

Afghan-American Identity and Belonging: An Introduction

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Located at the crossroads of Asia, and one of the cities along the Silk Road, Afghanistan has for centuries been a site of racial, ethnic, and linguistic mixing. From the mythical enclave of Greeks from Alexander's army who set up lives in the Hindu Kush mountains, to the pockets of Sikh and Hindu communities in Kabul, and in Jalalabad, location of one of the holy pilgrimage sites for Guru Baba Nanak in Sultanpour (Nangarhar), to the remaining descendants of the raiding Mongol army in Central Afghanistan who lived at the foot of the giant Buddhas: Afghanistan has a diversely varied people. It has three main languages (Dari, Pashtu, and Uzbek) and several smaller linguistic communities (Pashai, Kirghiz, Baluchi, Nuristani). This ethnic heritage, rich and robust, was not integrated by the national language. Because of the geography of Afghanistan, curved with mountains and flattened by deserts and large expanses of plains, these ethnic communities remained ensconced in their own communities and, before television and radio, remained unaware of Afghanistan's diversity. Rarely did kings acknowledge it, other than Shah Amanullah, who in the early 1920s traveled to several areas of Afghanistan, posing for photos in

ethnic clothing and integrating four languages on the national currency. At each corner of a five-Afghani bill, he had printed the Dari, Pashtu, Uzbek, and Hindi words for “five.” Later, under the reign of Zahir Shah, a policy of interethnic exposure sent young men for their two-year mandatory military training to areas of Afghanistan outside of their own ethnic circles: Northerners were sent to the South, Easterners to Central Afghanistan, introducing one group to another. However, since the post-Soviet Invasion Civil War, which was mostly a series of ethnic wars, the discussion of mixedness and ethnicity has been trumped by a focus on authenticity and the use of the term “Afghan” to define all regional areas of the state—a necessity for national solidarity and stability. The dialogue on multiculturalism, though, differs outside of Afghanistan within the Afghan diaspora, which is where we begin our exploration of the concept of mixedness within the term “Afghan.”

For *Asian American Literary Review's* special issue on mixed race, we brought together a series of interviews with Afghan-American writers and artists alongside essays and multimedia artworks about lived experiences of hybrid ethnicity. We approached hybridity as a marker of mixed ethnicity as well as a characteristic of media, disciplines, and history, flooding boundaries and breaking down categories. It is not coincidental that the voices in this series represent lifetimes of creative work that traverse a diversity of media, disciplines, and history. As Mariam Ghani explains, “I grew up in between everything—identities, cultures, languages, races—so it makes sense that I am still inhabiting a kind of border zone between disciplines or genres or positions, and am always attracted to places and moments that embody other kinds of border zones or ambiguous, indeterminate, transitory/transitioning spaces.” To that end, the interviews here are also accessible online, accompanied by additional dialogue as well as multi-

media contributions from the artists' and writers' personal collections, creating a cross-pollination of *AALR*'s print journal with the possibilities of digital space, a mixing of media alongside the mixing of ethnic backgrounds. These trans-media presences reflect the ways that globalized networks can both displace and reinvent cultural identities, a lesson that the Afghan diaspora knows well. Awareness of the way that Afghan-ness is being displaced, rediscovered, celebrated, or demonized in the twenty-first century is crucial to understanding the ethnic diversity of Afghanistan, both within and beyond its national borders—as the texts here demonstrate.

For the artists and writers in this collection, experiences of ethnic/racial hybridity take vastly different forms, challenging the frequent assumption that mixed identity manifests only through hyphenated binaries—that is, the bringing together of two distinct entities connected by a typographical line, often with American-ness serving as the normative marker. As Tamim Ansary explains in the course of his interview, Americans see him as Afghan, and Afghans consider him American, but his identity escapes both of these categories. In fact, he says, his labeling as “Afghan-American” has been inaccurate. Although he was raised by an Afghan father and an American mother, a more accurate descriptor would be “Finnish-Afghan” or “Afghan-Finnish.” His mother, although American, grew up within an insular family within an isolated Finnish community in the U.S., infusing his childhood with Finnish ways of being. In Zohra Saed’s personal history, mixedness leaves the binary logic of hyphenation and weaves through intergenerational layers of family migration, representing the immense ethnic diversity of Afghanistan. Her essay explores a mixedness internal to Central Asia. She considers herself an Afghan-Uzbek-Uyghur whose family developed roots in the rich diversity of Jalalabad, a

Pashtu-language cosmopolitan city located in Nangarhar state. Her story intermingles Pashtun and Turkistani cultures and languages along with an additional American layer. She explores the role of language in diaspora politics and finds today that the neutrality of English allows for connections across linguistic, religious, and geographic boundaries that once kept ethnic groups apart in Afghanistan. In her essay, Leila Nadir disrupts the assumptions of richness and exoticism that are often projected onto this sort of multicultural family history. In her reflection on her childhood growing up with an Afghan father and Slovak-American mother, she portrays her parents' marriage as a violent clash of cultures and psychologies rather than a flowering of multiplicity. This piece is part of a book-length memoir project, titled *Cold War*, that traces the concurrent battles of her parents alongside Afghanistan's U.S.- and U.S.S.R.-funded civil war.

In our interviews with artists Mariam Ghani, of Lebanese-Afghan-American identity, and Ariana Delawari, of Italian-Afghan American lineage, the conjoined processes of self-making and art-making move through and beyond binary understandings of identity. As Ghani responds in her interview, she cannot “reduce the evolution of my practice to the ‘weaving of an Afghan American life.’” All the artists and writers included in this collection have developed their work across legalistic national categories, toward a cosmopolitan sense of self made up of many fragments, extending beyond borders, one of which happens to be Afghan. Yet what unites these writers, artists, and filmmakers as Afghan-American is the need to respond to Afghan-ness in a post-9/11 world and the renewal and rediscovery of their connections to Afghanistan. As Ghani explains, “after 9/11 I was, like many other Afghan-Americans, thrust into a public performance of Afghan-ness.” The voices here are at once Afghan as well as not Afghan—part of Afghanistan's history, living the region's violence and beauty, yet within Afghanistan,

perhaps, these artists and writers might always be what Tamim describes as *farangi*, outsiders, or “permanent guests.” This term captures the freedom and alienation of hybridity in the Afghan context. Afghan-Americans visiting Afghanistan have mobility, the ability to leave the war-torn land, the ability to shift gender and ethnic boundaries. This allows room for error or transgression, but it also allows room for being left out of something large, cohesive, and mythically, “authentically” Afghan. In the texts and interviews here, we discovered that the blurred edges are both home and more than home, and are always a place of creation.

The online supplements to these interviews, located at aalrmag.org/mixedraceissue/digitalextras, include selections from various projects by the artists, writers, and filmmakers featured here. Photos, film excerpts, and audio files make up the tapestry of digital files to follow in this conversation on mixedness and authenticity in the Afghan American context.