging from

[65] Nye, "Introduction," xviii.

gardening in September to a tribute poem to Maury Maverick, Jr., while "Yours" explicitly responds to the War on Terror.

"During a War," which births the book's title, begins with a line from a letter which reads, "*Best wishes to you & yours,/* he closes the letter." This couplet is then followed by, "For a moment I can't/ fold it up again – where does 'yours' end?"[66] Within the broader context of the War on Terror, Nye poses a complicated question: how does the speaker determine the bounds of kinship? For Nye, a Palestinian-American who vocally opposes the demonization of Islam in the media post 9/11, the question works in multiple ways. First and most obviously, it functions as a question to the writer of the letter, who is presumably American. In other words, she is asking, "With whom do your well wishes end?" It also functions as a question for the speaker themselves; if readers imagine the speaker to be Arab American, does "yours" include the Afghans that live through the entirety of the War on Terror? Does it include Iraqis if like Nye, the speaker is imagined to be Palestinian-American? Does it include Syrians, Somalis, or Pashtuns in Western Pakistan, who also found themselves subjected to US drone programs? In asking this question, Nye underscores the absurdity of how the West intentionally blurs the line between Arabs, Pashtuns, Kurds, Persians, etc. into one ambiguously brown Muslim boogieman.

This blurring of specificities in favor of Orientalist tropes stretches as far back as Medieval Europe, as Sophia Arjana chronicles in her genealogy of Muslim monsters.[67]

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[66] Nye, "During a War," lines 1-5, *You & Yours* (BOA Editions, 2005), 56.
[67] Sophia Arjana, *Muslims in the Western Imagination* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 21.

The ambiguity Nye brings into focus is far from new; it is as old as the Occidental drive to secure the evolving borders of its power. By asking "where does 'yours' end," Nye places the religio-racial formation of the Muslim squarely within the discourse that calcifies in the War on Terror.

In the months and years following 9/11, Muslim communities in the United States were saddled with the responsibility to represent themselves for the American public. Evelyn Alsultany writes about how CAIR – the Council on American-Islamic Relations – had many post-9/11 initiatives including the "National and Worldwide Condemnation of Terrorism," "Not in the Name of Islam," and "I'm an American Muslim," which had a PSA featured during *24* after the group lobbied FOX for fair representation. Alsultany argues that the PSA "emphasizes the compatibility between Americans and Muslims and the possibility of a patriotic American Muslim identity."[68] In other words, much like Nye's introduction to *19 Varieties of Gazelle,* CAIR felt the need to disavow the opposition between Islam and the United States that was being articulated. This representational imperative to prove that Muslims were not a threat to the state led to both the calcification of the religio-racial formation of the Muslim, through categories such as MENA and AMEMSA, as well as the invisibilizing of Muslims who did not neatly fit into this racial formation, such as Black Muslims. In addition to the subsequent exacerbation of already-existing power dynamics within Muslim Communities in the US, this insistence on Muslims performing their patriotism led to an inevitable censoring of

[68] Alsultany, 141.

anti-imperialist critiques. As Sunaina Marr Maira's work on the repression of Muslim youth organizing post 9/11 shows, the representational imperative to be a good Muslim American came at a steep cost to radical anti-imperialist organizing.[69]

Furthermore, by looking at the shift from *19 Varieties of Gazelle* to *You & Yours,* I hope to further demonstrate how poetry, by virtue of its failure to live up to the representational imperative, becomes a space of rupture – and potential disruption – for/against what Maira refers to as "imperial statecraft."[70] In both Nye and Sharif's work, the obscuring logics of empire emerge as central to this "imperial statecraft." In "During a War," Nye uses these obscuring logics to open up potential solidarities. Moreover, her explicit questioning of "yours" signals Nye's larger interrogation of language throughout *You & Yours.*

In "Dictionary in the Dark," the first poem in the "Yours" section of *You & Yours,* Nye underscores how the language of war relies on obscurity. The poem begins, "The retired general said,/ 'The beautiful thing about it'/ discussing war."[71] Immediately, Nye establishes the contradiction between the reality of the War on Terror and the way it is discussed in the United States. She continues, "We were making 'progress'/ in our war effort."[72] Here, and indeed in every sentence that follows, she deepens and builds upon this rhetorical contradiction and in doing so, makes abundantly clear the way in which imperial wars weaponize language by sanitizing it. Here, readers find themselves in a

[69] Sunaina Maira, *The 9/11 Generation: Youth, Rights, and Solidarity in the War on Terror* (NYU Press, 2016), 93.
[70] Ibid., 6.
[71] Nye, "Dictionary in the Dark," lines 1-3, *You & Yours,* 51.
[72] Ibid., lines 4-5.

different poetic world than “Flinn, on the Bus.” Unlike *19 Varieties of Gazelle,* “Dictionary in the Dark” tasks itself with questioning the language it finds itself surrounded by.

A few lines down, Nye continues, “Someone else repeated, ‘in harm’s way’/ strangely popular lately.”[73] By following the quote with “strangely,” Shihab Nye subtlety makes strange the seemingly innocuous phrase “in harm’s way.” Consequently, the passive voice in “in harm’s way” rings louder. The harm here is constructed; it is not so much that people are in harm’s way but that the harm of war is forced upon people. Thus, the poem conditions readers to understand “in harm’s way” as “the war harms civilians.” Nye continues with, “and ‘weapons of mass destruction’/ felt gravely confused about their identity.”[74] Considering Alsulstany’s writing on the construction of Muslim American identity, this notion of being confused by one’s identity is particularly loaded in this context. Furthermore, this quote points to the lack of clarity surrounding the invasion of Iraq. While the war in Afghanistan was met with less popular resistance, the invasion of Iraq resulted in a whirlwind of anti-war demonstrations across the world. Thus, in describing weapons of mass destruction as “gravely confused about their identity,” Nye plays up the distrust of the Bush administration’s rationale for invading Iraq. Lastly, the notion of weapons of mass destruction being confused by their identity when their very existence is being questioned by anti-war activists across the globe leaves readers to question what constitutes weapons of mass destruction. Nye ends the poem with,

[73] Nye, “Dictionary in the Dark,” lines 10-11.
[74] Ibid., lines 12-13.

"'Friendly,' gasped. Fierce and terminal. / It had never agreed to sit beside fire, never.'"[75] Here, she brings her critique full-circle by personifying "friendly" and placing it at the receiving end of the obscuring rhetoric of war and empire. In a climate in which empire's ability to obscure becomes so ingrained in public discourses, this personification of "friendly" places US readers directly within the war rhetoric Nye critiques.

Nye continues her critique of the War on Terror's rhetoric in "Why I Could Not Accept Your Invitation," which recounts an invitation to an event in the so-called Middle East the speaker receives. Nye writes, "your fax contained the following phrases:/ …. *regionally based evaluation vehicles;/ culture should impregnate all different sectors;/ consumption of cultural products;/ key flashpoints in thematic areas*."[76] By listing the invitation's use of these phrases as rationale for not attending the event, Nye questions the underlying assumptions of this invitation to an "art and culture" event. Furthermore, the event in question takes place in what Nye refers to as "the country next to the country/ my country has recently been devastating/ in the name of democracy."[77] Here, Nye further questions the ideologies underpinning this "art and culture" event that takes place, presumably, near Afghanistan or Iraq. The poem suggests that the event is at odds with the best interests of people in this country, wherever it may be.  Then, Nye explicitly rejects the invitation's neoliberal rhetoric of "culture;" she writes, "that is not the language I live in."[78] Once again, *You & Yours* finds itself in a different poetic world. Nye

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[75] Nye, "Dictionary in the Dark,"  lines 14-15.
[76] Nye, "Why I Could Not Accept Your Invitation," lines 5-10, *You & Yours,* 58.
[77] Ibid., lines 13-15.
[78] Nye, "Why I Could Not Accept Your Invitation,"  line 16.

elaborates by writing “I cannot pretend/ a scrap of investment in the language/ that allows human beings to kill one another/ systematically, abstractly, distantly.”[79] Through this explicit refusal to engage in the neoliberal rhetoric of abstraction, Nye insists upon the material realities that are obscured by the abstraction of war rhetoric.

Nye’s interrogation of language also comes into play though the title of the book itself. The meaning of *You & Yours,* like much of the language in the book’s second half, shifts and is called into question as the collection unfolds. Entitling the first section “You,” Nye both recalls her own life and conditions her readers, who are presumably in the United States, to place themselves within this “you.” Particularly given the content of the poems, which are seemingly innocuous and not overtly about the War on Terror or Palestine, readers settle into imagery of Texas suburbs, gardens, and a multicultural Americana. Conversely, by titling the second portion of the book “Yours,” Nye recalls the open-ended sense of kinship she creates in “During a War" while disrupting the comfortable relatability she begins to establish in the first section. Instead, with “Yours,” which focuses on that which Nye considers “hers,” — the War on Terror and the Israeli occupation of Palestine — US readers are prompted to understand themselves in relation to this “yours.” In constructing this ambiguous and slippery relationship between “You” and “Yours,” Nye creates an apostrophic gesture. Jonathan Culler writes that apostrophe, or direct address in lyric poetry, “works to constitute a poetic speaker taking up an active relationship to a world or element of the world constructed as addressee, an addressee

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[79] Nye, “Why I Could Not Accept Your Invitation,” lines 21-23.

which is often asked to respond in some way, as if the burden of this apostrophic event were to make something happen."[80] While the poems do not directly address the readers, Nye creates an implied apostrophe through the structure of the collection itself. The addressees, in this case, are American readers. The possibilities of this implied apostrophe fluctuate as the poems in "Yours" progress; could it be "yours" as in "these too are my people?" Alternatively, it could be squarely placing the responsibility of the War on Terror, and specifically, the Invasion of Iraq, in the hands of the state and the readers who are complicit in the actions of the state. In this way, Nye uses apostrophe to prompt readers to think through their relationship to the War on Terror, US empire, and its rhetoric and tools more broadly. Furthermore, *You & Yours* works to map relations; it challenges readers to consider "where does yours end" alongside the speaker.

By exploring the shift from Naomi Shihab Nye's *19 Varieties of Gazelle* to *You & Yours,* I hope to identify a larger shift in the post-9/11 poetry of Muslims* in the United States. While *19 Varieties of Gazelle* engages in a representational project, *You & Yours* refuses this responsibility. Instead, it uses lyric poetry as a site to question the language of war. In "A Poetry of Proximity," Solmaz Sharif writes that language is one of the first casualties of war and that "the maiming and obliteration of language preempts and attempts to excuse the maiming and obliteration of bodies."[81] According to Sharif, it is the job of poets to defend language by acting as its "caretakers."[82] In shifting away from a

[80] Culler, Jonathan. "Lyric, History, and Genre." *New Literary History* 40, no. 4 (2009): 886. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40666452.
[81] Sharif, "A Poetry of Proximity."
[82] Ibid.

representational project and instead interrogating the language of war, Nye engages in this caretaking. Furthermore, through this act of caretaking, *You & Yours* moves away from representing the "humanity" of Arabs and Muslims, particularly when "humanity" is constructed as a liberal human subjectivity that is compatible with the settler-imperialist state. By juxtaposing these texts, I am suggesting that a refusal to represent the humanity of Muslims is a refusal to accept the terms of engagement set by US empire. In this case, caretaking language necessitates a refusal to leave the logics of the settler-imperialist state unquestioned.

**"LOOK" & the Limits of Imperialist Recognition**

In *Look,* Solmaz Sharif undergoes this work of caretaking through her engagement with the Department of Defense's *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms.* This begins with the title of the collection itself, as a "look" is deadly; the title of the collection and its first poem serve as a reminder that for those who stand in the way of the United States' interests, representation is dangerous.

After this definition, the first poem, "LOOK," begins with "It matters what you call a thing: *Exquisite* a lover called me./ *Exquisite*."[83] Here, the speaker starts by invoking the *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms;* if it matters what you call a thing, the Department of Defense's terminology must be understood as more than

[83] Solmaz Sharif, "Look," lines 1-2, *Look* (Graywolf Press, 2016), 3-5.

military jargon. Instead, Sharif throws it into relief as the rhetoric that transforms war-making into tasks to be carried out and technology to be monitored.

Sharif continues, *"Exquisite a lover called me./ Exquisite.*" Here, the speaker is established as a thing, exquisite, and a lover all in one breath and simultaneously refuses the reader's gaze by naming herself "Exquisite." This refusal of the reader's gaze, along with the triad the speaker immediately establishes is particularly resonant after her assertion that, "it matters what you call a thing." The poem prompts readers to think that it matters that the lover calls the speaker exquisite. The word "exquisite" itself comes from the Latin word "exquīsītus," which is the past participle of "to search out."[84] In other words, the speaker has been "searched out." While this certainly resonates with "look" as it is used throughout the poem, it also adds a layer of ambiguity to the speaker's relationship to the lover. This ambiguity is made more salient when one considers that the lover seems to see the speaker as a thing. Readers are left to wrestle with whether being called "exquisite" is a positive thing here.

Regardless of this ambiguity, the initial thingification of the speaker signals the speaker's lack of stable lyric personhood. Sara Dowling argues that this intentional withholding of lyric personhood mirrors the withholding of legal personhood from racial nonpersons.[85] Sharif continues to mobilize this tension as the poem progresses.

[84] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v., "exquisite, adj. & n., Etymology", July 2023. https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1156618483.
[85] Sara Dowling, *Translingual Poetics: Writing Personhood Under Settler Colonialism* (University of Iowa Press, 2018), 58.

The news that the lover calls the speaker exquisite is immediately followed with, "Whereas, *Well, if I were from your culture, living in this country,/* said the man outside the 2004 Republican National/ Convention, *I would put up with that for this country*."[86] Here, Sharif disrupts the "I-Thou" structure of lyric poetry by interrupting the speaker with a snippet of how the speaker is spoken to. While Culler writes about apostrophes as a way to disrupt the "I-Thou" relationship, in this stanza, a direct address to the speaker interrupts her, as opposed to the speaker directly addressing the man.[87] This interruption of the speaker's voice both destabilizes the expectation of an "I-Thou" structure within the poem, as well as pointing to the speaker's inability to inhabit a coherent "I." Not only is the speaker made into a thing, but she is interrupted in her own poem. The result is a poem in which the speaker's inability to inhabit lyric personhood limits the reader's access to the speaker; instead of hearing the "I" speak to us, we are given access to the world around the "I" and the conditions of how the "I" is recognized and indeed, looked at. In this way, "Look" works as a mirror of sorts, reflecting the distance between the reader's position and the speaker, who is situated in what Dowling refers to as a "deeply unequal scene of articulation."[88]

For example, the man quoted from the 2004 Republican National Convention understands the speaker as being from a dangerous place, so much so that when she asks, "*You would put up with* TORTURE," he responds, "*Yes*."[89] According to this man, the

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[86] Sharif, "Look," lines 3-5.
[87] Culler, "Lyric, History, and Genre," 886.
[88] Sara Dowling, *Translingual Poetics: Writing Personhood Under Settler Colonialism* (University of Iowa Press, 2018), 24.
[89] Sharif, "Look," lines 6-7.

speaker should deal with any amount of violence that comes her way in order to secure the privilege of being in the United States instead of her nation of origin. The notion that the speaker should put up with torture also makes apparent the chauvinism underwriting this particular "unequal scene of articulation;" the speaker, a SWANA immigrant woman, speaking to an American nationalist.

Understood within this context, the speaker withholding her subjectivity from the reader can be read as a way to retain some autonomy within a scene of articulation that is otherwise characterized by the overdetermined narratives of being a SWANA and/or Muslim woman in the United States. By withholding her subjectivity from readers, the speaker shows the mechanisms by which US empire transforms her into a "thing." Through destabilizing the lyric subject in this way, Sharif flips the dynamic of deadly recognition on its head. Instead of the reader "looking" at the speaker, the speaker prompts readers to look at the world around her, which is born out of the violence of US empire and its War on Terror.

Furthermore, through constructing the speaker in this way, Sharif creates a triangulation between the speaker, who exists in obscurity, the violence of US empire, and the reader, who is prompted to consider their role within this world. The poem continues with, "Whereas what is your life," which returns in the last few stanzas as "Whereas *ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is/ your life?*"[90] The first iteration of this line directly addresses the reader. The speaker asks: what is your life? The

[90] Sharif, "Look,", line 8 and lines 47-49.

second iteration of this line comes from the Bible. The verse that Sharif quotes continues, "For ye are a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away."[91] Sharif rewrites the latter half of this quote when she follows the Bible verse with, "It is even a THERMAL SHADOW, it appears/ so little, and then vanishes from the screen."[92] Thus, not only does she quote the Bible but she rewrites a Bible verse to describe an act of war. In doing so, Sharif emphasizes war's overreach of power; the "vanishing" described in the Bible is not beyond the jurisdiction of humanity.

After this direct address, the speaker continues "looking" at the destruction of war in the next stanza. Sharif writes, "Whereas years after they LOOK down from their jets/ and declare my mother's Abadan block PROBABLY/ DESTROYED, we walked by the villas, the faces/ of buildings torn off into dioramas, and recorded it/ on a handheld camcorder."[93] This is the first point at which "LOOK" appears in the body of the poem. The speaker describes the "look" itself as having been years ago, followed by her mother's street being declared "probably destroyed." As readers quickly learn, the block remains very much destroyed years later, well after it was declared "PROBABLY DESTROYED." While Abadan was besieged by Iraqi forces during the Iraq-Iran War, Sharif references the carelessness with which the US "looks" at the SWANA region more broadly. The speaker recording the damage years later further emphasizes this carelessness; the destruction that is left behind after military violence compounds while the lives impacted by this violence are forgotten. Furthermore, the speaker "looks" at her

[91] James 4:14, NIV.
[92] Sharif, "Look," lines 48-49.
[93] Ibid., lines 9-11 .

mother's Abadan block both directly, as well as through the lens of her camcorder. In doing so, she further underscores the irreparable harm that can be done by a few seconds of military violence.

This irreparable harm is further critiqued in the next stanza when Sharif writes, "Whereas it could take as long as 16 seconds between/ the trigger pulled in Las Vegas and the Hellfire missile/ landing in Mazar-e-Sharif, after which they will ask/ *Did we hit a child? No. A dog.* they will answer themselves."[94] Just as a few seconds of "looking" causes years of damage on the Abadan block in the previous stanza, 16 seconds is all that stands between a child's mortality in Mazar-e-Sharif, even with the drone operators being on an entirely different continent. Once again, recognition only exists as a tool for military violence. Additionally, Sharif demonstrates how the United States is removed from the real life and long-term consequences of its violence. This distance is made especially drastic by rhetoric and technology designed to distance the United States from the violence it engenders. Once again, the speaker shows readers what happens when the US military "looks."

When the speaker and the people in her life do experience moments of more intentional recognition, they are bookended by various forms of state violence. For example, Sharif writes, "Whereas the federal judge at the sentencing hearing said/ *I want to make sure I pronounce the defendant's name/ correctly*."[95] Here, the act of pronouncing someone's name correctly, which in neoliberal discourses of multiculturalism is

[94] Sharif, "Look," lines 14-17.
[95] Sharif, "Look," lines 18-20.

understood as a sign of respect, is sentencing the "defendant" to what readers later learn is a detention center. Recognition and by extension, representation, become tools of capture even outside of the drone's-eye view.

This notion of recognition as capture continues when the speaker describes a moment with her lover:

> Whereas the lover made my heat rise, rise so that if heat
> sensors were trained on me, they could read
> my THERMAL SHADOW through the roof and through
> the wardrobe;[96]

Here, a moment of intimacy, which would presumably humanize the speaker, actually leaves her vulnerable in a landscape in which recognition is designed as a tool of destruction. Thus, the speaker is not even free from an imperial gaze in her own home with her lover. Moreover, this stanza reminds readers of how moments of intimacy, which in some ways act as a stand-in for sincere recognition in "LOOK" as our perception of the speaker is mediated by how the lover characterizes her, are always threatened by the material realities of imperialist violence. In other words, in the world of "LOOK," the deadly recognition of empire always lurks in the shadows of intimacy that would otherwise be a safe form of recognition. Even in her own home with her lover, the speaker is always situated within the unequal scene of articulation that renders her as someone to be monitored.

The poem then continues with an excerpt from the PBS documentary *The Wounded Platoon,* in which a US veteran explains that, "…*its not like seeing a dead body*

[96]Sharif, "Look," lines 24-27.

*walking/ to the grocery store here. its not like that. its iraq you know/ its iraq. its kinda like acceptable to see that there and not – it/ was kinda like seeing a dead dog or a dead cat lying—."*[97] Here, the veteran explains that seeing corpses in Iraq was "acceptable" and compares them to seeing dead dogs or cats; just as the dog killed by the missile in Mazar-e-Sharif, animals and civilians become indistinguishable. Here, Sharif points out the normalization of destructing the ambiguously brown and Muslim so-called Middle East – in this case, Iraq – to the US public.

Sharif follows this imagery with more dialogue from the man at the 2004 Republican National Convention. She writes, "Whereas I thought if he would LOOK at my exquisite face/ or my father's, he would reconsider;/ Whereas *You mean I should be disappeared because of my family/ name?* and he answered *Yes. That's exactly what I mean,/* adding that his wife helped draft the PATRIOT Act."[98] Here, the speaker implores the man to see her and her family's humanity but is instead met with the same gaze that "looks" in order to capture. Once again, the speaker does not have control over how she is perceived as both a threat to national security and a victim in need of Western intervention. Sharif repeatedly interrupts the logic of lyric poetry with the logic of war and empire because that is the

> faraway people kill people a few blocks away every so often, not all the time but often enough that on 9/11 you watched the towers fall from the window of your office building & left work before everyone screaming "go home & pray" could change their minds. less than an hour since you got to the city & already, a day off, so you thought, why not get some ice cream? but even the mcdonald's down the street was full of strangers with all of their limbs intact screaming "go home & pray."

[97] Sharif, "Look," lines 30-33.
[98] Ibid., lines 34-38.

speaker's reality. Not only does the man express that she should be punished because of her presumably Muslim-sounding name, he also adds that his wife helped draft the Patriot Act, which becomes central to the counter-terrorist infrastructure that is used to target Muslims for the sake of national security post-9/11.[99] Even when the veteran quoted from *The Wounded Platoon* and the man the speaker talks to come face to face with the consequences of the War on Terror, their "looking" simply functions to bolster national security, which relegates the speaker to either a respectable Muslim-American citizen, terrorist, or Poor Muslim Woman.[100] The poem, in other words, is a study in how the architecture of US empire is designed to buttress ways of understanding the so-called Muslim World that serve US military might. The speaker, her family, and the fullness of their world are precluded from Western understanding; even when the various figureheads of US empire dispersed throughout the poem look, they do not see the speaker and her community's lived realities.

> the city was running in circles & in the twelve hours it took you to land across the river, you realized that people here don't listen for death each day the way they do back home, they don't pray each time they leave their homes or eat from a new street vendor, they don't live like death is waiting for them to leave the bedroom door ajar just for a moment.

[99] This counter-terrorist surveillance in the United States is of course its own form of looking; from COINTELPRO to the Patriot Act, counter-terrorism in the United States has always worked to capture a racialized concept of terrorists.

[100] Sylvia Chan-Malik defines the Poor Muslim Woman trope in *Being Muslim: A Cultural History of Women of Color in American Islam.* She argues that its emergence is predicated on the erasure of Black Muslim women's' legacies in the United States (181).

Given this structure of looking in which one is only seen to be hunted, the speaker both refuses the readers' gaze and flips the dynamic towards the end of the poem. Sharif writes:

> Whereas *A dog*. they will say: Now therefore,
>
> Let it matter what we call a thing.
>
> Let it be the exquisite face for at least 16
>
> seconds.
>
> Let me LOOK at you.
>
> Let me LOOK at you in a light that takes years
>
> to get here.[101]

After evading the readers' gaze and pointing out how US empire refuses to acknowledge the reality of its violence, the speaker flips the dynamic of being looked at by demanding to look back at US empire. After beginning each stanza (beginning with the second stanza) with "whereas," "Now therefore,/ Let it matter what we call a thing" signals finality. In legal rhetoric, "whereas" clauses are part of preambles; in other words, they do not have any legal binding force. By mimicking the grammars of US bureaucracy, Sharif creates her own word of law within the poem. In this version of law, it does genuinely matter what we call a thing, so words

years later, you tell us this story over dinner & say, "don't tell anyone." you laugh when you talk about being the only person in the mcdonald's, the only one in all of lower manhattan who thought "may as well get a treat." five years in this country & still, you were too new to understand the fear of those around you as anything other than the kind of tantrums toddlers throw when their mothers leave the house without them, like they've just realized they're alone, that safety is not guaranteed.

[101] Sharif, "Look," lines 53-57.

cannot be used to obfuscate the truth, especially when the truth is harmful. The speaker demands to be seen outside of what is possible through a drone's-eye view and ultimately, she demands to look at those who "LOOK" at her in the interest of US empire. In other words, Sharif's "Look" refuses to be subsumed by a way of understanding representation and recognition in which recognition aims to capture.

**Conclusion**

you thought it was funny, the way you didn't get it, so i did too, thinking "who gets mcdonald's soft serve at 9:30 in the morning anyway?"
but really,
it's the body metabolizing grief like it's nothing, like it's water even, like 70 something% of you knows to keep moving at the first whiff of catastrophe, like it was just another tuesday.

By looking at Naomi Shihab Nye's *19 Varieties of Gazelle* and *You & Yours* alongside Solmaz Sharif's "Look," another question comes into focus: what are the potentialities of anti-imperialist critique in lyric poetry? To return to "A Poetry of Proximity," Sharif argues for the lyric's potential to move through the multiplicity of language we are both subjected to and create in order to better "enlarge and complicate the *I,* the *here,* the *we*."[102] In other words, Sharif argues that the caretaking of language via lyric poetry allows us to name what is otherwise obscured by that which maims language (ie: empire, war, borders, etc.). In a similar vein, Sara Dowling writes that lyric poetry has the potential to respond to the state by "turning away, refusing the state's terms of address while claiming ground from which to speak in a deeply unequal scene of articulation."[103] I argue that by refusing the terms of engagement set by US empire, Nye's

[102] Sharif, "A Poetry of Proximity."
[103] Dowling, *Translingual Poetics,* 24.

*You & Yours* and Sharif's *Look,* and indeed, a host of other Muslim* poets who follow in their legacies, turn away from an inclusion/exclusion framework that ultimately works to legitimize the state's imperialist-settler logic. Within the context of post-9/11 Muslim* poetry, this means refusing to understand the US state as a savior, even as it proclaims itself necessary to defend women and queer people from Islamic extremism. Instead, lyric poetry creates space for Solmaz Sharif to address the imperialist-settler state and declare, "Let me LOOK at you." In doing so, Nye and Sharif join a growing list of women and queer poets that push us to language a world beyond US forever wars and the coloniality which engenders them.

the grief in the air is different nowadays — it's thick & it's everywhere, shocking the sunsets into pink bright as sin. even when you don't stop to feel it, it finds you through masks, through distance. as everywhere as crows.

**Chapter 2:** Unsettling the Muslim: Religio-Racial Formation & Post-9/11 Anthologies

While Muslim American literature has grown into a field of its own in the wake of the War on Terror, the framing of Muslims in the United States as a singular and coherent community that necessitates uniquely Muslim American literary and cultural production is a contemporary phenomenon. In fact, the first anthology that refers to itself as a specifically "American Muslim" text was not published until 2002; *Taking Back Islam: American Muslims Reclaim Their Faith,* edited by American convert Micheal Wolfe, was a direct response to 9/11. In "Why Now? An Introduction," Wolfe goes as far as to assert that 9/11 "forced a reckoning of sorts" and suggests, "Ten years from now, this period may mark the time when American Muslims found their real voice."[104]

I begin with Wolfe writing about American Muslims' "real voice" not because *Taking Back Islam* is unique in its invocation of this voice but because it is instructive in understanding how "the Muslim American" coalesces in US literary and cultural production. Moreover, this chapter is interested in how the anthology becomes a site through which Muslim* writers in North America navigate the problematics of articulating a "Muslim American" literary tradition. While not all of the anthologies discussed in this chapter are strictly "literary," I consider anthologies as a site through which Muslim writers contend with the limitations of identification.
Specifically, this chapter argues that the notion of a multiracial Muslim American Literature emerges in the fallout of the War on Terror, when the notion of a singular

[104] *Taking Back Islam: American Muslims Reclaim Their Faith,* edited by Micheal Wolfe (Rodale Books, 2003), xiii.

Muslim American community — as opposed to the pluralistic reality of many Muslim communities in the United States —becomes a socio-cultural consequence of the representational imperative.

While the years after 9/11 saw an outpouring of Muslim American narrative meant to showcase Muslim realities for North American audiences and "the Post-9/11 Novel" is increasingly understood as its own literary subgenre, I focus on anthologies because of the breadth of what they are able to index. Bringing together essays, short stories, poems, etc. by a wide range of contributors, anthologies — much like poems — tell us a great deal about themselves by how they construct themselves as well as their content. Thus, in addition to thinking through the shifts in Muslim American literature as a field, this chapter thinks through the potentialities of anthologies to disrupt hegemonic notions of identity.

**On Anthologies**

Prior to 9/11, many of the anthologies that arguably do the work of archiving texts by Muslims in North America, such as *Post Gibran: Anthology of New Arab American Writing* or even *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing* do not refer to themselves as "Muslim American" anthologies. Instead, "Muslim American literature" is scattered across African American literature, Arab American literature[105], and Asian American literature. Given this historical context, this chapter is interested in the potential

[105] Arab American publications like *Mizna* still publish a great deal of Muslim* writing.*Mizna* in particular takes an expansive approach to Arab American culture, often publishing writers broadly from the SWANA region and so-called Muslim World.

of anthologies to either consolidate hegemonic notions of identity or disrupt them. Particularly since texts like the *Norton* anthologies function as tools of canonization, anthologies of multiethnic literatures can take on an almost sociological air of disseminating information about racialized others to a broader Western audience. While earlier Muslim American anthologies like *Taking Back Islam* seek to be representative of a "Muslim American voice," more contemporary anthologies like *Halal if You Hear Me* and *Reconstructed Magazine* reject the imposition of a white and/or non-Muslim gaze. Instead, they function as what I refer to as catalyst anthologies.

I situate catalyst anthologies within a tradition of anthologies by radical women of color. The term itself comes from Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa characterization of their landmark anthology *This Bridge Called My Back.* In the updated introduction, Moraga and Anzaldúa write that *This Bridge's* creation was intended as a "catalyst" for other women of color to create art and literature.[106] Cherríe Moraga speaks to the ethos of the seminal text when she writes, "It is not always a matter of the actual bodies in the room, but of a life dedicated to a growing awareness of who and what is *missing* in that room; and responding to that absence. *What ideas never surface because we imagine we already have all the answers?*"[107]

For Moraga and her collaborators, *This Bridge* was born out of an awareness of who was left out of mainstream feminist and racial justice spaces. Thus, even after its initial publication in 1981, it was never meant to be a neat explanation of women of color

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[106] Cherríe Moraga, "Catching Fire: Preface to the Fourth Edition," *This Bridge Called My Back,* edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, 4th edition (SUNY Press, 2015), xlvi.
[107] Moraga, "Catching Fire," *This Bridge Called My Back*, xix.

feminism or a coherent window into the experiences of women of color in the United States. According to Moraga's own reflections on the text, such as orientation would be limiting in its presumptions of its wholeness. Instead, its creation was intended as a catalyst for other women of color to create art and literature.[108] *This Bridge Called My Back* opened up space for anthologies that are attuned to "what ideas never surface" because hegemonic discourses have rendered the existing answers complete.

This framing of *This Bridge Called My Back* as a catalyst text differentiates it from anthologies that serve the pseudo-anthropological purpose of representing a marginalized group for mainstream consumption via readership. As Jodi Melamed argues, literary studies emerges as a key site through which neoliberal institutions produce a defanged antiracism.[109] Melamed offers race radicalisms, which explicitly contend with racial capitalism, as an alternative to this neoliberal multiculturalism.[110] While *This Bridge Called My Back* certainly has a materialist bent in its critique, here, I am interested in how Moraga and Anzaldúa's characterization of the text as a "catalyst" points to a more relational way of positioning *This Bridge* within literary and cultural production. The anthology is understood as a discursive opening, as opposed to a complete and self-contained text. In this way, anthologies become a genre through which editors and contributors engage in a participatory project.

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[108] Moraga, "Catching Fire," xlvi.
[109] Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 35.
[110] Melamed, *Represent and Destroy,* 35.

Mayumi Tsutakawa's landmark 1989 text, *The Forbidden Stitch: An Asian American Women's Anthology,* follows *This Bridge'*s lead in using the curation of an anthology as a participatory project. In her "Introduction," Mayumi Tsutakawa writes, "This is not a book with a shelf life of forever, as with many textbooks resembling packaged foods shot with preservatives. This anthology gladly serves as an invitation."[111] Crucially, both Tsutakawa's description of *The Forbidden Stitch* as an "invitation" and Moraga and Anzaldúa's insistence on *This Bridge* as a catalyst situate these anthologies within living and breathing communities.

I begin here, with a description of how *This Bridge Called My Back* and *The Forbidden Stitch* invite their communities in, in order to situate my discussion of how anthologies function as a site for negotiation of the post-9/11 representational imperative. While the anthologies that were written in the early to mid 2000s are explicit in their intention to represent "American Muslims" for American audiences, catalyst anthologies like *Halal if You Hear Me* and *Reconstructed Magazine* reject the representational imperative. In doing so, they expand the possibilities of how one can understand Muslim American literary and cultural production beyond the confines of Western legibility.

**Locating the "American" in American Muslim**

While various kinds of Muslim texts originating from North America and the United States specifically certainly existed, this distinction of *Taking Back Islam* being

[111] Mayumi Tsutakawa, "Introduction," *The Forbidden Stitch: an Asian American Women's Anthology,* edited by Shirley Lim, Mayumi Tsutakawa, and Margarita Donnell (Calyx Books, 1989), 14.

the first one to explicitly name itself as American Muslim marks a telling shift in the post-9/11 landscape of Muslim American literary and cultural production. This chapter thinks through what *Taking Back Islam* tells us about the conditions that produce Muslim American Literature as a field. To that end, this chapter is particularly interested in how Wolfe's anthology frames American Muslims finding "their voice" as a necessity, as well as how Islam is constructed as something that must be "reclaimed" by American Muslims. While *Taking Back Islam* is not unique in its approach to the representational politics of Islam post-9/11, it is instructive in understanding how "the Muslim" coalesces in U.S. literary and cultural production.

In "Why Now? An Introduction," Wolfe begins the anthology by reflecting on the predicament of Muslims in the United States listening to "anti-American fanatics" and "anti-Muslim bigots" decontextualize the Quran for their own ends. He writes about Muslims in the United States publicly countering these "distortions" and "bad translations," as well as the dialogues about discontentment with religious leadership in Muslim American homes and mosques.[112] While the period after 9/11 and the subsequent surveillance conducted in the name of national security certainly did send shockwaves through Muslim communities in the United States, I am interested in what Wolfe's assertion that this period of time would be remembered for fostering American Muslims "real voice" presupposes. Moreover, how does *Taking Back Islam* construct this "real

[112] Wolfe, "Why Now? An Introduction," *Taking Back Islam,* xi.

voice" and what does it tell us about how Muslim American literary and cultural production shifted in the wake of the War on Terror?

Firstly, and perhaps most tellingly, *Taking Back Islam* articulates the necessity of a unified voice for American Muslims, which the text frames as one community. In this way, it obscures the processes by which an American Muslim community was constructed from a landscape of racially and ethnically diverse Muslims with varied faith practices, communities, and relationships to North America. In discussing the growing interest in Arab American literature post-9/11, Salah Hassan argues that while hyphenated terms such as "Arab-American" serve to bridge the gap of racial otherness, their "net effect is political accommodation within the nation."[113] Taking this into account, *Taking Back Islam*'s insistence upon an American Muslim community functions as a bid for political accommodation within the settler-imperialist state. In other words, the anthology works to "take back" Islam from Muslims who may not be readily accommodated into the political reality of the United States. The "real voice" Wolfe identifies is the voice that is most legible to state-sanctioned multiculturalism.

Putting aside for a moment the fraught nature of identifying and describing one singular American Muslim community, Wolfe's description of how this imagined community's "real voice" grows is also riddled with its own contractions. He writes that the tendency of Muslims in the United States to "take cues from one's Motherland is strong" due to Islam being relatively new to the United States. He then continues, "*And*

[113] Salah D. Hassan, Marcy Jane Knopf-Newman, "Introduction," *MELUS*, vol. 31, no. 4 (December 2006): 4, https://doi.org/10.1093/melus/31.4.3.

*then there comes a moment to grow up.* For many American Muslims, that moment arrived in the weeks following September 11, when a substantial number grew disenchanted with the habit of looking abroad for leadership."[114] Under the surface of Wolfe's claim that 9/11 constituted a moment of "growing up" for Muslim Americans are several contradictions. Firstly, the notion of Islam being inherently decentralized and therefore open to various expressions of practice, which he mentions earlier in the introduction, grows at odds with the Muslim Americans' need to "grow up" and stop taking cues from "the Motherland." Secondly, the idea of Islam being new to the United States betrays a deeply incomplete understanding of how Europe's colonial relationship with Islam impacted notions of race that worked as vehicles through which the so-called New World was colonized. As Junaid Rana writes, both the Spanish and the English transposed notions of race that came out of their anti-Black racism against Muslim populations in North and West Africa onto Indigenous peoples in the Americas. Particularly in the sixteenth century, ideas of racial difference were inextricable from religious differences.[115] In other words, Muslims have always been a part of the boogieman of the "other" against which the United States was formed.

Additionally, this framing of American Muslims as needing to "grow up" and think beyond "the Motherland" erases the legacies of enslaved Black Muslims, as well as the various Black Muslim communities that shape the landscape of Islam in the United States in the 20th century. Despite the last section of the anthology being dedicated to

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[114] Wolfe, "Why Now? An Introduction," *Taking Back Islam,* xiii.

[115] Junaid Rana, *Terrifying Muslims: Race and Labor in the South Asian Diaspora* (Duke University Press, 2011), 38.

"The African-American Experience," the largely Black life of Islam in the United States is not figured into Wolfe's characterization of "American Muslim communities." The result is a construction of Muslim American identity that becomes increasingly common in Muslim American literary and cultural production post-9/11: broad characterizations of Muslims in North America are made with an assumption of SWANA or South Asian identity, while the ongoing radical legacies of Black Muslim communities are relegated to footnotes, disclaimers, or their own chapters. This kind of epistemological redlining is exemplified in the relationship between *Taking Back Islam*'s formulation of American Muslim identity as a whole and the content of its "The African-American Experience" section.

The first essay in the "African American Experience" section, following Wolfe's introduction, is Precious Rasheeda Muhammad's "'Oh Allah, Operate On Us!' Islam and the Legacy of American Slavery." Precious Rasheeda Muhammad writes about the legacy of Islam in Black communities in the United States. For many Black communities in the 20th century, Islam carried a liberatory potential that many felt was foreclosed from Christianity due to its colonial and anti-Black legacies in the West.[116] As Muhammad argues, the afterlives of chattel slavery are pivotal to the contours of how Black Muslim communities grew in the 20th century. Towards the end of the essay, Muhammad shifts into a discussion of what immigrant Muslim communities can learn from Black Muslims in the so-called US. She argues that Black Muslim Americans "mak[e] the universal

[116] Precious Rasheeda Muhammad, "'Oh Allah, Operate On Us!' Islam and the Legacy of American Slavery," *Taking Back Islam,* 134.

principles of Islam heard over any culture of origin."[117] Here, Muhammad appeals to what she argues is the universality of African American Muslimness. Notably, this universality is made possible by American identity, which is posited as the absence "any culture of origin," echoing Michael Wolfe's declaration that American Muslims must "stop taking cues from the Motherland." In many ways, this characterization itself is a sanitization of Black Muslim history.

Moreover, the universal humanity invoked by Precious Rasheeda Muhammad – and indeed, the universal humanity invoked in other essays within the "African American Experience" section – performs its own kind of epistemological redlining by neatly folding Black Muslims into a liberal humanist project. This formulation of Black Muslim American identity, in which Black Muslims are retroactively celebrated as examples that Islam is not inherently at odds with the West, also appears in Akbar Muhammad's "African-American, Muslim, and Loyal to the U.S," as well as Deborah Caldwell's "Muhammad Ali: The Reassuring Face of American Islam," in which Muhammad Ali's popularity within Muslim communities is celebrated while simultaneously removing Ali from the Black Power Movement he was situated within.[118] In pointing out these contradictions, my intention is to demonstrate that they sit at the core of any articulation of a coherent Muslim American community & its cultural production, particularly when the scene of articulation is as fraught as developing a "real American Muslim voice."

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[117] Precious Rasheeda Muhammad, "'Oh Allah, Operate On Us!' Islam and the Legacy of American Slavery," 135.
[118] Deborah Caldwell, "Muhammad Ali: The Reassuring Face of American Islam," *Taking Back Islam,* 146.

Another concept that sits at the core of *Taking Back Islam* is the notion that Islam must be "reclaimed" by American Muslims. Not only does the text insist upon a legible American Muslim community, it also firmly argues for this American Muslim community to reclaim Islam from both Islamic extremists and American Islamophobia. However, a great deal of how the anthology, and Wolfe's introduction in particular, articulate this need amount to Orientalist characterizations of the so-called Muslim World. Wolfe points to the "near extinction of Afghanistan at the hands of the Taliban" and the "abysmal state of education in Pakistan" as examples that "Islam's 'traditional lands' have less to teach us than they claim."[119] Here, Wolfe's descriptions of Afghanistan and Pakistan reflect an unwillingness to understand the historical context of the Taliban's rise to power, let alone the ongoing legacies of Western colonialism and imperialism. Thinking back to Naomi Shihab Nye's introduction for *19 Varieties of Gazelle,* this discourse of the so-called Muslim World's inherent violence was ubiquitous in the years immediately following 9/11. Of course, it continues to be ubiquitous to this day in contexts such as major US news outlets like the *New York Times* covering topics that Western audiences are conditioned to think of as always volatile and overly complicated, such as Israel's occupation of Palestine.[120] However, what sets Wolfe's remarks on American Muslim communities post-9/11 apart is the way in which he mobilizes Orientalism to create a distinction between Muslims in the United States and Muslims in the "Motherland." Central to the project of *Taking Back Islam* is claiming the "American" in "American

[119] Wolfe, "Why Now? An Introduction," *Taking Back Islam,* " xiii.
[120] Palestine is critical within this discussion because of how Zionism has instrumentalized Islamophobia to legitimize Israel's occupation of Palestinian land by framing the occupation as a religious dispute.

Muslim;" in Wolfe's introduction, this is done in part by separating Muslims in the United States from a global Ummah. In doing so, *Taking Back Islam* engages in a specifically American Muslim exceptionalism that leaves unchallenged US global power.

This American Muslim exceptionalism is further evidenced by Wolfe writing, "Many of the essays here are not about politics, and that in itself is significant."[121] While one can understand and sympathize with the context of Wolfe's statement (an environment in which Islam is hyper-politicized), it reveals an underlying ethos in which it is possible to create and publish an anthology entitled *Taking Back Islam: American Muslims Reclaim Their Faith* in 2002 without the project being inherently political. The "apolitical" becomes a cover for Western hegemony. Moreover, as Salah Hassan argues about potential of cultural criticism of Arab American literature to "challenge the political determination of Arab American subjectivity,"[122] writings on an American Muslim subjectivity have the potential to challenge the politicization of Muslim identity. Instead, *Taking Back Islam* insists on a political neutrality, thereby leaving the politicizing of Muslim identity and subjectivity unquestioned. In doing so, the text plays into the dynamic Nabine Naber refers to as a "political racism" in 2000, when she argues that Arabs in the US experience racism when they are politically active, especially in the case of Palestinian solidarity work.[123] According to Wolfe's framing of *Taking Back Islam,* there is a limit to how much political engagement is acceptable. Even Omid Safi's essay,

[121] Wolfe, "Why Now? An Introduction," *Taking Back Islam,* xiii.
[122] Hassan & Knopf-Newman, "Introduction," *MELUS*, 5-6.
[123] Naber, Nadine. "Ambiguous Insiders: An Investigation of Arab American Invisibility." Ethnic and Racial Studies 23.1 (2000): 37-61.

"Being Muslim, Being American After 9/11," which insists on the importance of being able to openly critique the US government, coaches this point by framing critique as a kind of patriotism.[124]

Interestingly, this insistence upon the apolitical within a heavily politically charged context appears in one of the anthology's essays entitled "Mom Raised Me A Zionist" by Mas'ood Cajee. In it, Cajee recounts his upbringing as a young Muslim in a South African community with a large Jewish population. He writes about how one of his friend's mothers gifted his mother the book *Zionist's Guide to Child Rearing,* which he describes as an innocuous parenting book. While he mentions the asymmetrical power dynamics in Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation (stones against war tanks), he also argues for increased interfaith understanding between Muslim and Jewish religious leaders as critical to addressing the violence in occupied Palestine, writing, "Breakthroughs on the spiritual and theological fronts by Muslims and Jews need to be achieved before peace can be had and violence quelled."[125] Cajee's essay ultimately frames Zionism as having the potential to be politically neutral and suggests that the Israeli occupation of Palestine could be solved through increased interfaith dialogue. In pointing this out, my intention is not to simply critique *Taking Back Islam*'s implied politics or to suggest that it is novel. Instead, my hope is that this analysis, when situated at the beginning of a discussion about Muslim American anthologies, demonstrates the way in which what Steven Salaita refers to as imperative patriotism, or the need for

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[124] Omid Safi, "Being Muslim, Being American After 9/11," *Taking Back Islam,* 67-75.
[125] Mas'ood Cajee, "Mom Raised Me A Zionist," *Taking Back Islam,* 168.

Muslims in the United States to perform patriotism in be granted legitimacy[126] drives much of the Muslim* writing published in North America immediately after September 11.

Moreover, implicit in Cajee's essay and in Wolfe's insistence on an American Muslim exceptionalism, in his introduction as well as in the anthology's organization, is an imperative patriotism that hinges upon settler-colonialism. In other words, just as Cajee's essay insists on Muslims being able to be Zionists, *Taking Back Islam* and the project of creating a "Muslim American voice" insists on American Muslims as legibly American in a way that does not threaten the settler-imperialist state. Here, I am arguing that Muslim American as an identity formation operates via settler-colonialism because it insists upon the American. In doing so, it wipes its hands clean of Indigenous land dispossession and genocide in favor of what Jodi Byrd refers to as an inclusion/exclusion framework.[127] By insisting on the "Americanness" of American Muslims, *Taking Back Islam* ultimately functions as a plea for "political accommodation" of Muslims within a US body politic.

The second specifically "American Muslim" anthology to be published was *Living Islam Out Loud: American Muslim Women Speak.* The 2005 anthology was edited by Saleemah Abdul-Ghafur, a Black Muslim woman who founded *Azizah,* the first magazine for North American Muslim women, in 2000. In addition to her work with *Azizah,* she was also pivotal in a movement to increase women's spaces in US mosques. Other

[126] Salaita, Steven, "Ethnic Identity and Imperative Patriotism: Arab Americans Before and After 9/11," *College Literature* 32, no. 2 (2005): 154.
[127] Jodi Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Empire,* xxvi.

contributors span a wide range of Muslim women and include Black Muslim scholar Su'ad Abdul-Khabeer and writers such as Mohja Kahf and Sham-e-Ali al-Jamil, who continue to be prominent figures in their overlapping literary and artistic communities.

In her introduction, Abdul-Ghafur speaks to the text's larger political and cultural context. Much like Wolfe, she mentions the impact of the post-9/11 moment; she writes:

> The paradox of September 11, 2001, is that it firmly and forever established Islam and Muslims in the eyes of the West. Muslims have been in the West for centuries, and in ever-increasing numbers since the mid-twentieth century, but the tragic events of 9/11 created an unparalleled awareness of our presence.[128]

Abdul-Ghafur's characterization of the increased visibility of Muslims in the West after 9/11 as a "paradox" is a departure from Wolfe's description of the post-9/11 moment in *Taking Back Islam*. As Abdul-Ghafur describes it, the "unparalleled awareness" of Muslims in the United States always sits in tension with the reality of this awareness' absence before 9/11. Moreover, the steadily growing number of Muslim communities in the US during the twentieth century is situated as inseparable from a post-9/11 understanding of American Muslims. In beginning the collection with a discussion of this paradox, Abdul-Ghafur avoids collapsing the complexities of American Muslim women's histories and continued experiences.

*Living Islam Out Loud* also avoids the discursive flattening *Taking Back Islam* slips into through its use of autobiographical texts. Each contribution in the text is a personal narrative or, in Su'ad Abdul-Khabeer's case, a poem. In most of them, the

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[128] Saleemah Abdul Ghafur, "Introduction," *Living Islam Out Loud: American Muslim Women Speak* (Beacon Press, 2005): 2.

writers reflect on their own relationships to Islam and faith more broadly, with the topics ranging from marriage, coming to terms with queerness, interfaith relationships, hijab, intersecting identities, and more. Thus, unlike *Taking Back Islam,* none of the anthology's contributions work to address a Western readership on how American Muslims can reclaim Islam. Instead, the focus is on the personal experiences of a diverse range of Muslim women in the United States. When describing what sets her generation of American Muslim apart, Abdul-Ghafur writes:

> This book is about the first true generation of American Muslim women. That is, for the first time in history, we have a critical mass of women under forty years old, raised as Muslims in the United States by parents who themselves struggled to reconcile their American and Muslim identities. We have never lived without Islam, nor did we grow up in Muslim-majority countries.[129]

Here, Abdul-Ghafur asserts that her generation of American Muslim women are the first "true generation" of American Muslim women because of the sizable increase in the Muslim population in the United States towards the end of the twentieth century. As Abdul-Ghafur writes, the majority of the American Muslim population consisted of Black Muslims for centuries. While as of 2005, Black Muslims still represented the largest demographic of Muslims in the US, the number of Arab and South Asian Muslims also grew expeditiously. Thus, the "first true generation" *Living Islam Out Loud* writes with, about, among, and to is marked by its plurality. Moreover, their experiences have been marked by having to negotiate a politicized religious identity in the United States.

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[129] Abdul-Ghafur, "Introduction," *Living Islam Out Loud,* 4.

Taking Adbul-Ghafur's description of this "first true generation" as our point of departure, the title of the anthology is telling in its approach to the representational imperative. Unlike *Taking Back Islam, Living Islam Out Loud* does not seek to change Islam or Muslims in the United States. Instead, it simply seeks to recount how some American Muslim women live out their faith. While Abdul-Ghafur writes that the book's intention is partially to humanize Muslims for Western audiences, she also writes, "I hope that in hearing our stories, the masses of women who fear judgment and condemnation will find permission to claim their own experiences and a self-determined future."[130] In this way, *Living Islam Out Loud* serves as a testimony of what self-determination looks like for Muslim women who have been denied it from both their own communities and from the white supremacy which structures daily life in the United States.

For example, Samina Ali writes about her traditional Hyderabadi upbringing, which she ultimately distances herself from when she moves to San Francisco and marries a non-Muslim man. Since she was taught her lifestyle was incompatible with Islam, she distanced herself entirely from her faith as well, until she was exposed to Sufism. When recounting this experience, Ali writes, "For the first time in my life, someone had said what I had known since girlhood: God is not high up in heaven, an entity to which we bowed and prayed and worshiped. God is all around us, within us, outside us."[131] Through finding Sufism, Ali finds a way to practice her faith in a self-determined manner. She does not assert Sufism over the Shi'ism she was raised in;

[130] Abdul-Ghafur, "Introduction," *Living Islam Out Loud,* 6.
[131] Samina Ali, "How I Met God," *Living Islam Out Loud,* edited by Saleemah Abdul-Ghafur, 32.

instead, she presents her own journey with faith, which sits in its own specificities without having to be generalizable to all Muslims in the United States. Similarly, in "On the Edge of Belonging," Khalida Saed writes about how she reconciled her faith with her queerness and how her search for community led to her being on the board of Al-Fatiha Foundation, the first global advocacy group for LGBTQ Muslims.

*Living Islam Out Loud*'s insistence on the plurality of American Muslim women and its focus on memoir and personal narrative leads to a drastically different text than its predecessor, *Taking Back Islam.* By offering a variety of reflections by American Muslim women on their lived experiences, the text unsettles many assumptions about "the Muslim" that begin to crystallize in US discourses after 9/11. For example, the text leaves no room for an understanding of Muslims in the United States as mostly ambiguously brown, as Abdul-Ghafur explicitly writes about Black Muslims being the largest group of American Muslims. She also writes about her own upbringing as the daughter of Sunni converts, which disrupts assumptions that most Black Muslims are in the Nation of Islam.

Additionally, the women in *Living Islam Out Loud* reflect a multitude of attitudes around sexuality and faith, from women who are content in more traditional marriages, to women in interfaith relationships, to queer women. Particularly as the years after 9/11 came with the emergence of US sexual exceptionalism,[132] the notion that practicing Muslim women could have self-determined sexualities disrupts the imperialist myths that are posited as justification for US militarism. Thus, if the post-9/11 production of "the

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[132] Jasbir Puar coins sexual exceptionalism to describe the process by which LGBTQ people are absorbed into a heteronormative US national life. (*Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times,* Duke University Press, 2007).

Muslim" in the United States relies upon the erasure of Black Muslims, Orientalist tropes, and the notion of Muslims as sexually repressed and backwards, *Living Islam Out Loud* does away with this figuration of "the Muslim" entirely.

Despite *Living Islam Out Loud*'s emphasis on the diversity of American Muslim women, it still insists upon the importance of an "American Muslim identity." Specifically, Abdul-Ghafar emphasizes the importance of Muslim women in the United States having self-determination in how they practice their faith within a non-Muslim majority country. In other words, a great deal of what coheres "American Muslim women" here are the complexities of being in a heavily racialized and politicized religious minority. Still, none of the texts within *Living Islam Out Loud* specifically address the "American" within American Muslim. In this way, the "American Muslim" in *Living Islam Out Loud* is configured as a material consequence of the growing number of Muslims in the United States. Thus, the anthology is less interested in representing "American Muslim" as a coherent category and more interested in exploring the nuances of how Muslim women in the United States practice their faith despite challenges.

Interestingly enough, the earliest two anthologies discussed in this chapter are the only ones that use "American Muslim" as opposed to "Muslim Americans," which has since become the common term. In pointing out this discursive shift, I am suggesting that the work done by *Taking Back Islam, Living Islam Out Loud,* and other texts focused on representing "American Muslims" in the early years of the War on Terror was pivotal in the formation of "Muslim American" identity.

**Catalyst Anthologies**

*Halal if You Hear Me* was touted as the first anthology of its kind when Haymarket published it in 2019. It was described as an anthology of mostly poetry with some essays and short stories by Muslim women and queer Muslims. Safia Elhillo and Fatimah Asghar's introductions each take their own approach to introducing the collection, which is marked by its plurality. Echoing the introduction of *The Forbidden Stitch,* which rejects the imposition of being read as a complete representation of Asian American women, *Halal if You Hear Me* does not seek to offer a singular representation of Muslims; instead, the collection is meant to mirror the diversity of Muslims in North America, while extending particular care to those who are left at the margins of Muslim communities. Ashgar characterizes this as, "the hijabis, the haraamis, the uncovered, the gender-nonconforming, the queer, the married, the never-married, the virgins, the non-virgins, the brown, the black, the white, the yellow" while Elhillo writes, "The poems and essays in this anthology are the Muslim community I didn't know I was allowed to dream of." In seeking to bring together a community that is often tasked with explaining itself, *Halal if You Hear Me* builds on the tradition of catalyst anthologies exemplified by *This Bridge Called My Back* and *The Forbidden Stitch.*

*Halal if You Hear Me* differs from previous anthologies meant to represent Muslim American communities because much like *This Bridge* and *The Forbidden Stitch,* it is uninterested in "representing the humanity" of Muslim American communities to a

Western audience. Instead, since its inception, the collection has sought to open up discursive space for Muslims who are often left at the margins of Muslim communities in North America.

*Halal if You Hear Me*'s intentional unsettling of "the Muslim" begins with its editors and the way in which they solicited contributions. According to the call for submissions, Fatimah Asghar and Safia Elhillo approached the anthology's curation with the goal of "dispel[ling] the notion that there is one correct way to be a Muslim, particularly for women, gender non-conforming, and trans people."[133] This goal ultimately amounted to a refusal to reify dichotomous understandings of Muslims in the West. In an interview with *The Rumpus,* Fatimah Asghar explains that the call for submissions was shared widely on social media in an effort to reach writers outside of traditional institutional settings.[134] In this way, the production of the text itself embodied a race radical ethic; Asghar and Elhillo approached *Halal if You Hear Me*'s curation with an attention to the material realities which have limited Muslim writers' ability to publish and circulate their work. As a result of this intentionally disruptive approach to creating the anthology, *Halal if You Hear Me* has several contributions from people who emerged as writers in part because of the anthology. For example, "Queer Brown Futures (Or Lack Thereof)" was Lamya H's first piece in print. Since then, they have written a memoir entitled *Hijab Butch Blues*, as well as publishing an essay in *New Moons: Contemporary*

[133] "call for submissions," Safia Elhillo, https://safia-mafia.com/post/150825645449/call-for-submissions-for-a-new-anthology-halal-if.
[134] Levi Todd, "Talking Haram Auntie Poetics: A Conversation with Fatimah Asghar," *The Rumpus,* April 29, 2019, https://therumpus.net/2019/04/29/the-rumpus-interview-with-fatimah-asghar/.

*Writing by North American Muslims.* In many ways, if *Living Islam Out Loud* marked a "critical mass" of American Muslim women coming of age post-9/11, *Halal if You Hear Me* marks a critical mass of queer Muslims who write openly about the complexities of their identities in North America. While Ashgar and Elhillo's anthology certainly is not the only notable queer Muslim text to emerge in the last few years, its publication and popularity mark a shift in which queer Muslims in the United States become increasingly visible through literary and cultural production.

Much like *Living Islam Out Loud,* a great deal of the writing in *Halal if You Hear Me* which contends with the problematics of performing Muslim identity in the West takes shape through autobiographical pieces. Elhillo's foreword, entitled "Good Muslim/ Bad Muslim," begins the book with such a critique. Elhillo discusses a different "good Muslim, bad Muslim" dichotomy from the one described by scholars such as Evelyn Alsultany, in which good and bad Muslims are differentiated by their allegiance to the settler-imperialist state.[135] Instead, Elhillo writes about how she did not have a Muslim community growing up because she was afraid of "performing [her] identity incorrectly." She continues to write about how nuances in Muslim identity seemed to only be available to the men she knew growing up, while women were simply regarded as "religious or secular."[136] She writes about how this gendered policing of Muslim women prevented her from feeling connected to her faith, as fear of judgment often took precedence over

[135] Evelyn Alsultany, *Arabs Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation After 9/11* (NYU Press, 2012), 72.
[136] Safia Elhillo, "Foreword: Good Muslim / Bad Muslim," *Halal if You Hear Me: The Breakbeat Poets Volume 3,* ed. Fatimah Asghar and Safia Elhillo. (Chicago: Haymarket, 2019), xii.

spiritual curiosity. Nadine Naber writes about the dynamics of inter-community policing Elhillo describes as a phenomenon of Arab diasporas; Arab communities in the West, or in the case of Elhillo, the Sudani community she was raised in, veer towards social conservatism as a way to prevent the "Westernization" of their children and communities.[137] However, as Gayatri Gopinath writes, the task of maintaining the traditional bounds of heteropatriarchy falls upon women.[138] Thus, when Elhillo writes, "this anthology demonstrates the sheer cacophony of Muslimness, of Muslim identities, of Muslim people,"[139] she points to the ways in which *Halal if You Hear Me* exists outside these fraught understandings of how one can properly be Muslim.

Asghar's preface, "Finding the Hammam," offers the hammam, or Turkish bath, as a way to imagine a world beyond the dual violences of Islamophobia and cisheteropatriarchy. She writes about her experiences of the women's hammam she frequented during her time living in Jordan. It offered a respite from street harassment and judgment for being a "haraami"[140]; in the hammam, hijabis and non-hijabis alike spent hours bathing and talking to each other openly without the weight of being watched as a woman in public spaces. Asghar refers to it as a place that "was nothing short of magic,"[141] and writes, "Let us create a poetics that recreates the hamaam, where we can come in our real, naked skin, sit in the water, and talk openly."[142] This poetics that

[137] Nadine Naber, *Arab America: Gender, Cultural Politics, and Activism* (NYU Press, 2012), 5,
[138] Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Duke University Press, 2005), 12.
[139] Safia Elhillo, "Foreword: Good Muslim / Bad Muslim," *Halal if You Hear Me,* xii.
[140] Fatimah Asghar, "Foreword: Finding the Hammam," *Halal if You Hear Me,* xv.
[141] Ibid., xv.
[142] Ibid., xvi.

recreates the hammam suggests a kind of text that is entirely different from *Taking Back Islam* or even *Living Islam Out Loud.* Instead, *Halal if you Hear Me* is not concerned with how non-Muslims, Westerners, or Americans understand Muslims. In a sense, the anthology "takes back" Muslim identity from the representational imperative to "take back" Islam from terrorism. Asghar proclaims that such a poetics creates space in which those at the margins of Muslim communities "can live, exist, and make our own freedoms."[143] This openness is reflected in the range of texts included within the anthology, from Juniper Cruz's "After the Orlando Shooting" to Rasha Abdulhadi's "Nakba Day Dance."

Juniper Cruz's "After the Orlando Shooting" begins with a contradiction. The poem's subtitle reads, "On being of the same origin as both the victim and the shooter." For Cruz, an Afro-Latinx trans woman, this seems like a factually inaccurate statement, as the victims of the Pulse Nightclub Shooting, the "Orlando shooting" she references, were largely Black and Latinx queer people while the shooter was an Afghan-American Muslim man. By being "of the same origin," Cruz is referring to being both queer and Muslim. This "origin" is thus a space of multiple origins. Also, by referring to being Muslim as an origin, Cruz points out the way in which Muslim identity is constructed in American discourses as an ethnic or national origin, since Muslims are perceived as predominantly Middle Eastern or South Asian. Also, Islamophobic rhetoric understands Muslims as being sexually repressed and rigid, and consequently, exclusively

[143] Asghar, "Foreword: Finding the Hammam."

heterosexual. In other words, within the dominant American imagination, Muslims cannot be Afro-Latinx or queer. Thus, in including the subtitle "On being of the same origin as both the victim and the shooter," Cruz troubles the hegemonic boundaries placed around the origins of Muslim people in the United States and directly criticizes the discursive erasure of queer Muslims. From this space of multiplicity of origins and discursive invisibility, the poem begins.

To further complicate this question of origin, the first stanza of Juniper Cruz's "After the Orlando Shooting" takes cues from Alejandra Pizarnik's "A Dream in Which Silence is Golden." The stanza, which is labeled with the Roman numeral "I" to mark it as section one of four, reads, "I've had this dream before,/ the one in which I am naked/ and wear a necklace of bullets/ and drag my dead body,/ also naked and full of stones."[144] This basic conceit of the dream self dragging the dead self comes from Pizarnik, who writes:

> El perro del invierno dentellea mi sonrisa. Fue en el
> puente. Yo estaba desnuda y llevaba un sombrero con flores
> y arrastraba mi cadáver también desnudo y con un sombrero
> de hojas secas.
> He tenido muchos amores — dije — pero el más hermoso
> fue mi amor por los espejos.[145] [146]

In taking this concept of the dream self and the dead self from Pizarnik and bringing it to life, Cruz activates the intertext as another origin from which the poem emerges. Within

[144] Juniper Cruz, "After the Orlando Shooting," in *Halal if You Hear Me: The Breakbeat Poets Volume 3,* ed. Fatimah Asghar and Safia Elhillo. (Chicago: Haymarket, 2019), 65.
[145] Alejandra Pizarnik, "Un Sueño Donde el Silencio es de Oro," in *La Extracción de la Piedra de Locura: Otras Poemas* (Madrid: Visor Libros, 1999), 55).
[146] [The dog of winter gnaws at my smile. It goes to the/ bridge. I was naked and wore a hat with flowers/ and dragged my corpse also naked and with a hat/ of dry leaves./ I have had many loves — I said — but the most beautiful/ was my love of mirrors.]

the context of Pizarnik's work and legacy as a Latin American poet, it is worth asking how her position as an intertextual origin for Cruz's poem shifts or expands the speaker's "origins." As Lowry Pressly describes in the *Los Angeles Review of Books,* Pizarnik's work is often overshadowed in literary criticism and in the public imagination more broadly by her suicide, much like Sylvia Plath.[147] This perception of her work as the textual remnants of hysteria haunts the movement of her poetry through the spaces, and subsequently, the readers it reaches. Thus, when understanding "A Dream in Which Silence is Golden" as both intertext and origin, it is important to consider how the misogynistic narratives that haunt Pizarnik's work are at play within the ecology of Cruz's poem. Instead of asking how Pizarnik's poetry serves as material evidence of depression and self-destruction, one can question the structures of harm that killed Pizarnik. Similarly, within Cruz's poem, one can ask how the speaker is embedded within structures that render them always already dead.

In the first stanza of "After the Orlando Shooting," Cruz places her readers in a dream that the speaker has had before. In other words, the speaker is in familiar territory in the remainder of the stanza. This sense of being in a place they have been before is especially salient considering the title of the poem and the subtitle which follows it. Cruz begins her poem that is specifically about being a queer Muslim in the aftermath of the Pulse Nightclub Shooting with "I've had this dream before."[148] Thus, the concerns regarding homophobia and the usual Islamophobic backlash in the wake of such tragedies

[147] Lowry Pressly, "There is Someone Here who is Trembling," *Los Angeles Review of Books,* June 26, 2016, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/there-is-someone-here-who-is-trembling/.
[148] Cruz, "After the Orlando Shooting," 65.

executed at the hands of so-called fundamentalists, as well as the added juggernaut of accusations of particularly virulent homophobia in Muslim communities are all brought to the forefront and then swiftly followed by a line which communicates that none of this is new.

In the familiar dream Cruz begins with, the speaker, just like Pizarnik's speaker, is naked and dragging their dead body. However, instead of a hat with flowers, the dream self wears a necklace of bullets. The bright and beautiful hat with flowers is traded for something that arms the dream self, in addition to positioning the dream self as a threat to those around them. Similarly, the dead body the dream self drags switches Pizarnik's hat of dry leaves for a body full of stones. While Pizarnik's image brings to mind death and natural decay, Cruz's image of a body full of stones creates a body that is weighed down by itself. Additionally, readers are reminded of people that are stoned to death, especially for actions deemed morally and socially reprehensible. Thus the dream self and the dead self are further complicated by how both are pulled into images of violence. Both bullets and stones are especially strong images because of how they incorporate a contemporary lexicon of gun violence and mass shootings, as well as persecution at the hands of religious extremists. In having the dream self wear a necklace of bullets and drag the dead self full of stones, Cruz drags shootings and stonings into her poem.

Part II of the poem, subtitled "*To My Dead Self,*" begins, "The night of your neck/ carries bolts of lightning,/ that cackle through you."[149] Here, the night of your neck seems

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[149] Cruz, "After the Orlando Shooting," 65.

to refer to the night of your death. The necklace of bullets from the previous stanza echoes into this line and one can infer that the dead self was killed. This death, however, has an afterlife that extends beyond the dead self. Cruz continues, "The night of your back/ is full of exit wounds/ the color of stars."[150] Here, the back is riddled with bullet holes. However, they open up to the celestial, which suggests a life beyond the corporal end of the dead self. This stanza is then followed by a couplet which reads, "I hold you,/ the light bleeds through my fingertips."[151] Here, the speaker/dream self holds the dead self and in doing so, they seem to be sharing in the death of the dead self. While the dead self is dead, the dream self is experiencing an extinguishing of their own as they lose grip of the dead self. Part II then ends in three monostichs, the first of which is "The night of your night beautiful."[152] Given the previous lines, readers can assume the "night of your night" is the night of the dead self's death. The night of the dead self's death is thus made beautiful, much like the love of mirrors Pizarnik writes about. This line is followed by "The night belongs to you."[153] Cruz takes the dead self's death, which was entirely out of their control, and transforms it into a beautiful moment that the dead self seizes ownership of. She then ends this section of the poem with "I am sorry."[154] The death of the dead self is both a beautiful moment that opens up to the heavens and an event necessitating an apology. Through these monostichs, Cruz negotiates a faith-based understanding of the afterlife in which it is both inevitable and a space of further

[150] Cruz, "After the Orlando Shooting."
[151] Ibid.
[152] Ibid.
[153] Ibid.
[154] Ibid.

possibilities, as well as the inherent worldly injustice of the manner in which the dead self dies.

Part III of the poem is entitled "*The First Time I Made Love to a Man*." In this section, Cruz takes us away from the dream self and dead self and the scene of the dead self's death. This section, which consists of one quintet, begins with "It was Summer."[155] By starting this section in the summer, Cruz takes us as far away from Pizarnik's winter bridge as possible. This brings the speaker to a place where she can smile safely. The poem continues, "and the clouds thinned themselves across the sky."[156] Not only is the speaker in the Summer, but the poem opens up to a summer day. This is a stark contrast to the "night of your night" Cruz describes in the previous section, in which the dream self mourns the loss of the dead self. In the first two lines of this stanza in which Cruz describes the aftermath of a queer sexual awakening, not only are they alive but they are alive in the summertime with clear skies. At this juncture, the speaker has not yet reached the point where they have too much body to be understood and held within one person. Cruz then continues, "After we finished/ I thought the sky would fill itself with stones./ Instead, the day continued on as it would."[157] Here, the speaker reveals an expectation of being weighed down by the sin of queer sex and is instead met with a sunny and clear day. Notably, "After we finished" is the only mention of the man or the sex itself. This is also the only moment in which "after" appears in the poem other than the title. Thus, while the speaker finds themselves in a recurring dream "after the Orlando shooting,"

[155] Cruz, "After the Orlando Shooting."
[156] Ibid.
[157] Ibid.

after they engage in queer sex, they just find themselves continuing on with their day. This section is also the only one that does not take place in a dreamscape and instead describes an actual event. Thus, the only moment of presumed reality Cruz includes in the poem is one of joy.

The fourth and final section of the poem repeats the first stanza. Its placement right after the stanza in which the speaker has queer sex signals the ever-present nature of this dream they describe. For this speaker, the dream self is always dragging the dead self. The repetition of this stanza also enacts the mirroring that Pizarnik suggests through the "love of mirrors." Cruz takes this "love of mirrors" and holds a mirror up to the speaker's recurring dream. In order to understand the possible implications of this, it helps to return to when Pizarnik writes that her most beautiful love of all is her love of mirrors. Particularly within the context of a dream self dragging a dead self, a love of mirrors suggests an insistence on reveling in being alive. If Pizarnik's love of mirrors is a love of the live self, the question then becomes what does Cruz enable by mirroring this stanza within her poem? What is the truth that poem holds up through this doubling effect? The recurring dream the poem describes seems to be articulating the way in which queer Muslim subjectivity is always punctuated by how its material reality exists outside of discursive understandings of Muslim people always being sexually repressed and queer people always being secular, as Jasbir Puar details in *Terrorist Assemblages*.[158] In mirroring this stanza within the poem, Cruz emphasizes this taxonomic excessiveness but

[158] Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, 23.

simultaneously insists on its marginal role within the speaker's day to day life by relegating it to a dream, unlike the first time the speaker makes love to a man.

Still, despite their status as dream objects, the dream self and dead self carry a weightiness. The poem continues, "I am so close to death./ I listen to it/ and hear myself./ My body will never be remembered."[159] Here, the speaker exists in a state of always being close to death and as a consequence, always having to understand and process their mortality. Even after dying, the dead self experiences a secondary death that occurs when no one remembers them. In Cruz's recurring dream, there is always a self that is forgotten because the self always exists in an excess that is not legible to hegemonic understandings of queerness and Muslimness. Thus, the speaker is always navigating being forgotten within public discourses.

Despite the somber note on which the poem ends, its insistence on how the speaker's body will not be remembered is within itself an intervention in this discursive forgetting. Throughout the poem, Cruz breaks open the discursive frameworks through which queer people and Muslims are positioned as diametrically opposed and forces readers to acknowledge the multitude of her "origins." While the poem remains cynical regarding this lack of discursive acknowledgement, Cruz still leaves room for joy in the only stanza that does not center the recurring dream, the section entitled "*The First Time I Made Love to Man.*" This part of the poem describes the aftermath of the only overtly queer event that takes place within the body of the poem. Notably, it ends on a hopeful

[159] Cruz, "After the Orlando Shooting," 66.

note with “Instead, the day continued on as it would.”[160] This is particularly salient within the context of the poem’s entirety because it allows the speaker and their partner to live within the summer day without the threat of violence. Even though the speaker’s position within larger structures is one of precarity and invisibility as a queer Muslim, they are able to live through the end of the day when they are engaging with other queer people. In other words, the interaction between the speaker and their lover is kept safe from harm. In this way, Cruz builds in a refuge of sorts for the queer Muslim subject while simultaneously indicting hegemonic understandings of queer people and Muslim people that render queer Muslims invisible.

Within the context of post-9/11 Muslim American anthologies, Cruz’s “After the Orlando Shooting” demonstrates *Halal if You Hear Me’*s salience in creating literature without the need to explain oneself within the confines of “the Muslim” as a religio-racial formation or through the limiting frameworks of neoliberal representation.

If *Halal if You Hear Me* explicitly states its intention to “recreate the poetics of the hammam” and build a text reflecting the pluralistic reality of Muslim communities in North America, *Reconstructed Magazine* sidesteps any explanations for non-Muslim readers entirely and jumps right into building a transnational text with such a “hammam poetics.” As described in its first volume, “Light Upon Light,” *Reconstructed Magazine* is “a creative magazine and conversation space between all Muslims, including Muslim-heritage folks and individuals with evolving proximity to Islam, that recognizes

[160] Cruz, “After the Orlando Shooting,” 65.

religion to be a non-linear journey. Our magazine assumes our humanity and uplifts those who have been most marginalized within, and outside of, the Muslim Ummah."[161] Specifically, *Reconstructed* uplifts the writing and visual art of Black, Shia, queer, and disabled Muslims. Unlike the other texts discussed in this chapter, it does not focus on North America; instead, its editors and contributors include Muslims from all over the world, although most of them are based in North America or the UK.

*Reconstructed*'s first volume begins with the magazine's editorial team interviewing Islamic Studies scholar Omid Safi about *Radical Love,* a collection of poems from the Sufi tradition that Safi translated with a keen eye towards the poems' religious and spiritual context.[162] During the interview, Safi says, "When I think of *Reconstructed magazine*, my hope is that it is not a place to define ourselves negatively."[163]

He then elaborates by saying:

> We, as Muslims, are now going on more than 40 years being asked to prove our very basic humanity. People talk about how we should be profiled, placed under surveillance, and we keep trying to tell them, 'no, but we are doctors and engineers.' We are among the most educated immigrants -- even though many of us are not even immigrants. But, what if we weren't all of that?[164]

Safi urges for Muslim art that works beyond the representational imperative. In expressing his hopes for *Reconstructed* as a space where Muslims do not define

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[161] *Reconstructed Magazine,* Volume 1: "Light Upon Light," edited by Anissa Abdel-Jelil and Sarah Hakani (May 2019), https://www.reconstructedmag.com/vol-1-light-upon-light.

[162] As Safi explains, translations of Sufi poetry, particularly in English, have a tendency to secularize the poems or otherwise minimize the salience of the religious and spiritual context of Sufism.

[163] "Omid Safi: On 'Radical Love,'" *Reconstructed Magazine,* vol. 1, 4.

[164] "Omid Safi: On 'Radical Love,'" *Reconstructed Magazine.*

themselves negatively, Safi points to the potentialities of Muslim art in the West that works beyond a white/non-Muslim gaze. As a text, both volumes of *Reconstructed Magazine* do just that. As opposed to justifying identitarian concerns such as why they chose the writing and art included in the magazine, *Reconstructed* simply encourages its readers to "see a multiplicity of realities within Islam."[165] *Reconstructed*'s ability to sidestep the white/non-Muslim gaze is in part because of its transnational nature. Both the editorial staff and the contributors reflect the geographical diversity of the global Muslim Ummah. Moreover, as a text, *Reconstructed* is not concerned with speaking to a nationally determined readership. This frees the text to extend beyond the confines of Western hegemony.

The slow shift in North American Muslim anthology towards writing beyond the representational imperative is perhaps most explicit in *New Moons: Contemporary Writing by North American Muslims.* Edited by queer Muslim poet Kazim Ali, this collection was published in 2021 and consists of poetry, short stories, essays, memoir, etc. In his introduction, Kazim Ali wastes no time addressing the anthology's relationship to fraught expectations of coherent representation. He begins by writing:

> At the outset, I want to suggest that the project of this anthology may run counter to the most common purposes of such anthology, which would normally be to suggest an arc or trajectory or a range of common interests of Muslim writers. But it is hard to say what a 'Muslim' is.[166]

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[165] "Omid Safi: On 'Radical Love,'" *Reconstructed Magazine.*

[166] Kazim Ali, "Introduction," *New Moons: Contemporary Writings by North American Muslims,,*
edited by Kazim Ali (Red Hen Press, 2021): vx.

Here, Ali rejects the notion that *New Moons* must present a coherent representation of Muslim writing in North America. He also rejects attempts by Muslims in positions of power to define what makes someone a Muslim. In fact, Kazim Ali's introduction is entirely unconcerned with discussing the implications of the "American" within the text. In beginning his introduction by problematizing the way Muslim identity is configured in Western discourses, Ali demonstrates that *New Moons* is worlds away from *Taking Back Islam* or even *Living Islam Out Loud.*

Not only is the text uninterested in claiming the "American" within Muslim American, but it is also insistent on an expansive approach to Muslim writing. Kazim Ali expands on how he conceptualized the anthology when he writes:

> I wanted to put together this archive of writing precisely *because* I wanted to begin to shape a new definition of "Muslim," of "Islam," Maybe it is a strange thing for someone like me — someone at odds with the tradition, someone who struggles with the expectations of what it means to be "Muslim" in the first place — to be editing an anthology of writing by North American Muslims. On the

the spring the world stopped i saw more hummingbirds than ever before. up & down the west coast, all too quick for a decent picture, more music than subject.
a few weeks later, a plague of locusts appeared in pakistan, the worst swarms seen in years because of heavy rainfall on the arabian peninsula. they ate so many crops that even more people went hungry, even more people lost their livelihoods. but even that plague is a distant memory now, now a year after 80% of pakistan flooded & a few months after the bell pepper plant came back to life weeks after we thought it was gone, after the hurricane that felt a lot like hurricanes in jersey before we learned to anticipate them, before the community service trips down the shore to rebuild homes, before the soil itself became a waterlog.

> other hand, maybe that is precisely the reason why I *can.*[167]

Tellingly, Ali refers to the anthology as an archive. Moreover, he approaches his archive with the understanding that it sits within the fraught space of "Muslim American representation," and responds by creating as expansive an archive as possible, so as not to calcify hegemonic notions of "Muslims." Ali follows up this discussion of how he approaches the archive presented within *New Moons* with a brief historization of Muslim writing in North America, which begins with enslaved West African Muslims. In some ways, Ali beginning his framing of "North American Muslim writing" with the writing of enslaved Black Muslims redresses the epistemological redlining of Black Muslim knowledge production and history that underpins the figuration of Muslims* in the US as ambiguously brown and foreign.

> nowadays, the streets are flooded all over. if not with water than with bodies collecting over time, climbing cars & pay phones. sometimes there's just nowhere to go, nowhere to look but up.

The introduction to *New Moons* also explicitly discusses the diversity of faith practices amongst Muslims globally, and by extension, in North America. Ali writes about his own upbringing as a Shia Muslim and the differences between Shia and Sunni Islam, the specificities of Muslim faith traditions in various parts of the world, and more. Ali even goes as far as to write that Wahabi and Salafi movements -- the two Islamic movements most commonly associated with "fundamentalism," are "twentieth century movements founded in response to continued European aggression

[167] Kazim Ali, "Introduction," *New Moons*, xv-xvi.

following the fall of the Ottoman Empire in the early part of the century."[168] In doing so, Ali rejects not only Western notions of the "Muslim," but also attempts by Wahabi and Salafi movements to discredit Muslim faith practices that differ from them.

Through his insistence on writing about the plurality of Islam, Kazim Ali refuses the discursive traps of "the Muslim" as a religio-racial formation. For example, in writing about the relationship between Western colonialism and "fundamentalism," he carves out spaces of possibility that refute the imposition of Sunni hegemony, heteropatriarchy, and more on Muslim communities. Crucially, what sets *New Moons* apart from earlier anthologies discussed in this chapter is that he does through the history of Islam itself and not through the neoliberal logics of inclusion.

in long beach, the navy built a wall in the ocean. they call it breakwater like it's possible to cut through the pacific, like you can throw some rocks together a few miles off the coast & call it a day. for decades the shoreline saturates with bits of plastic, brown foam dissipating into wet sand. not the kind of beach you swim in but the kind people live on when there's nowhere else to go.

Perhaps most crucially, *New Moons* redresses the limitations of the post-9/11 representational imperative by creating an archive containing a full range of contemporary North American expressions of Islam. For example, "Learning to Pray," one of four poems by Kaveh Akbar in the text, describes a child's earliest memories of prayer: watching their father pray. The speaker describes watching their father kneeling on a prayer mat and pressing his forehead against a turbah made of

[168] Ali, "Introduction," *New Moons,* xvii.

"Karbala clay," while they "clumsily mirror[ed]" him.[169] When catching the occasional glimpse of his child mimicking his movements, the father "smile[s] despite himself."[170] Here, Akbar writes about a moment of prayer and spiritual practice becoming a ritual between a father and son. The father, trying to focus on his prayers, cannot help but smile when he sees his son trying to mirror him out of the corner of his eye. Through this gentle intimacy, the speaker is able to share in their father's prayer. Akbar further emphasizes the resonance of this scene when he writes, "Bending there with his whole form/ marbled in light, he looked like/ a photograph of a famous ghost./ I ached to be so beautiful."[171] In the quiet of prayer, the father takes on an otherworldly quality. The speaker's comparison of the father to a photograph of a famous ghost suggests a kind of grief in the father's prayer. Prayer, faith, and family coalesce through memory in "Learning to Pray," reminding the reader that learning to pray is never just about learning a sequence of verses and corresponding movements.

here's how it went: the navy conducted a study where the navy concluded it's too expensive for the navy to take down the wall the navy built.

even murky beaches are still beaches when you watch the sun bow into the water, the way the light hangs in the air so assuredly afterwards, even if just for a minute. sometimes, there's even flocks of birds resting on still water.

Kazim Ali ends his introduction by writing, "The Muslim community is plural and contradictory. This collection of voices ought to be symphony and cacophony at

[169] Kaveh Akbar, "Learning to Pray," *New Moons,* 21.
[170] Ibid.
[171] Ibid.

once, like the body of Muslims as they are today."[172] Through *New Moons,* Ali creates an archive of North American Muslim writing that is as expansive as the "body of Muslims" today. In creating this archive, *New Moons* unsettles the hegemonic notions of Muslim identity that further calcified in the years after 9/11. In *New Moons,* one does not have to explain the particulars of their Muslimness to non-Muslims *or* Muslims. Instead, the writers are granted the autonomy to write as they are.

**Conclusion**

By thinking through the shifts in Muslim* anthologies from 2001 to 2024, this chapter tracks the ways that Muslim* literary and cultural production in the US changes post-9/11. In the early years after 9/11, the category of the "Muslim American" became an assimilationist tool to contain anti-imperialist critique. The earlier anthologies in this chapter, with their insistence on sharing "American Muslim" perspectives, reflect this assimilationist impulse with their insistence on the American. Over time, as texts like *Reconstructed Magazine* and *New Moons* demonstrate, Muslim* literary and cultural production betrays the need for Western legibility. By explicitly critiquing the colonial limitations placed on Muslim identity in the West, catalyst anthologies carve out space for Muslim* writers and artists

> in the end, it's not up to them. water still makes its way through like when the same hurricane that raised the bell pepper plant from dead also pushed waves past the breakwater, pushed them up until surfers made it back to long beach.

[172] Ali, "Introduction," *New Moons,* xx.

to create art and literature beyond those limitations. This opening up of Muslim* literature as a field and literary community also materializes through the increase in explicitly anti-imperialist literature, as well as the plurality of Muslim histories and faith traditions.

Ultimately, the move towards catalyst anthologies and anthologies that seek to challenge hegemonic notions of "the Muslim" create more space for Muslims* in the United States to set their own terms of engagement. By prioritizing a relational approach, catalyst anthologies carve out new space for Muslims* in the United States to write to, for, and about each other, while unsettling the assimilationist assumptions of "Muslim American" identity formation in the process.

the caption below the video of a teenager paddle boarding on the flooded street reads "only in long beach" just like the caption below the video of the man sitting on a floaty in a flooded paterson reads "only in jersey" just like the caption below the video of the kids offering 50-rupee boat rides to cross a flooded street reads "only in lahore;" it's only been since 1095 & 1488 & 1492 & 1776 & each year between & after that some have found ways to profit in catastrophe while others have no choice but to play through it.

## **Chapter 3:** Unruly Political Horizons & Muslim* Rage

In the years since Naomi Shihab Nye wrote "Flinn, On the Bus," a great deal has shifted in Muslim* literature and art in the United States. Slowly but surely, the discursive space for Muslims* has expanded beyond hegemonic notions of identity, as well as beyond the imperative patriotism that quiets anti-imperialist critique for fear of being perceived as anti-American. Now, two decades after the onset of the War on Terror, Muslim*/SWANA poets and artists are less afraid.

This is perhaps most vividly illustrated in queer SWANA poet and performer Andrea Abi-Karam's poetry collection, *Villainy.* In the heart of the books, Abi-Karam writes, "A nation built up against a simple villain/ I am the villain./ But how dare u think me to be simple."[173] Here, we find ourselves worlds away from appealing to an inclusion/exclusion axis; the speaker does not want to be included within the settler-imperialist state because they seek a world beyond it. In articulating a desire for a world beyond US global power and militarism, poets like Solmaz Sharif and Abi-Karam embrace being "villains," or refusing to abide by the expectations of the settler-imperialist state.

This chapter explores the discursive space Sharif's *Customs* and Abi-Karam's *Villainy* create through engaging in a poetics of insurgency. By poetics of insurgency, I am referring to the texts' use of form to not only make plain their position within what Sarah Dowling calls a "deeply unequal scene of articulation," but also to name the

[173] Andrea Abi-Karam, *Villainy* (Nightboat Books, 2021): 43.

settler-imperialist state as responsible for their fraught position as Muslim*/SWANA texts in the United States.[174]

In addition to a burgeoning poetics of insurgency within Muslim*/SWANA literature and art, there is also more space for Muslims* to express anger, be loud, uncivil, unruly, etc. Thus, this chapter also puts *Customs* and *Villainy* in conversation with the North Carolina-based Muslim punk band The Muslims and the Nida Manzoor's British sitcom about an all-girl Muslim punk band, *We Are Lady Parts*. Both the real band The Muslims and the fictional band Lady Parts demonstrate how punk becomes a safe haven for Muslim*. Ultimately, this chapter is concerned with how and why Muslim* writers and artists mobilize rage and unruliness to create space for dissent.

### ***Customs***

If Solmaz Sharif's *Look* is characterized in part by its refusal to perform the humanity of its speaker, Sharif's second poetry collection, *Customs,* can arguably be characterized by how it buoys itself in decidedly antagonistic waters. Unlike *Look, Customs* does not include an overarching conceit. While it does critique the United States' legacies of imperialism and militarism, it does not explicitly reference the War on Terror or the Iran Iraq War like *Look.* Instead, *Customs* brings readers into everyday situations with the speaker, from speaking to a customs' officer to being in a hotel room in the Midwest. By doing so, Sharif brings her critique of empire into more mundane

[174] Sara Dowling, *Translingual Poetics: Writing Personhood Under Settler Colonialism* (University of Iowa Press, 2018), 24.

territory. *Customs* fosters a sort of antagonism between the speaker and the settler-imperialist state by critiquing the way in which empathy, civility, and the fear of being perceived as anti-American act as mechanisms of neoliberalism and imperialism. The book's antagonism is further underscored by how it specifically names these dynamics within literary spheres. Thus, *Customs* is a text that is unafraid to upset its readers if they find themselves implicated in its pages.

The book begins with a poem called "America." The only poem that is not contained within one of *Customs'* three sections, "America" is sparse on the page. The width of the poem itself barely stretches beyond the title it sits under, which is coincidentally the only proper noun in the poem (and the only noun other than "thing"). "America" is composed of twelve three-word sentences, beginning with, "I had to."[175] Immediately, America comes with a loss of agency. The speaker never quite clarifies what they had to do; it could be moving to the United States or it could be something they "had" to do as a result of living in the United States. Either way, the first line of "America" immediately puts *Customs* at odds with the idea of the United States as a signifier of freedom and choice.

The next few lines are more ambivalent. Sharif writes, "I/ learned it. It was/ if. If/ was nice./ I said/ sure."[176] Here, the poem withholds a clear referent that is alluded to by "it" from the reader. This ambiguity grows stronger when she writes, "It was/ if. If/ was nice." The reader is left to consider the fleeting nature of "if." Perhaps "it" has the

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[175] Solmaz Sharif, "America," *Customs* (Graywolf Press, 2022), 3.
[176] Ibid.

potential to provide the speaker with something. In the world of im/migration to the United States, this could mean legal status, employment, or a whole host of other material realities that could benefit the speaker.

Sharif continues to build this ambiguity until the last third of the poem, when she writes, “Eat/ it said./ It felt/ good. I/ was dead./ I learned/ it. I/ had do.”[177] Here, “it” commands the speaker to eat and they oblige, as they do throughout the poem. Although it “felt good,” presumably to eat what the speaker was told to consume, the speaker dies. The poem then ends with the repetition of “I learned/ it. I/ had to,” so that the poem both begins and ends with the speaker’s lack of agency in the United States. In this sense, “America” offers a cautionary tale against accommodating the US notions of civility, as well as a rejection of the imperialist myth that the state bestows and preserves freedom for those who find themselves within its borders.

“America” sets up the stakes of *Customs*. In considering the relationship between “America” and the book as a whole, it is helpful to turn to Achille Mbembe’s *Critique of Black Reason.* Mbembe points to the West’s invention of the “rights of people” and its creation of “a civil society of nations understood as a public space of legal reciprocity.”[178] He then writes that the West “alone had codified a range of customs accepted by different peoples that included diplomatic rituals, the rules of engagement, the right of conquest, public morality and polite behavior, and practices of business, religion, and government.” Crucially, these practices that Mbembe refers to as “customs” are what structure the daily

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[177] Sharif, “America,” *Customs.*

[178] Achille Mbembé and Libby Meintjes, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11, muse.jhu.edu/article/39984.

violences of Western coloniality, in its large and small iterations. Whether it is a visa interview or introducing oneself to new neighbors, the everyday customs which govern Western notions of civility are inextricably linked to coloniality. Thus, when Sharif writes, "I said/ sure. One/ more thing./ One more/ thing. Eat/ it said," and this steady acceptance of what is asked of the speaker leads to their death, the poem is critiquing the diplomatic rituals, rules of engagement, and polite behavior that Mbembe names as legacies of Western power. In this way, "America" makes clear the stakes of US customs.

Of course, to those familiar with Sharif's critiques of US empire, the title *Customs* also refers to US Customs and Border Protection. Both meanings of the word customs haunt "America," and subsequently, the entire book. In creating this rhetorical haunting, Sharif initiates a generative conversation between the two different kinds of "customs." In other words, the collection prompts readers to consider the relationship between the daily customs of civil society and the way in which borders function as fault lines of empire. Particularly in the case of im/migrants, *Customs* asks how the everyday reality of living in the United States reproduces the loss of one's homeland and reifies Western hegemony in doing so.

The double entendre of *Customs* is perhaps made most literal in "He, Too." The poem recounts an interaction between the speaker and a customs officer, which, as the poem reminds us, is an interaction marked by forced civility. The customs officer in "He, Too," says, "*I only like writing/ where you can make an argument*" upon learning that the speaker teaches poetry for a living. The poem continues, "Anything he asks, I must

answer. / This, too, he likes.*"*[179] Here, Sharif binds the customs officer liking argumentative writing to the way that people have no choice but to answer his questions with "too." The officer is characterized by his approach to writing, and by extension, his understanding of language, as a medium for gaining power and the way in which he relishes in the uneven power dynamics of his role in maintaining the security state. Moreover, the poem provides a portrait of how border imperialism[180] is maintained in part by these quiet and quotidian interactions. In other words, the settler-imperialist state secures its power in these small interactions of forced civility just as much as it does in the spectacular. In this way, the poem offers a portrait of the speaker moving through one of the myriad ways in which "good citizenship" is taught to the im/migrants in the Euro-American context vis-à-vis having to perform civility. The interaction the speaker has with the customs officer creates a rhetorical situation in which actually speaking her mind would mean opening herself up to retaliation in the form of criminalization. One can see how this dynamic is replicated in everyday interactions for the speaker, in which her anti-American sentiment is read as extreme, especially for Muslims and diasporic subjects read as Muslim. This becomes increasingly true in the United States and the United Kingdom, as legal systems continue to expand the terms by which one can be charged with "domestic terrorism," particularly to include critiques of colonial racial capitalism.

[179] Solmaz Sharif, "He, Too," *Customs* (Graywolf Press, 2022), 21.
[180] Border imperialism is an analytic that focuses on how the global system of borders structures Western empire. My use of border imperialism is informed by Harsha Walia's work in *Border and Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism* (Haymarket Books, 2021).

Sharif then writes, "I don't tell him/ he will be in a poem/ where the argument will be/ anti-American."[181] Crucially, "anti-American" sits in a one-line stanza of its own. Thus, the preceding stanza emphasizes the customs officer's inability to know that the speaker does in fact have an argument, that the argument appears in a poem, and of course, that he is central to said argument. This grants the speaker a kind of opacity with respect to the customs officer. While the speaker could not respond to him in earnest without fear of consequences, they can turn to poetry to articulate their grievances and can rest assured knowing the officer will never read it. In this way, poetry becomes a way for the speaker to articulate their critique without having to do so in a context that puts them at risk.

The argument itself, readers learn, is "anti-American." Here, anti-American is quite a loaded description. Crucially, within the context of a post-9/11 world in which anyone with proximity to Muslimness is made to perform what Steven Salaita refers to as the "patriotic imperative," or the imperative to perform being a good US citizen to bypass the state's scrutiny, making an anti-American argument is somewhat of a self-indictment. This is especially true considering Iranian nationals' inclusion in Trump's Muslim Travel Ban. Thus, the "anti-American" line in Sharif's poem rings louder than the rest of the lines in the poem. She insists on actively and explicitly making an "anti-American" argument, as opposed to "critiquing the United States" or making a pro-peace argument, for example. In doing so, Sharif renders "He, Too," and by extension, *Customs,*

[181] Solmaz Sharif, "He, Too."

impossible to neatly fold into a neoliberal multicultural sensibility in which one is permitted to critique the actions of the state for the betterment of the state. Here, Sharif understands the United States as a settler-imperialist state that is inexcusable and irredeemable.

Moreover, the poem places the customs officer as a stand-in for the United States. In the next two stanzas, she writes, "I place him here, puffy/ pink, ringed in plexi, pleased/ with his own wit/ and spittle."[182] With "here," the customs officer is quite literally placed in the poem, reiterating the speaker's statement that he will be in a poem. In this way, his words and the context they are spoken in, as well as the pleasure he takes in the forced nature of their interaction, is itself the poem's anti-American argument. The poem functions as an argument against the customs officer's power, which is ultimately an argument against American global power.

The poem ends with "Saving the argument/ I am let in/ I am let in until[.]" In other words, the speaker is let into the country because she saves her anti-American argument. When this entry is interrupted, it is unclear why. The poem fades into white space instead of explaining this interruption. "He, Too" makes literal the way in which Sharif critiques both understandings of customs. While the customs officer is a physical manifestation of state power and borders, the interaction he has with the speaker demonstrates all the thoughts the speaker must hold back. In other words, the interaction

[182] Sharif, "He, Too," *Customs,* 21.

itself is governed by the "customs" of civility. The speaker has little choice but to abide by these customs, which amounts to a censoring of anti-imperialist sentiment.

Then, as always, there is the title. "He, Too" can be read as a reference to Walt Whitman's "I Hear America Singing" and one of its most well-known responses, Langston Hughes, "I, Too." Famously, Hughes wrote "I, Too" as a response to the invisibility of Black life in Whitman's "I Hear America Singing." The poem is meant to make space for the indispensable role Black people had in building an "America," despite being subjected to the margins of an emerging national literature. Read in relation to Whitman's poem and the tradition of responses to it, Sharif explicitly rejects the notion of "singing America" as a desirable goal or something to be celebrated. Instead, she places the customs officer within a reference that is steeped in US literary tradition to emphasize that he is the material reality of "America singing." Solmaz Sharif, despite the representational imperative, insists on not "singing America" because to do so would be to flatten and gloss over the ways in which the customs officer "sings America." Thus, the argument of the poem is anti-American precisely because it is the officer who truly "sings America."

Sharif writes about the relationship between state power and civility perhaps most explicitly in "Social Skills Training." The poem begins:

> Studies suggest *How may I help you officer?* is the single most dis-
> arming thing to say and not *What's the problem?* Studies suggest it's
> best the help reply *My pleasure* and not *No problem.* Studies sug
> gest it's best not to mention *problem* in front of *power* even to say

there is none.[183]

Here, the concept of "social skills training" merges with civility as customs. Sharif begins with a vague reference to "studies" that suggest the least abrasive way to address police officers, presumably during a traffic stop. The poem then connects this notion of people needing to minimize the risk of interacting with police officers to the kind of coded civility expected of "the help." In doing so, Sharif draws a parallel between the police and the rich; both, as seen in this excerpt's last line, occupy positions of power. The notion of not being able to mention "problem" in front of those in power recalls the customs officer in "He, Too,;" once again, those who find themselves having to appease power to ensure their safety and livelihood, which are rendered one in the same under racial capitalism, must hold their tongues.

The poem ends, "studies suggest, *Solmaz, have you thanked your executioner today*?"[184] In doing so, it emphasizes the ways in which civility is weaponized to obscure systems of harm. By critiquing the ways in which civility maintains US global power, *Customs* challenges readers to articulate a critique of the settler-imperialist state that is not obliged to "thank [its] executioner."

The second poem in the "Dear Aleph" series, which addresses itself to the first letter in the Arabic script — the first letter in dozens of languages, including Farsi — also takes Western notions of civility to task. The poem begins, "You're correct. Every nation hates/ its children. This is a requirement of statehood."[185] Already, the poem, which

[183] Sharif, "Social Skills Training," *Customs,* 12.
[184] Sharif, "Social Skills Training," *Customs,* 12.
[185] Sharif, "Dear Aleph," *Customs,* 13.

addresses itself to the language subsumed by English in Sharif's writing, begins by asserting statehood's inability to care for those it assumes power over. Sharif even goes as far as to describe the relationship between states and their children as one of hatred. The first couplet is followed by, "This and empathy."[186] Here, Sharif puts empathy, something widely understood to be desirable, on the same plane as hating children. If both hating children and empathy are requirements of statehood, surely there is a limit to empathy's positive impact.

The poem continues, "Empathy means/ laying yourself down/ in someone else's chalklines/ and snapping a photo."[187] Here, Sharif defines empathy as an act that centers the self. To lay down in someone else's chalklines, or the outline of a deceased person at a crime scene, and take a photograph is to center one's own moral righteousness over the conditions that created the chalkines. Kyle Carrerro Lopez takes this reading a step further in his review of *Customs* by suggesting that the photograph taken in the scene described by Sharif would be circulated as protest art. Thus, in Sharif's definition of empathy she presents readers with a scene of "centering oneself as the lead in the story of another's death," to quote Carrerro Lopez.[188] While the image of someone taking a photo in a deceased person's outline is gruesome, it challenges the affective registers of Western civility, in which empathy is framed as vital to ethics. "Dear Aleph," flips this

[186] Sharif, "Dear Aleph," *Customs,* 13.
[187] Ibid.
[188] Kyle Carrerro Lopez, "On *Customs* by Solmaz Sharif," *The Poetry Project,* Spring 2022, "https://www.poetryproject.org/publications/newsletter/268-spring-2022/on-customs-by-solmaz-sharif.

expectation on its head by framing empathy as so harmful, it is on par with hating children.

"Dear Aleph," goes on to demonstrate empathy's role in maintaining the state's power by describing an interaction between Ethel Rosenberg and Mrs. Evans, the woman who walked Ethel Rosenberg to her execution. Ethel Rosenberg was executed by the state shortly after her husband, Julius Rosenberg, in 1953. Both the Rosenbergs were members of the Communist Party. Julius worked at a research facility in New Jersey that specialized in radar, missiles controls, and electronics. When he was approached by the Soviet Union to pass on information about this weapons research, he obliged and was subsequently tried by the United States for espionage. Ethel, who was also tried in an effort to get Julius to confess and provide the state with more information, was ultimately also executed when both Rosenbergs refused to confess or name any collaborators. While both executions were met with global condemnation, Ethel's was particularly gruesome, as her heart was still beating after the electric shocks intended to kill her. The state had to go as far as to place Ethel Rosenberg's body back in the chair.[189]

Thus, when Sharif writes, "*Oh, Mrs. Evans,/ you're such a wonderful woman,/* said, supposedly, Ethel Rosenberg/ to the woman who walked her/ to the chair," she is in some ways showing readers a historical example of someone "[thanking their] executioner," as she writes in "Social Skills Training." Even in her final moments before

[189] Rosita Boland, "Ethel Rosenberg: a gruesome death by execution that shocked the world," *Irish Times,* June 26, 2021, https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/ethel-rosenberg-a-gruesome-death-by-execution-that-shocked-the-world-1.4601233.

her wrongful execution, Ethel Rosenberg maintains her civility. The poem continues, "It was empathy on Evan's part./ Love on Ethel's./ I am a wonderful woman/ more often than I care to admit."[190] Here, the poem further indicts empathy. Mrs. Evans' empathy towards Ethel Rosenberg cannot extend passed the bounds of their material realities, as prescribed by the state. While Mrs. Evans' walks Ethel Rosenberg to the chair, seemingly in an act of care as a prison matron, her care is still delimited by the prison and the execution chamber. In this way, Mrs. Evans' empathy ultimately serves the state. Moreover, Sharif makes a distinction between empathy and love; in this formulation, empathy cannot possibly be loving, as it functions within the "chalklines," or boundaries, defined by hegemonic power. This point is driven home in the last two lines, which read, "We are going to have/ our first woman president."[191] No matter how emphatic or "wonderful" this woman president is, she is still (presumably) a US president, which is to say her impact is defined by being the leader of a settler-imperialist state first and foremost. Just as an imperialist feminism that would celebrate such a president can only ever work at the behest of the state, empathy that works within the structures of the state can only reify the uneven grounds it stands on. By writing about empathy in this way, Sharif demonstrates how it is central to the same Western notions of civility that work to discipline dissent.

Sharif also provides this more immediate contextualization in which "customs" refers to US Customs & Border Enforcement in "Visa." This poem, which is also placed

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[190] Sharif, "Dear Aleph," *Customs,* 13.
[191] Ibid.

in *Customs* first section, begins with the etymology of the word "visa." Sharif writes, "From past participle of videre or to see/ the sight decided by officer."[192] Here, the poem begins by informing readers that to have a visa is to have been seen and approved by an "officer." In this sense, to be a visa holder is to have been the object of a statist gaze; in a US context, having a visa is to have been the object of an imperialist gaze. This leaves anyone seeking a US visa at the whims of a necropolitical state that assesses people' access to its borders through parameters defined by racial capitalism and imperialism.

Two lines later, the poem reads, "Domestic terminals do not have this railing at the exit."[193] This line refers to the railings that create a walkway for international travelers in airports as they exit baggage claim and walk towards ground transportation and the area of terminals where family and friends await their arrival. By the same token, the railings also form a sort of border where one is permitted to stand as they wait for their loved ones. By pointing this out, Sharif names yet another quotidian site of empire's maintenance. While railings at international airport terminals have faded into the background of traveling, they still stand as a testament to the material consequences of the War on Terror and the subsequent fortification of the security state.

Then, the speaker locates themselves as waiting at one of these railings for an unnamed woman. Sharif writes, "As we wait for her to exit customs, our sightline is obstructed/ by opaque sliding doors, the twisting hallway behind it."[194] Here, the word "customs" appears in the book for the first and only time. In specifying that the speaker is

[192] Sharif, "Visa," *Customs,* 14.
[193] Sharif, "Visa," *Customs,* 14.
[194] Sharif, "Visa," *Customs,* 14.

waiting for "her" to exit customs, Sharif emphasizes the ways in which international travel is managed by US Customs & Border Patrol. If she had written, "waiting for her to exit" or "waiting for her to get her luggage" for example, the state's centrality in controlling the movement of bodies into US borders would have been obfuscated. In this way, Sharif once again directs our attention to the quotidian ways that border imperialism structures something as potentially mundane as waiting at an airport for someone. Moreover, the speaker's sight is specifically obstructed during this stage of the arrival process, by "opaque sliding doors," a "twisting hallway," and "the/ small convex mirror hung in the corner."[195] Once again, the poem emphasizes the way that the settler-imperialist gaze manages the materiality of movement into and across its borders. In addition to the customs officer interviewing new arrivals, there are three additional things distorting the speaker's sightline. These layered structures of unseeing stand as a stark contrast to "visa," in which the state has already seen the visa recipient by the time they arrive on Turtle Island. In this way, the relationship between the speaker and her loved one is mediated by the state.

After reflecting on the amount of time she has spent waiting at these railings for the chance to watch someone move from "shadow to shape to gait," the speaker refers to the loved one as "my imagined life." Here, my imagined life can be understood as the life the speaker imagines for herself when she thinks about what it would have been like to have never left Iran. Particularly when put in conversation with the rest of the book,

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[195] Sharif, "Visa," *Customs,* 14.

which is flush with Sharif's reflections on the loss of homeland and language, "my imagined life" functions as a stand-in for the speaker's life *if* it had never been mediated by "customs," or movement into US borders. This is further emphasized by the poem's last three lines, which read, "This is a light that lights everything dimly. / All my waiting at this railing./ All my writing is this squint."[196] Here, the light that lights everything dimly is the speaker's imagined life and the way in which the alternate possibilities of her life haunt her present. When she writes "All my writing is this squint," Sharif expresses the way that her poetry is squinting to see what she can of this imagined life, a life which has been obfuscated through US global power.

"Into English," one of the last poems in *Customs'* first section, begins with "I think I will translate/ Forough."[197] Throughout the rest of the poem, the speaker mulls over the task of translating Iranian poet Forough Farrokhzad "into English." Describing the quiet and solitary work of translating, Sharif writes, "I find it is/ very/ private. It is very/ private/ to be in another's/ syntax."[198] Here, the work of trying to translate Farrokhzad's poetry is described as a deeply intimate exercise. The poem continues, "*Look!* a translator holds/ up for/ the flash,/ a hooked and thrashing/ bass."[199] Immediately, readers familiar with Sharif's *Look* would approach the word with suspicion. If the invocation of Sharif's critique of the imperial gaze is not enough to cast doubt on the project of translating Forough Farrokhzad into English, the translator in this

[196] Sharif, "Visa."
[197] Sharif, "Into English," *Customs,* 29.
[198] Ibid.
[199] Ibid.

stanza is described holding up a thrashing bass fish with a hook pierced through its mouth for a photograph. The resulting image could never stand-in for the fish itself. Moreover, the image of a translator holding up a living thing to capture it recalls the image of empathy as laying in someone else's chalklines and snapping a photo. Just like empathy, translation leads to a flattening of its subject. By describing translation in this way, the speaker registers their discomfort with occupying that role.

Directing this discomfort, the poem continues, "I say let them have/ it: the/ think-tank wonks, the panty-/ sniffing/ critics, the consultant/ for the/ US Navy. Noble, / they call/ it. These saviors into/ English."[200] Here, the speaker rejects the task of translating Forough Farrokhzad into English because it is impossible to do so without the cultural baggage of being positioned as a noble translator saving the poems from a fate of not being read in English by Western audiences. Instead, the speaker declares "let them have it," with "them" including translators profiting from US imperial power. Through this framing, translating the poetry of an Iranian feminist into English for a primarily American audience can never be divorced from the project of US empire.

Sharif concludes the poem with, "Who would I do it for?/ You? I/ have forgotten even/ myself/ as reader. I turn off/ our light."[201] In this final stanza, the speaker reckons with how being a translator and a poet have made them forget themselves as a reader amidst the institutional pull to write towards a white readership. Having articulated this, the speaker turns off the light, signaling the end of their translation project.

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[200] Sharif, "Into English," 30.
[201] Ibid.

In some ways, this lights off moment, which becomes a recurring theme in *Customs,* is an extension of Sharif's critique of being "looked at," so to speak. In ultimately abandoning the pull to translate Forough into English, the speaker rejects even the civility and empathy of an American poetry world, which would simply go on to "look at" Forough. Once again, *Customs* rejects the desires or comfort of its American readers. The collection critiques civility and empathy as affectives mechanisms of empire by rejecting them outright, without fear of being perceived as an anti-American problem. In some ways, it performs an unlearning of the "social skills" it describes.

***Villainy***

If *Customs* presents an unlearning of civility, Andrea Abi-Karam's second full-length poetry collection, *Villainy,* embraces the uncivil and unruly by claiming the liberatory potential of the "villain." Abi-Karam makes the collection's desired political horizon explicit on its first page. The eleven pages that precede the table of contents, through which Abi-Karam maps out the logic of the book, begin with a page reading:

> THE END OF FASCISM LOOKS LIKE CENTURIES OF QUEERS DANCING ON THE GRAVE OF

1. CAPITALISM
2. THE STATE
3. COLONIALISM
4. NAZIS
5. RACISM

## 6. OPPRESSION[202]

It would be easy to dismiss this as polemic, especially if one adheres to the Euro-American notion that overtly political poetry lacks rigor. However, such a reading would overlook an obvious question which can otherwise inform one's reading of the collection as a whole; what does the end of fascism have to do with villainy? How do centuries of queers figure into this? In beginning with this scene of imagined celebration, Abi-Karam starts with the future *Villainy* works to make discursive space for. Moreover, *Villainy* makes its political horizons clear at first glance; the end of capitalism, the state, and colonialism, which beget the end of Nazis, racism, and oppression. Crucially, the end of capitalism, the state, and colonialism are a joyous occasion for "centuries of queers." In beginning with this celebration, *Villainy* immediately refutes a reading imbued with the logics of neoliberal representational politics. A far cry from Salaita's imperative patriotism, this first page makes clear that *Villainy* has no allegiance to the settler-imperialist state.

The book's acknowledgements offer some context for the world through which *Villainy* emerges; Abi-Karam writes that *Villainy* came out of "the most intense period of grief" they had ever experienced in the months following the Ghost Ship Fire in which 36 "beloved community members" lost their lives at a DIY show in Oakland, California and the aftermath of the Muslim Travel Ban, which Donald Trump instituted early in his presidency in 2017. In many ways, the book documents the process of coming to terms

202 Andrea Abi-Karam, *Villainy* (Nightboat Books, 2021): 1.

with how to be in a world that creates realities in which our loved ones exist within persistent proximity to death, whether we call it "willful subjectivity"[203] or necropolitics[204]. Either way, the material reality is one in which our relations are vulnerable to the whims of the settler-imperialist state. Understanding the context in which the book was written also locates *Villainy* within/between two experiences that are understood as ontologically disparate and incompatible; queer art spaces in the West and Muslim im/migrants. Thus, *Villainy* explores the relationship between poetry and the material conditions that brought about these modes of settler-imperialist violence; it invokes a future without the violence of the US and its many heads through the image of "centuries of queers" dancing together. In doing so, Abi-Karam emphasizes the relational autonomy that would exist if fascism, and by extension, the settler-imperialist state ceased to exist; queers would be able to rejoice with not just their immediate communities but with generations of queers. This image of the future as a multigenerational queer celebration offers an alternative to Lee Edelman's notion of reproductive futurity, in which the child is central to envisioning the future and the queer is placed in opposition to this future.[205] Instead, Abi-Karam offers a vision of the future in which the non-normative kinship structures of queer communities are honored as their own future worth fighting for.

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[203] Sara Ahmed, "Introduction: A Willfulness Archive," *Willful Subjects* (Duke University Press, 2014), 3.
[204] Mmembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture.*
[205] Lee Edelman, "The Future is Kid Stuff," *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Duke University Press, 2004), 4.

Moreover, as the book makes clear over its duration, containment by the state — in this case the settler-imperialist US state — is a weapon that limits insurgent potential in the service of national security. In the War on Terror era, neoliberal representational politics becomes particularly salient as a tool of neoliberal containment; it is precisely the end of this containment that *Villainy* celebrates in an imaginary future. Thus, "CAPITALISM, THE STATE, COLONIALISM, NAZIS, RACISM, AND OPPRESSION" are all posited as tools of containment/enclosure that must be buried for centuries of queers to be free to dance.

The all-caps of the first page spills over onto the next few pages and culminates in “REVELRY OF QUEERNESS AND DESIRE THAT WE HAVE ONLY NOW/ JUST BARELY BEGUN TO IMAGINE/ JUST BARELY BEGUN TO IMAGINE/ JUST BARELY BEGUN TO IMAGINE.”[206] Here, the speaker refers to the queer dance party referenced on the first page. The entirety of this three-page section also describes this “queer revelry” in all-caps that seem to scream at the reader. The text isn’t simply showing readers the very beginnings of this queer revelry through flowery lyric; it yells like the words have been chucked through a poetic megaphone. The all-caps continue to make an appearance throughout the book, some in more sections than others. When seen visually on the page, they create a noisy effect; each capitalized line reverberates more than the last, so that each time Abi-Karam repeats “JUST BARELY BEGUN TO

[206] Abi-Karam, *Villainy,* 3.

IMAGINE," for example, readers are left with a sense of the line loudly echoing for emphasis.[207]

However, these three pages and their all-caps speculative yelling is abruptly cut short by page four, which describes sex "in a room full of the dead."[208] Here, the speaker's grief follows their desire while simultaneously, their desire for connection is made more salient in the face of grief. In this way, the world of *Villainy* is instantiated through a yearning for the end of fascist and settler-imperialist violence, as well as the interconnectedness of grief and desire. So ends the "prologue;" the desire for a world which centers connection is always haunted by the grief of a world which severs it.

*Villainy* does not have distinct poems; instead, the book is separated into its prologue and eight sections that flow from page to page. With the eight sections entitled "THE AFTERMATH," "AN UNBECOMING," "WHAT IS CLOSED/ WHAT IS CONTAINED," "I GOT LOST/ I GOT DELETED," "THE PARALLEL BETWEEN BODY & EARTH," THE INTERRUPTION VS BLOCKADE," "TEMPORARY/ AUTONOMOUS/ DESIRE," AND "'POETRY AS FORCES,'" the table of contents page resembles the insert of a punk CD, or as Hazem Fahmy suggests in his review[209], the set list of a punk show. The punk aesthetic is made even stronger through the typesetting of "THE PARALLEL BETWEEN BODY & EARTH" and "THE INTERRUPTION VS

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[207] Abi-Karam, *Villainy,* 3.
[208] Ibid., 4.
[209] Hazem Fahmy, "'I Don't Want to Think about the Limits:' On Andrea Abi-Karam's *Villainy*," *LA Review of Books,* Sept. 21, 2021, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/i-dont-want-to-think-about-the-limits-on-andrea-abi-karams-villainy/.

BLOCKADE," which sit at an angle between their respective neighboring sections, like they've been placed there in a hasty DIY-fashion.

The content of the "track list"-esque table of contents reflects the book's anarcho-punk ethos just as much as its visual appearance. As Fahmy notes, even the eight sections listed can't serve as a neat and complete archive of the book's content. For example, "TEMPORARY/ AUTONOMOUS/ DESIRE" contains a series of "SF PRIDE" poems that are not included in the table of contents. This cluster of poems operating as its own "autonomous zone" demonstrates the book's reluctance to being archived or of having perfectly contained poems. Still, each section unfolds with its own poetics.

"THE AFTERMATH," the first section, contends with poetry's limitations in creating material change, as well as its complicity in containing insurgency. It begins, "there's a way in which american literature/ pretends to do certain things/ & pretends not to do certain things/ there are ways in which literature is not clean/ is not sterile/ is not outside of itself/ is not existing in a way that matters so fully."[210] Here, Abi-Karam questions the notion of literature, and American literature in particular, as a vehicle for the humanist project of "teaching proper citizenship," as literary study is often framed (notably to justify its space within institutions as corporatization continues to diminish the humanities). As Melamed writes, the inclusion of multicultural literature into American canon often functions as a state-sponsored form of anti-racism, which is to say,

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[210] Abi-Karam, *Villainy,* 17.

an anti-racism whose true function is to distance the settler-imperialist state from its past and current white supremacist violences in favor of an assimilationist project.

Abi-Karam continues, "there are ways in which writers pretend to do certain things &/ also don't do these things/ like/ writing about the riot from the 25th story/ flicking the lights of a hilton hotel room on & off/ or writing about the riot from a youtube video."[211] "THE AFTERMATH" mentions the material distance between the riot and the writer in order to contend with literature's distance from on-the-ground struggles. Moreover, the writer enjoys an increased level of material safety and comfort over the rioters they watch from above. On a more literal level, the need to produce writing may be keeping the writer from on-the-ground organizing; as Zaina Alsous suggests, the institutions which have historically supported writers (namely universities) also end up containing them within these institutions.[212] In any case, the writer never actually joins the riot; both are contained separately through racial-capitalist logics.

Abi-Karam continues, "I'm trying more to complain about how the riot gets more imaginative/ attention than physical attention & how those people doing the/ imagining but not the attending/ get the most IRL attention."[213] Here, the "IRL attention" the riot should be getting to sustain its power gets displaced onto the imaginative attention the riot gets through literary production. In this way, literary production about the riot becomes complicit in a counter-insurgent project of containment. Within a contemporary

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[211] Abi-Karam, *Villainy,* 17.
[212] Zaina Alsous, "Poetry and Freedom Movement: The Politics of Literary Practice Series," *Jewish Currents,* February 8, 2022.
[213] Abi-Karam, *Villainy,* 18.

North American poetry landscape that is more overtly concerned with identity politics than perhaps ever before, Abi-Karam's characterization is a sharp critique of poetry's relationship to racial capitalism. The "poetry world" described in *Villainy* is a far cry from the purpose of poetry as described by the varied influences of contemporary Muslim* poets; from Audre Lorde's "Poetry is Not a Luxury" to Sufi-orientations to poetry as an expression of Divine love, the poetic lineages of Abi-Karam's queer Arab poetry is not one that is content watching a riot from 25 floors above. Thus, Abi-Karam questions the radical potential of poetry by writing, "can we even/ think of arts as a form of militancy --& im very much conflicted on/ this too."[214] The speaker ruminates on the limits of art to create material change without offering a concrete answer.

Notably, within the book's first section, readers are met with the limits of poetry's ability to aid in making radical change. *Villainy* never quite resolves this question. "THE AFTERMATH" further complicates this question by speaking to the poet's limitations. Abi-Karam writes, "it's easy to think the poet is the problem/ but the poet is really just sad or maybe/ even just nothing & the poet can't/ burn down J's cell or the entire prison/ or all the prison & the poet can't even write/ a fanonian poem because what would that actually look like?"[215] Here, the speaker grapples with their own frustration at the poet's apparent helplessness; the speaker is themselves not immune from the limitations they point out. By beginning the book in this way, Abi-Karam confronts readers with their own complicity in "giving the riot more imaginative attention than physical attention." As

[214] Abi-Karam, *Villainy,* 18.
[215] Ibid., 19.

readers, this tension between what poetry can say and what it cannot do despite its purported radicalism haunts our reading of the book. Constantly, we are prompted to consider the initial image of "the end of fascism" as "queer revelry;" we are confronted with our own complicities in maintaining settler-imperialist logics of containment.

In "AN UNBECOMING," *Villainy* begins to work through how to move out of the "THE AFTERMATH" of catastrophe and into the imagined future. The section begins with two italicized lines situated on an otherwise blank page. They read, "imagine the possibility of singularity unbecoming/ imagine the possibility of unbecoming."[216] This suggests that "singularity" ceasing to exist as it does now is key to "unbecoming." Here, the speaker prompts the reader to imagine beyond the singularity of the individual man, as constructed by Western epistemologies. As Moten argues in *The Universal Machine,* white supremacy, patriarchy, and global capitalism rely on this individuation as a crucial building block of how they maintain power. In describing singularity unbecoming as desirable, Abi-Karam echoes Moten's assertion that a "social (meta)physics that violates individuation" is a necessity.[217]

The previous sections of the book suggest that "unbecoming" is an insurgent project that involves dismantling the settler-imperialist state in service of a collective future. Thus, in order for "an unbecoming" to take place, we must let go of being singular. In this way, Abi-Karam builds on Moten's critique of individuation by positioning "singularity" as integral to the structure of neoliberalism which bolsters War

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[216] Abi-Karam, *Villainy,* 31.
[217] Fred Moten, *The Universal Machine (consent not to be a single being),* (Duke University Press, 2018), xii.

on Terror-era containment. This is further emphasized a few pages into "AN UNBECOMING," when six stanzas beginning with "I think about the limits of what I will & will not do to stop this" appear. In the penultimate stanza, this is followed by "but I don't want to think about the limits because all of us together are/ expansive." Here, the speaker responds to the limits of their own singularity with returning to the need to think collectively. Still, the poem follows this meditation on the expansiveness of the collective with the sobering reality of surveillance post-9/11; Abi-Karam writes, "I think about the limits of what I will & will not do to stop this/ while a friend texts me & says she saw my mugshot from 2012 while/ reading about the J20 DC protests."[218] Both the expansiveness of the collective and the threat of criminalization for acting in service of that expansiveness must sit together on the page. Readers are left to reconcile this difficulty.

A few pages later, the book's first usage of "villain" appears. Abi-Karam writes, "A nation built up like a secret everyone knows/ A nation built up on a global web of lives/ A nation built up like powerwashers that clean cum off the sidewalk/ A nation built up against a simple villain/ I am the villain./ But how dare u think me to be simple."[219] The nation here is the United States. By referring to it as a "nation built up like a secret everyone knows," Abi-Karam hints at the various ways in which the settler-imperialist state is reified through ongoing settler-colonialism and imperialism. From continental imperialism to US imperialism in the Philippines, the speaker suggests that the empire-making which sustains the US is like an open secret. By writing that this nation is

[218] Abi-Karam, *Villainy,* 36.
[219] Ibid., 40.

also built on "a global web of lives," Abi-Karam emphasizes the global reach of US empire. Like a powerwasher cleaning a city sidewalk, nations and the narratives which carry them do away with hints of collectivity in favor of sterility and, as *Villainy* and Moten teach us, singularity.

Then, there's the simple villain. From Jodi Byrd to Jasbir Puar, many scholars have written about the monstrous others against which US empire is constructed. In that sense, a nation built up against a villain is nothing new. A simple villain, however, suggests that the nation is incapable of fully understanding the villain's complexity. The speaker, declaring "I am the villain./ But how dare u think me to be simple," asserts their sovereignty and demonstrates the way in which their villainy exists outside of Western taxonomies of identity politics and in doing so, subverts containment. “Simple” here can also signal a lack of intelligence. Also, the period following "I am the villain" is the first one which appears in *Villainy* after the preface. Thus, everything that precedes "I am the villain." beginning from "THE AFTERMATH" can be read as one long sentence. By stopping this continuous flow with "I am the villain." Abi-Karam draws readers attention to this line and to the speaker's villainy keeps it there throughout the book. Moreover, after pages and pages of mulling over poetry's inability to be insurgent and the fear of state surveillance, *Villainy* claims the role of the state's villain with a vengeance. "AN UNBECOMING" becomes the process through which the speaker is unafraid to be a complicated villain.

Then, Abi-Karam writes, "THIS MYTH/ IS HARD/ ON/ THE/ BODY ///."[220] This can be read in two ways. The "myth" of the simple villain can be hard on the body politic of the nation. Alternatively, the myth of the nation built up against a simple villain can be hard on the body of the complex villain. Either way, the settler-imperialist myths that the nation projects upon the body are detrimental to the nation's future, in part because they are detrimental to the villain's body. These last few lines are repeated one more time before "AN UNBECOMING" gives way to "WHAT IS CLOSED/ WHAT IS CONTAINED."

In "WHAT IS CLOSED / WHAT IS CONTAINED," Abi-Karam explicitly contends with the dangers of containment. They write, "What does it mean to contain something like a piece of land/ a / country/ a nation/ a body like a pair of bodies/ a pile of bodies/ a set of words between two covers"[221] The speaker brings this list into direct conversation with the notion of containment. By beginning with "a piece of land," Abi-Karam alludes to the violence of containment that is inherent to borders. Moreover, Abi-Karam brings readers' attention to how land must be contained and turned into nation-states in order for them to exist. In a sense, they ask us to consider containment as a method of border imperialism. The coloniality of containment is then placed against "a set of words between two covers;" one can read this as a critique of Western knowledge production as a site of containment. Of course, the literary is implicated in this line as well; the words between the two covers Abi-Karam mentions could very well be the book

[220] Abi-Karam, *Villainy,* 44.
[221] Abi-Karam, *Villainy,* 53.

about the riot written from the 25th floor. This pushes readers to consider the relationship between containment as the structuring logic of coloniality and literature.

On the following page, Abi- Karam expands this probing to address how neoliberal multiculturalism also hinges upon the logics of containment. They write, "What does it mean to contain an identity/ to contain an I in one body/ I/ think of my multiple selves/ fixed against the wall/ hooks around their/ necks holding them in place."[222] By establishing containment as structuring logic of coloniality and then putting it up against "identity," Abi-Karam gestures towards the state-sponsored "anti-racisms" that rely on multicultural representation as proof of the state's redeem-ability while erasing the historical and ongoing violences of settler-imperialism.[223] This is then connected to the larger project of liberal humanism when Abi-Karam writes "to contain an I in one body." The "I" as an entity that exists in such a way that is neatly separated from everything around it is antithetical to the collective ethos of *Villainy.* Containment, as Abi-Karam writes, suffocates one's multiple selves, as they must exist within legible taxonomies of neoliberal multicultural representation. As a text born out two seemingly disparate identities -- the queer and the Arab/SWANA -- *Villainy* is intent on showing readers the possibilities foreclosed by an understanding of identity that is premised on epistemological and ontological containment.

After "TEMPORARY/ AUTONOMOUS / DESIRE," the book ends with "'POETRY AS FORCES.'" Acting as an epilogue or coda, "'POETRY AS FORCES'" is

[222] Abi-Karam, *Villainy,* 53.
[223] Melamed, *Represent and Destroy.*

written after Cecelia Vacuna's "Palambras." It begins with an italicized paragraph where Abi-Karam writes about *"the line between language & action no longer feels quite as precise as the street vs./ the aftermath  an emergence of literature — unrestrained."*[224] Here, Abi-Karam returns to the tension around poetry's inability to create tangible action. After going back and forth on poetry's potential for radicalism, they land in the emergence of an "unrestrained" literature. Unrestrained can be understood as uncontained. In other words, in order to make more radical space in the poetic, containment must be subverted. In *Villainy,* this includes the containment of identity via neoliberal multiculturalism, as well as the containment of the collective through individuation. By claiming their own villainy and disrupting the stability of the singular lyric subject, the speaker rejects the representational imperative and more importantly, the imperative to understand the settler-imperialist state as redemptive.

**Muslim Punk**

While poetry like Sharif's and Abi-Karam's unsettles the liberal humanist poetic subject, their "cacophonous" influences often take the shape of forms that do not bring the same epistemological baggage as lyric poetry. For example, *Villainy*'s use of punk aesthetics is a large part of what allows the project to reject a totalizing imperialist gaze. From the use of all caps, which mimics screaming on the page, to the DIY aesthetic of the table of contents, *Villainy*'s ability to draw from punk is critical to its undermining of the lyric subject and by extension, its undermining of individuation. Arguably, the works

[224] Abi-Karam, *Villainy,* 117.

in which poets and artists have created more space for the communities around them to buoy themselves beyond a War on Terror-era representational imperative exist within epistemological and artistic constellations beyond the limits of the liberal humanist subject. One such constellation that the "unrestrained literature" of *Villainy* places itself in is minoritized punk.

Relatedly, the Muslim/SWANA punk bands that began emerging in the United States in the early years of the Invasion of Iraq, such as The Kominas, Secret Trial Five, and Vote Hezbollah, make explicitly anti-imperialist music. Due to punk's history of being anarchist and anti-state, Muslim punk becomes one of the few places of artistic expression in which Muslim youth can explicitly critique the settler-imperialist state without being seen as a threat.

While earlier bands like The Kominas have struggled to be understood beyond the perceived novelty of "Muslim punk,"[225] The Muslims satirize Western engagement with Muslim punk by simply calling themselves The Muslims. The Durham, North Carolina-based band started in 2017 after the inauguration of Donald Trump as President of the United States. They describe themselves as a Black and brown queer band that is "rageful and tender."[226] Since 2017, the three-person band has put out five albums, their most recent one being *Fuck These Fucking Fascists.* Lead guitarist and singer QADR

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[225] In a 2010 interview in *Religious Dispatches*, Basim Usmani of The Kominas expresses frustration at the amount of attention the concept of "Muslim punk" gets at the expense of the music itself. Usmani and bandmate Shahjehan Khan also mention how Arjun Ray, another member of The Kominas, regularly gets left out of reporting because his Hindu name does not neatly fit within Western media's reporting of "Muslim punk." (Shahjehan Khan, “Taqwacore Roundtable,” *Religious Dispatches*)
[226] “Punk - The Muslims,” https://themuslims.com/.

describes The Muslims starting in Durham within the context of a largely white punk scene and trying to create space to center Black, brown, and queer artists and people in the band's interview in *Punk News*.[227] QADR talks about the tendency of white-dominated punk spaces to become havens for unchecked white male rage. Interestingly enough, The Muslims also talk about how they expected pushback from Muslim communities about how they take up Muslim identity through their music when they first started but they have instead been met with the most resistance for their staunchly anti-fascist messaging.

Of note on The Muslims website is a web page entitled "The Munk Manifesto." Here, the band articulates their ethos, which they hope to reproduce in their larger community of fans, who they refer to as "munks." The "Munk Manifesto" begins with Arabic script, mimicking the way Islamic texts begin with invoking Allah's compassion and mercy. Then, preceding the rest of the manifesto, which resembles a poem, the band includes their play on the preamble for the Declaration of Independence, which reads "We hold these truths to be self evident that all [cis]men are not created equal and are, in fact, fucking trash."[228] Then, the manifesto declares, "We believe love is an action word that demands of us to speak up and fight, passionately, for the future we all deserve."[229] The manifesto continues to affirm the Munks belief in a future free of the oppression brought by "patriarchy, capitalism, religion and all forms of systemic violence."[230] Then, the manifesto affirms its commitment to a number of things including "being abundant in

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[227] John Gentile, "The Muslims talk their new album and their 401ks," *Punk News,* https://www.punknews.org/article/75362/interviews-the-muslims-talk-their-new-album-and-their-401ks.
[228] "The Munk Manifesto," The Muslims, https://themuslims.com/the-munk-manifesto.
[229] Ibid.
[230] Ibid.

the face of scarcity," "connection in the face of isolation," "collectivity in a system of individualism," and more. It ends by honoring the legacies of "Black and brown elders, queer and trans ancestors, and all fed-up freedom fighters," as well as the QT/BIPOC punk youth of the future. The final stanza (or verse) reads, "Black rage is valid/ Be gay, do crime/ Stay hydrated/ Stay haram."[231]

In many ways, the manifesto reads like a more tongue-in-cheek version of *Villainy*'s first page, with its generation of queers dancing on the graves of capitalism and colonialism. Much like the liberatory future invoked in *Villainy,* "The Munk Manifesto" begins with the centrality of love in building towards "the future we all deserve." The manifesto also articulates fighting for this future as necessary and unavoidable; in this way, The Muslims embody their own kind of unruliness or villainy through the band's persona. Also like *Villainy,* the manifesto stresses the importance of "collectivity in a system of individualism." In this way, The Muslims bring the insurgent ethos they share with *Villainy* to a performance context via the band's overall persona, which informs the "incivility" of their music, as well as the care with which they approach their lives shows, the primary way in which they create collective space.

The band's boldness in creating music like their 2020 holiday single, "Merry Jihad," shares a synergy with *Customs* and *Villainy's* insurgent poetics. While Sharif and Abi-Karam refuse the docility of War on Terror-era imperative patriotism through language, The Muslims enact a similar refusal to abide by the social contract of "Muslim

[231] "The Munk Manifesto," The Muslims, https://themuslims.com/the-munk-manifesto.

American" identity via their persona and the various kinds of music and spaces they create.

Pakistani-British writer and director Nida Manzoor's 2021 sitcom *We Are Lady Parts* is a testament to the increased space that Muslim women and queer Muslims have carved out to create art outside of the bounds of the representational imperative. The show, which follows the all-girl Muslim punk band Lady Parts, is particularly salient within this discussion of refusing Western notions of civility because of the pushback the fictional bands gets from non-Muslims and Muslims alike. The band is made up of Saira, its founder and lead singer, who is estranged from her South Asian family, Bisma, the calming figure and bassist of the band, whose Black Muslim presence gently topples the hegemony of Arabs and South Asians in Euro-American Muslim media, Ayesha, the fiery hijabi who plays the drums and briefly dates Zarina, an online magazine editor who promises to put Lady Parts on the pop cultural map, and Momtaz, the niqabi who faithfully manages the band. Lady Parts insists upon making and performing the music they want to, despite the difficulty they have finding supportive venues as visibly Muslim women, and the pressure from Muslims who believe their music is crass and disrespectful.

The show itself begins with Amina, a relatively straight-laced microbiology PhD student who ends up joining Lady Parts after Saira convinces her to get over her stage fright to be their much-needed lead guitarist. When viewers begin to get to know the band through Amina's first person narration, she says, "What you have to understand is I never

met girls like this before."[232] The scene then transitions through introductions of Saira, Bisma the bassist, Ayesha the drummer, and Momtaz, the band's manager. Each introductory scene is a quick glimpse into the contradictions of the women's lives; throughout the series, the women are seen praying together, driving around and screaming along to System of a Down songs, smoking joints, struggling through long work days, and more. In other words, the women in Lady Parts are multifaceted; they all have varying relationships with their families, dating, work, etc., but none of them are confused about their Muslimness. While seemingly simple, the show's refusal to frame Muslim identity as a central conflict is rare. Instead, *We Are Lady Parts* proceeds with the knowledge that Muslim women exist in excess to the ways in which neoliberal representational politics imagine them.

In Saira's introductory scene, she tries to convince her boss to let her host Lady Parts' lead guitarist auditions at the halal butcher shop she works at. Her boss, voicing the confusion that many people around Saira express at her dedication to Lady Parts, responds, "Why are you still trying to be famous pop star, huh? Like Michael Jackson, Mick Jagger?" Saira responds, "We don't seek fame. We simply seek to speak our truth before we're mangled by other people's bullshit ideas of us. Our music is about representation. It's about being heard."[233] While Saira characterizes the band as being about "representation" in this scene, the show itself is a far cry from the kind of Muslim representation in the media that is born out of the representational imperative to not be a

[232] *We Are Lady Parts,* season 1, episode 1, "Play Something," written and directed by Nida Manzoor, aired June 3, 2021, Peacock.
[233] *We Are Lady Parts,* season 1, episode 1, "Play Something."

threat to normative Western society. Along the same lines, Nida Manzoor has spoken about her intentions for the show as going beyond the one-dimensional depictions of Muslim women that have become commonplace in Euro-American media. In fact, Manzoor describes the catalyst for writing the show as being her frustration with the flat and subdued Muslim women she is often asked to write about. Instead, *We Are Lady Parts* was inspired by the Muslim women she met in arts spaces in London.[234] Returning to Saira's description of what she seeks through Lady Parts, this idea of speaking their truth before they are "mangled by other people's bullshit ideas of [them]" is quite telling. These "bullshit ideas" which seek to render the women in Lady Parts less angry and less vocal about it are not necessarily resolved through the notion of Muslim representation. Indeed, as Evelyn Alsultany documents, Muslim representation in Western media often seeks to simplify the complex realities of Muslim communities in service of a Western non-Muslim gaze. Thus, when Saira claims that Lady Parts is about representation, it is less so about representing Muslim women to a Western audience, and more-so about representing themselves, swear words and all.

in oregon on a road carved between green expanse, just a few miles before it curves into cliffside coastline, there is a sign that reads *persian gulf / afghanistan & iraq war veteran memorial highway*. soon after, redwood trees.

mariam ghani calls life after 9/11 *an accumulation of afters* as in it's not just after 9/11 it's also after 1948 & 1969 & 1979.

[234] "*We Are Lady Parts* Creator Nida Manzoor on Shattering Muslim Stereotypes and Why Representation isn't a Fad," *Variety,* June 4, 2021, https://variety.com/2021/tv/global/we-are-lady-parts-linda-lindas-nida-manzoor-1234989061/.

One scene that captures the women's insistence on living in their unruly realities unfolds in the fourth episode, entitled "Godzilla." After working on how to overcome her stage fright with Saira, Amina is met with a test when the band miraculously books a gig at a pub called The Red Lion, thanks to Zarina. Zarina's in-progress article about the band seems like it will bring them great exposure, so the women (minus Amina) are thrilled when Zarina is able to secure them a gig. When they walk into the pub, they find a group of unwelcoming white men staring back at them with disgust. One even goes as far as to say, "Your husband let you out the house tonight, did he?" before yelling "Boo!" as they set up on the stage. When Lady Parts tries to confront Zarina about subjecting them to a hostile crowd, Zarina responds, "Exactly; 'Lady Parts takes on racist Britain,'" alluding to the spectacle she hopes the show will create.[235] This potential to create clickbait seems to supersede the band's discomfort for Zarina. Still, Lady Parts takes the stage and proceeds to play a raucous punk rendition of Dolly Parton's "9 to 5." As the song progresses, Amina finally gets over her stage fright and plays her guitar solo. The band's elation at this development surpasses their anger at the racist crowd. As they finish the song, they run over to Amina to celebrate. The crowd continues to heckle and sneer but Lady Parts disregards this entirely. The band's willingness to not only play in

on the pacific coast highway driving towards huntington beach a sign reads *korean war veteran memorial highway.* this too, is an accumulation of afters.
i've driven past it countless times but i don't notice until the day the road is closed because too much sand has blown onto it.

[235] *We Are Lady Parts,* season 1, episode 4, "Gozdilla."

front of a hostile crowd, but to enjoy the performance illustrates how they have grown to enjoy playing their music despite the harshness with which they are received. Even the worst crowd cannot sway Lady Parts from "speaking [their] truth," to quote Saira. Since approval from others is not guaranteed, Lady Parts never bothers to seek it.

when i asked my mom why we never went down the shore growing up she told me she didn't know it was so close. the atlantic ocean is mostly something i've seen from planes in the minutes before landing in new york. the smell of the hudson is what sticks: dark & viscous & synonymous with trains where the conductors sound like they have handlebar mustaches. they too, are waterlogged.

Despite their insistence on expressing themselves precisely how they want to, even Lady Parts does not remain unscathed from the burden of representational politics. When Zarina's article turns out to paint them as "the bad girls of Islam," with out of context and falsified quotes like "fuck traditional Muslim values," the band is furious.[236] Not only do they feel misrepresented and used, they are left to deal with the intense backlash they receive from readers, from Islamophobes telling to "leave Britain" to Muslims who insist that Lady Parts is making a mockery of Islam. While the fallout from Zarina's article leads to the band going on hiatus after Saira lashes out at everyone, the first season eventually ends with Lady Parts throwing their own DIY show in a junkyard Momtaz scouts out.

What sets *We Are Lady Parts* apart from other examples of Muslims in Western media is the space each person is given to navigate the complexities of their lives.

[236] *We Are Lady Parts,* season 1, episode 5, "Represent."

Especially as Muslim women, the members of Lady Parts are steadfast in their love for making punk music together. The women may not produce neat representation for non-Muslim viewers (or Muslim viewers invested in upholding particular notions of what makes one Muslim) but they do not care. Ultimately, Manzoor's show demonstrates that to cater one's actions, including one's art, to imperialist expectations is to "mangled by other people's bullshit ideas," as Saira notes. For Lady Parts, expressing anger is key to claiming their autonomy. By being loud punks who "pray together and play together," Lady Parts rejects the Western notions of civility that representational imperatives are beholden to.

if you can believe it people used to dip their mangos in the canal in lahore to cool them down. yes, seriously — fleshy fruit lifted from nehar to open mouths. chewing & swallowing nehar pani like it was nothing.

**Conclusion**

Throughout a range of forms, the expanded space for Muslims* to express anger and anti-imperialist critique has led to more room for Muslim* collectivity in the West. This sense of a Muslim* collectivity that is not beholden to Western understanding or approval moves past rejecting the representational imperative. From *Customs* to *We Are Lady Parts,* rejecting civility becomes a method of resisting assimilation into a neoliberal multiculturalism. As Sharif's "America" illustrates, one must get in the way of the settler-imperialist state's limitations on our lives or risk being consumed. As The Muslims and *We Are Lady Parts* demonstrate, Muslim* literary and cultural production that

cultivates a collectivity of individuality offers an alternative to those who do not neatly assimilate into hegemonic "Muslim American" spaces. In my next chapter, I offer a more in-depth look at such a collective space through an oral history of the Los Angeles-based performance collective and party Discostan.

when water sits, it accumulates too, taking in debris & disease. in punjab, they fed the locusts to chickens. i'm no expert on locusts & how they accumulate in bodies but my cousin says chicken isn't safe to eat anymore, that she eats gosht if she eats meat at all. my cousin in a city by the sea, praying her city doesn't get knocked into the sea.

## **Chapter 4**: Discostan: Sonic History of a Borderless Nation[237]

Discostan started in a cassette shop in Hyderabad, India where a four-year old Arshia Fatima Haq picked out her first physical piece of music: Runa Laila's hit record *Superuna.* Thinking back on this choice, Haq, Hyderabadi-born and Los Angeles-based multimedia artist and Discostan's founder, speculates that she mostly chose the record because of its iconic cover image in which Runa Laila's head surfaces above her gold cape, alongside the glittering mic she brandishes like a sword. Remembering the image decades later, Haq talks about how Laila "asserts herself over the entire frame." She looks directly at the viewer, almost daring them to stop her from singing. Arshia Haq still understands this act of choosing *Superuna* for herself as a "foundational moment of Discostan."

For a young Haq, whose earliest memories of music include listening to her father's many qawwali cassettes and attending Sufi mehfils in Hyderabad, this was the first time she was offered a choice about what to listen to. In choosing Runa Laila'a golden cape and glittering microphone among a sea of men, Haq enacts the survival strategy Jose Muñoz coins as "disidentification."[238] In recognizing something akin to a different world in *Superuna,* one where women were fierce, loud, and unafraid to sing, Arshia Fatima Haq began to dream about and listen for "what the future could look like for us."

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[237] The following oral history is based on multiple interviews I conducted with Arshia Fatimah Haq, Jeremy Loudenback, Hushi Mortezaie, Khushboo Gulati, and Asiya Mir in Los Angeles between May 2023 and May 2024.

[238] Jose Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers and Color and Performance of Politics* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

For many of Discostan's collaborators and longtime attendees, the performance and party space Arshia built years later in Los Angeles would come to spur the same dreams of a future expansive enough to hold the joy and liberation of queer SWANA/South Asian communities. Dispersed throughout this sonic history, you will find the narratives of those who have labored to make Discostan the practice in community building it has grown into. Mostly though, Discostan started somewhere between Arshia listening to *Superuna* and the durgas she went to across the street on Thursday nights.

Hushidar Mortezaie — or Hushi — was a club kid. For him, being gay and Iranian in the 1990s in New York was all about play — playing with fashion, playing with people's limited understanding of Iran, and playing with the often too-white world of the gay rave scene. For him, fashion was always a second skin, one that could be taken apart and reworked like a living mural. Although he was born in Iran, Hushi was raised in the San Francisco Bay Area. After a childhood of hearing his father's stories of Iran and growing up to idolize Iranian intellectual figures like Samad Behrangi and pop culture figures like Googoosh, he visited Iran for himself in the late 1990s. It was this trip that sowed the seeds of what would become Hushi's distinctive style as a fashion designer, which first made waves in his and Micheal Sears' East Village store, Sears & Robot.

Decked out in silver mirrored walls like the little candy shops in Tehran, Sears & Robot quickly became a staple of avant-garde New York fashion. Its clientele was largely other club kids but over time, it attracted a wide swath of other fashion designers. By

1999, Hushi began taking more and more aesthetic influence from Iranian revolutionaries. By the time they had their first fashion show, entitled "The Persian Collection," Hushi's designs were creating a lot of buzz. The show, which featured ruffled gowns made of keffiyeh scarves and lace printed with chador-clad women with machine guns and anti-imperialist slogans, were classically Hushi in their tongue-in-cheek references. And still, people were interested; in fact, people were so interested that his designs wound up on Carrie Bradshaw herself in *Sex and the City*.

Crucially, the shop also grew into a hub of sorts for Iranian youth in New York. Back then, Shirin Neshat was the only Iranian artist who had gained mainstream visibility in the West but as Hushi puts it, "there was nothing about joy and celebration – only exile." Hushi's shop became a third space in its own right for Iranian kids who didn't realize they needed a joyous space until they walked in, danced to some Googoosh, and yearned for more spaces like it. It was here that Hushi, just by virtue of being Iranian and "gayer than life," modeled what it could look like to embody being what we are told is an impossibility. It was here that Hushi became intimately familiar with the need for "a language and a home for youth in the diaspora," watching how the worlds' of the Iranian youth who stepped into his shop bloomed.

Sears & Robot's highly anticipated second fashion show was scheduled for Friday, September 14$^{th}$, 2001. Hushi's designs were on the cusp of what seemed impossible: enough visibility to land him into material stability within the fashion world. That was until the Tuesday before the show when Hushi, Micheal, and their friend Sue

woke up in their Gramercy Park studio apartment to see the Twin Towers collapsing on TV. Hushi recalls watching footage of people desperately trying to escape and thinking, “Oh my god, they’re gonna call us terrorists.” The death threats to Hushi soon followed. Inevitably, his second show with all of its acclaimed guests was canceled until a smaller showing could be arranged a month later. Soon after, the store itself had to close down. In the span of just a few months, everything Hushi had was taken from him in the paranoid post-9/11 haze that seemed to creep into every corner of New York city.

Faced with this reality, Hushi decided to work in Iran. There, for several months, life moved on; Hushi immersed himself in his work and found new places to share it, like the very first issue of *Bidoun Magazine.*[239]

Hushi first met Arshia years later at a Discostan in San Francisco. After years of not knowing about each other, they recognized themselves in the other’s work like they’d been in conversation for centuries. Hushi describes that first Discostan, sometime before 2018 and somewhere up in the Bay, as a “homecoming.”

“This was a space where you didn’t have to pretend or lie at all, because lying is a part of our survival. Isn’t it a dream when you don’t have to lie or change your outfit when you go home?” Hushi’s words reflect the magic of what Discostan makes possible for queer Muslims*: a world in which survival, community, and truth can not only co-exist, but co-create. Even more miraculously, Discostan gives queer Muslim* youth access to elders (like Hushi himself) they don’t have to lie to.

[239] A transnational SWANA magazine highlighting contemporary Middle Eastern art and culture at a time when no one was interested in such a project in the West.

In many ways, the dream of Hushi's designs and what he was able to build in his little East Village shop – a sense of cultural history that cuts through the noise of what we are told we're supposed to be by embodying the possibilities of what we can create — is alive in Discostan. Hushi tells me that this is why he put the Discostan logo on his Tehrangles t-shirt dress; that's where it belongs.

It was also in Chicago in the 1990s that Haq met Jeremy Loudenback, Discostan's first and longest-running collaborator. Loudenback, who went by DJ Aji in the early days of Discostan, grew up in Los Angeles listening to all the left field music he could get his hands on. It only made sense that the two became fast friends, exchanging vinyl finds. In Chicago, the lifelong project that would become Discostan began to sow its seeds in the form of Haq's growing record collection, in all the noise and free jazz shows she attended (sometimes in saris despite being the only brown woman there), and in the musical community that Arshia and Jeremy found themselves in.

Several years later, in Los Angeles, Discostan's earliest iterations happened when Haq felt inclined to play music for her friends at house parties. In those days, she was working for Amoeba Records' World Music section. Over time, more and more people urged her to share her DJing more publicly, as people's love for Discostan grew beyond the capacity of the occasional house party. Then came Discostan's first public face: Radio Discostan, which began as a biweekly show on Radio Sombra, a community-based radio station in Boyle Heights in 2011. (Radio Discostan's more recent home is NTS Radio).

Initially, the bounds of Discostan's sonic landscapes were more porous, in part because of the diversity of musical traditions Haq was exposed to at Amoeba. In the years after its entry onto the Los Angeles music and nightlife scene, Discostan shifted into a more intentional exploration of the sonic pathways across South Asia and the SWANA region.

While Radio Discostan is the first and longest-running face of Discostan, the Discostan parties are perhaps its most well-known and beloved face. Arshia Haq DJed her first Discostan party at Blipsy Barcade in 2011; by 2012, the parties became a monthly fixture at Footsies' in Lincoln Heights. Back then, it was mostly about Haq, David Gomez, Kirk Gee, Sasha Ali, and Jeremy Loudenback — Discostan's original collaborators — playing tracks they loved that rarely found a sonic home elsewhere. Arshia recalls these early days of Discostan as a moment of musical experimentation for diverse crowds. Over time, Discostan became a fixture amongst queer SWANA and South Asian crowds in the greater LA area. It gave people a place where they could fully embody the joy of dancing to an old song they hadn't heard in years, without, as Hushi put it, "having to lie about themselves."[240]

Particularly within a post-9/11 landscape in which Muslim* people must navigate the pressures of a hypervisibility that shrinks the diverse histories of Muslim people globally into a readily consumable formation of "the Muslim other," Discostan does away

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[240] Discostan is part of a longer history of queer SWANA and South Asian parties in North America, as well as queer nightlife spaces in Los Angeles. Groups like Sangat in Chicago and Basement Bhangra in New York have existed since the late 1980s. As for Los Angeles' queer nightlife spaces, Mustache Mondays and the way it became an artistic and cultural hub for LA's queer Latinx community certainly marks it as an ancestor of sorts.

with the need for individualized identification. Instead, people can simply listen and dance.

Khushboo's first Discostan was the Nowruz party in 2017. Born and raised in Los Angeles, the now Oakland-based multidisciplinary artist first met Arshia through a Partition workshop run by poet and visual artist Sham-e-Ali.

The Nowruz party was at Footsies, Discostan's original venue. Khushboo attended with their sister and walked into a room full of splendor: a bronze disco ball and lots and lots of fog that gave everything a hazy effect. Almost immediately, they knew they'd be back; Khushboo talks about that first Discostan as a particularly memorable night. It was here that they learned about Nowruz, the Persian celebration that marks the New Year each spring for communities of people from Iran to Afghanistan. (Much like the South Asian and SWANA people who constitute Discostan's regular attendees, the diversity of Nowruz celebrations is often collapsed in favor of more hegemonically legible explanations, ie: Nowruz as a primarily Iranian holiday.) Having spent the better part of the years since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic learning about herbalism practices that would otherwise be lost to them, it is fitting that Khushboo's first Discostan led them to learning more about South Asian rituals meant to honor the arrival of spring. It is perhaps even more fitting that two years later, they created a large-scale installation for the 2019 Nowruz celebration at the Civic Center.

It started when they began making mirror altars with flowers and shells. Khushboo's intention was to activate the senses and transport the altars' users to

somewhere beyond their material reality. It was a practice in imagining other kinds of worlds when our dunya proved to be challenging and often harmful. Khushboo also talks about collecting materials and then creating mirror altars with them as a practice in "healing and invoking wonder." Back when Khushboo was just sharing images of their mirror altars on Instagram, they thought if they ever shared them more publicly, it would be at Discostan. Thus, when Arshia reached out to see if Khushboo would be interested in building a large-scale version of their mirror altars for Discostan's 2019 Nowruz party, it was the perfect opportunity.

They built the installation itself just a few hours before Discostan started at the Civic Center. A beloved past venue that has since been sold, the Civic Center was a huge open space. It had two floors, which meant that Khushboo was able to set up their installation on the second-floor mezzanine. When Discostan attendees walked up there to see/interact with the installation, they could still hear the music from below but the installation itself took them elsewhere. Khushboo recalls watching the range of reactions, from taking photographs with the installation to people silently taking it in.

This Nowruz party was the night after news broke about a white supremacist gunman committing a mass shooting in two separate masjids in Christchurch, New Zealand. Khushboo recalls that Arshia spoke about the atrocity during the event; the air was thick with grief but it was still a chance to come together in what Khushboo called "creative communion." Thinking back on the night of their installation, they said, "It was [grounding] to offer a life-affirming altar in the midst of this violence." Then, thinking

about how on some level, Discostan is always an insistence on celebrating in spite of the omnipresence of violence, they added that Discostan itself is an “affirmation of life.”

For Khushboo, having space to understand the larger context of one’s diasporic nostalgia has also been life-affirming. Reflecting on how being asked to create an installation for Nowruz prompted them to think through South Asian springtime rituals and celebrations, Khushboo talks about how this led them to learning more about the casteist origins of Holi. For them, Discostan is unlike other diasporic spaces because it does not seek to collapse nuances in service of a South Asian or SWANA identity that assimilates into a neoliberal multiculturalism. Instead, it confronts one with those nuances. Differences of caste, ethnicity, nationality, religion, immigration status, etc. are not set aside in favor of Western legibility because legibility is not a concern to begin with. Khushboo notes, “it’s a place for people to show up in better ways” and “an incubator for exploration & creating a world beyond the one we’ve been given.”

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Runa Laila herself is an apt catalyst for the deep listening practice which, over time, Arshia materialized into Discostan for multiple reasons. Firstly, her personal history reminds us that music — in this case, South Asian music in particular — can rarely be understood within the narratives ascribed by nation-states. Runa Laila was born in 1952 in what is now Bangladesh but was then East Pakistan. Her father’s civil service job brought the Laila family to Karachi in what was then West Pakistan. At the age of 14, Runa Laila made her breakthrough into the Pakistani film industry. In 1971, she moved

back to Dhaka after the Bangladesh Liberation War led to the partition of Pakistan and Bangladesh. Eventually, her career led her to Bollywood, and she became a pop sensation across the subcontinent, particularly with her rendition of the classic qawwali "Damadam Mast Qalander." She was also one of the first female singers in the subcontinent to experiment with disco influences in her music. The overwhelmingly positive reception of *Superuna* in 1982 cemented her position as a South Asian pop icon and eventually, the woman who beckoned Arshia Fatima Haq into a sonic future that would become Discostan. Much like Arshia Fatima Haq and Discostan itself, Runa Laila defies contemporary efforts to neatly separate out Bangladeshi, Pakistani, and Indian popular culture. She also defied expectations of classical Sufi music, once improvising a half hour long disco version of "Damadam Mast Qalander," complete with guitar riffs. She took everything she was given and made it her own. And thus, the possibility of a glittering future with brown women superheroes, dancing to disco music, and perhaps most importantly, maximum masti was born.

Arshia starts with Runa Laila when I ask her how Discostan came to be because above all, Discostan began with Arshia Fatima Haq listening to music. Beginning with her father's extensive cassette collection when she was a child, Haq grew to have a deep reverence for listening. Now, in her ongoing project "The Divine Listening Room," she talks about this deep listening practice within the context of the Sufi practice of Sama'.

Sama', which literally translates to "audition," refers to the Sufi tradition of listening with "the ear of the heart," as Islamic Studies scholar Leonard Lewisohn puts it.[241]

Before her extensive research on Sufi musicians in the subcontinent, which is to say before she had the language and frameworks to understand Sama', Haq considered herself a listener. Growing up, this meant listening to South Asian artists like Ghulam Ali or the Sabri Brothers with the attentiveness of someone who seeks to follow each word and every arrangement. She will tell you that "listening is its own vocation." Despite immigrating to the United States at a young age, Haq didn't grow up listening to much Western music.

When she left her family's house and had more space for sonic exploration, she found herself attending lots of free jazz shows because that's where she found the same devotion to listening she grew up with. This landed her at Chicago's Reckless Records in 1996, where she began to fashion her own musical archive that began with the subcontinent and expanded into the larger SWANA region and sometimes even as far and wide as the Soviet Union or Thailand.  It was also here that she began collecting ephemera; she recalls her hesitance to get rid of things like a record sleeve she knows was in Dhaka in 1982, like the objects themselves absorb the world around them and if she spends enough time with them, she too could be in Dhaka in 1982.

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[241]Leonard Lewisohn, "The Sacred Music of Islam: Samā' in the Persian Sufi Tradition," *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 6 (1997): 1–33, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3060828.

Discostan has been Asiya's home for years now; it's the only dancefloor they always walk right to the center of. Their first time on Discostan's dancefloor was at the LA4GAZA fundraiser; freshly arrived from Tucson, Arizona to Los Angeles, they attended with their best friend. It was October 14th at the Echoplex and Asiya had never seen so many queer brown people in one room.

Growing up in Tucson, Arizona with a Kashmiri father and a white mother, Asiya was always trying to experiment with self-expression in ways that made them stick out even more than they already did with their very Muslim name. When they moved to LA, it was because they needed to be somewhere else — ideally, somewhere with other people who loved them precisely for all the things that made Tucson unlivable. When they attended their first Discostan event in 2014, they knew they would be back soon. Delighted at the amount of queer South Asian and SWANA people under one roof, Asiya asked someone selling merch "who are these people?"

Years later, Asiya remains a fixture of Discostan's dancefloor. While describing some of their most memorable Discostan memories, they weave through stories of past venues: La Zona Rosa, one of Discostan's most iconic venues, with its velvet walls and mirrors, the El Cid where Bappi Lahiri himself once performed for Discostan[242], and the Echoplex where they excitedly tell me about watching Ana Tijoux perform. They talk about how even the venues reflect the intention Arshia puts into all things Discostan; venues, after all, are their workers. But most importantly, it's the music that pulls Asiya

[242] Bappi Lahiri is an Indian singer, composer, and music producer; he popularized synthesized disco music in the South Asian music industry and produced Runa Laila's *Superuna.*

in. They talk about hearing songs that Arshia plays at almost every Discostan and how even if they're not well known, "she's made them known through cultivating a group of people that will remember." Asiya refers to this practice of playing songs that would otherwise be lost as "another way to archive things." Here, the people themselves and their memories of dancing to the music become the archive. The music gets to live again, oceans away from its origin.

For Asiya, Discostan also "grounds [them] in a reality" where they're not expected to ignore or accept India's occupation of Kashmir. They talk about the dissonance of being in normative South Asian diasporic spaces in the United States and the notion that "we're all immigrants." In its refusal of an uncomplicated desi diasporic nostalgia and its insistence on the political, Discostan opens up space for Asiya to not have to participate in the exotification and consumption of Kashmir that is otherwise ubiquitous in hegemonic South Asian spaces.

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By 2016, a vibrant community had formed around and through Discostan. It was then that the parties moved out of Footsies and became a more curated experience. This is also when Discostan cements its position as a home of sorts for queer SWANA and South Asian artists across North America. Here, at this juncture, Discostan begins the work of making itself into a community practice that centers those who are often pushed out of hegemonic diasporic spaces in the US. Creating such a space in nightlife, which is often exclusionary, is no small feat. Embedded within everything that makes up the experience

of Discostan is the deep listening practice Haq brings to every decision, from playing grainy tracks recorded at weddings that would otherwise be lost to the performers she invites onto the dance floor.

Deep listening is the method through which all aspects of Discostan are labored over, from the parties to the rare vinyl releases, beginning with Arshia Haq and Jeremy Loudenback's musical archives. As the two main DJs spinning on Radio Discostan and alongside guest DJs at Discostan's parties, Arshia and Jeremy's musical archives are the bedrock of what Discostan sounds like. Central to this "Discostani" sound is the materiality of the musical archive itself. Many of the rare songs played at Discostan are the result of Haq's and Loudenback's persistent crate-digging. Particularly when Arshia worked for Amoeba Records with Kirk Gee and David Gomez, her respective vinyl collections grew exponentially. Eventually, the dearth of accessible experimental SWANA and South Asian music led Arshia to unconventional sources, like recordings ripped from Youtube videos or old VHS tapes. Often, the audio from these unconventional sources is mixed into a set on Radio Discostan or at a Discostan party without editing it to eliminate background noise and other disruptive sonic disruptions. While this was initially a result of Discostan's DIY-ethos, it has grown to be an ode to the materiality of the soundscape Haq creates. Songs bear the sonic residue of bypassing traffic or an audience's applause. Much like Discostan's diasporic nature, the musical archive itself bears the mark of its movement across different technologies, time periods, and borders.

Discostan's groundedness in deep listening is what sets it apart from other SWANA or South Asian diasporic nightlife spaces. One way that this deep listening practice materializes is through Discostan's resistance to reductionist classification. While a generation of musicians and DJs are pressured to use neoliberal identity politics to fall in line with algorithmic logics, Discostan remains a little confusing to a Western audience, while insisting on their right to opacity.[243] Discostan is often referred to as a "Middle Eastern party" by those who miss its South Asian roots. Still, calling Discostan a desi party would be an equally incomplete picture.

When you ask both Haq and Loudenback to describe Discostan, they talk about how the music steers the space. The similarities between Central Asian and South Asian music, for example, are evident when one listens to a Discostan set. Deep listening renders an uncomplicated neoliberal identity politics hollow; it certainly exists far beyond the available grammars of the "Muslim American." While many of the SWANA and South Asian queer nightlife spaces that have grown across North America since the 2010s signal a clear identity marker,[244] Discostan remains untethered to the kind of simple categorization that produces readily consumable diasporic nostalgia. Instead, Discostan insists upon an embodied experience that is steeped in its relationship to the anti-imperialist, feminist, and queer SWANA/Muslim* communities in Los Angeles.

[243] When tasked with explaining Discostan, Arshia often cites Édouard Glissant's concept of opacity to explain that Discostan is not for everyone to understand.
[244] For example Yalla Party, a queer SWANA party based in New York, clearly signals itself to a larger SWANA community by having an Arab name.

Particularly in contrast to the reductionist conceptions of Muslim* identity and cultural history produced by the assimilationist logics of the "Muslim American" as a category, Discostan presents an alternative. It demands an embodied experience out of the present that makes room for both forgotten pasts and unheard of futures.

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When I think of Discostan, I think of the crowd rushing the stage during Mohammed Assaf's "Dammi Falastini;" I think of the queer brown kid who sat near me at the *Showgirls of Pakistan* screening because she jumped at the chance of an all-ages Discostan event despite the daunting prospect of going alone; I think of the haft-sin Hushi made last Nowruz to honor queer Iranian youth killed in the uprisings after Mahsa Amini's death; I think of the haft-sin he made this Nowruz, to honor flowers native to places that are bearing a great deal of colonial violence, including Kashmir, Palestine, Congo, Sudan, and Afghanistan and how the flowers don't adhere to borders, just like sound. Most of all, I think of Arshia spinning the last track of the night (Runa Laila's rendition of "Damadam Mast Qalander" has been a personal favorite) and how we spin and spin and spin until the lights come on.

# Coda

"I don't know what they thought I was capable of;
I wish I was more capable of it."
— from "Violence," *A Theory of Birds,*
Zaina Alsous

"and I can't tell you who the hell set things up like this
but I can tell you that from now on my resistance
my simple and daily and nightly self-determination
may very well cost you your life"
— from "Poem about My Rights," *Directed By Desire: The Collected Poems of June Jordan,*
June Jordan

At the end of *Customs'* acknowledgement page, Sharif writes, "Thank you, fear. That's enough now." I've been sitting with this — both the thank you and the gentle parting. From the very beginning, you can feel the book shaking off fear with each line. If *Look* presents readers with a meticulously researched and carefully constructed conceit in which the violence of US empire is indisputable, *Customs* declares its anti-imperialist positioning without flinching. In "America," the speaker "had to" while in "He, Too" the poem is described as anti-American.

In many ways, *Post-9/11 Representational Imperative & Muslim* Refusal* is about how we, as Muslims in the settler-imperialist core, shake off the fear of articulating dissent. It is about how we nurse our imaginations to move past the political repression of

the years after 9/11; it is about how we reject the limitations of legibility to Western eyes and find new ways to speak to each other instead.

Seven months into Israel's genocide in Gaza, the importance of shedding fear has never felt clearer. With all forty-six of the student protestors who were arrested at UC Irvine on Nakba Day facing suspension and the bail of student protestors occupying a building at UC Berkeley being set at $120,000 each, the fear of criminalizing dissent has also never felt more palpable. Over the last few months, the university has been a national staging ground for repressing and criminalizing pro-Palestinian voices.

This month, as I struggled to find words to meet the moment, there were so many mornings where I woke up to immediately make sure that people I love made it home safely the night before. The scariest morning was the one after the UCLA raid, in part because it was so clear the Zionists attacking the students for six hours the night prior wanted to hurt people and the LAPD was letting them as they watched from the sidelines. It was so clear that the police would have left the protesters for dead before they stopped the Zionist mob. I went to sleep with this knowledge and the image of a sniper on a UCLA rooftop burned into my mind.

What to do with the fear? When a journalist asked Dr. Tiffany Willoughby-Herard if she was afraid of losing her job as she was being arrested for standing between police and students, she responded "Turn around. What job do I have if the students don't have a future?" Willoughby-Herard's words echo through each day the Zionist entity continues

its genocide because she articulates a truth larger than the fear of retaliation: there is no future in a settler-imperialist state that does not value life.

Over the past few months, Muslims in the United States have seen through the veneer of neoliberal attempts to placate their demands for a permanent ceasefire. In Dearborn, Michigan, Muslim leaders canceled a campaign event with Joe Biden and doubled down on their calls for a ceasefire. When the Biden administration attempted to respond to the threat of Muslim voters refusing to re-elect "Genocide Joe" by announcing a national strategy to combat Islamophobia, Muslim organizations across the United States saw through it as a demobilizing tactic. The Biden Administration even had to go as far as to cancel its annual White House Iftar. Meanwhile, in New York, nonprofits like the Asiyah Women's Center publicly denounced Mayor Eric Adams' attempt to use them as photo-ops for damage control. Each day, Muslim communities in the United States learn how to remain steadfast in the fight for a free Palestine.

As I sit with the implications of understanding "Muslim American" as an assimilationist and settler-colonial identity formation, I think about the potential of Palestine to "free us all," as pro-Palestinian organizers often say. As we say no to the normalization of the Zionist entity, may we also say no to the normalization of the settler-imperialist state. May we refuse the settler-imperialist state's terms of engagement so that we can build a future free from its genocidal reality. May our poems and art make us brave enough to get there

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