

## A vibrant, stylized illustration of various hands interacting with creative and technological tools. The scene includes a smartphone displaying a map, a Rubik's cube, a camera, a microphone, a paint palette, a watercolor set, a laptop, a tablet, and a small robot. The illustration is framed by a decorative border.

A MULTIMEDIA COLLECTION BY MUSLIM CREATIVES

Cover art by [Alaa](#), a Muslim Sudanese artist and a children's doctor on the side, currently based in New York. If she's not doing either, you can probably find her hiking somewhere in the wilderness.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>4</b>	<b>PREFACE</b> <i>AYA NIMER</i>
<b>5</b>	<b>NOTES ON THE CONTRIBUTORS</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>LISTENING AS A CREATIVE ACT</b> <i>ZAHEER ALI</i>
<b>15</b>	<b>THE BLACK STONE OF MECCA</b> <i>MAYTHA ALHASSEN</i>
<b>27</b>	<b>IHSAN: AESTHETIC ETHICS</b> <i>HUSSEIN RASHID</i>
<b>38</b>	<b>BLACK LIKE THE SCARVES THAT THE MUSLIMINA WEAR</b> <i>SU'AD ABDUL KHABEER</i>
<b>52</b>	<b>ON MEMORY, NOSTALGIA, &amp; THE HONORING OF ANCESTORS THROUGH ARTISTIC PRACTICE</b> <i>OMAR OFFENDUM</i>
<b>62</b>	<b>MANGO TIME</b> <i>ASAD ALI JAFRI</i>

The Muslim Narrative Change (MNC) cohort has been part of Pillars Fund's Culture Change programming since its inception. Our fellows have been our thought partners, offering insight into traditional Muslim creative practices and philosophy, landscape analyses, and incisive perspectives on the needs of artists. When we gathered to think of a way to honor their contributions to Pillars, we decided the best way to do so was to create a publication for our communities, a work exploring intercommunal curiosities, for us by us.

For this publication, we gave MNC fellows the freedom and support to explore their topics and mediums of interest. We were eager to provide a space outside of the pressures of having to justify their work. We asked fellows: What knowledge feels important to you? What have you been aching to explore but haven't had the support to do so?

From this initiative came the title of our publication, *Khayāl: A Multimedia Collection by Muslim Creatives*. *Khayāl* nods to a rich conversation in Islamic cultures of interpreting and discussing

imagination. We envision this collection as a continuation of our heritage as cultural practitioners committed to the intertwining of art and Islam.

What you'll read here is a mosaic of curiosities that honor the individuals of our cohort and the communities they call home: Zaheer Ali explores the creative inhale, and Maytha Alhassen examines the Sufi poetic tradition through Malcolm X's writings. Hussein Rashid takes us on a journey to understand aesthetic ethics. Su'ad Abdul Khabeer maps the history of her Brooklyn memories, while Omar Offendum takes us back in time and behind the scenes of his hip hopera *Little Syria*. Our collection ends with a comic from Asad Ali Jafri that envisions our future creative world.

I am thrilled to introduce this collection from Pillars Fund, rooted in the curiosities that drive our communities and created to provide a space for us to have meaningful conversations about art, imagination, and creativity. I hope you find as much joy and inspiration in this collection as we have.

Sincerely,

**Aya Nimer**

Program Manager, Culture Change  
Pillars Fund



**Su'ad Abdul Khabeer** is a scholar-artist-activist originally from Brooklyn. She is curator of Umi's Archive, a multimedia project documenting Black and Muslim histories, and co-founder of Sapelo Square, a digital media and education collective on Black Muslims in the United States. Trained as an anthropologist, Su'ad's first book, *Muslim Cool*, accompanied by her solo show, *Sampled: Beats of Muslim Life*, is a field-defining study on Islam and hip hop that examines how intersecting ideas of Muslimness and Blackness challenge and reproduce the meanings of race in the U.S. In 2018, she was profiled as one of CNN's 25 influential American Muslims. Su'ad is an associate professor of American Culture at the University of Michigan.

**Zaheer Ali** is an educator, oral historian, and the inaugural executive director of The Lawrenceville School's Hutchins Institute for Social Justice. He is an executive producer of the docuseries *American Muslims: A History Revealed* and is the creator and curator of The Prince Syllabus, which explores the life and work of Prince as a catalyst for social change. For more than two decades, he has led nationally recognized and award-winning public history and cultural heritage initiatives, including Columbia University's Malcolm X Project and the Center for Brooklyn History's Muslims in Brooklyn initiative. His work on Malcolm X has been featured in print and broadcast media.

**Maytha Alhassen**, a Harvard Religion and Public Life Fellow in Art and Pop Culture, is a historian, TV/film writer and producer, journalist, arts-based social justice organizer, and mending practitioner. In 2018, she authored the report *Haqq and Hollywood: Illuminating 100 Years of Muslim Tropes and How to Transform Them* as a Pop Culture Collaborative Senior Fellow. As a mender and cultural worker, Maytha has facilitated healing workshops infused with art, trauma-informed yoga, meditation, and reiki to displaced people. Currently, Maytha co-executive produces and writes for the Hulu series *Ramy* and serves as an executive producer for the upcoming docuseries *American Muslims: A History Revealed*.

**Asad Ali Jafri** is a cultural producer, community organizer, and interdisciplinary artist. Using a grassroots approach and global perspective, Asad connects artists and communities across imagined boundaries to create meaningful engagements and experiences. Asad has more than two decades of experience honing an intentional and holistic practice that allows him to take on the role of artist and administrator, curator and producer, educator and organizer, mentor and strategist. Asad is a founding member of SpaceShift, a collective of artists and cultural workers rethinking the ways in which people work, live, and create.

**Omar Offendum** is a Syrian-American rapper, spoken word poet, and theatrical storyteller. Over the course of his 20-year career, he's been featured by BBC, PBS, and the *Los Angeles Times*; lectured at Harvard, Yale, and Stanford; and helped raise millions of dollars for humanitarian relief groups. Omar was recently invited by the Qatar Foundation to perform during the FIFA World Cup 2022 in Doha. He was also named a Kennedy Center Citizen Artist Fellow and a member of the RaceForward Butterfly Lab cohort for Immigrant Narrative Strategy. He currently resides in the great state of New York with his wife and two little children, while daydreaming about the jasmine tree-lined streets of Damascus.

**Hussein Rashid** is the founder of Islamicate, L3C, a consultancy focusing on religious literacy and cultural competency. His work explores theology, the interaction between culture and religion, the role of the arts in conflict mediation, and Muslims and U.S. popular culture. He co-executive produced the award-winning *New York Times* documentary *The Secret History of Muslims in the U.S.* and is an executive producer for the upcoming docuseries *American Muslims: A History Revealed*. He serves on the board of I Am Your Protector, which uses public art as a means of building interfaith community, and Anikaya, a modern dance company that does interpretations of Persian and Urdu Sufi poetry.

A pair of black over-ear headphones is positioned in the center of the frame. The background is a solid dark blue. The headphones are slightly out of focus, with the ear cups and headband visible. The text 'LISTENING AS A CREATIVE ACT' is overlaid on the left side in a bold, yellow, sans-serif font.

# LISTENING AS A CREATIVE ACT

BY ZAHEER ALI

## I. THE CREATOR LISTENS; CREATORS LISTEN

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Human beings have a deep desire to experience genuine listening. Reflecting this need, in the Qur'an, Allah (God) assures each of us an audience with the Divine: "When My servants ask thee concerning Me, I am indeed close (to them): I listen to the prayer of every suppliant that calleth on Me." (Qur'an 2:186)<sup>1</sup> For those of us who create, our expressions—no matter what form they take—are like prayers, utterances of faith in the hope that we will find a receptive audience. In that respect, the Divine audience promised in the Qur'an speaks encouragingly to creators.

But it also speaks *for* creators as well. In the second part of that verse, it states, "Let them also, with a will, Listen to My call, and believe in Me: That they may walk in the right way." (Qur'an 2:186) If we understand Allah as the Creator and read this Qur'anic verse as those of a creator, the Creator's ask for a willful and believing listener resonates with all who make art. Read in its entirety, this verse is even more remarkable in establishing that Allah as the Creator—the Supreme among creators—desires an audience, but only after granting one as well. The Creator listens. And creators listen.

We often think of creation in terms of expression, but the creative process involves more than just production. It includes listening to the created world, even a world that has not yet been expressed. This is inspiration, the breathing in, the creative inhale, the tuning in and taking in the world around us.

In my work as an oral historian, listening is how a story gets told. There is no storytelling without story listening. Listening facilitates the narrative process; it is a co-creative practice that elicits, invites, encourages, welcomes, affirms, connects, receives, imagines, interprets, reflects, generates, and therefore shapes what gets told, what gets created. As oral historian Alessandro Portelli stated, "The essential art of the oral historian is the art of listening."<sup>2</sup>

As an art form, listening is a creative act.

<sup>1</sup> All Qur'an references come from Abdullah Yusuf Ali's translation.

<sup>2</sup> Alessandro Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 61.

## II. WHAT IS CREATIVE LISTENING?

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Do you have a favorite song? Is there a song that when you hear it, you proclaim, “That’s my jam!”? The process by which a song that someone else composed and/or performed becomes “ours” is creative listening. Through creative listening, we make meaning of and form attachment to the song as part of our creative engagement with it. The resulting experience of the song is uniquely our own, and thus the song itself becomes “our song.”

Creative listening is an artful encounter with the world, one in which the world we encounter is created in part through our listening to it. “Without a listener, music does not exist,” writes Susan Rogers, cognitive neuroscientist, multiplatinum record producer, and recording engineer for some of Prince’s most well-known albums, including *Purple Rain*, *Parade*, and *Sign o’ the Times*.<sup>3</sup> The musical experience is not complete until music enters the listener’s mind, where the sounds are referenced, cataloged, organized, arranged, produced, and performed. Even if we were to grant that multiple listeners are recreating the same sounds identical to the ways the artist produced and intended (they are not!), the *meaning* that is attached to those sounds are

unique to the creative process performed by each listener. One need not be a musician to listen and think musically.

Nor does one need to think of listening as an exclusively auditory experience. In *The Creative Act: A Way of Being*, record producer Rick Rubin reminds us that “we listen with the whole body, our whole self.” Even if we continue to think about listening in terms of music, music is not just heard but felt. It is experienced spatially, temporally, bodily, and visually. To listen creatively then is to do so expansively, “with the whole self... to include vast amounts of information otherwise missed, and [to] discover more material to feed your art habit.”<sup>4</sup> This discussion and the exercises contained in this document thus use listening both to refer broadly to all the ways people might take in the world and to the specific practices of auditory listening that help us understand that broader process.

<sup>3</sup>Susan Rogers and Ogi Ogas, *This Is What It Sounds Like: What the Music You Love Says about You* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2022), 8-9.

<sup>4</sup>Rick Rubin with Neil Strauss, *The Creative Act: A Way of Being* (New York: Penguin Press, 2023), 110

### III. WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE LISTEN?

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Listening is more than the sensory experience of hearing; listening is making sense of what is heard. To listen is to attend to a story as a caretaker and custodian, to seek out a connection over the shared emotional experience of holding a story with its teller, and to collaborate in the storytelling experience by providing a

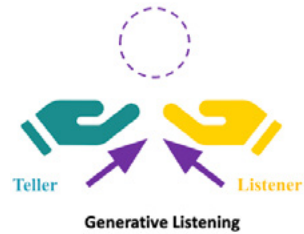
contextual framework for what a storyteller shares. These three functions of listening—attentive, relational, and generative—are not mutually exclusive to one another and in fact are often all operating when listening is at its most creative.



Attentive listening is listening to learn or increase knowledge through the passing of information from the storyteller to the listener. With attentive listening, the listener attends to stories by gathering, collecting, and becoming a custodian or caretaker of stories.



Relational listening is listening to connect over the shared emotional experience of the storyteller and listener holding a story together. With relational listening, the listener builds space and trust through ethical practices of community engagement.



Generative listening is listening to imagine and/or interpret an idea that neither the storyteller nor listener completely grasps by themselves. With generative listening, the listener provides contextual framing for what the storyteller shares, and together they activate stories through imagination and interpretation.

## IV. LISTENING EXERCISE

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To demonstrate how listening increases our knowledge, builds connections, and sparks our imagination, here is a listening exercise. To gain the full benefit from the exercise, each step should be completed in the order provided.

### 1. Read the following text silently.

*When I first got to Brooklyn, obviously you had to drive from JFK through East New York – and back in the '80s, East New York was not what it looks like now. So in my head I'm – I'm imagining the beautiful city, New York, the Statue of Liberty – and it greets you as soon as you get to the airport. So we drove through East New York, and I see burned-down houses and – and I'm saying to my family, "What is – this is New York? Are you kidding me? This is not what I'm thinking." They said, "Yup. Well, you get to see it." So we drove through Atlantic Avenue, Eastern Parkway, and eventually got to Downtown Brooklyn, and I was able to see the Twin Towers. I was like, "Oh, wow. This is what I came for." So that same day, believe it or not, I walked to the [Brooklyn Heights] Promenade, just down here, just to see that view. And it was an amazing sight. I took some pictures too, just to prove it. To be honest with you, I think Brooklyn is home for me, in a lot of ways. And when I think back – I think when I first came here, even though it was strange and starting new, I felt as if it was home. And I used to think, "You know, I'm going to be working here for a couple of years. I'll get my education, make my money, then leave." But then it didn't take too long to realize this is home. This is where I changed my life, for the better. Wow. I guess I love Brooklyn! Yeah. I mean, this is – I mean, I – I look at it, like, really more – more than home. Um – this is where I met my wife. This is where I have my kids. This is where I lived most of my life. I think Brooklyn is home for me. And I think it's going to continue to be home, even when I retire. Brooklyn is part of us, as we are part of it. And I wish the best for Brooklyn. That's how I see it.*

How would you describe what you just read, in terms of information, emotional experience, and the ideas being described?

**2. Now, read the text aloud in whatever way you think the narrator may have intended.** Is there another way to read the same text? What information, emotions, or ideas informed the way you chose to read the text?

**3. Now, [listen to the audio recording of this narrative](#).** As you listen, think about how you heard it in your head when you first read it. What new information do you get by listening to the actual audio recording? What may account for the similarities and/or differences compared to when you read it silently or aloud?



## IV. LISTENING EXERCISE

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### 4. Read this biographical sketch of the narrator.

Ahmed Nasser was born in 1966 in the village of Almayanah in Yemen. He immigrated to the United States in 1986 and settled in the Brooklyn Heights neighborhood of Brooklyn. He worked in family-owned restaurants and earned undergraduate degrees with New York City College of Technology in Brooklyn and Baruch College in Manhattan before joining the New York City Police Department (NYPD) in 2000. As a detective and member of the Community Affairs Bureau, he worked to improve communication between Muslim immigrant communities and the NYPD in the years following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. He also co-founded the American Muslim Law Enforcement Officers Association in 2001 and the NYPD Muslim Officers Society in 2004.

How does the narrator's biography add to our information, emotional experience, and ideas about the story?

### 5. Now, view a picture of the narrator.



### 6. Finally, here is the *full citation for the narrative*.

Ahmed Nasser, Oral history interview conducted by Liz H. Strong, September 18, 2018, Muslims in Brooklyn oral histories, 2018.006.40; Brooklyn Historical Society.<sup>5</sup>

How do the interviewer, date, and location of the interview shape our understanding of the information, emotions, and ideas being shared in this story?

Each step in this exercise provides the listener more information about the story told by the narrator; the audio in particular highlights the limits of original text in conveying information, emotion, and ideas. The pauses, the inflections, the rate of speech, the intonation—none of those are represented in the text transcript. How would you represent a super long pause versus a short pause when a period is just a period, anyway?

***Reflect on how your understanding of the story shifted with each additional layer of information.***

<sup>5</sup>The oral history excerpt in this exercise is modified with permission from the “Listening as a Creative Act” lesson plan of the Muslims in Brooklyn project. Muslims in Brooklyn, Center for Brooklyn History, Brooklyn Public Library, accessed May 2, 2023, <https://muslims.brooklynhistory.org/teacher-toolbox/lesson-plans/>.

## V. EXPANDING OUR LISTENING BANDWIDTH

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Sometimes when we get more information, it forecloses our imagination when it should continue to expand it. Do we interpret each layer of information as bringing us closer to the narrator's story? To think of ourselves as containers that just fill up with information is to approach listening as a purely receptive act.

Nobel Prize-winning political scientist Herbert A. Simon first formulated the notion of the attention economy, where attention is made scarcer by the abundance of information:

*In an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it.<sup>6</sup>*

In contrast to the scarcity mindset around attention, a verse in the Qur'an invites us to think more expansively: "O ye who believe! When ye are told to make room in the assemblies, (spread out and) make room: (ample) room will Allah provide for you." (Qur'an 58:11) Even though the data we have collected as

listeners—text, audio, biography, photograph, and citation—has filled our information container, creative listening makes room in our assemblies. An expanded listening bandwidth allows room for more inquiry, for more questions, for more discovery.

As we expand our bandwidth, we wonder what question the storyteller was asked. What did he talk about before and after this story? In what context did he situate this story—as part of nostalgia or progress? What gestures or facial expressions did he make while telling this story? What gestures or facial expressions did the interviewer make while he told this story?

Many people enter a listening experience with a specific question in mind; once they have answered their question, they conclude their listening. As creative listeners, we listen for more than what has been received. We understand attention not as a currency that must be paid but as a gift that is given. We do not "pay attention," we give it. And it gives back. The reward for creative listening is the deepening and widening of our own capacity for story care, the connections formed over shared emotional experiences, and the new possibilities we collaboratively imagine.

<sup>6</sup>Herbert A. Simon, "Designing Organizations for an Information-Rich World," in *Computers, Communications, and the Public Interest*, ed. Martin Greenberger (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), 40–41.

## VI. THE CREATIVE INHALE

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Pause what you are doing right now and take a deep breath. Feel your chest expand. And now, exhale as your muscles relax. Now take another breath, this time deeper than the first. Hold it for a few seconds, and exhale, this time expelling more than you breathed in. One more time—deeper and for a longer hold, and now exhale.

Creative listening is like deep breathing. It is the intentional taking in of the world beyond that which we would normally do, “to see past the ordinary and the mundane and get what might otherwise be invisible,” as Rick Rubin puts it.<sup>7</sup> It is holding ourselves in the present long enough to exhaust what we have taken in and releasing our hold as we collect ourselves for the next breath. It is the creative inhale (and exhale).

Jessica Orkin, president of consulting firm SYPartners, defines the creative inhale as “attending to the information we take in, the signals of the future we are sensing, the voices and perspectives that may be missing, and how we define the problems we solve.”<sup>8</sup>

Thinking of the creative inhale in accord with listening practices allows us to develop, or at least demystify, the habits of inspiration that are so necessary to the creative process:<sup>9</sup>

### 1. Search

What are we searching for? Before we embark on a creative project, we minimize distractions and declare our intention of what we hope to find.

### 2. Discovery

What do we find? Through attentive listening, we are fully present

in the moment in all its depth and expansiveness. With the object of our search not as an anchor, but a guide, discovery encourages movement and mind-wandering. If search is the one book we need from the library, discovery allows us to peruse the entire shelf for the books that come before and those that come after. It is opening ourselves up to the unexpected.

### 3. Resonance

What stays with us? After our encounter, we (re)collect the remnants and the echoes that resonated and stuck with us. Resonance is how we have connected with the experience of the encounter through relational listening. It is often the generative spark that activates our imagination even further.

### 4. Understanding

What do we understand? Through reflection, we make meaning of the experience of our encounter. How do we explain it to ourselves? How do we explain it to others? What new questions do we now have as a result of generative listening? Those new questions can become the basis of our search in our next inhale.

Like deep breathing, the creative inhale works as an iterative and cyclical process. It especially encourages us to find the strange and new in the familiar.

**Practice the creative inhale as a routine activity.** Whether it be a daily commute, an afternoon walk, or even the preparation of a meal, keep a journal that records answers to the four questions associated with search, discovery, resonance, and understanding. Producing different answers with each iteration deepens and expands our capacity to listen as a creative act.

<sup>7</sup>Rubin, *The Creative Act*, 23.

<sup>8</sup>“How Deep Listening Can Help You Be More Creative,” The Behance Blog, Adobe, published April 3, 2019, <https://www.behance.net/blog/how-deep-listening-can-help-you-be-more-creative>.

<sup>9</sup>These habits are adapted from design studio IDEO’s “How to Be a Creative Listener,” IDEO, accessed May 2, 2023, <https://www.ideo.com/post/how-to-be-a-creative-listener>.

## VII. THE CREATIVE EXHALE

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Jessica Orkin cautions us: “Don’t get stuck in listening mode... inhale and creative exhale... repeat. It’s the interplay of these modes that gets to somewhere interesting.”<sup>10</sup> The interplay between the creative inhale and exhale is not just about the creator’s artistic breath; it is also about the way the artist’s breath inspires others in their own creative inhale. As facilitators of creative listening, artists do more than provide artistic substance; they encourage and empower audiences to exercise care and custodianship over, form emotional connections with, and make meaning of that substance through attentive, relational, and generative listening.

The concept of the creative inhale provides a framework for artists and creators seeking to cultivate audiences as participant listeners. An exhaled version of search, discovery, resonance, and understanding inspires inquiry; invites wonder and wandering; strategically deploys inflection, repetition, emphasis, and silence;

and provides both interpretive space and some of the critical tools needed to construct meaning in that space.

More than a declaration, art is an invitation. It is a courtship with an idea that is realized only through the collaborative engagement between a listening creator and a creative listener. To initiate this courtship, the artist creates with listening. To consummate this courtship, the audience listens with creativity.

Creators listen. Listeners create. Listening is at the heart of the creative process and the creative experience with what is created. And the more intensive *and* extensive our listening, the more profound and expansive our creative experience will be.

<sup>10</sup> “How Deep Listening Can Help You Be More Creative.”

# THE BLACK STONE OF MECCA

MALCOLM X,  
PRISON LETTERS,  
TASAWWUF POETRY,  
AND ETHICAL TEXTS

[CLICK TO LISTEN](#)

**ZAHEER ALI**

*MALCOLM AS A POET (EXCERPT)*

BY MAYTHA ALHASSEN

## INTRODUCTION

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Black American Muslim freedom fighter Malcolm X was first imprisoned in Charlestown State Prison in Boston on February 27, 1946 (where he initiated an autodidact reading program for himself). Here he began an 8-to-10-year prison sentence for breaking and entering and larceny, before being moved to what was then Concord Reformatory in West Concord, Massachusetts, in January 1947. With the assistance of his older sister Ella, Malcolm was transferred to Norfolk Prison Colony on March 31, 1948. There, Malcolm began studying tasawwuf, or “Sufi,” poetry and ethical texts and relaying his explorations through written letters to his siblings.

This audio essay illuminates the dimensions of Malcolm X’s engagement with tasawwuf works while incarcerated. Through archival analysis of these letters and a series of interviews with scholars, the essay explores themes in Sufi poetry, the history of incarcerated Muslims, and what these dynamics reveal about Malcolm X’s spiritual and intellectual transformation and trajectory.



CLICK TO LISTEN

MAYTHA ALHASSEN

MALCOLM'S WRITING AS POETIC

CLICK TO LISTEN

ZAHEER ALI

BLACK PEOPLE OF AMERICA + THE BLACK STONE

CLICK TO LISTEN

HUSSEIN RASHID

THE EAST

KAABA + SAABA:

...So, does that  
make us the Black  
Stone of Mecca, the  
Kaaba? Then we are  
The East.

Malcolm X to Philbert, January 29, 1950

Correspondence, Letters Sent, Philbert and Henrietta Little, 1948-1952,  
(microfilm: folder 1: reel 3)

Malcolm X Collection: Papers, 1948-1965 Schomburg Center for Research  
in Black Culture, New York Public Library)

## NORFOLK PRISON COLONY

1948 - 1950

[CLICK TO LISTEN](#)

MAYTHA ALHASSEN

*NO PORK + NO CIGARETTES*

CLICK TO LISTEN

**MAYTHA ALHASSEN**  
UNCOVERING SOURCING FOR POETRY

CLICK TO LISTEN

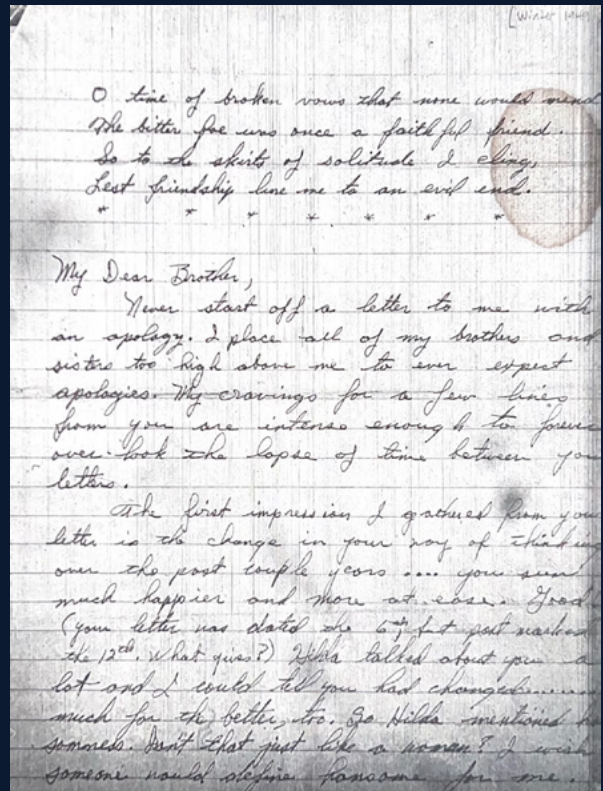
**ZAHEER ALI**  
MALCOLM'S DEMONSTRATION OF "LITERARY-NESS"

CLICK TO LISTEN

**OMID SAFI**  
HAFIZ + TRANSLATIONS

## LETTER TO PHILBERT

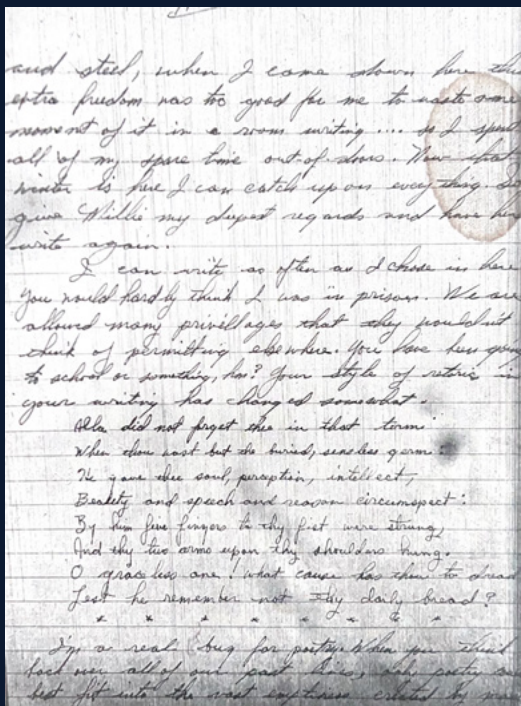
FEBRUARY 4, 1949



O time of broken vows that none would mend!  
The bitter foe was once a faithful friend.  
So to the skirts of solitude I cling,  
Lest friendship lure me to an evil end.

Hafiz

Ruba'iyat of Hafiz, translated by Syed Abdul-Majid, 1912, 31



Allah did not forget thee in that term  
When thou wast but the buried, senseless germ:  
He gave thee soul, perception, intellect,  
Beauty and speech and reason circumspect:  
By him five fingers to thy fist were strung,  
And thy two arms upon thy shoulders hung,  
O graceless one! what cause has thou to dread  
Lest he remember not thy daily bread?

Sa'di Shirazi

The Gulistan of Sa'di from Charles Sylvester's *The Writings of Mankind*, 1924

I'm a real bug for poetry. When you think back over all of our past lives, only poetry could best fit into the vast emptiness created by man.

Malcolm X to Philbert, February 4, 1949

[CLICK TO LISTEN](#)

**MAYTHA ALHASSEN**

[MALCOLM'S WRITINGS AS POETIC](#)

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**ZAHEER ALI**

[MALCOLM AS A POET](#)

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[EVEN MALCOLM'S NAME IS POETIC](#)

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**ZAHEER ALI**

[FIRST REVELATION](#)

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**OMID SAFI**

[SA'DI + THE ROSE GARDEN—THE TEXT](#)

[WHEREBY PEOPLE LEARN TO READ AND WRITE](#)

CLICK TO LISTEN

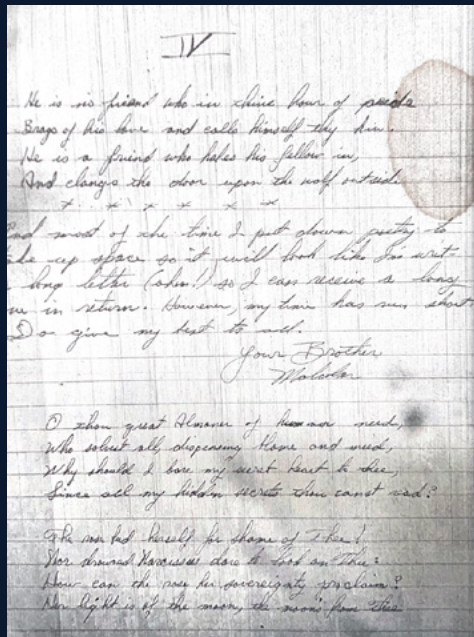
ZAHEER ALI

[IYKYK](#)

CLICK TO LISTEN

OMID SAFI

[ADAB TRADITION](#)



He is no friend who in thine hour of pride  
Braggs of his love and calls himself thy kin.  
He is a friend who hales his fellow in,  
And clangs the door upon the wolf outside.

Sa'di Shirazi

The Gulistan of Sa'di from Charles Sylvester's *The Writings of Mankind*, 1924

60

O thou great Almoner of human need,  
Who solvest all, dispensing blame and need,  
Why should I bare my secret heart to thee,  
Since all my hidden secrets thou canst read?

61

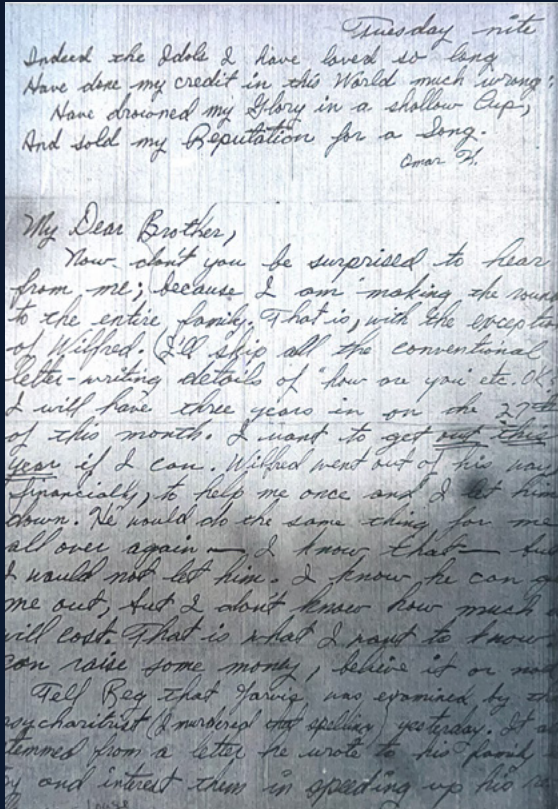
The rosebud [hides] herself for shame of Thee!  
Nor drowsed Narcissus dare to look on Thee:  
How can the rose her sovereignty proclaim?  
Her light is of the moon, the moon's from thee.

Hafiz

Ruba'iyat of Hafiz, translated by Syed Abdul-Majid, 1912, 54

## LETTER TO PHILBERT

FEBRUARY 4, 1949



Indeed the Idols I have loved so long  
Have done my credit in this World much wrong;  
Have drowned my Glory in a shallow Cup,  
And sold my Reputation for a Song.

Omar Khayyam

Ruba'iyat of Omar Khayyam, translated by Edward FitzGerald, 1859

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**ZAHEER ALI &  
MAYTHA ALHASSEN**  
[LEARNING FROM INCARCERATED MUSLIMS](#)

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**HUSSEIN RASHID**  
[ETHICAL POETRY](#)

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**OMID SAFI**  
[OMAR KHAYYAM](#)



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**MAYTHA ALHASSEN**

*[MULTIPLE LITERACY EXPLORATION](#)*

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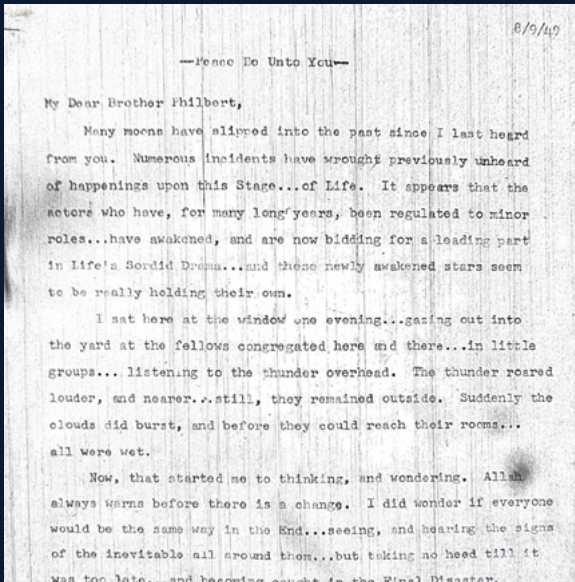
**OMID SAFI**

*[POETRY - A WAY OF IMAGINATION](#)*

**POETICS OF FAITH**

## LETTER TO PHILBERT

AUGUST 9, 1949



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MAYTHA ALHASSEN

*"PRISON, THANKS TO ISLAM, HAS CEASED TO BE PRISON."*

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ZAHEER ALI &  
MAYTHA ALHASSEN

*THE POWER OF SIGNS*

## LETTER TO PHILBERT

AUGUST 26, 1950

CLICK TO LISTEN

ZAHEER ALI &  
MAYTHA ALHASSEN

IN THE NAME OF

CLICK TO LISTEN

ZAHEER ALI &  
MAYTHA ALHASSEN

MEDINA LETTER - SEEKING REFUGE

March 26, 1950

As-Salaam-Alaikum

In the Holy Name of Allah, the All-Wise God, the Almighty Lord and Savior of our Blessed Black Nation, the Merciful Master of this Final Day of Judgement...and in the Name of His Last and Greatest Prophet, the First Begotten of us Dead, Our Guiding Light in this wretched darkness of hell, the Door by Whom we must All Pass to enter into the Complete paradise, the Most Meek and Humble of the Faithful, the Honorable Mr. Elijah Muhammad. I am happy to greet you in Their Great Name, again--

As-Salaam-Alaikum

My Dearly Beloved Brother Philbert,

May All-Wise Allah charge your brain with an abundance of His Eternally Supreme Wisdom, Knowledge and Understanding...and fill your beautiful heart with Peace and Love. Bountiful is the Mercy of Allah, and Wonderful is His way, so let us pray that we all may continue to tread His Path of Truth and Righteousness Together forever. He is indeed the Great God of this universe, and His Presence is now being made manifest throughout this North Country that has been long in Darkness.

desire who wishes to meditate upon the Truth. Prison, thanks to Islam, has ceased to be prison...for I have learned to love the pricelessness of Pure Solitude... The more of Islam I grasp, the more I wish to be along where I can meditate upon the Richness of Allah's Great Manifestations that are being brought to light before our eye each day. Allah is Truly the All-Wise Creator, the Beginning and the Ending of All in All!

This feeling I have right now is in itself worth my entire pilgrimage. I haven't really felt like this since my prison years when I would spend days upon days in solitude, hrs. upon hrs. studying and praying. There is no greater serenity of mind than when one can shut the hectic noise & pace of the materialistic outside world, & seek inner peace within one's self.

Malcolm X, April 25, 1964

Malcolm X Diary, April 15, 1964 (microfilm: reel 9), Malcolm X Collection: Papers, 1948-1965 Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, New York  
Letter to Philbert, March 26, 1950

## SOURCES + SUPPORT

### IMAGES

Images from the Malcolm X Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, New York): Correspondence, Letters Sent, Philbert and Henrietta Little, 1948-1952, (microfilm: folder: 1, reel: 3), and Papers, 1948-1965, Malcolm X Diary, April 15, 1964 (microfilm: reel 9)

### AUDIO

Audio clips from interviews with Zaheer Ali, Omid Safi, and Hussein Rashid. Maytha Alhassen's presentation to Pillars Muslim Narrative Cohort.

### SUPPORT

Gratitude for the entire Pillars Fund team

# IHSAN

AESTHETIC  
ETHICS

BY HUSSEIN RASHID

## INTRODUCTION

---

One of the reasons I became interested in studying Islam is because of the beauty I saw within the tradition. This beauty was both theological and cultural. My humble thoughts here are a way to think about how the theological and cultural connect. It is meant to be abstract, because I think the second we try to define something, it loses the ambiguity that makes it beautiful. We can create an elegant definition of beauty, but that definition becomes a layer between us and beauty, keeping us from the ineffable nature of beauty. I wanted to engage with beauty from within our tradition, and only within our tradition, without explicit references to aesthetic theory from Western antiquity or the “bio-politics” of contemporary European thinkers. I also want to think about what beauty means in practice. I want to think about what it means to be a partner in beauty.



In a hadith qudsi, God says to the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) that God is beautiful and loves beauty (اللَّهُ جَمِيلٌ يُحِبُّ الْجَمَالَ). The words that God uses for “beauty” come from the Arabic root j-m-l, meaning an outward or physical beauty. Yet we know that God has no physical appearance, so what does it mean when we are told that “God is beautiful”? I propose that we have to understand beauty as tied to iman (faith). Beauty is an aspect of ethical and spiritual development, not a fleeting aspect of the physical. Drawing on Muslim histories and traditions, I want

us to think about the contribution we make to beauty in the world as tied to ethical transformation, which can and should be aesthetically pleasing.

To answer the question of what it means to say “God is beautiful” when God has no physical form, I turn to the teachings of Imam Ali (as). Any time we speak of God as having any attributes that we can ascribe to God, we are committing shirk, or association with God. Imam Ali (as) tells us:

*Foremost in religion is knowledge of Him, and the perfection of this knowledge is believing in Him, and the perfection of this belief is affirming His oneness, and the perfection of this affirmation is to purify one's devotion to Him, and the perfection of this purification is to divest Him of all attributes—because of the testimony of every attribute that it is other than the object of attribution, and because of the testimony of every such object that it is other than the attribute. So whoever ascribes an attribute to God—glorified be He!—has conjoined Him [with something else], and whoever so conjoins Him has made Him twofold, and whoever makes Him twofold has fragmented Him, and whoever thus fragments Him is ignorant of Him. And whoever points to Him confines Him, and whoever confines Him counts Him; and whoever asks ‘in what?’ encloses Him, and whoever asks ‘upon what?’ isolates Him.<sup>1</sup>*

The association of anything with God diminishes us and our ability to fully understand the Divine, as we fundamentally misunderstand God. Of course, God always leaves us a way to think about the nature of the Divine. I would argue creation becomes a way to understand the presence of God in the world.

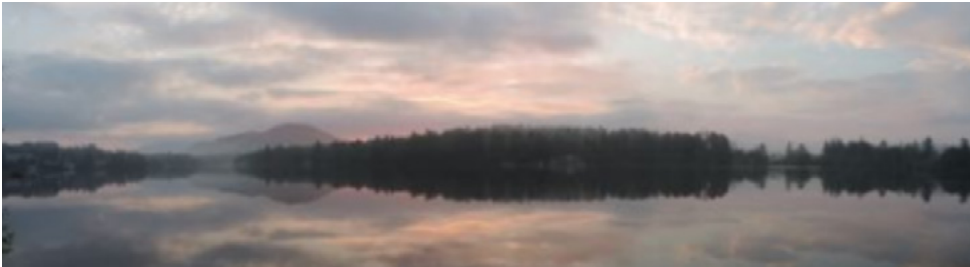
<sup>1</sup>Reza Shah-Kazemi, *Justice and Remembrance: Introducing the Spirituality of Imam Ali* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 208.

The Qur'an is replete with examples of Allah telling us that creation is a sign if we choose to understand it. For example, the following verses engage our senses of sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell (all translations adapted from Ali Quli Qarai).

*And whatever Allah has created for you in the earth of diverse hues—there is indeed a sign in that for a people who take admonition. (16:13)*

*Among God's signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the difference of your languages and colors. There are indeed signs in that for those who know. (30:22)*

*In the earth are signs for those who have conviction, and in your souls [as well]. Will you not then perceive? (51:20-21)*



Mirror Lake, New York, at dawn. The passing reflection of the real at the emergence of light. Photo by Hussein Rashid

The last verse reminds us that we too are a locus of signs; we are part of creation, subject to the command of the Divine. Creation is meant to be a series of signs, and signs that we cannot deny (40:81). These signs engage all our senses and are reminders that they are gifts from God. It is through recognizing that these are gifts from The Compassionate and The Merciful

that we understand creation as beautiful. God's creation is beautiful because God loves beauty, and we understand beauty through creation, so we understand God to be beautiful. That understanding of beauty is only to our level, not to that of the Divine. Divine Beauty is beyond our comprehension and creation is an expression of Divine Beauty and a way to understand it.

This question of the differences between the limits of our capacity to understand God and the capacity of the Divine to express Themselves has been a favorite topic of those who worship God. Thinking through how we approach formal worship gives us an opportunity to reflect. Imam Zayn al-Abidin (as) offers in his prayers that we are incapable of properly worshipping God, but because God commands it, we must do it and elevate ourselves in the process. He says:

*My God, tongues fall short of attaining praise of You proper to Your majesty,  
intellects are incapable of grasping the core of Your beauty,  
eyes fail before gazing upon the glories of Your face,  
and You have assigned to Your creatures no way to know You  
save incapacity to know You! (Munajat of the Knowers)*

---

*My God, the uninterrupted flow of Your graciousness has distracted me from thanking You!  
The flood of Your bounty has rendered me incapable of counting Your praises!  
The succession of Your kind acts has diverted me from mentioning You in laudation!  
The continuous rush of Your benefits has thwarted me from spreading the news of Your  
gentle favors! (Munajat of the Thankful)*

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*My God, were it not incumbent to accept Your command,  
I would declare You far too exalted for me to remember You,  
for I remember You in my measure, not in Your measure,  
and my scope can hardly reach the point where I may be a locus for glorifying You!  
Among Your greatest favors to us is the continuation of Your remembrance on our tongues  
and Your permission to us to supplicate You,  
declare You exalted, and glorify You! (Munajat of the Rememberers)<sup>2</sup>*

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Zayn al-Abidin, *Ali ibn al-Husayn, The Psalms of Islam: Al-Sahifat Al-Kamilat Al-Sajjadiyya*, trans. William C. Chittick (London: Muhammadi Trust of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, 1988).

According to these prayers, the act of worship is an act of obedience to God. We obey God because we too are part of creation. As a part of creation we are beautiful. Returning to Imam Ali (as), he tells us that in creation, God made us balanced and with purpose:

*Then He breathed into it of His spirit, and it stood up as a human being, endowed with intellectual powers with which to reflect, thoughts by which to conduct himself, limbs to put to service, instruments at his disposal, and knowledge with which to discern between the true and the false, between different tastes and fragrances, and between different colors and categories; having a constitution compounded of different hues, unified forms, contrasting oppositions, and distinct admixtures of heat and cold, moisture and dryness.<sup>3</sup>*

In this passage, Imam Ali is explicit that God made us with purpose and with balance. Prayer is a way to explore and appreciate the idea of creation in balance.

<sup>3</sup> Shah-Kazemi, *Justice and Remembrance*, 33.

**This internal balance, and the connection to the rest of creation as emerging from the Divine, reminds us that we have obligations and commitments beyond ourselves. Imam Jafar (as) says:**

*The roots of conduct have four aspects: conduct with Allah, conduct with the self, conduct with creation (i.e., people), and conduct with this world. Each of these aspects is based upon seven principles, just as there are seven principles of conduct with Allah: giving Him His due, keeping His limits, being thankful for His gift, being content with His decree, being patient with His trials, glorifying His sanctity, and yearning for Him.*

*The seven principles of conduct with the self are fear, striving, enduring harm, spiritual discipline, seeking truthfulness and sincerity, withdrawing the self from what it loves, and binding it in poverty (faqr).*

*The seven principles of conduct with creation are forbearance, forgiveness, humility, generosity, compassion, good counsel, justice, and fairness.*

*The seven principles of conduct with this world are being content with what is at hand, preferring what is available to what is not, abandoning the quest for the elusive, hating overabundance, choosing abstinence (zuhd), knowing the evils of this world and abandoning any desire for it, and negating its dominance.<sup>4</sup>*

**Because we are all part of creation (khalq), there is a way to behave in the world, an ethics (akhlaq). This ethics is what we owe each other by virtue of being created—what we owe each other because of and through God.**

<sup>4</sup> Ja'far al-Sadiq, *The Lantern of the Path*, trans. Fadhlalla Haeri (Dorset, UK: Element Books, 1989), 1.

The idea of akhlaq, what we owe each other because of God, is not the totality of understanding ethics. Beauty, so far, has been about jamal (j-m-l), which is a physical, or outward, beauty. Although Sufis later connect it back to God's qualities, and state that we love God because of how we perceive God's beauty, I want to keep the focus of jamal on physical attributes.

To paraphrase the great Angstian philosophers of the '80s, "I don't want to start any blasphemous rumors," but I think that God has a sense of humor. The root j-m-l is not just for "beauty," but also for "camel." Like a camel, physical beauty has a purpose, but we shouldn't confuse the conveyance for the goal. Do not be attached to the camel/physical beauty/the world, but rather use it as a means to get someplace.



Camel Head Clip Art, vector clip art, Clkr.com, November 13, 2007,  
<http://www.clker.com/clipart-3400.html>.

Akhlaq is a way to consider our relationship in and with the world and serves as a framework to understand beauty. From the root h-s-n, we get a new word for beauty: ihsan. To God belongs the most beautiful names (7:180, cf. 20:8), the Prophet is a beautiful role model (33:12), and the story of Hazrat Yusuf (as) is the most beautiful of stories (12:3). In all these examples, the idea of beauty is not just physical but moral and ethical. We are bettered by this beauty, not just as consumers but as producers of an aesthetic ethic, ihsan. We can create beautiful things, and we can understand these things in terms of aesthetic standards. The truly beautiful are informed by an ethic, so it is beautiful inside and out. The focus on the physical, the jamal, is the means to get to a deeper understanding of what beauty means. While we may be drawn to the sensory experience of attractiveness, staying at that level confuses the path with the destination. The jamal is the invitation to get to the ihsan.

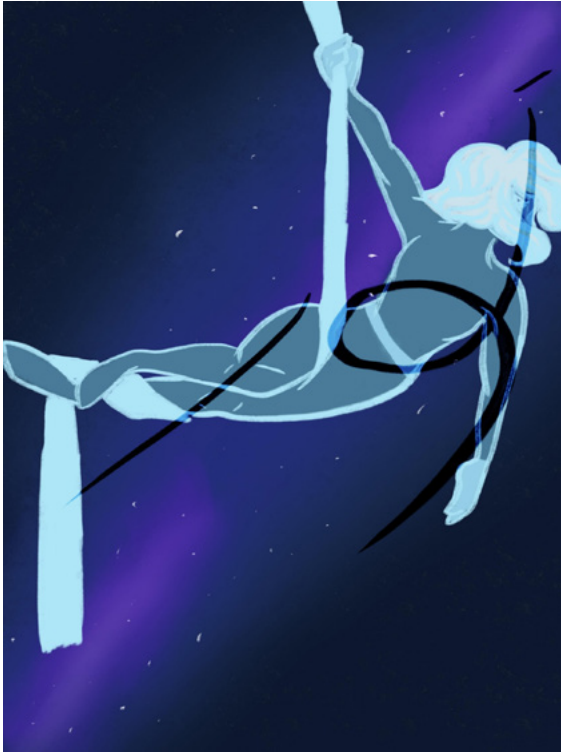


*Coffin of Imam 'Ali*, 1550-1560, Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper, 22 5/16 in. x 16 7/8 in., Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York,

One of my favorite pieces of art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art is called "Coffin of Imam 'Ali," a folio from a *Falnama* (*The Book of Omens*) of Ja'far al-Sadiq.

I could focus on the line work, the richness of the colors, the composition, and intricate details that make this an attractive artwork. That type of description is *jamal*. The coffin on the camel tells us that we are at a funeral. The nimbus around the heads of the three figures tell us it is the funeral of an important religious person because the nimbus is a sign of sanctity. The description, the *jamal*, is thus very important to understanding the painting. One possible approach to understanding *ihsan* is to think about the fact that our religion should be manifest in this world and not aimed for the next world. The invitation is there for us to consider what this art is doing to engage aesthetic ethics.

There are two contemporary pieces of artwork that demonstrate how beauty collapses boundaries that I want to highlight. The first is a piece of digital artwork called *Nur*.



*Nur* by Sitarah Nur Rashid, ©2021, <https://ko-fi.com/GRIMBIRD>.

According to the artist, the artwork places a genderless figure in space among the stars, representing the universe. This positioning is meant to demonstrate that the greatest source of light is not the stars but the light (*nur*) within us that we cannot contain. We hold fast to the rope of Allah, and because God is neither male nor female, the figure who is suffused with the idea of Godliness transcends those boundaries. The *waw/u/3* in *nur* is half an infinity symbol to demonstrate the vastness within us and outside of us and to acknowledge that we can never reach that level of completeness.

The artist is thus using the *jamal* of the body to get us toward *ihsan*. The form of a physically developed body focuses the viewer on the meaning of the ideal human, which is often conveyed through physical perfection. Although the human is centered and takes up most of the canvas, by placing it in the vastness of the universe, the viewer is invited to think about the smallness of the body in contrast to the vastness they have through their *nur*. The silk the person is holding references the Qur'anic verse on holding fast to the rope of Allah, and in doing so many of the distinctions we make as people dissolve in the infinite nature of the Divine.

In premodern Muslim visual arts, the word was always central; illustrations were often related to literary texts. The next example demonstrates a modern take on the relationship between word and image.



The second piece, by Piper Rutchik, is a visual response to a short story about jinn called “The Congregation” by Kamila Shamsie in *The Djinn Falls in Love & Other Stories*.<sup>5</sup>



Art by Piper Rutchik, charcoal on paper, ©2022,  
<https://www.piperjolieart.com>.

The story is about twins, one human and one jinn. Neither knows of each other's existence until they are slightly older, and they “meet” in prayer. The visual response is about how thin and imagined the barriers between the seen and unseen worlds are.

The twins are eternally connected by magic, and that magic moves between them as they age and discover the beauties of each other's worlds.

If, as Imam Ali (as) teaches, humans are created in a balance, then we should assume that all of creation is in a balance. The seen and the unseen world, the human and nonhuman creation, are all in a balance. Being in balance is not about being separate from each other but about existing in harmony. There are things that we should admire and seek to emulate from nonhuman creation, while also recognizing we have our own talents, skills, and beauty to offer. This artwork demonstrates that the false distinctions we create disappear when we realize we are connected through a greater power. The *jamal* of the human form is once more a vehicle to imagine a larger world and evoke the literary text. The image carries its own expression of *ihsan*, engaging with ideas of human dependency and relationship to all of creation, seen and unseen. It evokes the aesthetic ethic of the written word, which probes the complexities of human relations mediated by religion. The artwork is an expression of both/and thinking, seeking to move beyond constructed dichotomies, to get both *jamal* and *ihsan*.

## CONCLUSION

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Muslim cultures are full of beauty because the theologies of Islam are grounded in beauty. The beautiful acts are done by the Most Beautiful One, who creates. Thus, we are invited into that creation through worship, which reminds us of our relationship with the Divine and each other. It is through those relationships that we recognize what we owe each other. It is what we owe each other that is the basis of ethics because we are alike in Creation. Ethics are grounded in beauty and can be beautiful. The aesthetics that we generate have an ethical connection, and it is that aesthetic ethic that is *ihsan*. God is beautiful and loves beauty.

<sup>5</sup> Mahvesh Murad and Jared Shurin, eds., *The Djinn Falls in Love & Other Stories* (New York: Solaris, 2017).

# BLACK LIKE THE SCARVES THAT THE MUSLIMINA WEAR

BY SU'AD ABDUL KHABEER



AN ATLAS

BY SU'AD ABDUL KHABEER

Art created in collaboration with Nicole Najma Abraham

## INTRODUCTION

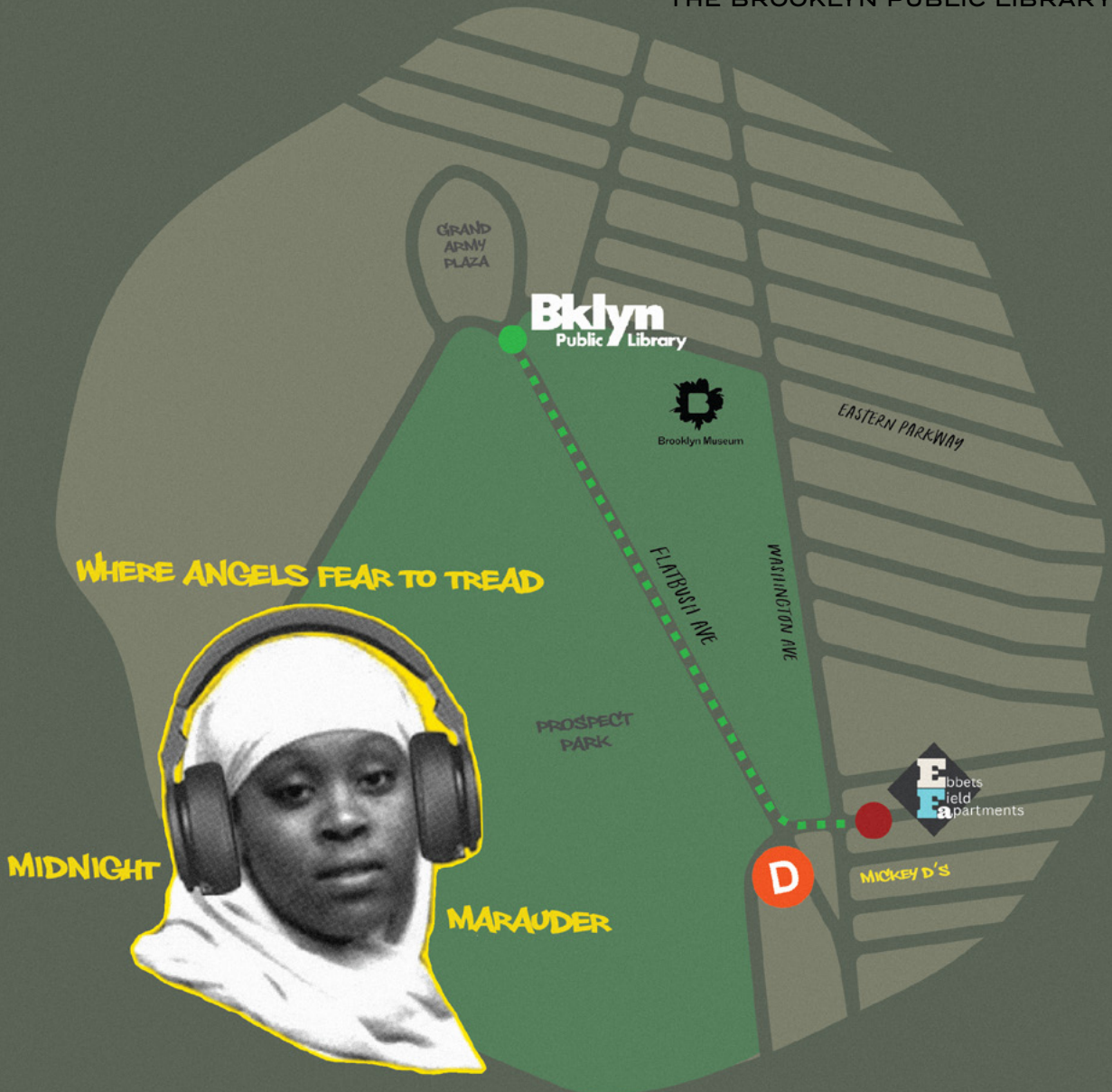
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I LOVE maps because of the stories they can tell. We are usually taught to think of maps as objective, factual topographical views of landscapes and waterways, but maps are interpretations.

The map of the world we all most likely have living in our heads was developed by a sixteenth-century European who, surprise surprise, made Europe the center of the world and significantly distorted the size, and therefore the importance, of other continents. For example, a traditional Mercator projection map makes it seem as if the United States is almost half the size of the continent of Africa, when it is in reality just under a third. No wonder so many people think Africa is a country.

Maps are places where values are drawn. And an atlas, which is what this project is, comprises a collection of maps that presents points of significance: the locational histories of natural resources, celestial objects, cities, and other places. As such, an atlas is a guide through un/familiar territory. I came to the idea of doing an atlas after reflecting on the Brooklyn I grew up in and the communities that made me, in relation to what Brooklyn is today and is becoming. The Brooklyn I knew is being erased, not just by the march of time but the violent march of capital, known in polite company as *gentrification*. Accordingly, I offer this atlas as a collection of maps that presents some points of significance that tell my story of Brooklyn. A story that is mine because I lived it, *not* because I own it. Rather, it's a part of me, and I'm a part of it and so are the many people that made me and made Brooklyn.





GRAND  
ARMY  
PLAZA

**Bklyn**  
Public Library



Brooklyn Museum

EASTERN PARKWAY

WHERE ANGELS FEAR TO TREAD

FLATBUSH AVE

WASHINGTON AVE

PROSPECT  
PARK

**E**  
**F**  
**A**  
bbets  
field  
apartments

MIDNIGHT

D

MIKEY D'S

MARAUDER

One of the things maps can do is track distance and proximity: how far or how close something is from something else. This tracking of distance and proximity brings me to my memories of the Brooklyn Public Library, memories that center on how I got there as much as which books I borrowed. After leaving my apartment on the 22nd floor of Ebbets Field Apartments, the site of the former home of the Brooklyn Dodgers, crossing past the McDonald's on Empire Boulevard and the hustle and bustle of the Flatbush/Empire/Parkside intersection, I would end up on a tree-lined Flatbush Avenue. On my right, behind wrought iron gates was bushy greenery, and behind that was the Brooklyn Botanic Garden. On my left, across the street, were the trees and grasses and zoo of Brooklyn's Prospect Park. In my early teens, I would regularly take this walk to the library, and each time I did, I carried my Walkman playing hip hop.

In 1990s Crown Heights, Brooklyn, still predominantly made up of Black families, a teenaged Black Muslim girl listening to hip hop while walking to the library is not particularly remarkable. Yet what might be a bit more unexpected or at least interesting is the kinds of books I was checking out. Around that time, I had discovered Public Broadcast Service's drama series *Masterpiece Theatre*, and

after watching a book adaptation, I would immediately head to the library to read the book for myself. When I think back to that time, one memory stands out. Picture this: me, in my khimar and headphones, listening to Q-Tip rhyme "Yo I start to flinch, as I try not to say it/But my lips is like the oowop as I start to spray it" while walking down Flatbush to the library to pick up E. M. Forster's *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, an early twentieth-century novel about a white British girl and forbidden love in Italy. You might be asking yourself, "how Sway?"; however, the distance I traveled between Ebbets Field and the library and between '90s hip hop and Regency/Victorian/Edwardian literature is a metaphor for the distances and proximities that made me and make Brooklyn.

That bar by Q-Tip comes from the A Tribe Called Quest song "Sucka Nigga" off their 1993 album *Midnight Marauders*. "Sucka Nigga" delves into the messiness, prompted by hip hop's growing use of the n-word, of intergenerational debates around culture in the Black community. As a member of the hip hop generation who was raised in a very pro-Black household and Muslim community, this song's themes were very close to me. These debates were happening not just in songs but in my everyday life.

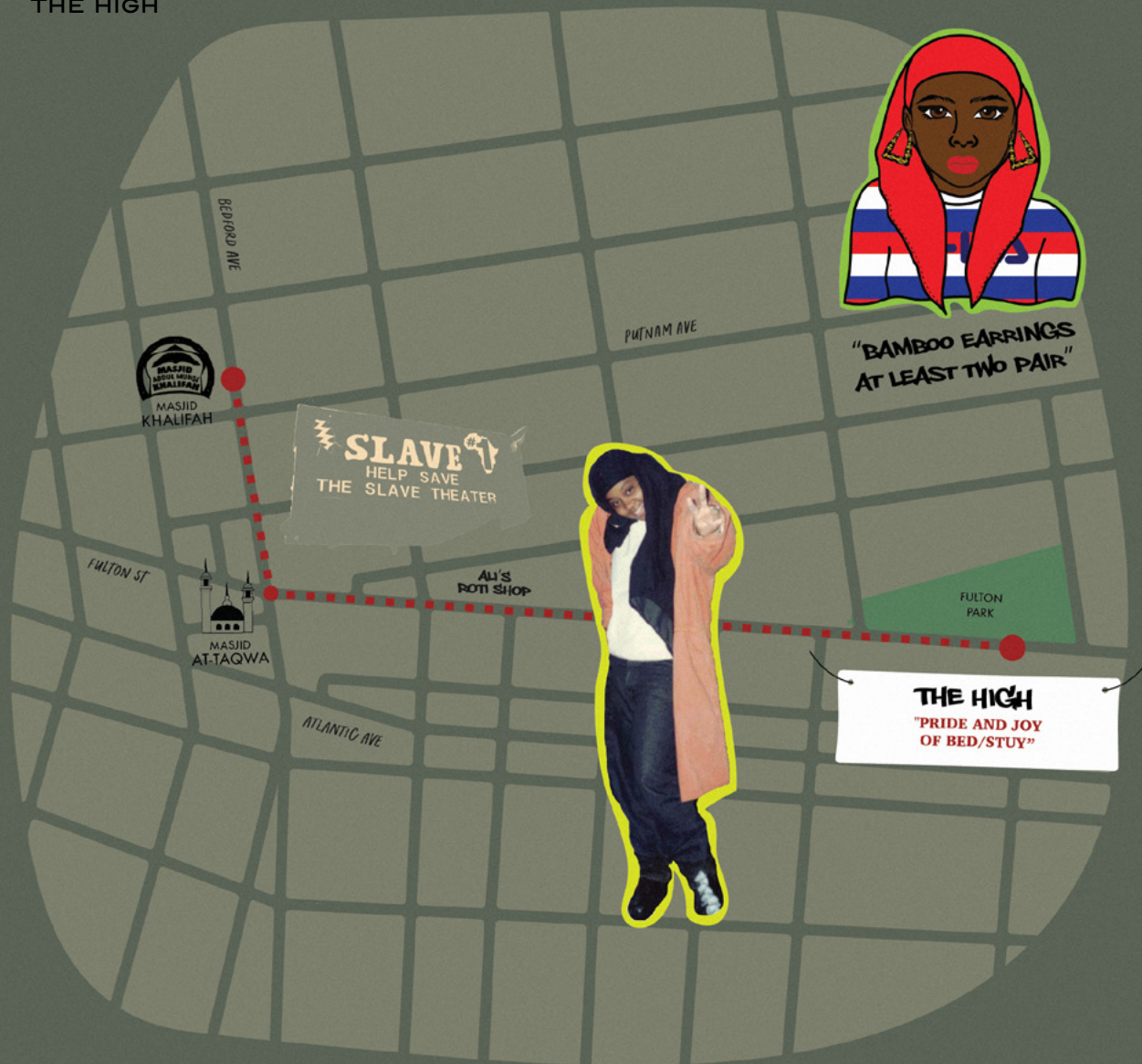
And in a certain vein, the literature was also close to me. Slavery and colonialism, which gave birth to the “n-word,” is the backdrop of all these British stories, as are rules around gender, some of which could be found in my Muslim community. Proximity. On the other hand, there was a great breadth of time and race between this literature and the Brooklyn I called home. Distance.

When I used Google maps to track the distance between my home and the library, I noted that neither Ebbets Field nor the library showed up in the first view that came up on my tablet. If I zoomed in, I could see the library and Ebbets Field but not in the same screen capture; in contrast to both places, the Brooklyn Museum was always visible. An eventual manipulation of zoom would reveal all three places, but the prominence of the museum was undeniable. This stuck out for me because while I spent *a lot* of time at the library, I only recall visiting the museum as an adult and only after I had moved away from Brooklyn, even though the library and museum are almost equidistant from my childhood home. I informally polled some folks I grew up with, and most of

them didn't spend much time at the museum either. My guess is back then, it was not a place for kids and especially Black kids and the Black community that was around it.

For me, the uninterrupted visibility of the museum is also an index for the ways libraries and museums are different kinds of spaces. Libraries are free (making them havens for poor and working-class people and prime targets for underfunding and book bans) while museums charge a fee. Libraries tend to be organized around topics that cross geographies, whereas museums are more like maps, i.e., interpretations; Rome and Greece in their own galleries and Africa in that corner. At a museum, you see collections at a distance, whereas you come to the library to borrow something, to touch something, to have proximity. And while the last time I was home, I found the Brooklyn Museum to be more community oriented, the community around it has changed... Brooklyn is no longer a place where I walk freely while others fear to tread.

# THE HIGH





Is there any aspiration greater than being an *Around the Way Girl*?! The way I wanted bamboo earrings! I'd have taken just one (fake) pair. The 1990 hip hop song "Around the Way Girl" by LL Cool J was and is still a jam! It celebrates "regular" Black girls and women, the kind of people that even in the age of #BlackGirlMagic continue to be overlooked and underappreciated. That song made/ makes us feel seen, even for a 12-year-old like me whose Umi could not afford (Fendi) or just did not believe in all the *Around the Way Girl* accouterments (perms and extensions). Being a *Muslim Around the Way Girl* (ATWG) or aspiring to her greatness matched LL's descriptions... bus stops and lollipops, New Edition and basketball courts, lip gloss and baby bangs... but those baby bangs did not border extensions, perms, or curly weaves one could see. No, for the Muslim ATWG...

♪ Anika/Jamilah/Fatima/Sade ♪

... baby bangs were carefully crafted, with a toothbrush and gel, against the edge of her georgette khimar pinned at the nape with the ends hanging, leaving plenty room for her door knockers to shine on her way to "The High."

"The High" is how we referred to Boys and Girls High School, known in the '90s as the "Pride and Joy of Bed-Stuy." The High, located in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, has the distinction of being the oldest public high school in Brooklyn. It was opened as [Boys High in the 1890s](#), and it became coeducational in 1974 and two years later moved to the auspicious corner of Fulton Street and Utica Avenue. The High becoming the Pride and Joy of Bed-Stuy is tied to the years that Mr. Frank Mickens was its principal (1986-2004). *New York Times* headlines like "A Tough Principal Turns a School Around" and "Unconventional Principal Who Saved a Troubled School" spoke to the way a school once known for its scholarship in the first half of the twentieth century had become more of a remedial institution in a neighborhood

struggling with impacts of poverty, crime, and drug abuse that came with private and public abandonment. Today, I would probably protest Mickens's tough love approach, but back in the day, I valued the consequences of it, how it made The High the place to be, a special place. As renowned photographer Laylah Barrayn told me, it was the "Hillman of High Schools."

Looking back, I can see that The High was a Muslim ATWG's haven. You were safe and you belonged. Take, for example, jumma prayer. Today, we see Muslim kids facing bullying in public schools due to anti-Muslim racism. It was a little different in the Black '90s. It never happened to me, but I did hear stories of Muslim girls getting into fights because someone wanted to pull their scarf off—but it didn't seem to be because they were Muslim per se but more generally "different." Yet at The High, Muslim ATWGs was getting off for jumma! As Katrina Harrison (Class of 1994) described it to me, they were walking up Fulton Street with school permission to attend Friday prayers at Masjids Taqwa or Khalifah. I see this as the consequence of a strong Muslim presence in Black communities paired with direct efforts by Muslim public school educators and parents to have Muslim student needs met.

In the summertime, when classes were out, The High's football field was home to the African Street Festival, what I grew up calling "The East" and is officially known as the International African Arts Festival. Street festival is an uber Afrocentric and Pan-African space: the Muslims were there, the herbalists, the naturalists, the Israelites, the Rastas, the Kushites (not that these were necessarily different groups), and I assume a Christian or two... all kinds of Black folks in a rich, affirming space, which is basically what Brooklyn was for me.

Today, from the little I gathered online, The High is a shell of its old self and the Around the Way Girls have gotten run out...

# KHALIFAH AND TAQWA



I like to tell the story of, or, rather, brag about, how the first time I heard the adhan called over loudspeakers on a street corner was not in Cairo or Damascus but in “Do or Die” Bed-Stuy. This was because there are two masjids, Masjid At-Taqwa and Masjid Abdul Muhsi Khalifah, located only a few blocks from each other. And they would, like clockwork, call the adhan for the five daily prayers. As I walked down Bedford Avenue from Fulton to Madison or vice versa, the sound of the adhan would carry me there. As a child, I don’t know if I ever really wondered why there were two masjids so close to each other—0.3 miles apart. And that was probably because I was too young to understand but also because I felt equally at home in both places. I have memories of running around the musallah at Taqwa, which was, at the time, just one big room for everything from prayer to weddings. I also remember moving from one Girl Scout rank to another in a candle ceremony of Muslim Girl Scout troops at Khalifah.

My feeling at home has a lot to do with my umi, who was pretty cosmopolitan with her Islam. She told me she was drawn to Islam, inspired by Malcolm and as “a member of the Black Panther Party, a very big advocate of the Pan-African Movement [which] naturally put me where there was a lot of afrocentric culture and Muslims.” She was not a part of “The First,” the initial generation of Muslims who came to Islam through the Nation of Islam (NOI) under The Honorable Elijah Muhammad. Rather, she converted directly to Sunni Islam. She took her shahadah at a prison whose political

captives (she was not one of them) were hosting a mawlid. She found her first masjid home at State Street Mosque, run by the dynamic Black Internationalist duo of Shaykh Daoud and Mother Khadijah Faisal. She was close friends with and mentored by Tijani Shaykh Hassan Cisse’s indefatigable supporter Kareemah Abdul-Kareem. And all this was just in NYC! My first memory of ISNA (Islamic Society of North America), a predominantly South Asian U.S. American space, is of a soccer ball hitting me on the head while attending one of their conferences in Peoria, Illinois, as a ten-year-old. For Umi, if there were Muslims, she was at least gonna check it out!

I moved quite easily between the two masjids until things changed *for me* at Taqwa. I remember being around 13 when they built a wall to separate the men and the women. Before that, there was a curtain, but it was often open or easily trespassed. Yet for me, the wall was something different, and I was not having it (I had strong opinions at 13... still do... sue me!). So while Umi continued to make her rounds, I began to plant some roots at Khalifah because they had no wall and lots of activities. My first summer job was as a camp counselor there, and I learned how to organize as a part of the youth group Muslim Youth on the Move. I did not completely leave Taqwa behind though. After jummah on Fridays, I would also make my rounds to see my girls at Taqwa (and peep a cutie or two) and pick up a steak-n-take from Shameem’s. (It was so GOOD!)

When I got older, I learned that Khalifah was originally NOI Temple 7C and that Malcolm found the property. His name is on the lease along with Br. Umar Calloway, who is like an uncle to me. Umi told me that Imam Siraj Wahaj was first a minister at 7C until he left and his fiery speeches attracted a following that eventually built a new masjid on the corner of Fulton St. and Bedford Ave. Soon I began to realize there was a reason there were two masjids so close to each other. The distance between Taqwa and Khalifa represents fissures that define Black Islam nationally. On the one hand, folks disparaged Khalifah's community, who despite leaving behind the initial ideology of the NOI and coming to what they call Al-Islam (Sunni orthodoxy) would not disparage Elijah Muhammad. This is seen as a stain on their aqidah. On the other hand, folks disparaged the community at Taqwa for being self-

hating Black folks, evidenced by the way they privileged Arab Islam and its aesthetic and religious sources over anything homegrown. Of course, those characterizations aren't literally true but are gross generalizations that oversimplify a complex set of issues all Diasporic Black folks in the U.S. deal with: How should I relate to this country? What does reclaiming my history look like? Where does my future reside?

These two religious institutions and their relationship to each other are deeply and historically important. They are monuments to Black Islam and the Black experience more broadly. And while the internal differences are real, as Brooklyn has moved from a place white folks ran from to a place they are columbusing *again*, they are monuments continuously on the precipice of extinction.



PROSPECT PARK

WHEN EID  
WAS IN

PROSPECT PARK



## PROSPECT PARK

### ORIGINAL SUNNI BROOKLYN STYLE - REDUX

The scent of Egyptian Musk  
makes me reminiscent of...

When Eid was in Prospect Park/and  
you probably missed the first prayer/because  
Umi had been frying chicken since fajr,  
but you looked good when you got there,  
in your new fit and shoes.

...

When Eid was in Prospect Park/ONLY  
after multiple phone calls,  
back and forth,  
confirmed the moon was sighted!

When Eid was in Prospect Park/and  
that Eid day sunrise was something special!  
Morning dew on a project window sill.

When Eid was in Prospect Park and/  
you got a parking spot (if it was a weekday)!

When Eid was in Prospect Park/and  
that trek, whew!...  
with shopping carts and strollers...  
till the sounds of the drums said you were close...  
to that wide green field  
of possibilities.

When Eid was in Prospect Park/and  
Everyone is all..  
“AS-Salaamu Alaikum!” “Haven’t seen you in...!”  
“...gotten so big! “...where’s...?!”

When Eid was in Prospect Park/and  
The COLORS!  
of the turbans and the khimars,  
the kufis and the niqabs  
the thobes, tunics, skirts...  
and the family in the matching African print.

When Eid was in Prospect Park/and  
you ran through the grass  
till you were dizzy  
with sunshine and love.

When Eid was in Prospect Park/and  
errybody came home smelling like outside,  
belly full and hearts fuller.

When Eid was in Prospect Park.

When we protest gentrification, a common response is dismissal: "you just don't like change!" Yet gentrification is not just a matter of "change," which is often posed, oddly, as a kind of autonomous phenomenon. Gentrification is a matter of inequality.

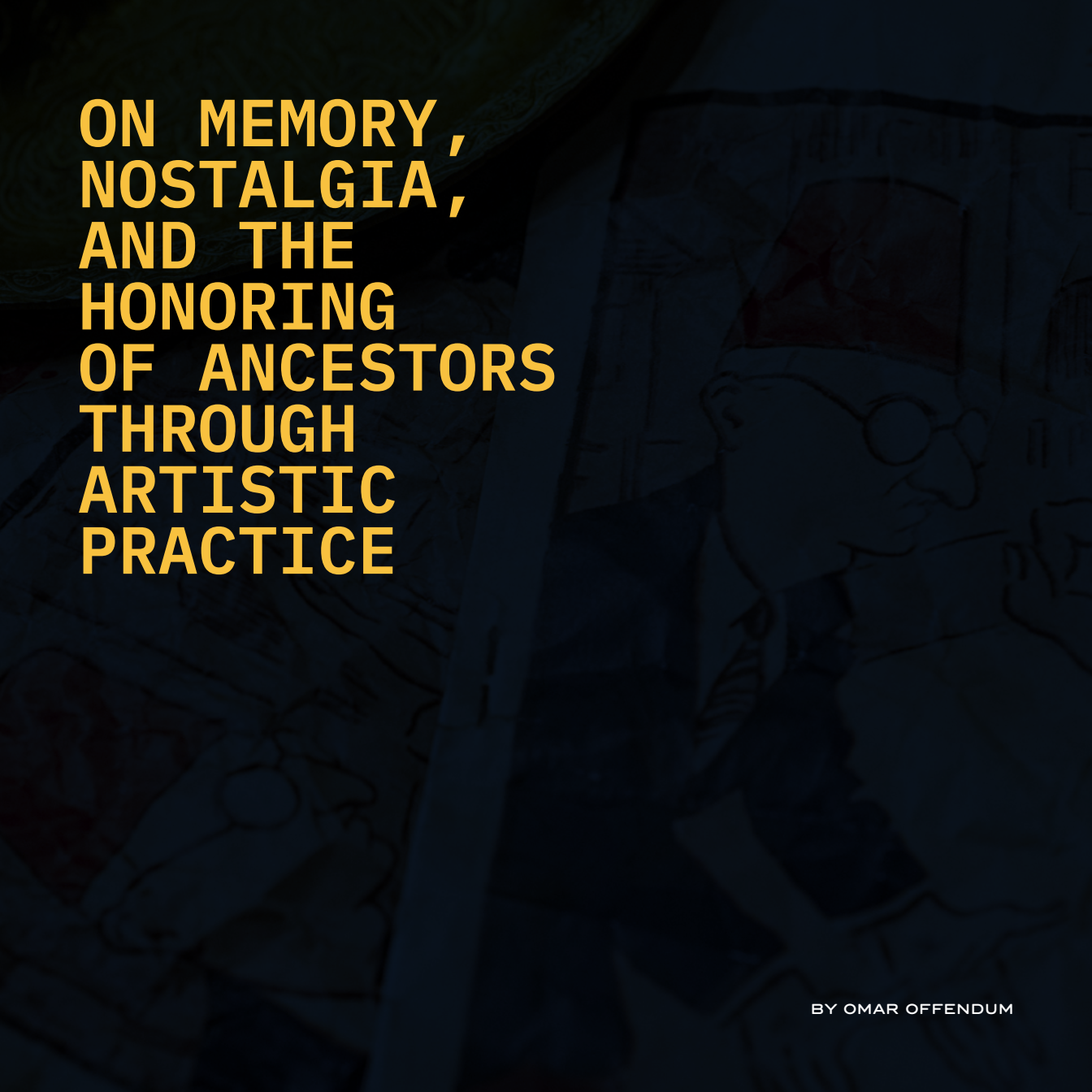
Some years ago, I watched a documentary called [My Brooklyn](#). It was made by Kelly Anderson, a white woman who moved to Brooklyn in the late '80s/early '90s. Grounded in her own position as a gentrifier, the film tracks the impact of gentrification on the borough. It focuses on the drastic changes to the business district on Fulton Street in downtown Brooklyn and the demise of Albee Square mall. The narrative pushed by those in power was that the mall was not making money and its closure would bring revitalization by opening the way for more profitable businesses. This, the documentary explains, was a lie. One of the expert commentators pointed out that the mall was generating revenue just not for the big developers, supported by then-New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg, hence the local independent businesses housed in the mall got pushed out. This story of Albee Square mall demonstrates **there is nothing innovative or inevitable about displacement**.

Indeed, early twenty-first-century gentrification is an extension of the displacement of nations and peoples indigenous to North America and to Africa that is the origin of the United States. Before the land I call home was named Brooklyn by Dutch settlers, it was known as part of [Lenapehoking](#). Lenapehoking is the name given by the Lenape to their [homelands](#) that spanned from western Connecticut to eastern Pennsylvanian down to Delaware. The Lenape were driven from their homelands by Dutch, British, and U.S. settler colonialism and now form the [Lenape Diaspora](#), which includes bands and nations in [Oklahoma](#), [Wisconsin](#), and [Ontario](#), Canada. The [same year](#) that the Dutch "bought" Manhattan from the Lenape, the first enslaved Africans arrived in Brooklyn. European settlers used forced African labor to try to cement their displacement of the Lenape such that by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries Brooklyn was "[the slaveholding](#)

[capital of New York State](#)." The history is enraging and at first glance might even make one feel hopeless about the present. I mean, the descendants of both groups now form diasporas, with all the traumas and reclamations that entails. Yet as I learned from the brilliant Mohawk scholar [Audra Simpson](#), *it ain't over*. Indigenous nations are still here and are still fighting for their sovereignty in the same way African people, including African Muslims, are still here and are still fighting for their freedom. (Of course, these two groups also share members.) And although the state seems powerful, it is also quite fragile. The violence inflicted upon people—from displacement, slavery, and genocide to mass incarceration, gentrification, and cuts in spending on education, healthcare, and poverty alleviation—is the only way the state can hold onto its power.

In September of 2017, I joined a march protesting gentrification in Brooklyn organized by a coalition of organizations, including [Equality for Flatbush](#). The march started at the monstrosity that is Barclays Center, traveled up Fulton Street through downtown Brooklyn, Crown Heights, Bed-Stuy, and ended up in Bushwick by the J train. The march was maybe a couple hundred people, and the police followed us the entire way. I had come to the march frustrated and unsure if anything could be done to thwart all the "change" that was happening in Brooklyn. The police presence, which was meant to intimidate, actually made me see that yes, there is still a reason to fight. That the people they want to push out of Brooklyn do indeed have power. If they/we didn't, the powers-that-be would not bother sending the police.

I don't live in Brooklyn anymore. I am not on the front lines dealing with the ravages of displacement there. But that does not mean I will stop fighting, in the ways I can, cause "it ain't over." We cannot change the displacements of the past, but we can challenge that legacy in the present. And this I realize is what this atlas, this work of memory, is for... I remember to challenge. I remember to fight. And I invite you to join me.



# ON MEMORY, NOSTALGIA, AND THE HONORING OF ANCESTORS THROUGH ARTISTIC PRACTICE

BY OMAR OFFENDUM





The timeless in  
you is aware of  
life's timelessness,  
And knows that  
yesterday is but  
today's memory  
and tomorrow is  
today's dream.

GIBRAN KHALIL GIBRAN

*Little Syria* has been my passion project for several years. Set in a Lower Manhattan neighborhood once known as Little Syria (1880-1940), the show uses hip hop, Arabic instrumentation, and hakawati oral storytelling traditions to imagine early twentieth-century life in the heart of this Arab American community. While it began in earnest during my Kennedy Center fellowship in 2018-2019, if I'm honest, the groundwork was laid long before I was born ...

Tracing the poetic footsteps from my mother, Salma Nassar (born 1946) back to Elia Abu Madi (1890-1957) to Usama Ibn Munqidh (1095-1188) to Al-Khansa (575-646) and countless others, the lyrical theme of standing upon the ruins of one's homeland and

drawing upon memories of a people and place has been central to Arab identity both in the motherland and diaspora for well over 1500 years. Indeed, longing for one's home is so central to Arabic poetry—and Arabic poetry is so central to being Arab—that these kinds of verses are passed down from generation to generation even when families aren't uprooted from their homes during their lifetimes. From adorning the walls of the pre-Islamic Kaaba to being transplanted across continents via the tongues of immigrants fleeing war and famine to perhaps even being written by digital avatars and AI bots in the metaverse during our not-too-distant dystopian future, Al-Atlal ("the ruins") is an ever-present motif creating a sense of deep nostalgia and remembrance for us all.

When performing *Little Syria* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) in May of 2022, I made a point to dress the set (and myself) with traditional furniture and collectibles I'd inherited from various family members and intercontinental travels over the course of my 40 years on this planet. These physical memories adorning the stage were reflected in the memories I summoned

from a deep poetic subconscious—recalling lyrical lessons my grandfather Naim blessed me with after praying together in his Damascus living room, visits to my aunt's home in New York as she welcomed me with the kindest of greetings and warmest of hugs, and stories I'd heard from my mother as she reminisced about her life in her beloved Sham before immigrating to Amreeka.



## TARABISH AND FEZZES



Pictured above (right) is my mother's paternal great-grandfather Hassan Al-Gayed, an Ottoman officer from Libya. Her maternal grandfather, Omar Effendi (one of the inspirations behind my stage name), was an Ottoman general of Kurdish origin, and he too was rarely photographed without his tarboosh. Even my paternal grandfather, Mohammad, a humble teacher from the central Syrian city of Hama on the banks of the Orontes River, was always wearing one in public. Much has been written about the origins of these hats and their various levels of symbolism—

from how the name "Fez" refers to a Moroccan city where the dye to color the hat was first extracted from crimson berries to how it became the official headgear of the Shriners fraternal order here in the United States in 1872 ... The decision to wear one in the *Little Syria* show stemmed from my desire to both honor my own ancestors and the hakawati storytelling traditions of Damascus, where it is customary for the storyteller to wear a tarboosh while delivering poetic parables ... That and I think they look really fly on stage.

As fate would have it, I traveled to Cairo a few weeks before the BAM performance in the spring of 2022 to pay a visit to my mother. She left Damascus at the height of the war in 2014 and resettled in the Egyptian capital city. It was Ramadan when I was there, and I took the opportunity to have a few custom tarabish made at one of the last traditional fez-makers' shops in the Al-Ghuriya neighborhood of Fatimid Cairo: [Ahmad Mohammad Ahmad Al-Tarabishi](#) (the last name says it all) ... They took my measurements in the early afternoon and had four custom felt hats ready for me in the evening just before the Tarawih prayers began.

The photo on the bottom left is from the 1940s and shows a Tarabishi family member not only using the same Ottoman brass hat presses they still use today (dating back to the mid-1800s) but the very same hand-painted, wooden sign still hanging in their modest shop decades later. From Al-Azhar University graduations down the street to wedding receptions in countries like Kuwait and Australia, business is still thriving for this family almost two centuries later. I recall telling the shopkeeper that I was originally from Syria, at which point he said the only other fez-maker in the world that measured up to his quality standards was a man in Aleppo whom he hadn't heard from in years but prayed was still in business and doing well ... Insha'Allah.



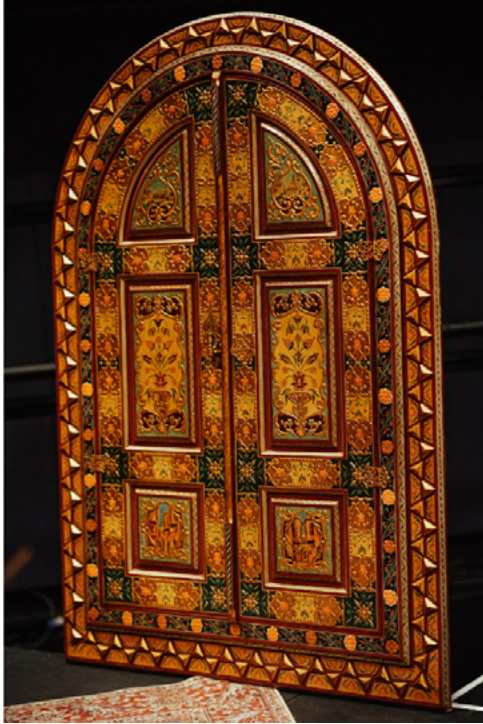


## SHAMI FURNITURE

When my family immigrated to the United States of Amreeka back in the mid-1980s, our first pit stop was Queens, New York, at the home of my beloved late Aunt Hazar. She was the kindest, most affectionate family member I ever had, and her warm embrace set the standard for how I would come to understand tenderness as I grew older. Khalto (Auntie) was always lifting me up both literally and figuratively with big hugs and words of encouragement that echo in my subconscious to this day. I miss her dearly.

After almost two decades in the D.C. area and 16-plus subsequent years in Los Angeles, I found myself moving back to New York in early 2021. Through a fortunate stroke of serendipity (Syriandipity?), I ended up inheriting my Auntie Hazar's two prized mother-of-pearl inlay chairs from Damascus. They were in need of some serious TLC, and I was able to find a local Italian furniture restorer named Luciano who'd worked on antique Syrian and Turkish furniture throughout his career. While he began repairing some of the broken sections of the chairs, I quickly started searching for an appropriate fabric to reupholster them with. I ultimately landed on one from a "Museum of New Mexico" collection with colors that I felt could complement an Ajami-painted Syrian door my mother had also left behind before returning to Syria in the early 2000s. While chairs like these would typically be dressed with a sayeh fabric (a Levantine textile historically made with cotton and silk), I was drawn to the way these patterns resembled ones often employed by traditional Bedouin and Kurdish tribes throughout Bilad Al-Sham (Greater Syria).





I was extremely pleased with the way they turned out and got confirmation from my cousin Sarah that her mother would've loved them too, alhamdulillah. Having them on stage with me at the Brooklyn Academy of Music last year gave me a feeling of comfort that I can barely put into words ... There she was, my dearest Auntie Hazar, still "lifting me up" in New York three decades later as I recounted stories of Syrian migration to a packed house just a few miles away from where I first felt her loving embrace on Turtle Island.



## MIGRANT (MAHJAR) POETRY BOOKS

Like many Syrians of her generation, my mother's love for Arabic poetry and prose ran deep. She graduated from the University of Damascus in the early 1960s with a degree in Arabic Literature and moved to Al-Khobar with my father a decade later. It is there on the eastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula that I was born. Not knowing that we would be moving to the United States a few years later, she first taught me English in the hopes that I would learn

another language besides my easily accessible "mother tongue" of Arabic ... This reasoning soon reversed itself as we crossed the Atlantic Ocean in the mid-'80s, and my parents enrolled us in a new Arabic language school that mostly serviced children of embassy staff from Saudi Arabia yet was open to students from other parts of the Muslim community.



At this Islamic Saudi Academy, I found myself being introduced to centuries-old Arabic poetry in the classroom while listening to local D.C. hip hop and R&B radio stations in between classes and on bus rides home. Though I appreciated the love my elders had

for poetic verse, I didn't always find the content as relatable as my favorite rap lyrics. I remember seeing collections of Arabic poetry in our bookcases at home and feeling distant from them as a child.

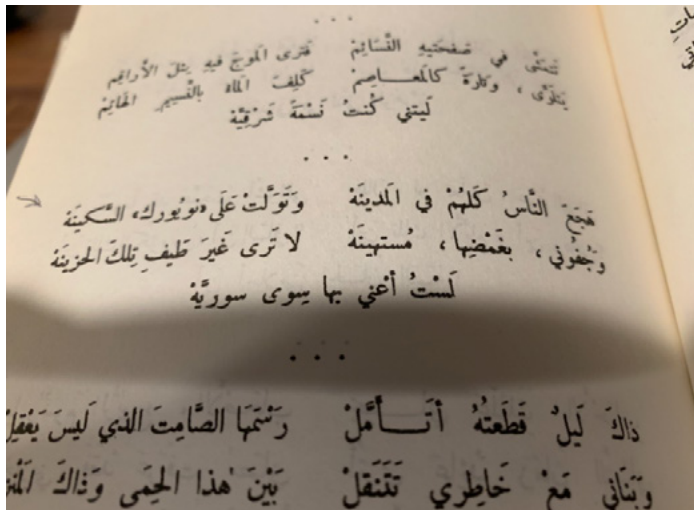


During this time, my mother had taken a keen interest in the work of migrant poets like Khalil Gibran and Elia Abu Madi, especially their works pertaining to life abroad in this new foreign place called "Amreeka" ... Unbeknownst to me, Mama had been drawing arrows by verses in her books that would ultimately lay the foundation for my research when creating the *Little Syria* show—verses like:

هجع الناس كلهم في المدينة  
وتولت على نيو يورك السكينة  
وجفوني بغمضها مستهينة  
لا ترى غير طيف تلك الحزينة  
لست أعني بها سوى سورية

These couplets penned by Elia Abu Madi in the early 1900s would later form the thematic heart and soul of my *Little Syria* show. To me, they represented a new way of understanding the poetic concept of Al-Atfal, especially when one considers how they were likely written in Brooklyn, where the Arab American community ended up relocating after being pushed out of the original Syrian colony on the Lower West Side of Manhattan. I imagined the poet standing alone at night gazing upon the skyline of NYC—feeling the pain of double-displacement from both the Washington Street corridor and his homeland of Greater Syria—whispering these lines to himself as the city lights shimmered on the river below ...

*Fast asleep are all the people in this beautiful city  
Falling upon New York a feeling of tranquility  
Yet my eyelids in their closing still deceive me  
As they see nothing but that enduring sadness that bereaves me  
To which of course I could only mean one thing ...  
Syria.*





## THE WORK

Setting words like Elia Abu Madi's to music with the help of my brilliant musical collaborators Ronnie Malley and Thanks Joey proved to be an incredibly rewarding process for us all. Ronnie's oud-playing virtuosity was the quintessential accompaniment to the poetry of early Arab American writers—tugging at the audience's heartstrings with deeply resonant and nostalgic tones. Meanwhile, the infectious rhythms of Joey's drum machine gave me the perfect sonic bed to deliver my own rap verses with a cadence I hoped would honor the plethora of genius emcees I grew up listening to on those long bus rides home.

Building these musical and poetic bridges between cultures, continents, and generations is an enormous responsibility I do not take lightly. I strive to inspire the youth and honor our ancestors with pride and authenticity in every detail on stage and note on a page ... As the beloved Khalil Gibran once said, "Work is love made visible," and I pray it is abundantly clear just how much I love this work.

**Sinsyrianly,**  
**Omar Offendum**

P. S. The name Offendum is a play on the Ottoman Turkish term Efendim ("sir" or "lord"), with etymological roots in the ancient Greek word *authentēs* ... Because authenticity is key ya habayeb.



# MANGO TIME



STORY BY ASAD ALI JAFRI

## INTRODUCTION

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*Mango Time* is an exploration. It imagines a future world, perhaps in a parallel dimension, that reminds us of our own and allows us to contemplate what may result when we are no longer here. To explore this, *Mango Time* is a reflection on a Chicago neighborhood lovingly known as Devon. Devon is significant because of its unique multilayered-ness. Chicago's South Asian communities are rooted there, and it is home to many new immigrants and refugees, while also serving as a hub for Muslim communities. Devon is a portal to other places, times, people, and experiences.

In *Mango Time*, set in Devon roughly 50 years from the present, the everyday lives and adventures of a trio of characters are captured in short comic vignettes, which will eventually lead up to a full-fledged graphic novel.

The concept for *Mango Time* was developed in 2021, and as it grew, I knew I needed a collaborator, an illustrator who would understand the characters, themes, and world I was hoping to build. I met Saadia Pervaiz in 2022 at starlight, a pop-up community arts space in Chicago's Devon neighborhood developed by SpaceShift Collective. Saadia was interested in becoming more involved with the collective, and after sharing the concept for *Mango Time*, this collaboration felt like the right fit. Through her illustrations, Saadia helped bring this world and its characters to life. We're excited to see how the stories of our trio will continue to evolve.

ASAD ALI JAFRI

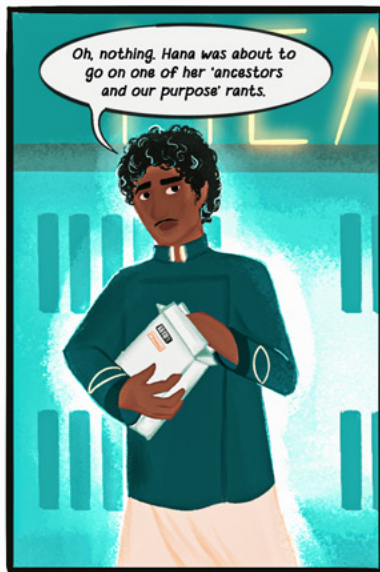
SAADIA PERVAIZ

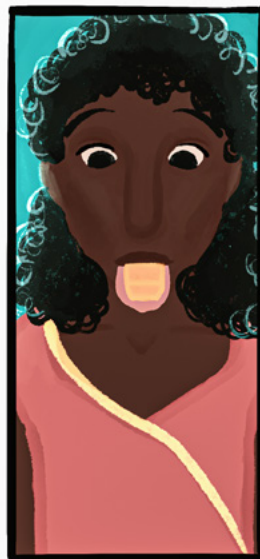
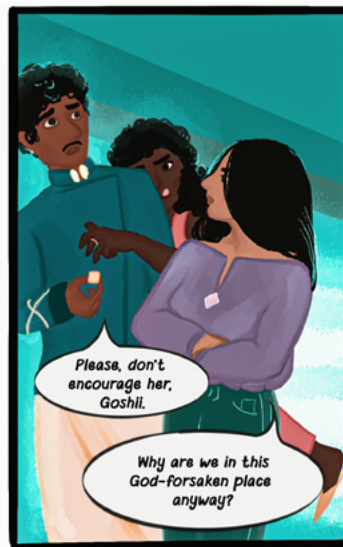
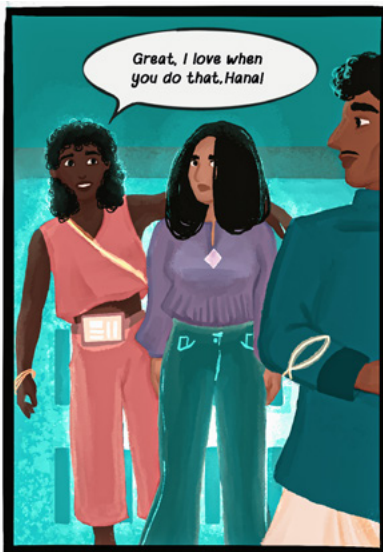
# Mango Time















### ABOUT THE MUSLIM NARRATIVE CHANGE COHORT

In January 2020, Pillars Fund assembled a diverse group of brilliant Muslim artists, academics, and thinkers to form the Muslim Narrative Change (MNC) Cohort in collaboration with the Pop Culture Collaborative and Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art. Over the course of the fellowship, MNC fellows used their unique experiences and expertise to develop a roadmap for telling authentic Muslim stories rooted in culture change strategy. Fellows developed an infrastructure and ecosystem that sustains historically rooted, faith-inspired, community-responsive narratives by investing in deep partnerships with the emerging directors and writers in our Pillars Artist Fellowship and co-authoring a collection that explores the legacy of creativity in Muslim cultures.

Special thanks to our partners at Pop Culture Collaborative and Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art for supporting this fellowship.