

Silence, Oppression, and Continued Narrative as a Form of Collective Empowerment

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A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirement for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Department of English

University of Washington

2021

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Abstract

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The collective healing of a collective trauma that women of color are unfolding every second. What's more infuriating than using the anger towards the patriarchal harm that has already been inflicted on femme bodies by men operating within many powerful and oppressive structures is having new anger generated as a side effect to existing in more "liberal" Western spaces. The problem with being visible in Western spaces is the erasure of all past identities that happens when women have to claim the bare minimum of space that give them no room left for the inclusion of past identities that are an integral part of whatever is visible of the identity presented in a Western space. This essay is an exploration of the continuation of narrative throughout history amongst women of color who share similar identities.

Silence, Oppression, and Continued Narrative as a Form of Collective Empowerment

“if collective healing doesn’t involve being angry, I don’t want it.” (Belkis 35).

I grew up a shy child. Some would call me “on silent”, like a phone. Silence looks safe on the outside. Audrey Lorde says that we must speak up, even if our rhetoric will be misinterpreted. That we must stand up to our identities and speak our truth. That speaking our truth would benefit us. That to question and articulate believes, it could mean death, “the final silence”, but when she was diagnosed, and operated on for a breast tumor, she reflected on the truth that she could die anyway. Why be afraid if you could die and all the harm that could’ve been inflicted on you for having spoken up would be stripped of all power (Lorde 41). Speaking up does not come in vacuum, and the sense of imminent danger surrounding it also comes in the context of the comradery and sisterhood experienced among women of color experiencing multilayers of oppression within different context. Knowing many women who have died, Lorde, like many of us, knows it is a waste to not speak up, or to not claim justices for lives wasted under patriarchal wings, and the “tyrannies of silence”.

I am because you are – thank you. We all grow by leaning on one another, societally, biologically, emotionally. (Al-Kidwa 16).

As a writer, I write to comment on what I’ve witnessed, and the first and second-hand traumas Arab and Muslim go through daily. As recently as two days ago, a Lebanese woman was strangled to death by her husband. And every day someone in Jordan, and every day someone in Palestine, and Saudi, and Yemen, and others. Women scream, hashtagged, then forgotten. Being

an Arab Muslim woman in the United States, I can now see that resistance understood by my Black and Indigenous sisters, as well as the women of colors from different places with similar tyrannies of silence. In the MFA program at the University of Washington, I had the privilege to grow as a writer in a community of writers with varying degrees of blunt poetic voices and subtle subtextual threads. The greatest reward of my time in the program is that I had found my voice.

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As a child, I used to write stories on ripped pieces of paper. I would write three lines of an imagined narrative, and pass it along to my sister, who would, without reading my lines, write her imagined sequence of my story. And so on, and so forth. And in the end, we would open the sheet, and read how our narratives combined can make one whole meaningful story.

As a translator, I had internalized voices of poets and novelists without being very aware of how this possession managed to take place in the literary voice I now call my own. In my current writing style, I see myself influenced by the works of Nizar Qabbani, whose political prose I translated in 2017. Qabbani was a poet, who refused the role of a journalist, but thought working as a journalist would allow him to be angry without the filter of poetry, but because of his poetic nature, his angry prose ended up being prose poetry, flavored in anger (Qabbani 13). I'm not a scholar. I became a prose writer because I had failed to become a poet. But failure is relative, subjective, calculatable. Perhaps I haven't failed at all. Perhaps one day I would walk up to a group of people and shout, "I'm a poet". Writing for me is a vehicle to healing individually through communal healing with women from different backgrounds and similar brands of struggle: speaking up, saying no, saying yes, dreaming of, fighting for—everything we do is a collective empowerment. I grew to believe that this is why I write, and I am not alone.

It is like a game of writing a few lines then passing it along to the next person, with eyes closed, writing, then reading what had been said, and envisioning a way of connecting the dots.

“I only have one language, it is not mine... I remain in it, and inhibit it, it inhibits me.” –Derrida (2).

I was never divorced from the dictionary. As an anxious “international student” writing in English as a foreign language, I read every craft book I could get my hands on, googled how-to, and watched YouTube. I made sure my writing would be grammatically checked from nonspecialized “native-speaker” friends (I thought anyone who spoke English as a native language was a better linguist than I was). It took me three years of rigorous writing and reading to realize that we may not fit into the mold because the mold wasn’t designed for us to begin with, that we think outside the box because these boxes were also not designed for us. We can create our own boxes and be creative about it.

Rebuilding a new culture and a new tradition requires enough people to join and adapt and practice such culture. When I was experiencing linguistic alienation and the general angst and desire to belong during quarantine, I thought since everything is done virtually now, why don’t I seek that connection virtually? And I sought out the community of who could be my community, the like-minded people. I read Joumana Haddad’s *Superman is an Arab* and it made me think of fearlessness as an essential quality in a piece of writing and navigating the risk of critiquing power structures is a never-ending battle a writer has to go through, especially a woman in the

Middle East and North Africa residing in the region or is bound to eventually return to the region.

I, and other women (and men), like me, exist. And we are bound to run into each other at a crossroad or two (Haddad 18).

Growing up a second-class citizen, it is not that we are told we don't deserve opportunities. It is that we saw opportunities were not for us. The whole system was for someone else. So when good things happen, or when opportunities come our way, or when someone hands us a megaphone to amplify our voices, we can't help but look behind our backs in case something was wrong.

Reading writers of color who have experienced many levels of oppression made me realize that things will always be difficult, but that's why we write. As a woman of color, it helps me to read others writers who have tackled the topics of danger: the dehumanization and commodification of the body, and of termination and abuse as a sport, disposal of the body when that body is no longer in service of the tribe, the master, the patriarch.

"I do not like the notion of not having a grand army to defend me, but I can face that. What I cannot face is living without my art." (Morrison 62).

Growing up, I had no role models who resembled my experience in life. I grew up with national, religious, and domestic labels of what it meant to be myself, or *myselfes*. in the small world I physically existed in.

I majored in English because it was a slightly different world. When I read Virginia Woolf for the first time. That was the time I was introduced to feminism. English literature as a discipline was a “them” that I had to study for credit. Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* was the first English novel I read, realizing that literature is an “us” discipline. Like a multigenerational comradery of women: both dead and alive: we write, we close our eyes, and pass the lines.

When I applied to the University of Washington, the sample I used was a novel project *From Maryam to Mahdi*, a story set in a Palestinian refugee camp in Syria. I wrote the story because I had a message to make in terms of criticizing Hezbollah supporting Assad’s regime and how different religious forces fight each other at the expense of innocent people. The project stemmed from the frustration I carried at being brought up Shia and believing Hezbollah were the good people. The Arab spring revealed how all religion is political in the clearest and most disturbing way. Identities are ideologized while all what children want is to play in the streets and be children. Why do people, especially children, have to make sacrifices for battles they didn’t choose to begin with, and then be praise for a bravery they did not choose?

While I’m very passionate about the topic, and I was initially planning on working further on that project in my MFA, I grew to learn that it was not my story to tell. Because I am not Palestinian, nor Syrian, and I have never been to Syria. This is a similar scope to the “write what you know” argument, but in this case, if you write, write about your reality, and do it well. Because it can be offensive and come off wrong to try and tell stories that aren’t ours, or exoticize, romanticize or exaggerate someone else’s suffering for the sake of art, or for the sake of relieving the guilt of standing idly.

During my time in the MFA program at the University of Washington, I explored considering my own positionality, an Arab Muslim woman of color in the United States, when thinking critically of causes I am passionate about. I wrote a satire of a salesman selling causes to refugees upon entering the borders. An artist as an ethnic representative of whoever the speaker thinks, is a great burden, that while artists do have a cause, sometimes it is a huge burden to carry the cause around like a heavy carryon with broken wheels on a plane with full head bins.

“We seem somehow to cut off the limbs of the individual artist to fit our short bed, and we ascribe to him or her penury and sacrifice and the notion of a posthumous award. We love so much the idea of the struggling artist that we enfranchise not the artist, but the struggle.” (Morrison 58).

In her essay, “The Individual Artist”, Toni Morrison critiques the idea of glorifying the struggle more than the humanity of the artist, that the artist is a person who has things to express beautifully. The artist is not a prophet and therefore she is not funded by god. If she starves, she will die. Dead artists can’t produce the next masterpiece (unless if it’s the overglorified posthumous publication followed by a posthumous award). When I was visiting Brooklyn Museum, an exhibit by the Korean artist Kwang Young Chun was on display. His bio captured my attention. It stated that he had gone to prison and the south Korean government was against his art. I don’t know why it for the ethnic artist is to suffer and suffer greater than the local/national artist to be worthy of recognition and Western exhibit halls. It is as if applying for an artist’s recognition is as hard, if not harder, than applying for a visa, a permanent residency, a legacy of some sort.

The first piece of writing I wrote in the MFA program was called “On Maps”, in which I chronicled a road trip I took with my family through Yemen. To me, geography and maps are literal concepts that have always affected the mental, political, and literary maps I find myself operating within. These maps that started being a colonized cartography of what makes a land, of what is ours, or what we thought was ours, and what is the world’s. And I grew to learn that the world was nothing but empires, devouring each other. The confines of space determine what grows and what doesn’t, from plants to people. This is also why an individual reality, as valid as it is, need to intersect with other realities, to witness life, or justice, or something in between. These restrictions almost always start with the family as an oppressive unit, representing patriarchal power that everyone needs to be liberated from.

“If you want us to change the world, we at least have to live long enough to grow up!” Shouts the child (Lorde 38).

For my experience being a Saudi woman to see the light in an artistic expression, it had to be matched with a few years of what I thought was life in the United States, then weighing the experiences against each other. The child that shouts could also signify the inner child within each of us, from whom we act and react. And we wonder why our wounds still hurt when our bodies grew but there was not really a chance for the screaming child to grow. The quotes of both Al Hakim and Lorde signify the importance of experiencing life, growing enough to have a say, and to form a critical analysis of the life we have. The artist is often in conflict with parental figures, and it is often the very first conflict an artist, or anyone else, has to experience and learn to either overcome or escape in order to become an artist. Parents are often acting and preaching out of fear, speaking out of the experiences and of fear of those they’re yet to unlock. Therefore,

nurturing children like flowers in a house glass, safe enough, but nothing but that physical still safety. This immobility creates a sense of danger that transforms care and attending into surveillance, therefore turning nurturing into a form of violent containment.

The screaming child must change herself before changing the world. And sometimes when unlearning patriarchal constructs, we tend to fault our mothers, and older generations for not having the same access to cognitive, digital, imagined maps we do. Be it the internet, as an entity replacing gossip circles in the village, the small town. Our parents' maps have already been carved out, bordered, and labeled, that any map attempting to come to replace it. I was greatly influenced by a short essay by the Egyptian author Anis Mansour, "When We Were Children, Everything Stood Still."

We did not know there was a better life: healthy schools, with windows and doors above the ground, or paved roads or clean streets, nor did we know play. The street was the meeting point for everything: eating, drinking, playing, fighting. And the rural street is much different than the city street. When we were children, our world was big. When we grew older, the streets of childhood shrunk.
(Mansour 35).

I grew up in a small town, that we called "a village"—*el-deera*. But each and every person had their own *el deera*. *El deera* was just a word, but it indicated we were inferior, because our town didn't have a fixed name printed on a map. There was a big shame surrounding being a "townie". The internet allowed me to explore a map father than the confines of my town, and in that exploration, I learned I should be ashamed from being a "townie". The hierarchy of geography is something I was never prepared for, because who gets to decide what's superior? Taller buildings? Chain restaurants? The existence of American franchise was the mark of civilization

to my teenage self. I wanted to experience the brands, the restaurants, the Arabicized pronunciation of McDonald's. But without knowing of the existence of all these elements of proclaimed civilization and advancement, our world as a small town was just fine. Reading Anis Mansour was comforting to the heart, and so was Habib Selmi's work, a Tunisian author who wrote about his own *el Deera*, and the sexism among its confines. Male authors see injustice and write about it. Not always, but sometimes they do. But even writing about injustice when leaving the small town and being introduced to the larger world, with chain restaurants and malls and mispronounced American proper nouns, they come back to the village baffled as to how to tell the whole community they are a subject to study, as a literary unit, or a chapter in a sociology book.

But tell me, do small towns breed great authors?

The poor like us are those who feel their poverty. The poor like us hate for others to know how poor we are, so we would wear all what we own around our fingers, necks, and pockets. To make us, before anyone else, reassured that we're not poor. So that people would see us affording diamond rings, golden lighters, Dior ties, the Saxon shoes...etc. (Mansour 24)

Small towns are usually content with their reality as the Reality. When you grow up poor, you don't walk around defining and labeling yourself as poor. And your reality is fine. It's only when you leave *el deera* that you are faced with your lack of life, lack of a touch of something that somewhat resembles what the norm is. You don't call yourself the underprivileged, or the misrepresented. It is only when you meet the world face-to-face that you become aware of the

fact that you are indeed a chapter in a sociology book. All your life, and emotional baggage, is that chapter. So you walk around defending yourself, and redefining, labeling and relabeling, what was all of that existence called?

A town that revolves around itself cannot be easily changed with a few books and the internet. It is so easy to judge and label realities, but it is as similar as Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, where a village circulating a gossip narrative of an incident that took place, and proving innocent was more important than factual truths or attaining justice for the man who was murdered in defense of honor. Another gossip form novel I was inspired by is Jessica Hagedorn's *Dog eaters*. Hagedorn chronicles different narratives in a multi-point of view, sometimes gossip, sometimes report form of the mundane lives of people living in the Philippines. The novel shows the effects of American imperialism and the dreams of being emancipated from a hopeless reality. What interests me about gossip as a narrative form is not gossip itself, but the existence and documentation of untamed narrations that resemble the world as we see it as we peel off the layers of our realities that cross borders only to end up feeling misplaced and confused.

I appreciate reading a work of fiction that is somewhere in between a novel and a collection of short stories. Because my first novel project was planned to be a multi-point of view narrative of one day from the point of view of many characters, that as pages go by, fill in the blanks, until the picture is complete. Having just learned to write at the time, I was not confident enough to fight for a multi-point of view work. I was annoyed when people called it short stories, but I didn't have proof to say otherwise.

An inspiring and thought-provoking example of a similar narrative was *The City of Infinite Walls* by the Egyptian author Tariq Imam. Which is a collection of short tales exaggerated in a fantastical narrative of different characters. The eerie “magical realist” narrative was a rebirth of my literary imagination—that everything is allowed, that it is refreshing to redefine what we think we know, like our street, neighborhood, town, universe, both internal and external. The title of each story was simple in juxtaposition to the wild and wandering imagination of each story’s content. For example, “The Tale of the Woman who Sings”, and “The Tale of the Man who Decided not to be Alone.” They were called tales not stories because they resemble oral tradition and folklore. Each story was accompanied by an art piece by the Sudanese artist Salah al Mur. The art pieces were not always one hundred percent resembling the stories content. So among the stories as a whole book, the reader gets to fill in the blanks of what’s in-between, and the art work generates stories within the stories. And all resembles the dynamic and ever-changing nature of oral storytelling.

I was fascinated by this book and I translated sample chapters and queried it to many publishers, but no one responded. I pitched it to agents; they weren’t interested. I realized that as an Arab, especially Saudi woman of color existing and operating within a different literary map from that which I purchased the book and admired as a literary work of genius. I cannot be a literary translator without marketing my identity with all of its cultural and historical baggage in my literary pitch. This collection of stories is seen as a man’s imagination that is unworthy of amplifying. No editor ever looked interested. They would smile at me politely as if I had just told them they have something in their teeth. They wanted stories of women talking about oppression, and nothing else.

“I am the detective’s daughter. I stayed that way until I got married, then I became a merchant’s daughter. And sometimes I’m both.” (Khalifa 5).

Without planning to pitch, I read this line in an instant translation to the editor while at a coffee meeting. She was very interested in getting the rights to *The Diary of an Unrealistic Woman* by Sahar Khalifa, a chronicle of a dreamy woman stuck in a loveless marriage. It is a great novel, yes, sure, but why was that line appealing as a defining factor in scouting for Arab voices that Western audience would appreciate? And in more conflicted areas, Arab authors are expected to be ambassadors of war. And war is branded as an all-encompassing umbrella of different countries in different continents that have nothing to do with each other. If war is marketable, then let’s pitch it. I had another translation project I was working on: *Factory of Memories* by Ahlam Bsharat. It is a young adult Palestinian novel that builds a narrative on a graveyard to bring life and make life out of a bleak reality as a form of resistance. Pitching this one at literary conferences was a heavy emotional labor. We know that to pitch you must be passionate about your topic. Can the literary market accommodate more dead children? The literary market will politely smile at us “we’ll think about it,” They’d say. Only to not be heard from ever again.

“When the spectacle becomes “public” in the narrowest sense of the word—meaning available to purchase—the world can buy you, but it can’t afford you.”

(Morrison 39).

It is disheartening to think of all the traumatic triggers it takes to pitch a literary work that’s specific to one’s identity and experience of the world, only for it to be rejected. This summer, the literary market says they want to amplify Black, Indigenous and People of Color’s voices. But why now? Why weren’t we listened to, and taken seriously, the first time? Why does it have to be a display of pain on a global scale for it to be seen?

How am I to lose, maintain, or gain a female identity when it is impossible for me to take up a position outside this identity from which I. presumably reach in and feel for it? Difference in such a context is that which undermines the very idea of identity, differing to infinity those layers of totality that form I ... I have often been asked what viewers call lack of conflict in my films. Psychological conflict is often equated with substance and depth. Conflicts in Western contexts often serve to define identities... let difference replace conflict (Minh-ha 416).

In her Essay: "Not You, Like You", Minh-Ha discusses the microaggressive form of violence that is limiting women from ethnic groups to their one and one only identity, turning them into spokespeople of whole population, culture, country, and even continents. This is limiting to ethnic people who hold a certain apparent identity, and undermines the complexities of the other identities each woman holds. Gloria Anzuldúa criticizes this limitation when it comes to the home, the tribe, the community that prioritizes the tribe over the individual that her Mexican culture holds, how "selfishness is condemned", and the woman is defined in relation to her community and relatives, not by herself (Azuldua 18). This is why it is exceptionally frustrating and dehumanizing when Western people also continue the tradition of dehumanizing women of color. Minh mentions that these identities "form I" and women of color as individual beings is not a concept that is commonly accepted in Western artistic spaces, because women have to represent the "we", and while the "we" is very valid as a form of comradeship, collective resistance and collective healing, each person in the "we" carries a different, often intersecting, set of realities that share the same goal as the identities of others. Minh-Ha states, "Conflicts in Western contexts often serve to define identities... let difference replace conflict" (Minh-Ha 416). Suzan Lori Parks, an American Black playwright, argues that in most theater productions,

Black stories are told in relation to the white presence. That Black cannot exist without white. Either that, or Black equals suffering. Either that, or Black equals superior. Why can't the artistic imagination envision a Black presence telling a Black story without it being limiting and defining of what it means to be Black or what it means to tell a Black story on stage. "The Klan doesn't always have to be outside the door for Black people to have lives worthy of dramatic literature. Saying that "Whitey" has to be present in Black drama because "Whitey" is inextricable aspect of Black reality is like saying that every play has to have a murder in it, is like saying that every drama involving Jews must reference Treblinka..." (Lori Parks 20)

Mystifying the Black and brown narrative into a hero's journey with a traumatic obstacle to overcome and a triumph in the end, or a sad narrative that doesn't cease to be sad is dehumanizing to the basic human nature of women of color, who are just people, as surprising as it may be, normal people just like everyone else. Just like Minh-Ha's argument, conflict is not an identity. There are many complexities to artists of color that does not revolve around overcoming or struggling through oppression. The reason we fight oppression is to be able to say what we want to say, be it overthrowing the government or serenading a garden of flowers. We can take refuge in each other, learn from each other, and cite and empower each other to reclaim the narrative of what's beyond suffering. We need to normalize the diversity of ethnic narratives being, in the most basic terms, equal to its white counterparts. Judged by the merit of whatever art and literature should do, not measured against a pre-set template of a suffering tailored for seasonal sales and profits.

"In fact, you are people, human individuals with a stake in being so...Boards of directors, owners, editorial managers are made up of people trying to get profitable, stay profitable, and increase profitability. ... it will take more than an

effort of the will to make such a press profitable; it will take imagination, invention, and a strong sense of responsibility and accountability. Without you (the press), we can just pull raw off our computers; shape it ourselves, talk to one another, argue, get it wrong, get it right. Reinvent public space, in other words, and the public dialogue that can take place within it.” (Morrison 40).

Why did it have to have people killed in front of camera and tear gassed and maimed for publishers to look into their spam email?

If white men want to become authors, all they have to do is write. About flowers, and spring: it’s all valid. If women of color want to write, they have to bring a birth certificate, a notary from the government, a documented family history, a degree or two with flawless grades, and a diversity statement, only to be asked to write about one and one only topic...

So, how does oppression feel like?

“There is something monstrous about never having been hurt, never having been made to bleed, never having lost anything, never having gained anything because life is beautiful...Now you don’t know that by reading, by looking, You don’t know what the river is like by standing on the shore. You can’t know anything about life and suppose you can get through it clean. The most monstrous people are those who think they are going to” (Baldwin 79- 80).

Now when we talk about being against glorifying suffering is because suffering is real, can’t be summoned for a performance for a spectacle who knows nothing about what it means to suffer. It is monstrous to never having been hurt because that naivety of the human condition make

suffering on display being nothing but suffering on display. Observed from a safe distance, happening to someone else, who may or may not have a happy ending, who may or may not have a moral for you to learn at the end. If someone who was never made to understand what life really is runs a publishing press, or operates in a literary scene, an award jury, that makes literature and other art form written by a struggling artist a commodity, subject to be believed or disbelieved, or a story with a climax and an end. And if someone's suffering is not interesting or profitable, what we need to ask is interesting to whom? And what deciding factors come into play when weighing one suffering against another?

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Art does not come from suffering, art comes from healing.

“maybe if the artist himself had not begged for his life—begged and struggled through poverty, perhaps on into death—perhaps his art wasn’t any good... a minority artist in this game and in this climate of ambivalence is required either to abandon his minorityhood and join the prevailing criteria, or he has to defend and defend and defend ad nauseam his right to hear and love a different drummer. That’s part of the romanticism that clings to the idea of the individual artist—the artist as begger. It keeps him begging, and when he is successful, he should feel guilty—even apologetic” (Morrison 59).

The collective healing of a collective trauma that women of color are unfolding every second. What’s more infuriating than using the anger towards the patriarchal harm that has already been inflicted on femme bodies by men operating within many powerful and oppressive structures is having new anger generated as a side effect to existing in more “liberal” Western spaces. The

problem with being visible in Western spaces is the erasure of all past identities that happens when women have to claim the bare minimum of space that give them no room left for the inclusion of past identities that are an integral part of whatever is visible of the identity presented in a Western space.

Oppression, how does it feel like?

‘Woman does not feel safe when her own culture, and white culture, are critical of her; when the males of all races hunt her as prey. Alienated from her mother culture, "alien" in the dominant culture, the woman of color does not feel safe within the inner life of her Self. Petrified, she can't respond, her face caught between las intersticios, the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits... we can't move forward, can't move backwards... We do not engage fully. We do not make full use of our faculties. We abnegate. And there in front of us is the crossroads and choice: to feel a victim where someone else is in control and therefore responsible and to blame (being a victim and transfer ring the blame on culture, mother, father, ex-lover, friend, absolves me of responsibility), or to feel strong, and, for the most part, in control. “

In national, local, domestic spaces, women are terrorized, surveilled, ignored. And in Western spaces, women are dismissed, and the difference between ignored and dismissed is that ignored implies a complete lack of visibility to the sight range of the observer, while dismissing offers a look, a fleeting look. Someone takes a look at you, says “no”, then moves on with their lives. Men terrorize women, and when they don't, they feel entitled to something in relation to her: her body, her mind, her safety. Just last weekend, Layan, a 20 year old Jordanian woman, posted a video seeking protection from her family, who are threatening to kill her for dishonoring the family. She is not the first and will not be the last to seek safety with a great weight of

uncertainty, and to want to make safety bound to logical rationales, such as the right to education and the prospect of being murdered. Taking back safety is close to impossible—If safety ever existed. So women seek refuge in forming intentional spaces where collective healing can take place. When a woman of color doesn't feel safe within her inner self is because that inner self had its fair share of traumatizing violence in its varying forms from patriarchal systems. From a young age, women are trained to carry shame like a golden medal, until they grow up only to realize how unbearably violent it is.

“And if going home is denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture-una cultura mestiza-with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture.” (Anzuldua 20-22).

The displacement women feel in different spaces and different realities is a proof that all these realities, all these worlds, were not made for us. Not tailored to the curves of our bodies that we fear and fear for every single night. Anzuldua makes a call to shred the old culture and make a new one, so does Nada Al Ahdal, a Yemeni activist who escaped child marriage in 2013 and became an advocate to educating Yemeni girls and banning child marriage. Al Ahdal went on many platforms calling for ripping apart old traditions that no longer serve us or suit us and create new ones. That just because a tradition is such, doesn't mean it is good. A tradition indicates that something is old, and therefore it is completely valid for that tradition to stay where it belongs, in history. Let's create our own traditions.

“Culture is made up by those in power—men. Males make the rules and laws; women transmit them. How many times have I heard mothers and mothers-in-law tell their sons to beat their wives for not obeying them?” (Anzuldua 16).

Living in a western society adds a whole another layer to the shame associated with anger. Not only are we as women of color shamed by members of our own communities, but also of being in the presence of white people who deny our realities. The woman of color is seen as either too tragic or too angry. The ancestral and communal anger is hard to explain to white counterparts. The question of excusing our silent passive mothers and neighbors and many other women that were too afraid to decide to write and take up space. Taking up space sounds good, revolutionary on paper, but in reality, it is a sequence of restating a reality on a loop, a reality that's different, real. And that's why we write.

“You speak the impossible. Your speech does not hold water. It will always remain incoherent, "inconsistent," as one would say in English. Apparently inconsistent...Your statement makes no sense, it has no common sense, you can see it getting carried away with itself. How could anyone have a language that is not theirs? Especially if one claims, as you insist, to have just one, one only, all alone?” (Derrida 2).

During lockdown, as I grieved the fact that I have no one to speak [English] to, let alone my native language, Arabic. No one to exclaim and cuss to, without consulting a dictionary. I thought of the sacrifices I didn't know I would have to make, of speaking Arabic into a vast space and all the space I want, with no one there.

That time I read Zainab Fasiki, a Moroccan illustration artist, an unapologetic feminist. Her book *Hishouma* explores taboo topics of gender and sexuality. Moroccan Arabic is difficult, but I watched interviews where I understood a fair part of it, and I thought of the importance of doing what I preach: going the extra mile to access someone else's vowels. Because reading literature in translation as well as reading Gloria Anzuldúa was a validating experience in term of

impeding one's native language with English in written prose, because we, as writers in English as a second or a foreign language, carry these variations with us. Before we respond to any word, a whole process of transporting and processing linguistic units takes places so fast in our brains, with an anxiety of am-I-pronouncing it wrong? Do I sound too Arab? I should be ashamed, the same shame of coming from a small town and having a small-town dialect. A linguistic shame that surrounded us at birth. But one way to heal the shame of broken vowels and sharp consonants is by acknowledging our linguistic backgrounds as an integral part of us, and with every sound, comes history. And we should always hold on to our history as real, with all its imperfections.

This summer I wanted to post a long Facebook status addressed to my white friends who kept talking about the Black Lives Matter protests as something that's happening, separate from them, not concerning them. These friends were good meaning people who kept asking me if I'm staying safe, when neither of us were yet protesting. And some friends talked about the protests as if it were a music festival. I read the long status that kept getting longer to a friend, who suggested I should submit it for publication instead of it just being on Facebook. So I submitted the essay called "Why the Good White People Should Stop Asking Me If I'm Staying Safe" to Kohl Journal, and they were able to accept it and edit it on a short notice before the July issue release date. In that essay, I modeled James Baldwin's style when stating with self-awareness while addressing a specific audience.

It turned out, the scarier the thing to say, the more important it is to say it.

“For women, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams towards survival and change. First made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible.” (Lorde 37).

I write as a necessity, not as a luxury. I’m grateful to be privileged enough to have rhetorical access to language that many women in my community don’t. They don’t because they were silenced from an early age, and I, too, was silenced, and I continue to be silenced, but rhetoric is resistance. When I say my community, I mean my family, the town, and all other towns that resemble it with women angry, loud or suppressed. With women who were silenced to the final silence (death), and the women who did not know speaking up was an option, the women who spoke up and paid the price, and the women with many unrevised drafts left in drawers. And that community changes and expands the more my geographical movement expands. The more we write, the more we endanger ourselves, the lonelier we feel. Until we hit that submit button, and our work sees the light. The more we read, intentionally read, works by women who carry identities like the ones we wear, the more we realize that each and every one of us though they were alone. Alone, together, we carry the burden of all the women alone somewhere called home.

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