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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
SANTA CRUZ

**STITCHING SOLIDARITY:
BELONGING AS A MUSLIM IN THE UNITED STATES**

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

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

DIGITAL ARTS AND NEW MEDIA

by

Shimul F. Chowdhury

June 2019

This Thesis of Shimul Chowdhury
is approved:

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Professor Sharon Daniel, Chair

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Professor Laurie Palmer

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Professor Madhavi Murty

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Lori Kletzer
Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

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2019

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Abstract

Stitching Solidarity: Belonging as a Muslim in the United States

Shimul Chowdhury

This thesis presents collaborative and participatory craft-making as catalysts for dialogue regarding the surging Islamophobia after events such as the tragedy on September 11th and the 2016 presidential election.

Inspired by the South Asian tradition of *kanthas*, I created a series of quilts out of my mother's *saris*. The imagery embroidered and sewn onto the *kanthas* was informed by interviews with 11 Muslim participants who live in the United States. Each embroidered segment was based on an image that the participant suggested, which symbolically represented their strained sense of belonging based on their religious or cultural association with Islam. Five *kanthas* were sewn together to form a large tent; hanging, they created an enclosed space which could be entered. The audience was invited to enter the space and stitch or draw their own notions of how a "sense of belonging" could potentially be identified.

The combined processes of cooperative making, textile craft, participatory installation, and involved dialogue in *Stitching Solidarity* attempt to demonstrate how this participatory art practice can record a history of lived experience, build and define community, and contribute to healing.

Dedication

To my mother, whose presence is felt in every thread of this work.

Acknowledgement

Stitching Solidarity would have been entirely unsuccessful if not for the participation and contributions of many. I must first acknowledge my collaborators, the 11 individuals who I interviewed: Sara Alfageeh, Iram Bibi, Hanif Chowdhury, Aida M., Sara Nasr, Sana Sheikholeslami, Sabina Safia Wildman, “Khadijah,” and the remaining 3 who wished to remain anonymous. Their vulnerability and honesty are the backbone of this work.

I also acknowledge the support of my committee of advisors: Sharon Daniel, Laurie Palmer, and Madhavi Murty. Their guidance, belief, and support helped me develop my work further than I dreamed.

Thank you as well to John Weber, who curated the 2019 Digital Arts and New Media MFA Exhibition, *Receivership*. His dedication to the work resulted in an exhibition that exceeded all expectations.

A final note of gratitude to the members of the 2019 Digital Arts and New Media cohort. We thirteen wildly different individuals united through our struggle over the past two years. I am certain that the strength of our body of work came from our collective dedication to advocating for ourselves within this program. I am so grateful to have learned with and from you all.

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Introduction

"I am an American."

When I was in the third grade, I was asked by my teacher to come to school one day wearing cultural garb. She told me that I had been selected to take part in a special program on the schoolwide morning announcements. Filmed and streamed live like a news show, the morning announcements at this public elementary school was a full production. To be featured on this show was, at that age, a great honor.

I arrived at school the day of the program wearing a sparkly yellow *lehenga*. Comprised of a decorative top and flowing skirt, it was one of my most cherished outfits. I felt jarringly out of place as I walked through the corridors full of my peers in uniform.

I entered the library where the program was to be filmed and found other students dressed as unusually as I was. We were directed to line up alongside a wall and, when given indication, to step up in front of a camera. A teleprompter stood alongside the camera and we were instructed to read from when it was our turn. I moved forward when prompted and, staring at the scrolling words, read aloud, "My name is Shimul and I am an American." It was November of 2001.

I am uncertain if I felt a strong sense of self-preservation in those early days; clearly, I did not feel it enough to question why only I and the other students of color were asked to do this special segment. Rather than saying these words of my own volition, I was put into an unmistakable position of defense by authority figures who I

trusted implicitly. I was asked as a child to proclaim my sameness to the entire student body. I had to assert that my U.S. American identity, previously unshaken and unquestioned, was legitimate. I was made to arrive in costume, dressed up in such a way that highlighted everything about me that made me Other.

I faced more violent or obvious instances of Islamophobia post-9/11, but this seemingly-innocuous incident in the months after the event stands out. In this situation, it was implied that others would assume I did not belong due to what little they knew about what I believed. It was also implied that the strangeness of my cultural identity, though typically hidden when I attended school, would need to be on display in order to communicate how un-American most others perceived me to be.

I conceived *Stitching Solidarity* as a platform that records histories of lived experiences like this one and describes how Muslim individuals in the United States understand the Islamophobia they have faced. It strives to present these histories in a manner which provokes catharsis for participants and self-reflection for observers, Muslim or non-Muslim. In part, this was an effort to find and share community. More so, it was an effort to create space, literally and figuratively, to open a dialogue about the multi-faceted notions of belonging and community within the contexts of social practice and craft.

Participation, Social Practice, and Dialogue

Participatory Art

Stitching Solidarity is a not only a participatory and collaborative installation with an online digital interface, but also a model for how participation can be integral to both social practice and community engagement. Participatory art "connotes the involvement of many people (as opposed to the one-on one relationship of 'interactivity.')" Furthermore, "the artist is conceived less as an individual producer of discrete objects than as a collaborator and producer of *situations*...while the audience, previously conceived as a 'viewer' or beholder', is now repositioned as a co-producer or *participant*."[1] In the conceptualization of this work, the notion of collaboration on the part of both the community represented in the work as well as the eventual audience was a crucial component. In creating a work which could act as a catalyst for dialogue and some level of social impact, it was imperative to recognize that in this situation, "artistic practice can no longer revolve around the construction of objects to [simply] be consumed by a passive bystander."[2]

I felt a deep disconnect with the idea of passive consumption of content by the audience or an aesthetic dictated and constructed solely by me as the artist. Until this project, my art practice has been almost entirely autobiographical. Though this was transformative and important for me as an artist, I reached a point where I did not

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[1] Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012), 1-2.
[2] Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 11.

want to present individual experience as representative of the collective experience. Rather, I felt that I had the opportunity as an artist to use the framework of my practice to include and highlight other Muslim voices. For this reason, the work necessitated a structure that allowed for participation guided by the participants themselves.

Participatory Structures in Socially Engaged Art

"...Socially engaged art is [characterized by] its dependence on social intercourse as a factor of its existence."[3] Additionally, the emphasis on socially engaged art "is less on the act of protest than on becoming a platform or a network for the participation of others."[4] Participation became the guiding concept behind *Stitching Solidarity* because it was imperative to define the work in part by others. This was particularly important because my past work, which centered solely my own perspective, did not always achieve the level of social commentary or impact that I hoped for.

Pablo Helguera defines four participatory structures: nominal, directed, creative, and collaborative. Nominal participation dictates that "the visitor or viewer contemplates the work in a reflective manner, in passive detachment that is nonetheless a form of participation."[5] With directed participation, "the visitor

[3] Pablo Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook* (New York: Jorge Pinto Books, 2011), 2.
[4] Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, 12.
[5] Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, 14.

completes a simple task to contribute to the creation of the work." In the creative participation structure, "the visitor provides content for a component of the work within a structure established by the artist." Lastly, collaborative participation dictates that "the visitor shares responsibility for developing the structure and content of the work in collaboration and direct dialogue with the artist."[6]

The two structures employed in the ideation and creation of this work are the creative and collaborative structures. I focused primarily on these two structures because they both require some significant level of investment on the part of the participant. Furthermore, the participant has agency which influences the direction of the work itself. I felt that direct participation which engages participants to offer their time on a significant contribution had the potential to influence not only the complexity of the work itself, but also the preconceived notions held by the audience.

In its current form, *Stitching Solidarity* is best categorized within the creative participation structure. My goal for future iterations is for the work to more completely reflect the collaborative participation structure. In the following section, I will describe how, in one example of art activist group WochenKlausur's work, this structure established equal footing for both artist and collaborator.

WochenKlausur – Collaborative Participation

WochenKlausur demonstrated how collaborative participation could be an effective mode for addressing an issue when, in 1996, they were invited to the

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[6] Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, 15.

Bundesrealgymnasium Stubenbastei school in Vienna to consult students on how they would like to redesign classrooms. Existing conditions in the classrooms were less than ideal due to "stringent guidelines for the furnishing of classrooms in Austrian schools." The members of WochenKlausur asked the students directly, "What would you like to change about your classroom?" and proceeded to coordinate discussions with the students in which they ranked classroom conditions in other countries before comparing them to their own. Over several weeks and through many workshops and discussions, the group allowed the students to dictate the new direction of the rooms while also inviting the students to delegate the importance of new features.[7]

Figure 1. WochenKlausur collaborating with students
Source: Susanna Niedermayr, "Intervention in a School", *WochenKlausur: Sociopolitical Activism in Art*, 2001.

[7] Susanna Niedermayr, "Intervention in a School," in *WochenKlausur: Sociopolitical Activism in Art*, trans. Christopher Barber (New York: Springer-Verlag Wien, 2001), 55-60.

In this project, the act of consulting a specific group and enabling their contribution to address and influence a concern they shared resulted in a solution that would directly benefit them. WochenKlausur's practice here was working as an art group which does not necessarily create a tangible artwork. Rather, they recognized that "art has political capital at its disposal that should not be underestimated" and the act of using "this potential to manipulate social circumstances is a practice of art just as valid as the manipulation of traditional materials."[8] The notion of conversation or dialogue as the sole or main component to an art practice is, of course, not limited to WochenKlausur; "dialogical work" is a category of socially-engaged art which falls neatly within the collaborative participatory structure.

Suzanne Lacy - Dialogical Works

In projects such as WochenKlausur's classrooms in Vienna, "conversation becomes an integral part of the work itself."[9] Grant Kester describes these "dialogical works" as works in which the artist's role is subverted and in which an exchange of meaning and vulnerability is required. Additionally, "dialogical works can challenge dominant representations of a given community, and create a more complex understanding of, and empathy for, that community among a broader public."[10] These

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[8] Wolfgang Zinggl, "From the Object to the Concrete Intervention," in *WochenKlausur: Sociopolitical Activism in Art*, trans. Christopher Barber (New York: Springer-Verlag Wien, 2001), 17.
[9] Grant Kester, "Conversation Pieces: The Role of Dialogue in Socially-Engaged Art," *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985* (January 2012): 2.
[10] Kester, "Conversation Pieces," 7.

qualities allow for an artwork or an art practice to transgress traditional bounds and establish a socially-engaged or social practice perspective.

Artist Suzanne Lacy is widely recognized for her prolific body of work involving social engagement and communities. 'The Oakland Projects' were a "ten-year series of installations, performances and political activism with youth in Oakland, California."[11] The projects invited local students, teachers, authority figures, and general community members to partake in conversations regarding public policy. These conversations and events would at times span over years, culminating in performance, installation, or some other form of public presentation.

Code 33 was a project from 1998 – 2000 which focused on "reduc[ing] police hostility toward youth, provid[ing] youth with a set of skills to participate in their communities, and generat[ing] a more profound understanding of youth needs."[12] Through many art workshops, presentations, training sessions, and vocal support from local authorities, *Code 33* publicized crucial conversations and relationships that reflected the needs of the community.

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[11] "The Oakland Projects (1991-2001)", The Oakland Projects, accessed May 25, 2019, https://theoaklandprojects.wordpress.com/.
[12] "Code 33 (1998-2000) – project summary", The Oakland Projects, accessed May 25, 2019, https://theoaklandprojects.wordpress.com/code-33-1998-2000-description/.

Figure 2. Young people and police officers conversing on a rooftop in Oakland
Source: Suzanne Lacy, *Code 33*, 1999.

The project culminated in a performance "on October 7, 1999 [with] dozens of cars converged on the rooftop of Oakland's City Center West Garage." Inside and around the cars sat groups of police officers and young people having rehearsed but completely live conversations regarding "crime, authority, power, and safety." [13] As these conversations occurred, over 1000 members of the public were invited to walk amongst the cars, listen in on the conversations, and witness change and understanding taking place before their eyes.

In *Code 33*, dialogue was not simply a result of the work; it was the goal. It allowed young people and officers to communicate on equal ground and furthermore, it invited the public to engage and benefit as well. Additionally, the carefully

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[13] "Code 33."

orchestrated spaces atop the roof and within those parked cars encouraged an unprecedented level of candid conversation. Dialogical works such as this one are successful because they prioritize the needs of the community while creating an environment which allows the disenfranchised to have agency.

Community and Belonging

Intersections of Community

Zareena Grewal draws from Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* when she writes,

> The gap between legal citizenship and social citizenship belies the idea that the nation is a natural entity, merely a territorially bound political unit; rather, the United States is a place both physical and also imagined, one that is produced and perpetually reproduced by a community of citizens who collectively imagine that they share a deep, horizontal kinship.[14]

Muslim identity popularized in the media is not, in fact, a singular, homogenous community. Rather, many intersections of Muslims coexist across regions and communities, Muslim or otherwise, may not necessarily be bound by physical location. Similarly, the identifier of Muslim does not denote any single group. Terminology such as "the Muslim World" or "the Middle East" are frequently misused and misunderstood by non-Muslim individuals. The conflation of these terms is problematic because "both terms refer to far more sweeping groupings of peoples and lands than those defined by the specific and narrow American political and cultural interests in these geographies over time."[15]

When considering involving a community's participation in a socially-engaged work, it is crucial to not limit the understanding of this community. There should be an understanding that there is more to a community than the stereotypes or

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[14] Zareena Grewal, *Islam is a Foreign Country: American Muslims and the Global Crisis of Authority* (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 4.
[15] Grewal, *Islam is a Foreign Country, 5.*

assumptions assigned to them. Communities are not homogenous and members of one community can simultaneously belong to others. Therefore, it is important to understand that the community addressed may represent itself differently than expected.

With *Stitching Solidarity*, I intended for the work to represent a varied and realistic representation of Muslims. As a Muslim myself, it was imperative that my own perception of the community was not limited to my experiences alone. It was further important to recognize that the non-Muslim audience would likely approach the work with assumptions that could influence their interpretation or reception of the work. Therefore, the fact that the Muslim community is comprised of many diverse individuals and identities would need to be clear in the work itself in order to allow for an open dialogue to occur.

Studying Belonging

In this work, I speculate on a concern which is evidently shared throughout what we are calling the Muslim community: belonging. At the annual Muslim Student Association West Conference held at the University of California, Irvine, it came to my attention that the notion of 'belonging' was a significant topic of study. The conference, full of talks delivered by local spiritual leaders and influential scholars, had an underlying current of activism and awareness. Attendees were encouraged multiple times throughout the weekend to take part in various different climate surveys which would compile statistics and information to be presented to

various institutions or organizations. These surveys prompted participants to describe the climate on their campuses as Muslim individuals and through surveying Muslim students of this particular region, the researchers hoped to present a comprehensive look at collective struggle and experience.

The surveys asked participants to consider belonging or other feelings associated with belonging or not belonging. The assessment was typically conducted numerically, quantifying what felt to me an unquantifiable feeling. In taking part in these surveys, I came to understand that a strained sense of belonging was evidently not an isolated feeling among my peers. I also came to realize that from the perspective of an artist rather than a researcher, describing a sense of belonging might require a more nuanced and complex method than a scale of 1 to 10. This realization is what eventually became the conceptual framework for *Stitching Solidarity*.

Threads of Recollection

***Kantha* – Repurposed Legacy**

"Created from fragments of old family garments and recycled threads, *kanthas* evoke memories" in both material and image.[16] Traditionally handcrafted utilizing old and worn *saris*, *kanthas* are quilts meticulously embroidered with geometric designs, floral motifs, and historical symbols. My personal relationship with these objects emerges from the fact that, since my childhood, many of my women relatives living in Bangladesh have labored over quilts to pass on to me. Despite hardly knowing some of these relatives due to physical distance, I have a small collection of their stunning handmade efforts. From these worn-soft garments and the evident care and labor involved in transforming them into quilts, I can clearly feel connection to their makers. They are imbued with the stories of she who wore the cloth and she who repurposed it. Though I have always approached textile and fiber crafts as a hobbyist, I recognized my deep personal connection to these objects and realized that I could call on that connection to create the form of my work.

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[16] Ed. Darielle Mason. *Kantha: The Embroidered Quilts of Bengal from the Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection and the Stella Kramrisch Collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art*. (Philadelphia, PA: New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), ix.

Figure 3. Kantha gifted to me by my Bangladeshi cousin
Source: Chowdhury, Shimul. "Kantha." 2019. JPEG.

Subversive Craft

Quilting is a collaborative craft which traverses borders. Furthermore, the use of quilting and other textile arts as a vehicle for activist art is an established practice. "*Craftivism*...is the point where *crafts* and *activism* meet" and could potentially have emerged from "interest in using alternative strategies for protest and action."[17] Additionally, the use of textiles and other craft materials within the art context is a practice which subverts existing constructs. The idea that craft practices and what is commonly referred to as 'women's work' do not belong within the arts is perhaps not as common now as it once was. Despite this, the history behind these practices lends a sense of radical subversion. "...An art practice that crosses with textiles becomes

[17] Betsy Greer, *Knitting for Good! A Guide to Creating Personal, Social, and Political Change, Stitch by Stitch* (London: Roost Books, 2008), 127-130.

political because textiles and specifically the act of stitching...[are] form[s] of resistance: a performative and transformative site for political struggle and becoming."[18] Crafting, stitching, and making are purposeful acts which require a commitment of both time and effort; they are, in a way, the embodiment of community-making. This very notion is made clear in examples of textile-based community projects such as the AIDS Memorial Quilt.

The AIDS Memorial Quilt – Collective Mourning

The AIDS Memorial Quilt is perhaps one of the most recognizable textile and socially engaged works. In 1985, San Francisco LGBTQ+ activist Cleve Jones had been planning the annual candlelight march in memory of Harvey Milk and George Moscone. When "he learned that over 1,000 San Franciscans has been lost to AIDS," he asked the marchers to write their names on placards. Afterwards, they all "stood on ladders [and] tap[ed] these placards to the walls of the San Francisco Federal Building." The collection of placards on the walls had a striking visual resemblance to a patchwork quilt.[19]

This initial concept developed into what is known as the AIDS Memorial Quilt today. Actual quilt panels were submitted from people all over the country for Jones and volunteers to sew together. Since then, it has grown larger and larger with

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[18] Françoise Dupré "From Brixton to Mostar: social practice through textiles," in *Cultural Threads: Transnational Textiles Today*, ed. Jessica Hemmings (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 171.
[19] "Activist Beginnings," The AIDS Memorial Quilt, accessed May 12, 2019, https://www.aidsquilt.org/about/the-aids-memorial-quilt.

time and has been displayed in countless venues.[20] It “remains the largest community art project in the world” and “has redefined the tradition of quilt-making in response to contemporary circumstances.”[21] It has further been archived into a permanent collection of photographs available on the AIDS Memorial Quilt website. This archive of each individual panel ensures that the work has enormous reach; because AIDS education and HIV prevention are goals of the NAMES Project Foundation, having an accessible digital version of the quilt allows them to continue to grow their efforts.[22]

Figure 4. Block number 02342 of the AIDS Memorial Quilt
Source: The NAMES Project, “Block 02342”, date unknown. http://search.aidsquilt.org/.

[20] “The Quilt Grows,” The AIDS Memorial Quilt, accessed May 12, 2019, https://www.aidsquilt.org/about/the-aids-memorial-quilt.
[21] “The Quilt Today,” The AIDS Memorial Quilt, accessed May 12, 2019, https://www.aidsquilt.org/about/the-aids-memorial-quilt.
[22] “The AIDS Memorial Quilt Archive,” The AIDS Memorial Quilt, accessed May 12, 2019, https://www.aidsquilt.org/about/the-aids-memorial-quilt.

The AIDS Memorial Quilt exists not only as a physical memorial, but also as a symbol which "represents the deaths of hundreds of thousands of other [individuals that] it does not name explicitly."[23] Therefore, its enormous size and legacy is representative not only of the participants who shared the names of their loved ones, but also of the vast extent of devastation caused by the stigma around the illness. In using quilting in particular to represent this particularly large scale of public mourning, each contributor must call on the idea that "no less important than the stories told *by* quilters are the stories told *about* them through their quilts."[24] The format of the quilt allowed for the stories being told to visually and symbolically depict a dire situation within a recognizable and accessible context.

***OUVRAGE* – Workshops as Art**

A different example of a textile-based work which is deeply entrenched in social practice is *OUVRAGE* by artist Françoise Dupré. The work manifested in the form of an installation which was developed over the course of many workshops. When coordinating the work, Dupré referenced Helguera's collaborative participatory structure previously mentioned in this paper. Dupré collaborated with Novi Pogled, a women's association supporting breast cancer survivors. Novi Pogled "wanted to be

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[23]Carole Blair and Neil Michel, "The AIDS Memorial Quilt and the Contemporary Culture of Public Commemoration," in *Remembering the AIDS Quilt*, ed. Charles E. Morris (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011), 3.
[24] Brian L. Ott, Eric Aoki, and Greg Dickinson, "Collage/Montage as Critical Practice, or How to "Quilt"/Read Postmodern Text(ile)s," in *Remembering the AIDS Quilt*, ed. Charles E. Morris (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011), 104.

perceived as active and creative subjects rather than as victims of cancer," so their participation was less about their own lives and experiences and more about an "emphasis on the haptic experience and creation of an art object with a strong materiality."[25]

Figure 5. Project workshop at the French Cultural Centere, Mostar
Source: Françoise Dupré, *OUVRAGE [uvra:ž]*, 2009.

The strength of this work lies in its prioritization of the creative expression of its participants. The act of crafting (specifically knitting and crochet looping and/or stitching in this work) was treated as a performative process which would contribute to "delivering the project's aim: to celebrate women's creativity, cultural diversity and commonality through crafting."[26] Though the products of the workshops entirely dictated the eventual form and aesthetic of the installation itself, it is also worth

[25]Françoise Dupré, "From Brixton to Mostar", 179.
[26] Françoise Dupré "From Brixton to Mostar", 180.

considering that in this case (and in many of Dupré's other work,) the art object held equal importance to the dialogue and participation. In my own practice, I have hoped to achieve precisely this balance of object and dialogue.

***Arpilleras* – Protest and Healing with Folk Art**

A final example of textile art objects which represent how social practice is entrenched in craft is *arpilleras* made by Chilean women during the Pinochet era. '*Arpillera'* means 'burlap' but the form of *arpilleras* is actually as hand-stitched tapestries "about the size of a pillowcase."[27] They typically depict landscapes and scenarios referencing the region from which they come and a variety of fabrics and techniques are used to create their intricate, painting-like images. They are emblematic of the folk art of the region, nowadays sold inexpensively in gift and tourist shops. The *arpilleras* "gain strength as 'authentic' souvenirs through their unpolished aesthetic" and despite their doll-like figures and cheery landscapes, they tend to feature text or symbols which represent a "demand for justice and accountability."[28]

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[27] Julia Bryan-Wilson "Threads of Protest" in *Fray: art and textile politics*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 143.
[28] Bryan-Wilson "Threads of Protest", 148.

Figure 6. Anonymous *arpillera*
Source: Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Threads of Protest" in *Fray: art and textile politics*, date unknown.

The combination of stitched phrases referencing protest and colorful landscapes and scenes originates from Chilean women responding directly to Pinochet's influence. The women resourcefully repurposed worn garments and "produced appliquéd scenes that became some of the most potent and lasting depictions of poverty, human rights violations, and resistance in Chile during the 1970s and 1980s." As the disenfranchised went missing, these *arpilleristas* used the garments of the people they lost in these objects so as to have a way to remember them. The process of creating the *arpilleras* was furthermore a practice to process grief. Eventually, the act of crafting and then selling *arpilleras* turned into a source of income for many of the impoverished *arpilleristas*. Workshops developed during

which *arpilleras* could be crafted collectively; though these workshops are no longer in practice, the historical tapestries as well as the newer, cheaply sold versions represent the collective effort to stitch and share stories.[29]

The rich history behind modern day *arpilleras* stems not only from their craftswomen and the imagery visualized on the canvas, but also from the stories of the people who disappeared. The women who produced them used the format available to them to publicly express their loss. The textiles they used could be distributed widely and much like the AIDS Memorial Quilt, the stories embedded within them traveled far. Additionally, the practice of crafting them was simultaneously a necessity and a healing practice. As such, the form of a tapestry was transformed into a vehicle for recorded history and for protest. Similarly, I attempted to subvert the traditional form of *kanthas* into a platform for the unheard voices in Muslim communities.

[29] Bryan-Wilson "Threads of Protest", 149-151.

Embroidering the U.S. Muslim Experience

Stitch Jam and Workshops

The early steps for working on *Stitching Solidarity* were centered around establishing a situation in which the community of Muslims I wanted to involve (in those early stages, Muslim women who were students at UC Santa Cruz) could come together for conversation and skill-sharing. The very first plan was to organize weekly workshops, potentially in the form of an independent study for undergraduate students to receive credit. With this plan, I was hoping to engage with some of the students who I had previously worked with in a workshop in the fall of 2017. At that time, I had organized a single workshop during which a small group of Muslim students collaged and painted depictions of *ummah*. *Ummah*, meaning community, was the central theme around a zine I produced which presented the artwork made by the students during the workshop.

After much deliberation and feedback, I soon shifted gears and started planning what I had dubbed a "Stitch Jam." Similar to code or game jams, this would have been a retreat-like event during which students would spend an extended period conversing, learning, and stitching. A great deal of time and effort went into details such as deciding upon a venue and activities. For example, I communicated with the San Francisco-Bay Area chapter of the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) about them potentially hosting a 24-hour event. As an organization which offers a multitude of workshops for Muslims with topics ranging from anti-bullying

to self-defense, it seemed logical to contextualize the event I was planning with them. The logistics of planning such an event proved to be too difficult to arrange in a timely manner, however, and I was forced to move on from working with them.

I shifted instead to organizing two shorter Stitch Jams, this time focused locally in Santa Cruz. The Fábrica is a community workspace in Santa Cruz that offers free materials, equipment, and knowledge to the public in an effort to engage a wide community in craft practices. I arranged to host my Stitch Jams there for 5-hour sessions over two weekends in the hope that the proximity and shorter time commitment would make participation more accessible.

I had a rude awakening when my first Stitch Jam had zero attendance, despite verbal commitments from several of the students who I had worked with. However, this turn of events proved to be beneficial to me in the long run. I came to understand that I was expecting an inordinate level of commitment from these students and that my perception of my own community was limited because I assumed that they would all put everything aside to take part in my conversation. The reality is that crafting – and taking hours out of a day during the school term to craft – is an act of leisure that many are unable to give themselves the permission to enjoy. Other responsibilities take precedence and as the artist attempting to coordinate a collective experience, I needed to respect that.

Rushing the process or forcing participation by coercing individuals to come to my events at any cost would have resulted in ingenuine work. It also would have resulted in a confused and botched idea of community and socially engaged art.

Though the ideal form of *Stitching Solidarity* would have been as a collaborative participatory work that involves the participants embroidering on their own, I understood at this point that I would need to focus on creative participation for the work to accomplish a sense of genuine dialogue.

Online Interview

As previously mentioned, creative participation involves participants providing content which will then be incorporated into a structure or form dictated by the artist. I decided that I would conduct some form of interview online which would allow individuals to participate at their convenience. The questions in this interview would attempt to explicitly draw out content for the embroideries that would become a main component of the work. It then became my duty to create those embroideries.

I created a Google Form that included a brief description of what the work would do, an assurance that participants who fill out the form would be thought of and credited as collaborators, and an invitation to join me in stitching. Beyond asking general information, I posed three main prompts which would inform the content of the embroideries. They are:

- As a Muslim individual living in the United States post 9/11 & post-Trump: How do you define belonging? How would you describe your community? Do you feel a sense of belonging in your community?

- Can you recall a specific instance in which you questioned or thought about your belonging as a Muslim person in the U.S.? What words or actions made you feel this way? Please clearly describe this memory.
- If you had to choose an image or symbol to represent this memory, what would you choose? Please describe it clearly. If you have a file of what this image might look like, you can also submit that below.

When preparing the language for these prompts, I sought to find a balance between guiding the conversation, but also asking questions which were broad enough to allow for both different and common responses.

I shared this form with the individuals who were interested in the Stitch Jams. I also shared them with other UC Santa Cruz portals, such as the Muslim Student Association listserv and a group chat for "MSA Sisters." The online format also allowed me to expand my reach, so I sent the form to people outside of Santa Cruz as well. These were mostly people who I had been following on social media and who have some sort of presence online as a Muslim activist or creative. For all of the criticism and limitations of social media, the visibility offered by them is invaluable to many marginalized groups. Finding representation on social media has the potential to be yet one more intersection of community and it is that idea that led me to contact Muslim individuals who I admired.

The benefit to this method of interview was that I was able to easily reach dozens of potential contributors and received far more immediate participation than I did with my attempts at hosting workshops. Furthermore, the option to submit written

responses seemed to have allowed participants the freedom to be honest and vulnerable on their own terms. For the scope of the work in the time that I was able to dedicate to it, I was pleasantly surprised by depth of the responses that I received.

Collection of Stories

The tone of the responses varied wildly but a common theme of similarity within difference emerged. One participant, Sabina Safia Wildman, began her response by stating that she is a "a mixed-race (white and Pakistani), bisexual, neuroatypical [sic], Muslim person in the U.S."[30] She went on to describe how the various intersections of her identity inhibited her from feeling a true sense of belonging within each of the respective communities one would associate those intersections with. Sara Nasr related something similar when she wrote, "I feel like I belong in the LGBTQIA+ Muslim and LGBTQIA+ Iranian community, but sometimes it feels weird just being only in Iranian or only Muslim spaces considering all my identities, and my distance from my Muslim identity."[31] For both of these participants, the limitations of the communities associated with how they identify cause conflicting senses of belonging. Despite this, both (and others) felt it imperative to distinguish themselves by these points of difference.

In her response, 'Khadijah' stated, "People don't really understand how a person can identify with two different cultures."[32] This statement seems to encompass

[30] Appendix A, 46.
[31] Appendix A, 42.
[32] Appendix A, 48-49.

the shared feelings from each of the participants. Assumptions about each of them because of one or more of their identities (most prominently that of being Muslim and something else) resulted in confused expectations and unfair situations. From these responses it was evident to me that there is no simple answer to seeking or finding belonging or, as a matter of fact, community.

The images described were just as varied as the responses to the questions. Some of the submissions included a pomegranate, a hijab floating among water lilies, a jade plant, and even an original illustration drawn soon after the shooting in Christchurch, New Zealand.[33] My intention in having each contributor suggesting an image was to inspire them to describe their lived experience in a poetic or symbolic manner. Choosing an image or symbol seemed difficult for some and easier for others but in all cases, the resulting designs were rich and unique.

Stitched Image

As the responses to my form came in, I began designing embroideries based off of the images the participants described. Using another repurposed *sari* as the canvas, I meticulously stitched the images by hand. The process was extremely methodical; 7 or 8 consecutive hours in a day would be spent in front of a gigantic hoop, pulling the needle through. As I worked on each individual piece, I felt a kinship to the women in my family who labored similarly to craft *kanthas* for me. The slowness of the process forced me to pause in my making and think about the person

[33] Appendix A, 52.

whose story I was representing. The act required a measure of patience and care that resulted in unexpectedly complex finished pieces. This level of character and intricacy could not have been easily achieved with a machine.

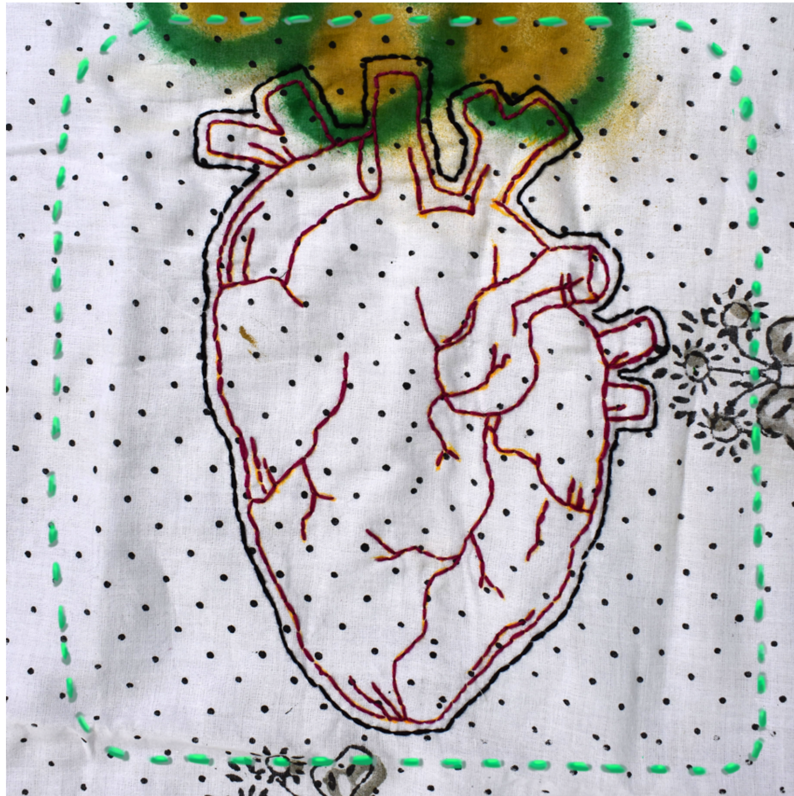


Figure 7. Hand embroidered heart
Source: Chowdhury, Shimul. "Heart", 2019. JPEG.

Each finished embroidery became a large patch which would eventually join the structure of the installation.[34] I photographed them individually so that they could be compiled onto a website.[35] This interface of this digital archive mimics the look of a quilt itself. Presented on an enormous touch screen which laid nearly entirely flat,

[34] Appendix B.
[35] Appendix C.

the tactile nature of the fabric is almost tangible. The design of the site is devoid of buttons or cues which would reference the system from which it ran. Rather, one can simply swipe and tap on the images to view the next page.

Each embroidery has an accompanying page which has the written responses to the interview questions framed alongside the stitched image. The design of the text poetically highlights key phrases from those responses and though the text is clearly digital, the translucent fabric background also mimics the look of the *kanthas*.

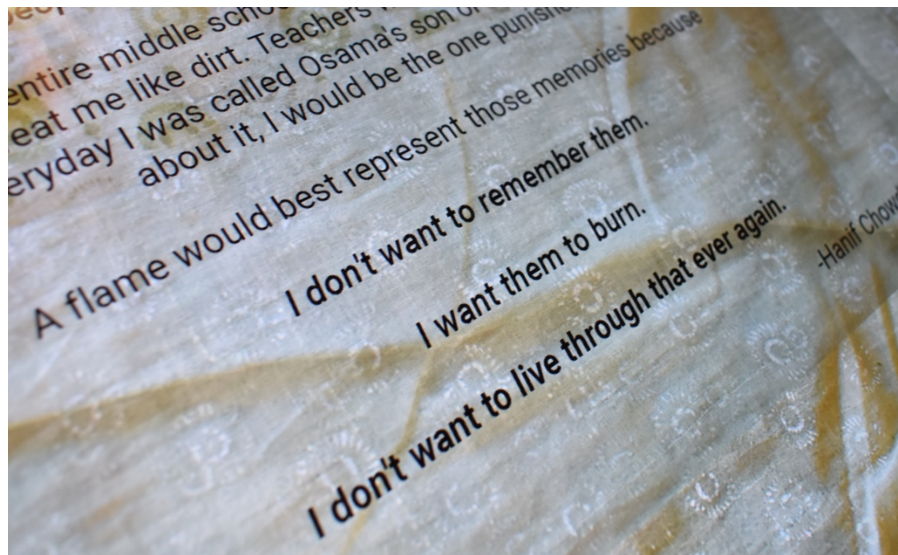


Figure 8. Image of text based off of interview with Hanif Chowdhury
Source: Chowdhury, Shimul. "Flame", 2019. JPEG.

This digital archive is accessible on any device which has internet and a browser. Though ideally viewed on a touch screen surface for tactility, the content can be accessed virtually anywhere. In this way, the structure is in place for the results of this collaborative work to be shared beyond the physical location of the installation. The accessibility of this content is important; in order for this work to

truly sustain a dialogue and grow, the conversation cannot be limited to just whoever was able to view the work during the run of the exhibition.

***Kanthas* in Space**

When thinking about the different ways in which I wanted participants and audiences to engage with my work, I decided that a physical space that could be both observed and entered would represent my goals well. I felt that immersion within a curated physical space could encourage transformative interaction from visitors. Inspired by my childhood *kanthas*, I collected colorful old *saris* from my mother and began to transform them into a hanging structure.

The structure went through many names and styles in the planning stage. For a time, I considered calling it a blanket fort or a tent. I eventually settled on calling it simply an 'enclosed space.' The most significant feature of this space was that rather than referencing a specific cultural form of shelter, it would highlight the *kanthas* themselves as art objects. In this way, the space could properly highlight the embroidered additions without offering an unrelated context.

Using both machine sewing and hand stitching, I made 5 separate *kanthas* comprised of 10 individual *saris*. These 5 *kanthas* were sewn together to create one top panel (a ceiling) and 4 side panels (walls.) Rope strung through the corners of the top panel hooked to the ceiling to create a 6' x 6' x 8' (length x width x height) space.

The purpose of this structure was to create a physical space which would not only reference the history of *kanthas* and other quilts as canvases for stories, but also

would allow for immersive engagement during the time of exhibition. This effectively expands participation in the work into two levels: participation of the contributors and participation of the visitors.

Installation and Spontaneous Participation

The installation came together with the *kanthas* hanging from the ceiling and within the enclosed space was a colorful *chindi* rug and many *kantha* stitched cushions. 8 embroideries were stitched onto the outer walls of the structure, 2 to a side. One of the corners of the structure was pulled open so that the inside was visible. Across the room was the touch screen interface facing the structure. A single seat sat behind the screen so that one individual could interact with it while also observing the work before them.

Figure 9. Stitching Solidarity enclosed space
Source: Chowdhury, Shimul. "Enclosed Space", 2019. JPEG.

The center of the enclosed space also housed the final component of participation. A 24-inch embroidery hoop, fitted with more *sari* fabric and clamped into a standing embroidery frame, stood in the opposite corner of the opening. Beneath it sat two baskets: one was filled with a needles, scissors, and stitching zines and the other filled with dozens of skeins of embroidery floss as well as colored markers. Written on the fabric of the hoop were the words, “Stitch or write a word or phrase that represents a sense of belonging.”

Figure 10. Embroidery hoop inside *Stitching Solidarity* enclosed space
Source: Chowdhury, Shimul. “The Hoop”, 2019. JPEG.

From when I first began to think about participatory work, I knew that I wanted to create an opportunity for some level of participation from the audience. Following the framework of dialogical art, I planned for the dialogue to not only be

contained to those who are Muslim, but also the non-Muslims who were engaging with the stories. I strove to coordinate a level of balance and fairness in the conversation, much like Lacy's *Code 33* did between officers and young people. My hope was that upon encountering the powerful and vulnerable memories of my collaborators, visitors would be compelled to contribute their own. I also hoped that the environment within the space was inviting and welcoming enough that it might entice the audience to linger for more than the compulsory 30 seconds. To help this along, I spent time inside the space myself, stitching performatively and awaiting visitors.

Figure 11. Visitor stitching on embroidery hoop inside *Stitching Solidarity*
Source: Chowdhury, Shimul. "Stitching Inside", 2019. JPEG.

A Spectrum of Conversations

For six days spread intermittently throughout the two-week run of the exhibition, I waited for visitors to enter. I worked on the few embroideries that I had remaining from the interviews as I waited, attaching them to the structure and updating the digital interface as I finished each piece. I also stitched an embroidery representing my own reflections on belonging, stemming specifically from the teleprompter I referenced earlier on in this paper.

Interaction with visitors in the gallery varied widely. Some approached me themselves while others preferred to observe on their own. During those sessions, I learned a great deal about how to communicate and how to gauge if one was willing or ready to communicate. I did not verbally instruct any visitors to stitch on the hoop; rather, I waited to see if the space itself would be enough to convince them to stay. To my pleasant surprise, many visitors needed no prompting.

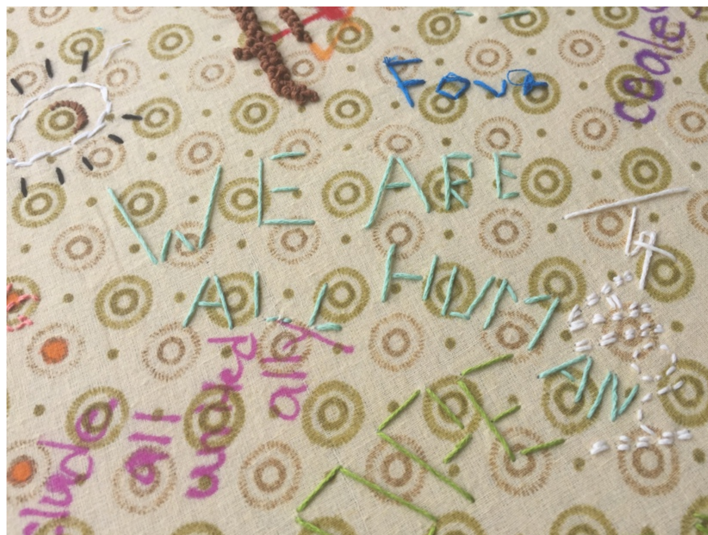


Figure 12. Stitched words on embroidery hoop
Source: Chowdhury, Shimul. "WE ARE ALL HUMAN", 2019. JPEG.

When I noticed that visitors were taking steps to engage, I initiated conversation. The resulting discussions ranged from quick, five-minute descriptions of the work to long discussions about fast fashion, culture, and diaspora. Some visitors stitched as they spoke to me while others watched me embroider myself. Each encounter was entirely unique, and part of the process was learning that they were all valuable in their own way.

Two first year undergraduate students at UC Santa Cruz sat within the space with me for nearly two hours. They spoke to me animatedly as they embroidered words representing their sense of belonging and the topic of conversation flowed from one to the next with ease. As the conversation went on, I found myself wishing that I could record this moment somehow because the time they gave to the work was so incredibly precious. When they eventually left, I realized that the moment was indeed recorded in the stitches they left behind. I felt then that the entire project was worth it just for that one moment of seamless dialogue.

Other encounters in the space were not so positive. I had a handful of conversations with individuals who approached me with the very misconceptions and assumptions that the work critiqued. Some individuals had difficulty reconciling with the interviews reflecting LGBTQ+ identity intersecting with faith. Others simply had very specific assumptions about Islam and expected me to address those assumptions before they even attempted to understand the work itself.

These encounters were jarring, as they always are in contexts outside of this work. Suddenly, I was again in the position of having to defend myself and an entire faith. I felt shocked that even in a space of my own creation, I had to deal with the unfair burden of responsibility over all Muslims. Despite this shock, I realized later how even these conversations were valid and, in their own way, valuable. They led me to have difficult conversations on my own terms, in a space where I (and the histories represented in the work) could be protected. I also realized that the perspectives of the individuals I interviewed were so underrepresented that for these particular visitors, it was their first time encountering them. Perhaps those visitors gained insight into a different perspective following those conversations. *Stitching Solidarity* exists so that someday, the idea of a bisexual Muslim individual may not come as a shock or surprise.

<u>**Conclusion**</u>

"I *am* an American."

The interviews that I conducted detail intense feelings of ostracization and isolation. They reflect memories in airport security, of migration, hate crimes, and unexpected places where solace could be found. The intricate stitched images do not immediately describe the intimate and vulnerable lived experiences which they represent. I expected that through active engagement with the screen, the hoop, and the space itself, the visitor's focus might travel from the image of the memory to the actual human being behind it.

Furthermore, I hoped for the audience (Muslim or not) to have a moment of self-reflection upon approaching the work. The goal was that in encountering these varied histories and true lived experiences, visitors might rethink their understanding of "Muslim" and, on a broader level, community or identity. *Stitching Solidarity* gives space for all participants to have agency over their own narrative. It also demonstrates how the concepts of identity and community can be both varied and complex.

My hope for Stitching Solidarity is that it will continue to grow. While I am certainly able to move forward by using the existing framework of conducting interviews and stitching images from them, I would like to eventually return to my original aspiration of having collaborative participation as the core structure of the work. The ideal home for this project is inside a community center or a mosque, with

workshops or classes dedicated to sustained discussion, needlework, and community-building. Hands other than my own would touch the *kanthas*, shifting and changing the narratives on them with each pass of the needle. The hoops with visitor contributions would be displayed alongside the structure, in conversation with the histories written there but not competing with them. The structure itself would grow larger with each iteration, becoming a portable space of safety and comfort wherever it is installed.

Stitching Solidarity is by no means a finished work. Rather, it is simply the beginning of what I hope is a practice that can be sustained for years to come. As the *kanthas,* embroideries, and digital archive expand, I hope that the conversations will as well. The work may never settle upon a single definition for 'belonging.' With open discussion of difference, however, it is possible the commonality can indeed be found.

Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Responses

1. Sana Sheikholeslami

   As a Muslim individual living in the United States post 9/11 & post-Trump: How do you define belonging? How would you describe your community? Do you feel a sense of belonging in your community?

   > "My community is resilient and invested in creating a better future. As my community fights for their rights and justice, they are also learning what it means to be woke and good allies to others. My community fuels me with hope and determination."

   Can you recall a specific instance in which you questioned or thought about your belonging as a Muslim person in the U.S.? What words or actions made you feel this way? Please clearly describe this memory.

   > "The travel ban on my family in Iran, makes me question how complete my home in the U.S. is. How can this be my home, when they cannot even visit me?"

   If you had to choose an image or symbol to represent this memory, what would you choose? Please describe it clearly. If you have a file of this what this image might look like, you can also submit that below.

   > "A pomegranate: food keeps me connected to my family abroad. There is comfort in know we are eating the same foods."

2. Iram Bibi

   As a Muslim individual living in the United States post 9/11 & post-Trump: How do you define belonging? How would you describe your community? Do you feel a sense of belonging in your community?

   > "For me belonging means to be part of a community. To be accepted regardless of religion, race or gender. Do I feel like I belong in my community? I would answer yes however I would also say no. Yes because I don't experience hate like many hijabis out there do. I would say my community people keep to themselves. I'm not sure if that's a good thing or not but as long we are not hating on each other I would say Yes I do belong and I do feel accepted. On the other hand I would answer no because I do get stares here and there for physically

looking like a Muslim. Why do I get stared at? I'm not sure. Maybe they like the color of my hijab? Oh, I really hope so."

Can you recall a specific instance in which you questioned or thought about your belonging as a Muslim person in the U.S.? What words or actions made you feel this way? Please clearly describe this memory.

> "A week ago, a horrible massacre occurred in New Zealand which shattered the hearts of millions. Many of my non-Muslims friends did not speak a word about it which made me question my belonging. However, a few days later our local mosque was surrounded with kind and caring individuals who came to show their support while the Muslims were inside praying. These small acts of kindness speak volumes. That's when I knew that love triumphs hate."

If you had to choose an image or symbol to represent this memory, what would you choose? Please describe it clearly. If you have a file of this what this image might look like, you can also submit that below.

3. Anonymous 1

As a Muslim individual living in the United States post 9/11 & post-Trump: How do you define belonging? How would you describe your community? Do you feel a sense of belonging in your community?

> "I feel very fortunate in that I have never been personally attacked for being Muslim. Nonetheless, there has always been a lingering fear in the back of my mind, especially with the rapidness of news and hearing how ordinary people are attacked everyday, brutally. Muslim or not. I would love to feel more connected, but it is difficult to feel a sense of belonging or community in a society that is so rampantly divided between hate and support."

Can you recall a specific instance in which you questioned or thought about your belonging as a Muslim person in the U.S.? What words or actions made you feel this way? Please clearly describe this memory.

> "One of the first and most impactful moments for was the attack of the Muslim girl outside the Virginia mosque in 2017. It definitely made the reality of hate more concrete. This was especially jarring because it was such a vile act that took place during the last days of Ramadan."

If you had to choose an image or symbol to represent this memory, what would you choose? Please describe it clearly. If you have a file of this what this image might look like, you can also submit that below.

> "I imagine a headscarf (hijab) floating in a pond, surrounded sparsely by water llillies [sic]."

4. Sara Nasr

As a Muslim individual living in the United States post 9/11 & post-Trump: How do you define belonging? How would you describe your community? Do you feel a sense of belonging in your community?

> "Belonging is feeling like you have people close to you in your life that understand you and the experiences you've had, and [sic] may have similar experiences as you. My community would probably include other Iranian-Americans, Muslim-Americans and queer folks. In another sense, my other community is where I live. I feel like I belong in the LGBTQIA+ Muslim and LGBTQIA+ Iranian community, but sometimes it feels weird just being only in Iranian or only Muslim spaces considering all my identities, and my distance from my Muslim identity."

Can you recall a specific instance in which you questioned or thought about your belonging as a Muslim person in the U.S.? What words or actions made you feel this way? Please clearly describe this memory.

> "As a kid, I really did not know what being Muslim was, and I remember one time when I actually told another person in my class that I was Muslim, they called me a terrorist. I'm sure they didn't know what that meant either, but it still impacted the way I thought about my religion. Then growing up, I felt like I just didn't fit in with other Muslims I met because I wasn't as religious as them, or I was Iranian and I hadn't really interacting with many other Muslim Iranians."

If you had to choose an image or symbol to represent this memory, what would you choose? Please describe it clearly. If you have a file of this what this image might look like, you can also submit that below.

> "Maybe an explosion of some sort, or like a cartoony explosion with 'BAM' written inside. It a confusing, shocking experience that I could only describe as that."

5. Aida

As a Muslim individual living in the United States post 9/11 & post-Trump: How do you define belonging? How would you describe your community? Do you feel a sense of belonging in your community?

> "I would define belonging as building community with other people across difference, creating nurturing, respectful, and inspiring spaces to work towards our individual needs and collective liberation, and forging friendships/comraderie [sic]. I would describe my community as transcending borders, from the Middle East to the West Coast, and all over the world. Community is something I and my friends/comrades are constantly working to build. I have never necessarily felt community in the places/settings/groups that I maybe should describe as my community, and maybe this is because I am mixed? Or because I was always drawn to being different from the sentiment of 'thats [sic] the way things are' and 'that's [sic] how you are supposed to be/act/feel/know/define yourself'. I also grew up in Lebanon when my parents are Yemeni/Syrian and Danish, so I had to make home in the place where I am not from. My communities have always been something that I actively have to build. Community for me is diverse, and has always been a process of building with people who think differently, act creatively, and support one another. I struggle to build and maintain community with other people in the US but especially in Santa Cruz - the kind of lifestyle is different, we can't just knock on each others [sic] door, or just show up at eachother's [sic] houses; I sometimes don't feel I belong because of this. I struggle because I know Yemen and Syria are being bombed everyday. I wish we could eat together more, show up at eachother's [sic] houses, spend hours together doing our own thing but together. I desperately need community."

Can you recall a specific instance in which you questioned or thought about your belonging as a Muslim person in the U.S.? What words or actions made you feel this way? Please clearly describe this memory.

“I never really wanted to move to what my Baba calls 'the empire', but I had this sudden change of heart one night that Spring, and applied to an MA program in San Francisco. I arrived in the US after a long double-legged flight from Lebanon in August 2013. My dogs had to go in the cargo hold and I was terrified the whole way; about them down there in the dark, about the life I left behind and what was ahead of me. My [now ex-] husband and I were guided into one of the many long and winding lines at the Customs and Border Patrol in SFO. We both had dual-citizenship, so we assumed it would be easier than the experience for many, but I found myself sweating and my heart anxiously beating nonetheless. I thought back to the loud and rowdy Lebanese airport, where Lebanese citizens/Arab nationals of oil-rich countries/and Westerners pack into the same 5 customs lines at the airport, while migrant workers were lined up against the walls. I knew that this was violent. But there was something differently violent about the cold sterile looks on the people with bullet proof CBP vests sitting behind glass in their little booths, to my memory not cracking a smile. After inching step by step through the bulging lines that led you to face one of these officers for over an hour and a half, we came face to face with one of the CBP men sitting behind his protective glass. He did not return our smiles, asked for our passports and papers, and took an anxiety provoking 10 minutes fumbling through this paperwork that might give us access into the US, looking up every now and then to order us to get our fingerprints scanned on some virtual device, or to look straight into the camera to make sure we were in databases going who knows where. He looked up - 'why does it say Lebanon in your passport?'. We lived there, we answered. 'Why did you live there'? We proceed to try to justify our upbringing and life history. 'Do you financially support Hamas or Hezbollah? Were you a part of any militias?'. No, of course not, we respond. He nods, calls someone over, and they proceed to take us across the huge Customs hall into a small room on the edge, where I looked around and saw that the people around me looked like people from the so-called Middle East and/or Muslims. They made us sit there for 2 hours as they took in each person for questioning. Our anxiety was building and I had to calm down my ex who was not only anxious but angry about the profiling, tell him not to start making a scene. Eventually, we only get the same two questions again 'Do you financially support Hamas or Hezbollah? Were you a part of any militias in Lebanon or Syria?'. No. They let us go, but only after trying to shame us, to I imagine in their minds 'put us in our place'. But we know it is not only the individuals. Islamophobia

and anti-Muslim racism is systemic. The next time at the airport, I made sure to tell the Customs and Border Patrol person immediately how I was an MA student at a Jesuit (Christian) university."

If you had to choose an image or symbol to represent this memory, what would you choose? Please describe it clearly. If you have a file of this what this image might look like, you can also submit that below.

"Fuck Borders" by Dulce María López González. 9 March 2018. Screenprint.

https://www.dulcemarialopez.com/

Something like 'stretch your humanity, no more borders'."

6. Hanif Chowdhury

As a Muslim individual living in the United States post 9/11 & post-Trump: How do you define belonging? How would you describe your community? Do you feel a sense of belonging in your community?

"I didn't feel like I belonged. Especially after 9/11. Everything was so horrible then. Barely had any friends at the time and it always felt like everyone was against me or wanted to hurt me in some sort of way. Now it isn't nearly as bad, but there's still that sense of hate where people see me as someone who shouldn't be here. Community wise I don't really feel like there is anything really there. People say that they'll band together or that they'll support you, but they never do. Most people are just all talk and never follow through."

Can you recall a specific instance in which you questioned or thought about your belonging as a Muslim person in the U.S.? What words or actions made you feel this way? Please clearly describe this memory.

> "Literally my entire middle school years were a hell. I had entire classes who would treat me like dirt. Teachers would ignore everything others did to me. Everyday [sic] I was called Osama's son or terrorist. If I did anything about it, I would be the one punished."

If you had to choose an image or symbol to represent this memory, what would you choose? Please describe it clearly. If you have a file of this what this image might look like, you can also submit that below.

> "If anything, a flame would best represent those memories because I don't want to remember them. I want them to burn. I don't want to live through that ever again."

7. Sabina Safia Wildman

As a Muslim individual living in the United States post 9/11 & post-Trump: How do you define belonging? How would you describe your community? Do you feel a sense of belonging in your community?

> "I don't very a true sense of belonging in most surrounding people or places. I'm not sure how to define belonging because I feel in between so many categories, being a mixed-race (white and Pakistani), bisexual, neuroatypical [sic], Muslim person in the U.S. I feel like to many peoples' stereotypes my identities would seemingly contradict eachother [sic], although I don't feel that way. In many spaces I feel partial belonging and I'm used to this since I'm queer and biracial, but it's also a benefit for more because I feel that same partially comfortable feeling among various identity groups with identitied [sic] I don't have. I have different communities: my family in SF, my mother's family all over the world, my friends from SF, Muslim students in the prayer organizing group that is not MSA, and probably one of my closest most belonging space being with students involved in the Worker Student Solidarity Coalition (WSSC) Local 501 which I helped create last year! I feel like I belong differently in each community space -- usually just certain aspects of my identity feel belonging with the exception being WSSC!"

Can you recall a specific instance in which you questioned or thought about your belonging as a Muslim person in the U.S.? What words or actions made you feel this way? Please clearly describe this memory.

> “Probably every day in the past 5 years or so I question this part of my identity - being in the US and being Muslim - especially since I started wearing a duparta or hijab most days beginning last year. I get a lot of looks and people say things to me or have certain expectations of me they are surprised when I'm loud and strong-minded and voice my opinion. Sometimes I feel like I have to emphasize how I am not oppressed by Islam and how empowered it makes me truly feel - kind of to counteract that stereotype people have of Muslim women. But also sometimes I have trouble belonging within Muslim communities - possibly because I grew up with Christianity and Islam but not specifically one and no pressure to practice either and so I said my shahada my freshmen year of college, but also because I am queer and I do not follow all of the practices of Islam regarding haram actions like drinking, sex before marriage, etc) and I am worried that my representation of the ways I am Muslim and how I practice Islam could reflect poorly on other Muslims. I also feel like my actions [sic]”

If you had to choose an image or symbol to represent this memory, what would you choose? Please describe it clearly. If you have a file of this what this image might look like, you can also submit that below.

> “I'm thinking of an image including 2 images flowing into eachother [sic]. One of the images is many US people's assumptions and stereotypes that Muslim women are submissive, quiet, oppressed, conservative, internalized misogyny, accepting their place and all that BS (words written around a hijabi womens [sic] face) and then the picture flowing out of it is defying those stereotypes (she can have a megaphone in her hand) while still also fighting the patriarchy within your communities/cultures/religious student groups/religious institutions/classrooms etc. So the 2nd image would show these fights she has to put up within her community spaces written inside her body and then outsude [sic] would be the megaphone and organizing and fighting in solidarity with global movements for justice.”

8. Anonymous 2

As a Muslim individual living in the United States post 9/11 & post-Trump: How do you define belonging? How would you describe your community? Do you feel a sense of belonging in your community?

> “I feel "belonging" when my body, mind, and spirit are free to just "be," existing in harmony with surrounding environments and communities. Belonging means I have enough trust in my environment

> to live without fear of being harmed, controlled, manipulated, dismissed, or outcasted. Living in Santa Cruz, I feel no sense of this belonging. In this town, I feel as though my body is trapped in an ongoing state of anxiety, fear, and defensiveness. Thoughts racing, muscles clenching, goosebumps all over my back, overwhelming nausea. My body bracing itself, always preparing for the worst. I never feel this way in the East Bay..."

Can you recall a specific instance in which you questioned or thought about your belonging as a Muslim person in the U.S.? What words or actions made you feel this way? Please clearly describe this memory.

> "As a Muslim woman who wears the hijab, every time I have to go through airport security I always feel a clear sense that I am unwelcome in the U.S. While most people around me get to go through security without being questioned or overly-surveilled, my body shakes with nervousness while I am waiting in line because I know that I will be thoroughly searched and checked, which is even more humiliating in such a public setting.
>
> I remember last time while I was in line for airport security, I started having anxiety because I had just began my period. I was scared that they would make me strip down my pants to show them my pad, as I had heard on the news that another Muslim woman went through that. Sure enough, once I actually went through security, they searched me and were asking what I felt were inappropriate questions about my clothing. The man was questioning what the symbolism on my sweater represented, even though the sweater just represented a student org that I was apart [sic] of. I could tell he was suspicious of what organizations I was affiliated with as a Muslim."

If you had to choose an image or symbol to represent this memory, what would you choose? Please describe it clearly. If you have a file of this what this image might look like, you can also submit that below.

> "This might sound weird but maybe like an abstract image that represents feeling stripped/naked/exposed to the public? Because I feel like those airport searches make me feel naked and like all my privacy has been invaded. But maybe the symbol could be of a feminine Muslim figure that is holding her body to shield/cover it from the eyes of the public."

9. "Khadijah"

As a Muslim individual living in the United States post 9/11 & post-Trump: How do you define belonging? How would you describe your community? Do you feel a sense of belonging in your community?

> "Belonging is a feeling I have when I'm with people who get me, when I don't have to explain myself. The people I belong with aren't necessarily people from the same background, they're people who have had similar experiences (even though they might not be Muslim, the children of immigrants, etc). I'm mixed race and my parents are not the same religion, which has had a big influence on my understanding of belonging. People don't really understand how a person can identify with two different cultures, so when someone from one of the countries of my background finds out that I'm mixed, they often ask which one I identify 'more' with or tell me that I can't identify with one because I'm too much of the other!
>
> I don't know if I have a 'community' in Santa Cruz. I have a group of grad students (mainly women of color and non-binary POC) that I know and that I trust, but we rarely get the chance to be together as a group because everyone's schedules with teaching, research, etc are so hectic. Once during finals week, a bunch of us ended up working at the same coffee shop by chance. It was amazing! I don't feel like I belong in my department. I'm involved in a lot of the things that go on there because it's my work, but I have to schedule time away."

Can you recall a specific instance in which you questioned or thought about your belonging as a Muslim person in the U.S.? What words or actions made you feel this way? Please clearly describe this memory.

> "ALL THE TIME. From things that politicians say, to things my non-Muslim in-laws might do--I'm constantly on edge, feeling like I have to defend the fact that Americans are Muslims too! I think the most recent time was when my neighbor's teenage daughter had a party. One of the kids there drew white supremacist symbols on car windows on our street, including my car. When I moved in, the same neighbor asked what my religion was (I'm not white), and I told her honestly."

If you had to choose an image or symbol to represent this memory, what would you choose? Please describe it clearly. If you have a file of this what this image might look like, you can also submit that below.

> "It doesn't link explicitly, but the jade we talked about. When I moved to Santa Cruz, I encountered so many people who didn't understand

the plants that were familiar to me, the plants I grew up with (I am a plant person). Even the jade plants on the streets looked completely different from the one that my grandmother had (a massive 5' high plant that I couldn't put my arms around) and my mother has. The leaves here in Santa Cruz often end up pointy and red rimmed, but the ones I'm used to are fleshy, round, and dark green. I intentionally grow my own jade, a cutting from my mother's plant, away from a window so that it stays the way I know it."

10. Anonymous 3

As a Muslim individual living in the United States post 9/11 & post-Trump: How do you define belonging? How would you describe your community? Do you feel a sense of belonging in your community?

"Belonging in its truest form for me has always been the feeling of being loved-- or at the very least, respected-- among a group of people. I like to think I have a very unique Muslim community because I have had the blessing of growing up in a very active and caring Malaysian-Singaporean Muslim community. Seeing as its both in the nature of Islam and Malaysian culture to treat everyone as if they were family, everyone within my community has become my huge, beautiful family here in the States. Despite this, I can't say that I have a perfect relationship with my community. My sense of belonging is a bit convoluted because I've had to hide my queer identity from my family and friends for a very long time. The pain caused by the prejudices some of the community members hold because they feel that is what the religion asks them to believe makes me feel distant. I fear that if they knew, I would no longer have the love I grew up with, the support I'm so used to, and have been avidly and painfully sacrificing a very defining part of me to secure my sense of belonging."

Can you recall a specific instance in which you questioned or thought about your belonging as a Muslim person in the U.S.? What words or actions made you feel this way? Please clearly describe this memory.

"The most defining moment I have where I questioned my place as a Muslim in the U.S. in recent memory was shortly after the Quebec City mosque shootings. I remember crying in mourning the day of while in class. As heart breaking the initial news was, overhearing a peer while in passing applauding the murders was a terrifying moment. Someone in my school, someone my age and in my area with mutual friends, actively commended the destruction of innocent lives because

they believed in the same religion as I did. Someone I knew made me feel unsafe in our shared space where we were supposed to be learning, and their intolerance made me think, "Do I really have a place here, if someone has such hateful feelings towards me? Do other people I know share their sentiment?". Every [sic] since I was younger, I understood a lot of people has their fears about Islam post-9/11. But to have such obvious hatred spoken, to joke about a tragedy, within a space I initially felt welcomed in, question my feeling of being welcome in this country."

If you had to choose an image or symbol to represent this memory, what would you choose? Please describe it clearly. If you have a file of this what this image might look like, you can also submit that below.

"I'm not entirely sure what imagery I would use to represent my memory, but I supposed since it was pretty heart breaking to me, I would include some form of heart imagery."

11. Sara Alfageeh

As a Muslim individual living in the United States post 9/11 & post-Trump: How do you define belonging? How would you describe your community? Do you feel a sense of belonging in your community?

"I don't like to contextualize the relationships I have by terms like "9/11" and "post-trump", but the reality of the matter is that it seeps into the every day. I do feel like I belong in my community, both my professional community as an illustrator, my local muslim [sic] community in Boston, and the greater community I navigate when I walk the streets in Cambridge. I recognize much of that comes with the various privileges I carry in order to feel comfortable in those spaces, and recognize it is on me to do my best to make those spaces more accessible to others as well. I have the audacity my parents did not as a 1st generation immigrant, to insist that I belong."

Can you recall a specific instance in which you questioned or thought about your belonging as a Muslim person in the U.S.? What words or actions made you feel this way? Please clearly describe this memory.

"Just 2 weeks ago. Went to a concert in the middle of Boston, my Boston, and for the first time in my life had the word "habibti" spat at me when an older white woman made it very clear my sister and I were not welcome to stand anywhere near her at a packed general admission show. A word that was meant to be a term of endearment

twisted around and used back at me condescendingly, to remind me that as an arab [sic] and visibly muslim [sic] woman I ought to remember my place. I had never conceived a reality where a word so tender could be used against me."

If you had to choose an image or symbol to represent this memory, what would you choose? Please describe it clearly. If you have a file of this what this image might look like, you can also submit that below.

"My own experience with my first time in a while getting that clear and outright aggression in my face was just a week before the NZ Christchurch shootings. I drew this after the shooting, but my feelings from both events were very melded together.

This is my own illustration work. May not be commercially resold and must be redistrubted [sic] with explicit credit."

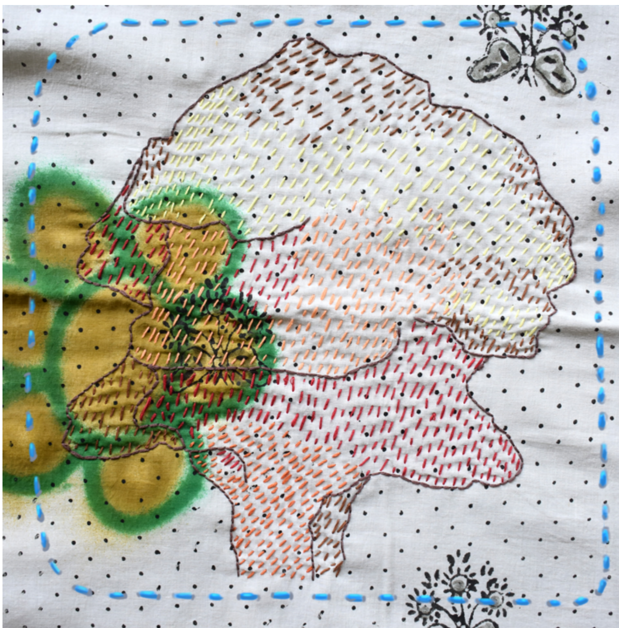
Appendix B: Individual Embroideries

1. Sana Sheikholeslami

2. Iram Bibi

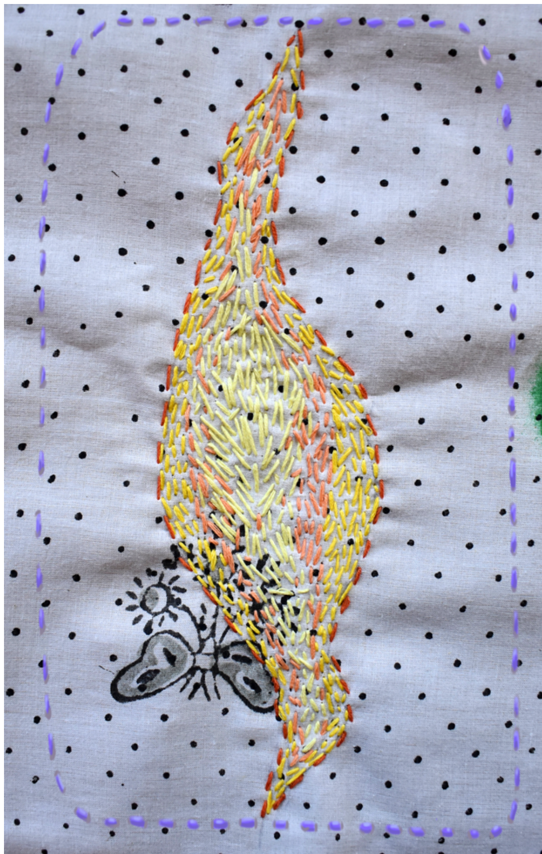
3. Anonymous 1

4. Sara Nasr



5. Aida

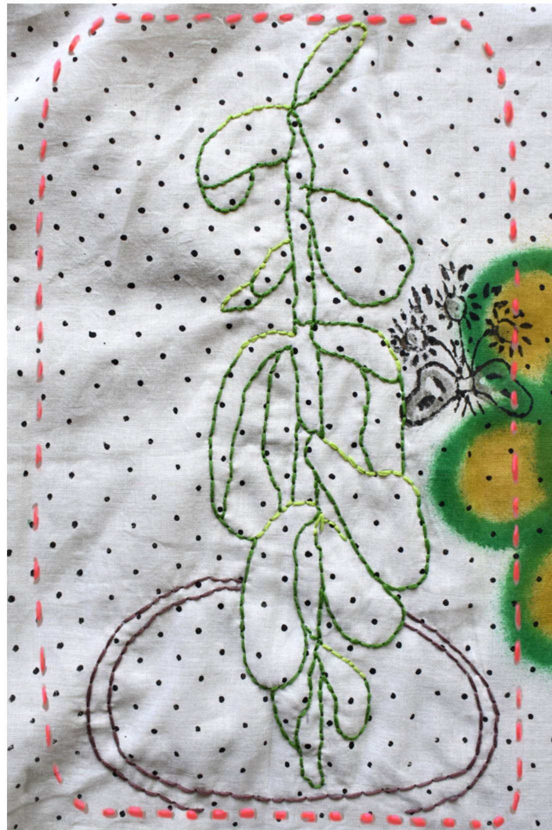
6. Hanif Chowdhury



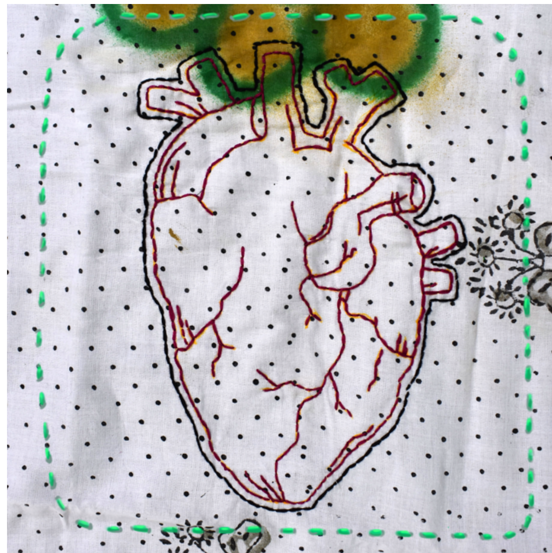
7. Sabina Safia Wildman

8. Anonymous 2

9. “Khadijah”



10. Anonymous 3



11. Sara Alfageeh

Appendix 3 – Website

http://www.stitchingsolidarity.art/

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