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Rewriting the Self: Muslim Women and Resilience in the Kalaashakti Liberatory Arts  
Workshops in Gujarat, India

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of  
Philosophy in Gender Studies

by

Naazneen Shabbir Diwan

2016



## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Rewriting the Self: Muslim Women and Resilience in the Kalaashakti Liberatory Arts  
Workshops in Gujarat, India

by

Naazneen Shabbir Diwan

Doctor of Philosophy in Gender Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2016

Professor Sondra Hale, Chair

This dissertation moves beyond an exploration of the gendered nature of communal violence and its traumatic impacts on Muslim women towards radical and liberatory methodological interventions. The Kalaashakti arts and healing workshops, conducted with Muslim women survivors of the 2002 communal violence in Gujarat, India, hold critical and holistic ethnography, the liberatory arts and spiritual activism at their core. I discuss the themes of belonging, connection, and empathy in the Kalaashakti women's written work and argue that these indications of healing and recovery of the self and collective, despite the divisive logic of genocide, are significant for social transformation. I argue that self-epistemology, or self-knowing, is possible through mindfulness and creative expression and can lead to self-transformation and therefore social change. I conclude with how these women's stories and poems traveled to the U.S. for a public art and awareness-building event commemorating the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the genocide. I offer "Gujarat Genocide and U.S. Solidarity" as a hopeful example

of transnational solidarity through art activism and evaluate the power of public expression and witnessing to create new critical, public cultures.

The dissertation of Naazneen Shabbir Diwan is approved.

Kyungwon Hong

Piya Chatterjee

Sondra Hale, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2016

Dedicated to Trupti Shah and the vibrant sisters of Sahiyar. And to all my students over the past 10 years: you are my joy and life force.

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|--|--|
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- Carnahan, Sarah and Naazneen Diwan. "There is Life Here: Poetry As Transnational Feminist Praxis." *Conference on Cultural Productions, Gender and Activism*. University of South Carolina. March 2010.
- Dauda, Deborah Omowunmi, Diwan, Naazneen and Patricia Torres. "A Tale of Three Cities: Excavating Possibilities for Peace, Forgiveness and Dignity." *First Annual Critical Mixed Race Studies Conference*. DePaul University. November 2010.
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- Carnahan, Sarah, Whitworth, Lauran and Naazneen Diwan. "Power, Privilege and Perspective in the U.S." *Gender and Emancipation-Perspectives from 'East' and 'West'- A Transnational Exchange Project*. Berlin, Germany. August 2008. Keynote Address.

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## *Introduction: Transnational Feminist Genealogy*

This dissertation looks at the conception of the Kalaashakti liberatory arts workshops with Muslim women survivors as a methodological and anti-violence intervention in the aftermath of the 2002 communal attacks in Gujarat, India. In detailing my academic, activist and artistic trajectory, I attempt to locate the personal and political process that compelled me to return to Gujarat and embark on a transnational feminist inquiry through the methodologies of critical and holistic ethnography, liberatory arts and spiritual activism. I discuss my personal experiences enduring and resisting gendered violence and how the framework with which to confront this violence shifted from dismantling systems of oppression to cultivating expression and connection among survivors, as a response to the logic of violence aimed at silence and separation. In *Chapter One: Context of 2002 Genocide and Gendered Violence in Gujarat*, I examine the exceptional nature of the 2002 genocidal violence that targeted Muslims in its connection to pervasive Islamophobic ideology, policy and hate globally and for its state collusion, premeditation, and extreme forms of brutality and torture. I further analyze how gendered violence was a deliberate tactic of communal violence, and how brutalizing Muslim women, who were considered to be the bearers of culture and future generations, was an effective way to eliminate Muslim undesirables altogether. The residual psychological, emotional, social and spiritual traumas that Muslim women face led me to probe for innovative research methodologies that could sufficiently collect and respond to such intense stories of trauma.

In *Chapter Two: Liberatory Methodologies: Trauma and Healing, Critical Ethnography and Spiritual Activism*, I engage with the ethical contemplations that helped me conceive of my

methodologies. These were my central research questions when crafting my methodology and the Kalaashakti workshops: How do Muslim women survivors relay stories of belonging, empathy, connection despite and because of what they've endured? What has inspired them to thrive not just survive? How can the methodologies of critical and holistic ethnography and liberatory arts allow ethnographic work to be responsive to suffering? What effects can transforming the self and interpersonal relationships have on social justice organizing work? How is it possible for mutually-beneficial, transnational knowledge production and allyship to be fostered within feminist ethnographic research? I introduce the Kalaashakti workshops as the synthesis of innovative, feminist ethnographic methodologies to break down the artificial distance between the researcher and the communities most greatly impacted by injustice. I elaborate on how my methodological choices were a response to how communal violence has impacted Muslim women individually and collectively, leading to fragmentation, isolation, community divisions and detachment. Veena Das states, "to grasp a love or tragedy by intellect is not sufficient in having real human knowledge of it" (Das, 76). In this spirit, I use a liberatory arts methodology in order to elicit multiple intelligences and ways of knowing, a holistic epistemology. I use Gloria Anzaldua's concept of *conocimiento*, "an epistemology that tries to encompass all the dimensions of life, both inner – mental, emotional, instinctive, imaginal, spiritual, bodily realms – and outer – social, political, lived experiences..." (Gonzales-Lopez, 6) as the foundation of my holistic ethnographic methodology. I argue that this holistic approach to gathering stories of trauma and healing is absolutely crucial to understand the pain, humanity, and resistance in Muslim women's experiences. I further explain how the ethnographic methodologies I employ were guided by a commitment to ethics, critical theory in action (Madison, 14) and critical ethnography that moves the researcher as witness to conscious and

empathetic responsiveness. I employ anthropology scholar, Dr. Soyini Madison's concept of critical ethnography which places responsibility on the researcher to not only investigate how hegemonic systems of oppression operate but imagine alternatives to them. I demonstrate how the liberatory arts methodologies make it possible to resignify the world and restructure systems of oppression through "talking back" to power and how they embody the ethics of holistic and critical ethnography that guide my study. They are both a response to suffering and a way of knowing it more fully. I conclude the chapter with the significance of spirituality and spiritual activism to this work in that it gestures at how self-knowing and self-transformation impacts communities and facilitates connection in the face of the divisive logic of communal violence. I define spirituality as a dismantling of the binary between "self" and "other," as radical interconnection and a search for a deeper meaning beyond the ego - one that is not bound to specific rituals or traditions of institutionalized religion. South Asian scholar Lata Mani states that suffering exists because we feel separate from the entirety of ourselves and all beings, we feel separate from the wounds of others. I argue that liberatory arts and spiritual activism offer opportunities to experience and document stories of empathy and integration that counter the dualities of "self" and "other" that communal violence perpetuates.

In *Chapter Three: Spirit Tellings*, I share the stories from the Kalaashakti workshops with Sahiyar fieldworkers and staff and explore how they are examples of self-transformation and spiritual activism. I select stories from the winter 2011 workshops series in Baroda, Gujarat and detail the structure and format of the sessions. In my readings of the Sahiyar women's stories and poems, I draw out themes of belonging, empathy, embodiment and interconnection and use the theoretical frameworks of contemplative critique and transformative movement building to introduce my interpretations. Through my analysis I ask: How is healing found in these



imaginings? Where do individual and collective pain meet, intersect and join forces for recovery? How do these stories embody the true meaning of healing, which according to trauma scholar Catherine Garrett is transforming pain into an occasion for connection? Are these stories making an anti-violence intervention by countering the logic of communal violence? I assert that the Kalaashakti participants could be deemed critical ethnographers in their own right in how they respond to suffering and imagine ways of being together that defy the genocidal logic to divide.

In my concluding chapter, *Community-based Art: Gujarat Genocide and U.S. Solidarity event in South L.A.*, I examine how the self-reflexive and collective-reflexive, art produced by the Kalaashakti women was externalized in society, transnationally, and whether this example of art activism can be considered a catalyst and indicator of transformative strategies for social change and new organizing methods. I analyze the conception, execution and post-event reflections of Gujarat Genocide and U.S. Solidarity, an event hosted by South Asians for Justice, Los Angeles to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the Gujarat Genocide on April 22, 2012. The event was a hybrid public art and awareness-building event; it featured the stories, poems and performances of the Sahiyar field workers and staff as well as voices of the South Asian diasporic communities in the U.S. I propose that art activism can serve as a tool for critical cultural work, work that aims at subverting dominant narratives and configurations and paving the way for new cultures of resistance and justice.

Ultimately, I argue that my dissertation is significant for the field of gender studies in how it builds on two of its central calls – to center the lived experiences and expressions of the oppressed and marginalized and to acknowledge that these experiences come from real conditions of social inequality and injustice. As a response, I introduce a blend of methodologies

that examine and address social suffering, holistically. In fact, it is the connection I build between several interrelated methodologies and my exploration of how they all operate together that is my major methodological intervention. This project builds on innovations in feminist ethnography that break down binaries between subject and researcher by centering a politics of relation, a self-reflexivity that always locates ourselves in relation to each other and in community. By creating a workshop space in which to collect knowledge, instead of straightforward interviews, this project further challenges traditional ethnographic methodologies. It asks what qualifies knowledge as valid and what are ethical and effective ways of collecting knowledge from marginalized communities that suffer from violence. My methodology of holistic ethnography celebrates multiple ways of knowing and uses the liberatory arts to arrive at holistic knowledge production. The creative workshop space expands the role of ethnographer to allow them to maneuver between facilitator of textual production as well as one conducting textual analysis with the resulting creative works. It is my conjecture, that, at their core, personal and relational transformation require self-inquiry and self-epistemology; my chosen methodologies and methods of holistic epistemology and liberatory arts facilitate these processes of reflection. Self-epistemology, or self-knowing, reveal moments of self-transformation that I argue are key to community and societal transformation. Not only is the personal political, but personal transformation is crucial to societal transformation. Through the liberatory arts framework, I argue that the other vital aspect of my methodology, critical ethnography, which challenges the researcher to not only investigate hegemonic systems but imagine alternatives to them, is taken up by my participants in how they recognize and respond to the suffering they witness. The Kalaashakti workshops challenge hegemonic narratives of communal violence,

fragmentation, and misogyny by conceiving of creative ways to uplift marginalized voices and stories.

### ***Positionality, Locating MySelf, and Politics of Belonging***

This dissertation is about the power of storytelling. In the vein of an ethics of reciprocity, exchange and self-reflexivity, I will disclose my own personal story of how I arrived at liberatory arts and spiritual activism as my chosen methodologies and conceived of the Kalaashakti expressive arts and mindfulness workshops. Through this transparency, I am modeling my methodology, making an innovative intervention in already innovative transnational feminist research, and embodying my praxis. By beginning with my intimate journey to writing, scholarship, social justice and spirit, I hope to challenge academic expectations that, often, as Anzaldúa states, demand we “put frames and metaframes around writing. [demand we] achieve distance in order to win the coveted title ‘literary writer’ or ‘professional writer’” (81). My project was moved by an internal and innate need to heal and be seen as whole. My project originated from a deep commitment to know myself through others; to exalt a self-epistemology that permeates outwards, validating others’ excavations. I take cues from feminist ethnographers Richa Nagar, Kamala Visweswaran, Sondra Hale, Piya Chatterjee and Aime Carillo Rowe and their calls to dismantle power hierarchies in our research by locating ourselves, our stakes, and our motivations in our scholarship. I will be using the scholarship of Chicana feminist scholar, Elisa Facio, as a model as I lay the foundation for this work with my personal poetry and creative writing. Facio, in “Spirit Journey: “Home” as a Site for Healing and Transformation,” directs her scholarly inquiry inward through autoethnography.

Just as a researcher would be motivated by a drive to discover their research subjects' stories, Facio comes to a deeper understanding of herself as she unfurls her self-told narrative, one that weaves through the violence of academia and finding and reclaiming indigenous ceremony and feminist community. Facio shares her first Inipi ceremony in a sweat lodge, focusing on women's healing; the lodge and its rituals were illustrated in detail, as were the suffering, complex emotions and refuge she experienced (Facio, 61). She offers her own voice as a valid resource, and with that validation the research and researched become one. This form of self-study within autoethnography makes "self-epistemology" possible. I employ self-epistemology not only because it provides background for the audience of my motivations, inspirations and scholarly path, but because I believe this self-interrogation and disclosure, in its inherent vulnerability, makes the researcher more effective. Vulnerability leads to human connection and empathy; gathering others' stories must begin with our own. My trajectory of consciousness and action are outlined in several excerpts of creative non-fiction interspersed throughout this paper. I believe this is an essential place to begin before delving into the stories of Muslim women in my workshops. My project is about intimacy not distance; intimacy with my own spiritual - activist journey and that of the women that I had the honor of working with.

This self-exploration and self-epistemology value emotional intelligence as much as cognitive intelligence, asserting that personal experiences and expressions of feelings are legitimate and worthy sources of knowledge. Elevating these commonly dismissed sources of knowledge can be a decolonizing strategy. "When we view living in the european mode only as a problem to be solved, we rely solely upon our ideas to free us, for these were what the white fathers told us were precious. But as we come more in touch with our own ancient, non-european consciousness of living as a situation to be experienced and interacted with, we learn more and

more to cherish our feelings, and to respect those hidden sources of our power from where true knowledge and, therefore, lasting action comes" (Lorde, 37).

I use multiple mediums of written expression to dive into self-epistemology with the hope of challenging and expanding traditional modes of knowledge production, delivery and legibility within academia. My hybrid identity and relational positionality to my research participants, necessitates a hybrid writing style, largely influenced by Anzaldua. I fuse this hybrid, multi-media and multi-perspective writing approach within my scholarly work, prioritizing the process. As Piya Chatterjee, a feminist, South Asian scholar states, "the making is inside and part of the product --- dialogue, anecdotes, author's voice, inside text instead of footnotes" (12). Therefore, my reflections, as the researcher and writer, are visible, transparent, and strikingly present in the text. Tara Lockhart quotes Adorno as he explains the relevance of creative writing in scholarly work: "As Theodor Adorno noted in his influential piece "The Essay as Form," the essay functions as "an arena of intellectual experience" in which knowledges can be brought together, tested, and complicated.... The essay as a genre then, and the fluid, hybrid forms Anzaldúa composes, serve as key texts through which to consider feminist epistemologies. What ways of knowing do writers offer via their texts? How can feminist knowledge strategies exceed traditional, often linear, argumentative or narrative structures? And how do these texts thus offer possibilities for knowing ourselves, our identities, and our worlds otherwise" (Lockhart)? The fluidity mentioned, offers a certain movement between structured and unstructured writing and validates all voices and all interventions. Poetic language, Lockhart states, extends the narrator's ability to move between shifting discourses and types of writing. Many feminist ethnographers have played with non-traditional modes of presenting their research findings. Patti Lather's book, *Troubling the Angels: Women Living with*

*HIV/AIDS*, offers a powerful example of this skillful maneuvering, one that intends to create dissonance, tension and discomfort. Kamala Visweswaran in *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* advocates drawing upon different senses. I visualize this as a radiating web that, however disparate, comes back to the core argument of the text. It also more effectively engages the readers; the visual line breaks representing complex identities and the non-linear movements between them. Chatterjee, herself a creative writer who weaves in theater scenes into each chapter of her ethnographic inquiry, *A Time for Tea*, summons and seeks "a language of interruptions" (Chatterjee, 13), one that seems to redefine scholarly writing, undo normative trends and inserts and integrates, however rough and uncomfortable, multiple conveyances of knowledge.

My venture into self-epistemological inquiry begins with the limits and absence of speech. Being silenced is powerful, surviving it with a voice intact even more so. It can be a catalyst for handmade, liberatory expression. In writing my stories, I found, as Anzaldúa did, "a feminist confrontation to the tradition of patriarchal silence... [and] a possible way to counter the "tradition" of silence through alternative and confrontational language usage" (3). The written word as confrontation to injustice and violence, merely through its telling, held ever-swelling ripples of consciousness and opening. Writing is not just a metaphor, but action itself. Ironically, it was the disavowal of my own Muslim identity that eventually lead me to spiritual activism and silencing and internalized shame that lead to my poetry and art activism. I grew up in white, conservative Ohio, a child of Indian immigrants, a grandchild of poor, traveling imams. My dad, a disabled painter; my mom, a full time caretaker. I experienced first-hand the effects of intergenerational trauma when, as a young child, my own experience of sexual assault resurfaced and my mother told me not to tell anyone, prosecute or seek justice, because telling my story

publicly would bring more shame and stigma to the family.<sup>1</sup> I grew up in the Bohra Muslim community with corrupt and patriarchal religious leaders that thwarted free-thought and critique and pushed a narrow vision of Islam. They saw themselves as the gatekeepers of knowledge and community and made us outcasts when my brother married a Catholic woman. And when I contested their refusal to perform the marriage with scriptural evidence, they demanded I never read an English translation of the Quran again.<sup>2</sup> Silence compounded upon silence. And yet, as Gloria Anzaldua states in "How to Tame a Wild Tongue," for those who speak up against injustice, "Wild tongues can't be tamed. They can only be cut out" (59).

At the age of five, I became a poet, healer, visionary and scholar-activist. I had no choice. Poetry became a way for me to survive, to exist even after being beaten down by present misogynists and pulled at by battered ancestors of the past. It was a way to express the ineffable, as Audre Lorde would say. I lived Anzaldua's words: "Why am I compelled to write? Because writing saves me from the complacency I fear. Because I have no choice. Because I must keep the spirit of my revolt and myself alive. Because the world I create in the writing compensates for what the real world does not give me. By writing I put the world in order, give it a handle so I can grasp it. I write because life does not appease my appetite and hunger. I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories miswritten about me, about you. To become more intimate with myself and you. Finally, I write because I am scared of writing but I am more scared of not writing" ("Speaking in Tongues," 83-84).

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<sup>1</sup> See Naazneen Diwan, "Salted Slugs," performance, Tuesday Night Café, Summer 2008.

<sup>2</sup> See Naazneen Diwan, "Breaking Bread," performance, Children of Refugees: Inaugural Forum for Art and Peace Fundraiser, Khmer Arts Academy, December 8, 2013.

This poem by Meena Alexander exemplifies the connections between expression and the natural world, to power and change. And especially, to imagining alternative pasts and presents, ones that allow us to sustain and thrive in hope and beauty.

### **Question Time**

I remember the scarred spine  
Of mountains the moon slips through,  
Fox fire in a stump, bushes red with blisters,  
Her question, a woman in a sweatshirt,  
Hand raised in a crowded room –  
What use is poetry?  
Above us, lights flickered,  
Something wrong with the wiring.  
I turned and saw the moon whirl in water,  
The Rockies struck with a mauve light,  
Sea creatures cut into sky foliage.  
In the shadow of a shrub once you and I  
Brushed lips and thighs,  
Dreamt of a past that frees its prisoners.



Standing apart I looked at her and said –

We have poetry

So we do not die of history.

I had no idea what I meant (89).

The violence I suffered in my home and at my masjid caused many refusals and renegotiations with my voice and identity. I refused Islam as a religious institution and, as I entered my freshman year of college right after 9/11, acknowledged it only to combat Islamophobic ideology and hate. I sought my own interpretations and majored in Arabic, falling in love with Mahmud Darwish, Tayeb Salih, and Marcel Khalife. I eventually moved to Syria, and the first majority-Muslim country I had ever lived in. My studies in Syria lead to an investigation of legacies of French colonial violence and its role in perpetuating honor killings through colonial law. They also lead me to transnational feminism and the co-creation of a community of feminists in the West, Middle East and North Africa through the Gender and Emancipation project. When I moved to Los Angeles for a PhD in Gender Studies, my scholarly inclinations to understand structural and systemic violence against women met praxis and I became rooted in local community struggles against gender violence and for immigrant rights. All the while, I longed for a Muslim community that had inclusive visions of Islam and infused their spirituality with critiques of violent systems and calls for social justice.

I decided to reconnect with my homeland of India and the history of anti-Muslim violence in my home state of Gujarat. I recognized the reach of U.S. empire and ideology and how intimately Islamophobia in the U.S. was connected to communal violence against Muslims

in India. My trip was delayed due to pending criminal charges; I was one of 14 protesters arrested for blocking the federal detention center in downtown L.A. to draw attention to legalized racial profiling and xenophobia in the U.S. At that point in my intellectual and activist trajectory, I only knew certain strategies for anti-violence: to lie down in the middle of the street and block buses from departing and prisons from detaining or read and write about horrific accounts of gendered violence and the systems that perpetuated them. I was trained to critique oppressive institutions such as my own Bohra community and the U.S. government's anti-immigrant policies, in an attempt to dismantle them.

I was slowly realizing, as Lata Mani states, that “activism is not just about systems of domination and socioeconomic conditions but existential questions – human capacity to endure, the inspiration and courage that enable so many to live not just survive” (Mani, 148). I asked myself: Instead of my previous focus on critiquing violent institutions, could anti-violence be in the stories we tell and in our transformation of silence? Could it be in how we connect when institutionalized violence says we are supposed to remain silent and divided? Creative life and building alternative futures through the written word enabled me to thrive while joining hands helped me to step out of isolation into a universe of knowing and feeling. Writing was never passive; it was action itself. Audre Lorde asserts "For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity for our existence. It forms the quality of light from which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea and then into more tangible action" (37). Suddenly and gradually my lunges towards justice in a world external to me and my internal reflections of that world integrated and I could imagine, and maybe experience, a Self that was not split into binaries. Anzaldua's words ring true: “I am playing with my Self, I am playing with the world's soul, I am the dialogue between my Self and *el espíritu*

*del mundo*. I change myself, I change the world" ("How to Tame a Wild Tongue," 5). I could tap into the current and life force of now. Kalaashakti was the synthesis of these human needs to belong, connect, heal and transform.

The Kalaashakti workshops I founded and facilitated had, at their heart, a strong compulsion to create a space where dialogues between the Self and the world could flourish, a seeking of unity and understanding that would be messy but profound. And, there was an intention from the beginning to transmit the resulting self and collective discoveries amongst, between and through transnational channels. I choose transnational scholarship because, as Richa Nagar and Amanda Swarr state, local and global knowledges are produced simultaneously (Nagar and Swarr, 3) and the juncture of Islamophobic ideology that I live daily as a Muslim, Gujarati, American woman informs my position as a scholar, writer and activist. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, in her ethnographic work concerning indigenous cultivators in Indonesia on the peripheries of state power, discusses the histories of local-global interconnections in anthropological scholarship. She states that the critique of anthropology as both a Western colonial discourse and exploitative invention, though it rings true with the origins of the field, increases the gulf between the West and the Other and "ignores the complex interexchanges and interactions [between the two]" (Tsing, 13). She states that this imaginary segregation does not serve or improve anthropology's analytic tools. Piya Chatterjee, in her study of women tea laborers on a Darjeeling plantation, advocates "displacing binaries by constantly shifting voice, moving between the local and global and blurring them, between center and margin, as they are necessarily codependent and simultaneous" (5). Sondra Hale, a feminist scholar working in Sudan, has, since the 1960's, along with several other anthropologists, contested these binaries of place and context by both revealing global interdependence, impact and power dynamics and

voicing her own struggles with decolonizing her Western-centric perspective. She calls herself a "recovering anthropologist" [in order to] underscore the self-transformation [she has] tried to undergo to shake off many of the ideological trappings embedded in the field" ("Colonial Discourse and Ethnographic Residuals," 210).

I believe that my site of knowledge and exploration is at the space and the edge between worlds, a space Anzaldúa refers to as "nepantla" (González-López 4). This position offers radical possibilities of interconnection and disruption just as it could a denial of accountability, detachment and confusion. Even as I am pulled toward both worlds, I don't live under the anti-Muslim laws, policies and threats of the Gujarati political and justice system. And in this shifting in-between of nepantla, it is vital to take queues from Richa Nagar's road map of self-reflexivity, a process that asks the researcher, "how the production of ethnographic knowledge is shaped by the shifting contextual, and relational contours of the researcher's social *identity* with respect to her subjects, and by her social situatedness or *positionality* in terms of gender, race, class, sexuality, and other axes of social difference" (Nagar, 179). With the responsibility of ethical self-reflection, this choice of transnational ethnography is, as Chatterjee states, "a must for those with multiple homelands.... [making the] ethnographic site as home-as-field, rife with histories of globalization and mobility" (10). I, as a queer, Muslim, feminist scholar and poet, an educator in Arabic and Gender Studies for the past 9 years, and an Indian American in the diaspora, did not simply fall into my community work on the Gujarat genocide of 2002. After 15 years of separation from India, my family unable to afford frequent trips during my childhood, I decided to fund my own trip in 2010 and, through my privileged access to institutional resources, received a research grant. I made the journey because I wanted to know and meet my family and step out of estrangement; I made the journey because I had studied violence directed at Muslim

women in many Middle Eastern contexts but never within my own home state; I made the journey because of the silence from my Gujarati, Muslim family, because of the stories I never heard. I made the journey because I had extensively studied Islamophobia and Gujarat, India was yet another important site that was inextricably bound to anti-Muslim violence in the U.S.

During my first trip to Gujarat, my preliminary discussions and projects were with organizations seeking justice for Muslim victims through the legal system. I learned about pending cases, reopened cases, uncooperative police and exhaustingly long court procedures. I learned about intimidation and assassinations of those testifying against state officials. I even co-published a booklet on access to justice in Dang, a tribal area in South Gujarat, for the Center for Social Justice. I formed friendships with Muslim women organizers, who were mostly engaged in grassroots micro lending and education campaigns and were all from a marginalized socioeconomic status. They took me on walks through the relief colonies where they lived post-riots, or still lived in now. They pointed to wells where bodies were dumped. They told me the schedule of power outages and about pipes ravaged by rust. I didn't seek out academics but when we crossed paths I noticed most of them were Hindu women; I was the sole Muslim woman with educational privilege, the sole Muslim woman, even amongst NRI's (Non-resident Indians), in these academic spaces. I was fluidly and simultaneously able to belong in spaces of contradiction and stark contrast; I held a pass of privilege to libraries and scholarly conversations and also to Muslim ghettos. When I was introduced to Trupti Shah, the co-founder and executive director of Sahiyar, a women's rights organization, I witnessed how the primarily Hindu organization stood in solidarity with Muslim women targeted in the genocidal violence and promoted communal harmony through trainings in schools. Upon returning to the U.S., just in time for the 10th anniversary of the Gujarat atrocities, it was the stories of the Muslim women field workers of

Sahiyar that were showcased at our first South Asians for Justice, LA event entitled, "Gujarat Genocide and U.S. Solidarity," and in which many South Asian American artists came together to perform and express allyship.

I think the foundation for solidarity is a thoughtful examination of overlapping systems of oppression. Islamophobia functions as a global phenomenon, strengthened by U.S. imperial wars in majority Muslim countries which are fueled by a frenzy of war on terror measures and policies. Muslims are targeted through detention and disappearance in the U.S. by the hundreds just as anti-Muslim, Hindutva ideology crosses seas to the diaspora, accrues ideological and financial support, and then is funneled back to Gujarat to prop up Hindu nationalist parties (Maira, 203), the same parties complicit in the 2002 Gujarat genocide against Muslims. The success of Hindutva politicians in establishing India as a Hindu nation seems directly linked to the security of Hindu Americans (who prescribe to and are invested in Hindu trans-nationalism) in the U.S. Sangeeta Kamat and Biju Matthews explain how Hindu nationalist ideology fits into U.S. multiculturalism. "Faced with negotiating the racial politics of the U.S., Indian-Americans have very little choice but to adopt and operate some version of an ethnic or religious identity that allows them to position themselves within the logic of U.S. race politics" (12). Kamat and Matthews look at Indian Americans' investment in bolstering Hindu nationalism from the diaspora.

"...The diasporic Indian population celebrates the rise of a militant and fascist movement in their native country with a public display of pride and patriotism in an American metropolis. The open support of diasporic Indians for a politics of violence, intimidation, and fear, even as they seek representation as a minority group in the U.S., is a clear example that in an era of globalization, political identity and allegiances are contradictory

and unpredictable. The politics of the Indian diaspora also show how contemporary political violence crosses national borders and is manifested as a global phenomenon even when it is directed toward a national project" (8).

The global implications and impetus for political violence in this context lends itself to the term "transnational genocide," one that I think appropriately describes the scope, reach and ripples of the 2002 genocidal violence and especially the transnational actors responsible. As I will explore later in this paper, the Gujarat violence was not spontaneous mob violence, it was carefully orchestrated by a diverse and dispersed set of agents.

Vijay Prasad, in *Uncle Swami*, quotes Rajasthani RSS and VHP<sup>3</sup> leaders celebrating the transactional, transnational Hindutva apparatus and the violence it elicits:

“Afterall, American NRI’s have really helped the Hindu cause by sending us money. In fact, during the Ram Mandir movement, they were really generous. That masjid<sup>4</sup> was demolished, which was something very good" (212).

As seen in this quote, Indian American supporters of Hindutva ideology, undoubtedly also support communal violence directed at communities that stood in the way of the Hindu nationalist dream. Their attachment to religious identity, which, ironically binds them to

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<sup>3</sup> RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) and VHP (Vishva Hindu Parishad), are both right-wing, Hindu nationalist, organizations in India, part of the Sangh Parivar, a network of groups operating under Hindutva ideology

<sup>4</sup> The 1992 demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya by Shiv Sena political leaders was justified through a claim that the masjid was illegitimately built on the sacred ground of the birthplace of Ram, a Hindu god. Through dismantling a Muslim construction, the rage and frustration of Hindu men at the conquering and reconquering of their bodies and their livelihoods and land by the British, and the Mughals before them, was unleashed and so was a public display of self-transformation from the role of victim to agent. Once again a formidable Hindu community was constituted through masculine violence while public declarations of responsibility for the demolition by Shiv Sena leaders Bal Thackeray and Moreshwar Save sought to cement insider loyalties. In their confident declarations they demonstrated how their acts laid outside the purview of criminal sanction by the state. Through the Babri Masjid demolition, and the communal violence targeting Muslims that followed in Bombay in which killed over 800 people, forced around 150,000 out of Bombay and put 100,000 into displacement camps. (from Thomas Blom Hansen, *Violence in Urban India: Identity Politics, ‘Mumbai’, and the Postcolonial City* (Permanent Black, 2005).

majoritarian politics in India and at the same time to minority status in the U.S., can make them more viable candidates for ascension in the racial hierarchy of the multicultural U.S.

As a Dawoodi Bohra Muslim, I didn't grow up identifying as Gujarati. I also didn't grow up identifying with a larger Muslim ummah. We were marginalized within the Bohra community, both of my parents were children of poor, traveling imams, and my father was a disabled painter. Yet, the Bohras ranked high amongst Muslims in India and were often the exceptional, "good" Muslims. Bohras are characterized in India as fair-skinned, highly-educated, business people. These were stereotypes or truths I had to confront in myself when returning to Gujarat for the first time in 15 years. One of the workshop groups I created was with the girls at MES Boys School in Mogalwada, Baroda, a Muslim school, founded in a Muslim ghetto. I remember one day the teachers invited me into the teachers' lounge and, in trying to determine my sect, caste, village, and, family lineage from my last name (all possible through the inherited, local mechanisms of identification), asked me whether I was a "Diwan" that fell into the OBC (other backward caste) or the "upwardly mobile," "respectable" Dawoodi Bohras. Eventually, inquisitiveness relaxed into relief. In India, the Hindu nationalist BJP<sup>5</sup> Government with Modi at its helm as Prime Minister, purportedly gave the Bohra religious leadership the option to disavow Islamic unity, and thereby ostensibly gain protection during communal attacks. In exchange for separating themselves from the rest of the Ummah, they were given the option to join as collaborators in Modi's monopoly over Gujarat's neoliberal, economic development program. Absorbing the Bohra community into the "Vibrant Gujarat" campaign has been a wise move for Modi; Bohras' influential position, their success and ambition, made this alliance necessary to secure his corporate and financially lucrative political seat. The Bohra religious

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<sup>5</sup> Bharata Janata Party, the political wing of the RSS.



leadership have also used their positions to manipulate the masses and make a quick profit. Chittees, written permission by the Syedna, the head of the faith, are needed for almost every life decision a Bohra makes; even after one dies, a chittee is needed to ensure entrance into heaven. The leadership make sure the community is entirely dependent on their good graces. In this way, a Modi-Bohra collusion is a win-win for leaders on both sides. In fact, both hierarchical structures of Hindutva and Dawoodi Bohradom function similarly, by demanding "moral obedience" from their constituencies to ensure the political survival of their leaders. As the Indian news magazine Tehelka reported: "[In] February [2011], when the Syedna turned 100, one of his seven sons, Huzefa Mohiuddin, walked in for the celebrations in Ahmedabad with Chief Minister Narendra Modi and BJP leaders Vijay Rupani, Asit Vohra and Jayanti Barot. Inside the brightly- lit hall, Mohiuddin praised governance in 'vibrant Gujarat'" (Yadav). With this political and economic alliance in mind, I could have been treated differently by government officials and police both because of Western privilege and good Muslim privilege; I could have chosen to wield my Bohraness like a badge of differentiation and superiority.

In relation to the Muslim women in Gujarat I worked with, I held Western privilege, Bohra privilege and education privilege and yet, I heed the call of Kamala Visweswaran in *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* when she entreats us to keep telling our stories in spite of this chasm of privilege and ever-present danger of betrayal. She dares us to use our privilege, see it clearly and not hide from transnational allyship because of it. Sondra Hale, instead of retreating in guilt, is "asking whether and how we can be allies for each other. How can so-called Western women be allies to so-called Third World women" ("Colonial Discourse and Ethnographic Residuals," 209)? Also, Hale points out the tendency for alliance to flow in one direction only, leading one group to be treated as the welfare group ("Colonial Discourse and Ethnographic

Residuals," 210). This compels me to reflect on the assumptions inlaid within my interventions and what mutual allyship could look like between South Asian Muslims in the U.S. and Gujarati Muslims. Particularly, what is a partnership born out of reciprocity in this context and how could Gujarati Muslims contribute to U.S. based Desis<sup>6</sup> campaigns for justice? How urgent was my intervention and did I receive an invitation to allyship? Hale states that it may be problematic to wait for an invitation when concerning genocide and yet, in my case, my entry into this work came 10 years post-genocide and was initiated after developing my own understanding of the emotional, spiritual and mental conditions of wellness and healing for Muslim women.

Nagar and Swarr discuss the hierarchy inherent within transnational research; they ask how and for whom knowledge is produced and, of course, who controls the production of knowledge. What could it mean to make workshop participants agents of knowledge production while still holding onto the power to determine when and how their stories would be shared with a Western audience, whether academic or otherwise? The Kalaashakti workshops were instigated by a curiosity about ethnographic research and one question: could mutually-beneficial knowledge production, one that Richa Nagar aims for, be fostered within my scholarly project? Kalaashakti grew out of the intention to craft and hone skills, to compose a methodology that offers, gives, and is an exchange, not merely an extraction of native knowledge. Perhaps it was not about making my dissertation legible to these Muslim women workshop participants, but instead, enlivening the very methods that I employed so they could be reused, repurposed, and carried forward.

The workshops I conducted with the Muslim women fieldworkers of Sahiyar in Baroda fit almost seamlessly into their weekly trainings, which also meant they became mandatory and I

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<sup>6</sup> A term used to describe South Asian living in the diaspora, literally meaning “of the country.”

became another trainer and supervisor. The expressive arts and storytelling workshops I proposed held possibilities of shifting the organizing paradigm, one that, according to “Out of the Spiritual Closet,” privileges thinking over emotional/social intelligence and focuses mostly on the material conditions of injustice. When the fieldworkers mentioned an interest in grant writing, all I could offer was storytelling prompts and exercises to ground them in their emotional and bodily senses. In an attempt to challenge Marxist approaches that center struggle on the material plane, I attempted to reverse the hierarchy of knowledge, while holding the authority to set the agenda and being insistent on elevating the importance of self-transformation to the level of structural transformation.

And yet, despite the gulfs of experience and privilege, the inevitability to misread and betray authentic voices, I choose and chose transnational work, feminism and collaboration. It allows for the metamorphosis of theory to practice, mixing research objectives and community needs, and made it possible for me to make an activist intervention as an academic through the arts (Nagar and Swarr, 14), one that I hoped could challenge dominant narratives with collective voice. I choose transnational scholarship/activism because I want to belong. Because, instead of a politics of location, I believe in a politics of relation. Aimee Carillo Rowe, in her conceptualization of a politics of relation, asks us to reflect on the affective, passionate and political ties that bind. What are the collective conditions of our agency and consciousness (18)? My intimate engagement with the traumatic experiences of Muslim women in Gujarat is at the same time an intimate engagement with my own traumatic experiences, different and unique as opposite coasts and yet still making pounding impressions on our psyches, wellness and sense of wholeness and community. This project holds at its core a “radical loving subjectivity” that allows for liberatory methods of ethnography to emerge and co-mingle with self-expression

through creative writing. Chela Sandoval introduces the concept of radical loving subjectivity to challenge the traditional binary between researcher and subject that demands objectivity from the researcher and poses it as the only ethical approach to conduct ethnographic study. Instead, Sandoval calls for research that grounds itself in a subjectivity forged in love. Love, rather than hindering research, makes researchers more critical of the objects of their love; the bond of love spurring more authentic expectations, investments and hopes in the research and the subjects. Radical loving subjectivity proposes an anti-colonial methodology, countering professional distance while embracing subjective truths born out of personal connections. For me, my love for this project and these women is rooted in the familial. I am drawn to and bound to them because of sacrificing goats for Eid; the ancestral reminder, five times a day, in the call to prayer; struggling to place a face to the imam from behind the lattice divider. I call them kin because of Alhamdulillah and Khuda Hafiz, because of Shahrukh Khan and mango pulp and rotis. We reflect each other and we do not. Sometimes I see my mother in a participant's poem and the creases in her forehead and sometimes I get lost in the geography of their city and terrain of their hills.

I often think about how my move to Los Angeles opened up a world of consciousness and how I was incredibly privileged to be exposed to the discourses and debates, conversations and townhalls, the workshops, lectures and marches that LA is saturated with. Not only my PhD program, but my activist communities as well, provided me with the collective conditions, about which Carillo Rowe queries, to know, see and act. My education in transnational Islamophobia began with Palestine and wars in the Middle East and then, as a mostly South Asian politically radical Muslim community of artists and activists formed in LA, I was schooled in social justice strategies rooted in spiritual practice. This is the wide net I cast to honor the provocateurs that

catalyzed my expanded awareness. This induction and fluency in global citizenship, this panoramic vision brought me to Gujarat. I know what I know about being a Muslim woman in Gujarat, survival and community because of the sisters in my workshops; it is because of them that I have the sight that I do.

I went to Gujarat and conducted these Kalaashakti workshops because of the human need to belong, for me and, my hope was, for them. These affections, and ritual and political understandings, ushered me into that belonging. As Carillo Rowe expounds, quoting Probyn:

“Belonging is about where you long to belong, whom you want to nestle beside at the end of the day, who you call when you are in pain, or who accompanies you in ritual-in-signifying practices that give life meaning, if by no other means than to call mindful attention to the awesome beauty of now. It is a concept that permits us to imagine life beyond our own skin because what is foregrounded is a space of "yearning to make skin stretch beyond individual needs and wants" (1996, 6). In other words, belonging helps us imagine "identity," subjectivity, and a sense of self that goes beyond the (interiority of the) self, that strives to connect, that yearns to live." (27)

And I think of Audre Lorde when she laments...“all the ways we rob ourselves of ourselves and each other” (44). This project was a way of pushing past separation, exile, and isolation; giving us back the gift of each other.

## **Chapter One: Context of 2002 Genocide and Gendered Violence in Gujarat**

In this chapter I contextualize the gendered violence in Gujarat, India as a continuum that culminated in the 2002 attacks against Muslims. After laying out a background of the material violence Muslim women suffered, I demonstrate how this leads to emotional trauma and disconnection. I provide this background in order to explore how the gendered violence that Muslim women have endured could disrupt the sense of belonging to which Aime Carillo Rowe refers, a belonging that could allow for imagining identity and subjectivity in relationship instead of as an isolated individual. I explore what it could mean to move beyond a separate self, often an outcome of violence and trauma, to interconnectedness. I ask how gendered violence affects Muslim women's emotional wellness, their overall living conditions, and their ability to connect to themselves, each other, social justice struggles and spirituality. I am interested in how, despite the traumatic effects of violence, Muslim women preserve and maintain affective bonds.

Through each of my chapters I am building a case as to why recording these stories of fragmented and resilient connection through the methods of liberatory arts workshops is effective and how the methods themselves could provide a medium of expression to explore, record and strengthen these affective bonds. This chapter, in detailing the context and continuum of violence against Muslim women and the effects of such violence, explains how and why the arts and storytelling are my chosen praxis to conduct critical and holistic ethnography.

First, I briefly define and distinguish between my use of terms for the various, interlinked forms of violence. When I speak of communalism (in a South Asian understanding of the term), I am not necessarily referring to a progression towards, or outcome of, material violence. Instead I mean an in-group exclusivity (for the purposes of this paper I am concerned with Hindu

communalism) that solidifies insider communities, usually based on religious identity, and positions them against ostracized and unwanted outsider communities. Hindu communalism, according to Urvashi Butalia, tries to right past historical wrongs [eg. The Mughal Empire established by Muslim rulers in the 16<sup>th</sup> century] by confronting the enemy within [India] that takes strength from foreign alliances outside the country—in this case, Pakistan (Butalia, 6). When communalist ideology, then, leads to communal violence, this is the eruption of inter-community tension with a definite power differential, between the community that contends as native, authentic and justified and the one considered foreign. Although an exchange of attacks may take place, disproportionate force and state government cooperation with the dominant community is a common feature. Anti-Muslim communal violence, the particular violence I am interested in, is violence directed at the Muslim community by the dominant community (read: Hindu) that lays claim to an original land, culture and religion and poses Muslims as a threat to these claims. In terms of the communal violence against Muslims in 2002, I use Sondra Hale's chapter, "By Any Other Name: Gender and Genocide – Women of Darfur and the Nuba Mountains," to conceptualize and identify this occurrence of violence within the slippages of "genocide." Although many human rights experts are forced to rely on a strict Geneva Convention definition of genocide that includes in its definition "intent by the state" to physically eliminate a particular group of people based on a shared identity, Hale argues that this definition, which makes it necessary to prove intent by the state in order for genocide to be officially acted upon, makes it difficult to implicate the state, prove official complicity and identify who the state-sanctioned actors are (205). Hale, instead, de-emphasizes the intent of the state and focuses on "state instigated or state condoned or state encouraged acts" (205). The disavowal of mobs and proxies as state actors by the Gujarati government prevents me from

clearly tracing state involvement, a prerequisite for claims of genocide according to international law. Also, the massacres of 2002 did not occur over a sufficient amount of time to fit the measures of genocide outlined. Therefore, I refer to the 2002 violence that occurred in Gujarat as “genocidal attacks,” a form of communal violence that may intensify when a power differential is exhibited and propped up by state sponsorship and very skewed, disproportionate and excessive force is used by Hindu nationalists. The origins of contemporary communal violence in Gujarat, India are rooted in histories of political power, dominance, and the demarcation of borders. Whether the state formation was colonial or native, scholars on South Asian history repeatedly demonstrate that the common feature of communalism and communal violence, particularly in South Asia, has been to employ it as a political maneuver in a competitive, liberal democracy such that it becomes a way to organize constituents, taking the place of rallies or strikes (Nandy, 159). Communalism is not, however, easily traced to one particular moment of South Asian state formation but through the ideology of Hindu nationalism, privilege and ethnocentrism. Communal violence grew through the layers of the British imperial regime, anti-colonial struggle and independence, and the ensuing fragmentation of South Asia into modern nation-states, predominantly encouraged along religious divisions.

South Asian scholar Urvashi Butalia links Hindu communalism to Hindu nationalism and, what I call, Hindu supremacy. Hindu communalism is formed through the “lineage of the [Indian] nation to the ancient Hindu past, claims the Hindu scriptures as the source of all knowledge, the Indian civilization as superior to every other civilization, and ancient Indian achievements in science, mathematics and other branches of knowledge as unsurpassed by other civilizations” (Butalia, 101-2). It is precisely this staunch claim to superiority and authenticity that allows Hindu communalism to flourish while it necessarily excludes. The other effect and



function of the particular communalism I am concerned with --anti-Muslim communalism-- beyond rallying around common identity and in-group belonging, is naming a threat, most often in a competing community (often for resources), that should be externalized for authenticity to be preserved. As scholar Dibyesh Anand states:

“Communalism is associated with exclusive attachment to one’s own community combined with active hostility towards other communities that share its geographical and political space (Kakar 1996, 13). Hindu nationalism (Hindutva/Hindu Right) is the primary organised expression of Hindu communalism in India and is embodied within various political and cultural organisations, most of which are branded as part of the Sangh Parivar (‘the Sangh family’; Sangh loosely translates as organisation but is used as a proper name in this context)” (257).

Scholar of South Asian Studies, Paola Bacchetta, defines Hindu nationalism as one dependent on rigid demarcations of "insider" and "other," in terms of both religion and gender.

"Hindu nationalism, from its inception in the early twentieth century until the founding of samiti,<sup>7</sup> was an exclusively upper caste male enterprise as reflected in the ideology, actions, leadership, membership, structure and symbols of Hindu nationalist organizations until the 1930's. Hindu nationalism can be understood as an extremist religious fractional-nationalism of elites. It can be understood as a "fractional-nationalism" in that its "imagined community" is restricted to only a part of the nation in which it emerged" (127).

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<sup>7</sup> Here she is referring to Rashtra Sevika Samiti, a Hindu Nationalist Women's organization founded in the 1930's.

Gujarat has been the ideal petri dish for Hindu nationalism and its manifestation of communal violence to grow and flourish. As Yogesh Chandrani states, Hindu nationalism was able to emerge and flourish with British colonialism and, as a result, so was the othering and estrangement of Gujarati Muslims (111). These "legacies of colonial violence" were carried into the anti-colonial struggle. There is an important connection between Hindu supremacist ideology and anti-colonial, Hindu nationalism (distinct from the Indian nationalism of Gandhi) in pre-independence Gujarat. This connection is the foundation for current dynamics of Islamophobia, misogyny against Muslim women and genocidal strategies by the Hindutva-led Gujarati government over the past decade and a half.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in Gujarat, an organization called the Arya Samaj<sup>8</sup> (the precursor to the Sangh Parivar) coaxed the Patidar class (promoted to landowning class by the British) into Hindu nationalism by ushering them deeper into British favor and encouraging their participation in violence during Muslim religious rituals and ceremonies.<sup>9</sup> Cultivating Hindu nationalist sentiment vacillated from opening schools to indoctrinate youth with Hindu loyalty, under the guise of memorializing great British colonial leaders,<sup>10</sup> to inaugurating orphanages with the direct objective of saving Hindu children from Christian missionaries.<sup>11</sup> Hindu nationalist base-building always insisted upon preserving an authentic Hindu identity, and the elevation of that identity to fully and successfully defeat British rule, even while colluding with that rule when politically useful.

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<sup>8</sup> Dayananda founded the Arya Samaj in 1875, in Punjab, the province where Hindus, more than anywhere else, felt a strong sense of vulnerability because of their demographic weakness *vis-à-vis* Muslims (51 per cent of the local population) and Sikhs (7.5 per cent). It was a Hindu Reformist movement.

<sup>9</sup> In 1906, in Narsanda, Gujarat, during the Muslim holy month of Muharram, Patidar boys threw stones at the tajiya (a theatrical reenactment of the battle the month commemorates). See David Hardimann.

<sup>10</sup> Examples are Borsad Memorial High School, Dadabhai Naoraji High School at Anand, Petlad English School. (Hardimann, 68-69.) As we can see, an amiable front to the British civilizing mission was maintained just as a campaign to promote and push forward a Hindu state was being built.

<sup>11</sup> Nadian Orphanage. (Hardimann, 63-65.)

As Arya Samajis ascended to the leadership of the Home Rule League<sup>12</sup> in the Kheda District of Gujarat, they courted Mohandas Gandhi's favor, or at least appropriated his popular message of resistance and self-rule, to legitimize their claims to the struggle to return to everything native, including governance. Hindu supremacy hinged upon joining, and thereby defining, the forces that were forging the vision of a post-British nation-state. Arya Samaj, and the other Sangh Parivar organizations to follow, understood how integral their inclusion and involvement was in order to resurrect the glory of an ancient Hindu civilization using modern, nation-state building techniques. After Gandhi's visits to the Hindu Ananth Ashram orphanage (1905-1915) Arya Samaj made this site their base for satyagraha<sup>13</sup> and, eventually, Gandhi was made President of the Gujarat Sabha in 1917 (Hardimann, 81). With Gandhi's leadership and influence, Gujarat entered the scene as a major leader in the nationalist movement. Gandhi guided the Home League's organizing strategies and made suggestions to purge the movement of any residual Western ideologies. Hindu nationalist forces derived legitimacy from Gandhi's influence, riding the waves of the anti-colonial movement to secure their own power after independence. And yet, Gandhian visions of nationalism and the post-colonial nation differed greatly from that of Arya Samaj and its allies.

As Manali Desai states, "Gandhi's discourse and principles of self-organization (ethical-moral stances) became 'free-floating' (reference to Foucault), there was the potential of straying away from authorial intent...with the power to reorganize among the Hindu right" (Desai, 304). His philosophies of tolerance, secularism, and an "Indian nationalism which accepts people of all faiths as citizens and brings in religious pluralism into its concept of secularism" (Bacchetta,

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<sup>12</sup> a political organization that aimed at self-government

<sup>13</sup> "Satyagraha" is literally translated as "insistence on truth" and in terms of the struggle for independence refers to nonviolent resistance. (Hardimann, 75).

127) were and are perverted in contemporary, Hindu supremacist Gujarat. Gandhi rejected liberal tolerance, the privatization of one's religious beliefs, and the "gratuitous assumption of the inferiority of other faiths to one's own" and instead promoted the equality of all traditions (Chandrani). Gandhi, though an advocate of secular, pluralist nationalism, also recognized the dangers of nationalism and how it could be co-opted as a tool of exclusion. The Hindu supremacist brand of nationalism, that hung to the coattails of the Gandhian movement for independence, was in stringent opposition to a secular, pluralist nationalism of inclusion. The strategy of Hindu nationalism was, in exalting a superior Hindu identity, to also spur " the construction of Islam as inessential and external to the idea of Gujarat ...[and] the transmutation of Gujarati Muslims into strangers...[which] occurred simultaneously with the articulation of the modern idea of Gujarat in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" (Chandrani). The sedimentation of Gujaratiness with Hinduness, that Chandrani discusses, seems contingent upon Muslim exclusion from Gujarati identity and the new Indian nation-state. Chandrani astutely asks: "When and how did Muslims cease to be imagined as belonging to Gujarat and/or as representing Gujaratiness? Through what processes of violence, forgetting, and erasure did a region whose religious and political histories were forged by conquerors, itinerants and settlers, come to be imagined as exclusively Hindu? How did over five million Muslims get discursively erased from Gujarat's map" (Chandrani, 15)?

In order to recognize the everyday persecutions of difference in contemporary Gujarat, it is crucial to look at how Hindu nationalism in Gujarat flourished to a climax, making it possible for VHP politician Ashok Singhal to state in 2002, "Gujarat was an experiment which was to be replicated in other parts of the country, and one assumes, eventually throughout the country. The State had been carefully chosen as the laboratory for putting into practice the Hindutva ideology

of the RSS”<sup>14</sup> (Ornit, 14-15). The central instigator in the selection of Gujarat as a Hindutva laboratory was, as one might anticipate, the Sangh Parivar, the umbrella organization for Hindu nationalist ideology. In the 1960’s, Muslims’ transnational status was emphasized and manipulated to reveal split loyalties that could damage the integrity of the Indian state. This rhetoric helped bring popularity to the Jana Sangh, the forerunner to the BJP, with the Indo-Pak War of 1965 (Shah, 244-5) and then again in 1969 when Muslims were criticized by the RSS for holding solidarity protests after the attack of the Al-Aqsa mosque because it took place a thousand miles away from their national allegiance (Shah, 247). When the BJP came to power in 1995, local infrastructure was uprooted and reinfused with Hindutva. The BJP "disbanded most of the advisory committees in the districts and talukas, as well as the State-owned Boards and Corporations and packed the bodies with people from the Sangh Parivar” (Dasgupta) while pumping school curricula with saffron ideology (Human Rights Watch, 39-45). Gujarat was unique in that the Hindu right was able to rule without a reliance on political allies. The consequence of that rule is apparent in the lack of accountability and proliferation of Hindu nationalist policies that were premised on exclusion.

The threat of difference of all varieties - caste, religion and gender - and the strategic inclusion of some of these marginalized groups at certain key moments, propelled the misogynist, anti-Muslim violence of 2002 and the more subtle continuances in the 10 years since. What began as a conflict within Hindu communities concerning reservations, status and rights of backwards castes in 1985, was hijacked by Hindu nationalists as an opportunity to project violence at another marginalized community, Muslims. Hindutva spared no moment to temporarily rescind their glorification of an upper caste, Hindu identity (Ornit, 15-16). In 1992,

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<sup>14</sup> Also see Tanika Sarkar, 2002.

the yatra to demolish the Babri Masjid mobilized Dalits and tribals under the banner of Hindu unity and against the Muslim invaders (Shah, 251). Later in the decade, in 1998, in the Southern Gujarat tribal belt of Dang, Hindu nationalists turned their enmity on Christian Adivasis,<sup>15</sup> conducting large anti-Christian rallies followed by attacks on schools, places of worship and businesses, as well as forced conversions (Human Rights Watch). The project of division and eradicating traces of difference, a colonial project revived, was effective at pitting marginalized communities against each other and blocking potential ally ships based on shared oppression and oppressors.

### ***History and Present of Communal Violence in Gujarat***

Desai discusses the 2002 genocide of Muslims in Gujarat as a continuum of the mutually constitutive forces of Islamophobia and misogyny. Although Gujarat has seen violence some fifteen times since Independence and Partition,<sup>16</sup> with 2,938 instances of communal violence between 1960-69 nationwide (Hansen and Jaffrelot, 245), the “cruelty, state collusion and popular silence” (Desai, 293) was unique and has continued since. Communalist forces did not try to hide the state participation and complicity in the violence. On one mosque it was written: “This is an inside matter. The police are with us” (Desai, 299). Desai elucidates why it is helpful to think about violence as not just physical eruptions against bodies, but on a continuum that surpasses marks left on the body and that leave scars in the social and psychic space Muslims

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<sup>15</sup> an umbrella term for a heterogeneous set of ethnic and tribal groups considered the [aboriginal](#) population of [India](#)

<sup>16</sup> The Partition was the creation of two separate nations of India and Pakistan, mainly orchestrated by political leaders Muhammad Ali Jinnah and Jawaharlal Nehru. Fourteen million Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims were displaced; 6.5 million Muslims moved from India to West Pakistan, and 4.7 million Hindus and Sikhs moved from West Pakistan to India. The riots lead to the deaths of .5-1 million people. Thirty-five million of the original 95 million Muslims in India remained in India. The Indian Partition was the largest mass migration in recorded history.

still occupy in the “post” violence aftermath. Desai asks what could have prepared the stage for such a show. “How does the quotidian, historically sedimented violence against women in ‘peacetime’ constitute the small steps towards the ‘banal’ rehearsals for the crisis event (Billig, 1995)? How do the pathologies of structural inequality gather momentum towards the event, constituting a continuum (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004: 19)” (Desai, 295)? Violence, through her analysis, is then stored into the everyday persecution of difference and when these everyday violations are not recognized, outbursts of physical violence can seem extraordinary and unexpected. I choose the term “genocidal attacks” to describe the anti-Muslim violence in Gujarat in 2002 instead of the mainstream characterization of “riots” used by most media sources, politicians and policies, in order to emphasize the premeditated, structural nature of this type of state-orchestrated violence. Even with a term intentionally chosen to show collective culpability of deliberate and well-planned mass executions, Tanika Sarkar states, “communal violence” also falls short in describing the scope and intensity of the horrors of 2002. She asserts that all levels of Hindu supremacist public and private actors coordinated and acted together, from “well known political leaders, teachers, advocates, shopowners and traders, sarpanches, farmers, labourers, tribal and dalit groups...” (Sarkar, 2873). Sarkar describes the exceptionally horrific nature of the 2002 violence, saying, “Looked at dispassionately, we have exceeded the achievements of Nazi terror, Bosnians atrocities, our own partition violence -- if not in scale and numbers, then in the intensity of torture, the sheer opulence and exuberance in forms of cruelty” (2872).

The incident in Godhra on February 27th, 2002, in which a Muslim mob allegedly killed 59 Hindu sevaks<sup>17</sup> returning from a pilgrimage, set off an onslaught of anti-Muslim massacres throughout Gujarat. "[In the] weeks leading up to the February 27<sup>th</sup>, 2002 violence in Godhra, Hindu activists had been traveling back and forth on the Sabarmati Express (the train that was eventually burnt in Godhra) carrying materials for the construction of a temple dedicated to Ram on the site of the destroyed Babri masjid in Ayodhya" (Human Rights Watch). Then Chief Minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi, and the extremist VHP where his Hindu nationalist ideology was grown, called it a "terrorist attack" and justified "blood for blood" (Human Rights Watch). In the two months following the Godhra train burning, up to 2,000 Muslims were killed, 2,500 injured, over 150,000 displaced, some 20,000 Muslim homes and businesses and over 500 places of worship were destroyed and hundreds of Muslim women were raped (Human Rights Watch and Desai). Tanika Sarkar describes further:

"Mobs of thousands roaming the streets in as many as 16 districts ... The recruitment of widely divergent social groups, the training in combat action, the mobilisation of an immense will to violence bespeak tenacious and long-standing political activity within the very pores of civil society" (2873)

The 2002 attacks in Gujarat targeting Muslim communities may have been a more concentrated effort at cleansing the Hindu supremacist climate of undesirable, foreign elements, but, as discussed above, had been gestating in the Gujarati, Hindu public psyche long before their physical manifestations. Ethnic cleansing was performed through disappearing Muslim history,

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<sup>17</sup> religious pilgrims/volunteers



culture and religion, any trace of Muslimness; thereby scorching the earth clear for the rebirth of Hindustan.<sup>18</sup>

"Bodies were not just massacred, they disappeared, as did houses, shrines, mosques. Overnight, roads were laid, and Hindu temples were built where Muslim homes used to be. Identities disappeared as well, for refugees in relief camps have neither documents nor identification papers of any sort to prove that they ever had property, jobs, bank balances, land, families, Indian citizenship" (Sarkar, 2873).

During the 2002 communal violence, sacred Muslim places of worship, such as mosques and dargahs,<sup>19</sup> were not only burned and destroyed; a symbolic re-conversion was enacted as well. Taha Abdul Rauf states in "Violence Inflicted on Muslims: Direct, Cultural and Structural" that "according to Pandey (2002), the Gujarat pogrom saw 298 dargahs (visited by non-Muslims as well) and 205 mosques damaged or demolished" (71).

Teesta Setalvad, a local anti-communalism activist, recorded her observations while visiting Babanshah Mosque in Ahmedabad:

"[There were] not just torn pages of the Quran strewn all over the floor; the vandals had even enough time to defecate on it. The framed photograph of a Hindu idol was planted at the very spot where the imam stands to lead namaz.<sup>20</sup> There were tell-tale signs of a puja<sup>21</sup> having been performed at the place" (Varadarajan, 110).

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<sup>18</sup> A popular naming of India, particularly used by Hindu nationalists.

<sup>19</sup> Islamic shrine built at the gravesite of a revered Sufi saint.

<sup>20</sup> Muslim prayers traditionally performed 5 times a day.

<sup>21</sup> Puja (in the Hindu tradition) is the act of showing reverence to a god, a spirit, or another aspect of the divine through invocations, prayers, and rituals. Often these rituals include idol worship which is forbidden in Islam.

Often a murti (idol) of a Hindu God or Goddess was placed inside the charred remains (People's Union of Civil Liberties), signifying a forced return to Hinduism for Muslims who strayed from the true, innate identity of every Indian. Ganesh, or the remover of obstacles (Islam could be considered an obstacle to Hindu unity) and Lord of beginnings, was a popular memento. To this effect, this purging and purification through fire could now allow India (and particularly Gujarat as a test lab) to fully enter (return) into a glowing era of progress and civilization. In addition to vandalizing Muslim places of worship, there was also disruption and denial of sacred Muslim rituals, particularly associated with death. After massacres, Muslim bodies were often burned in the ritualistic style of Hindu cremation, preventing Muslims, even in death, from the practice of Islamic burial (Sarkar in Rauf, 71).

The vandalizing, defaming, and stripping of sanctity and identity of places of worship was more than symbolically enacted on Muslim mosques and dargahs; it was a significant aspect of genocidal violence. As discussed in the documentary, *Our Spirits Don't Speak English: Indian Boarding School*, the boarding schools in the U.S. were set up with a settler colonialist goal of eradicating the language, culture and religion of Native Americans. Because the indigeneity of Native Americans was deemed an obstacle to the new European ethics being institutionalized in the U.S., a campaign to normalize and civilize them through re-education was initiated ("Our Spirits Don't Speak English"). The boarding schools served as a medium for cultural genocide just as violence enacted upon Muslim holy places signified a similar erasure. It is important to note how xenophobia (and in India's case, a particular form of xenophobia: Islamophobia) operates in the context of the U.S. settler colonial state and the post-colonial state of India. Unlike Native Americans, who endured an occupation of their Native lands that stripped them of their indigenous claims and cultural ties to these lands by deeming them as

foreign to a European, occupying force, Muslims, in terms of South Asian history, were seen as invaders by Hindu nationalists (stretching back to the Mughal Empire of the 16<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> centuries) and while their connection to the land was also stripped, they were never seen as being indigenous to those lands, nor were they occupied in a similar way.

Of course, in addition to this symbolic, cultural and religious violence, in a very visceral and brutal sense, Muslim bodies were also maimed, tortured, disfigured and torn apart, contributing to what seemed to be a fracturing of Muslim selves and communities (emotionally, spiritually and physically) indefinitely. Siddharth Varadarajan describes in detail:

“Parents were made to watch their children being dismembered and children were left with memories of their mothers rolling in pain engulfed in fire. In some terribly warped re-enactment of a medieval battle scene, an old man in Tarsali (Vadodara) was shown his beheaded son’s head on a tray before being killed himself...In Anjanwa (Panchmahals), eight women and children were hacked with swords and thrown into a well...” (447-8).

### ***Gendercide: Misogyny, Masculinity and Annihilation***

These horrific acts of embodied, genocidal violence, as demonstrated above, take shape in particular, calculated ways when directed at women and girls. Gendered violence was a deliberate tactic of terror in the 2002 communal violence in Gujarat that targeted Muslims (Desai, 293). Hale’s explanation of “gendercide” proves useful here. She states that gendercide is distinguished from gendered violence during conflict because the former is not merely the aggression men inflict on women during war, it is, and here she quotes Catharine MacKinnon, "being done by some men against certain women for specific reasons" ("By Any Other Name," 209). Tanika Sarkar discusses the findings from the report "How Has the Gujarat Massacre

Affected Minority Women?: The Survivors Speak." She articulates the pattern of torture as, "...rape, gang rape, mass rape, stripping, insertion of objects into their body, molestation... a majority of rape victims were burnt alive" (Sarkar, 2875). It is necessary to include some detailed accounts of specific cases so that the scope and brutality of the violence is not lost in numbers, and depersonalized. The following survivor accounts were collected by scholar Tanika, Sarkar.

"Bilkees Beghum from the Godhra relief camp told a tale that seemed to confirm a recurrent pattern in most places, according to survivors' accounts. She was stripped, gang-raped, her baby was killed before her, she was then beaten up, then burnt and left for dead. For variety's sake, other women also had acid thrown upon them, and then burnt in fires...

A 13-year old girl, Farzana, had a rod pushed into her stomach, and was then burnt. A mother reported that her three-year old baby girl was raped and killed in front of her, while elsewhere daughters reported on the rapes of their mothers, now dead...

Kausar Bano, a young girl from Naroda Patiya, was several months pregnant. Several eyewitnesses testified that she was raped, tortured, her womb was slit open with a sword to disgorge the fetus which was then hacked to pieces and roasted alive with the mother.

At Fatehpura, young girls were paraded naked. After they were rescued by a Muslim ambulance service, they traveled to the camp without a stitch on them. Other victims arrived naked at camps, too, after acid had been poured upon their clothes, which they tore off in agony from their burning and peeling bodies" (Sarkar, 2875).

The People's Union of Civil Liberties, based in Vadodara, published "An Interim Report of the Situation in and Around Vadodara" and specifically outlined not just police complicity in, or incompetence in responding to, gendered violence, but their direct perpetration.

"In Bahaar colony of Ajwa Road, women went out to request the police to set up a police point as tension had been increasing in the face of violence. The police refused to listen to the women and in fact, laathi<sup>22</sup> charged to force them into their homes. At Rain Basera, Machchipith, under Karelilig Police Station, several women were assaulted by the police during "combing operations." Four policemen entered the basti at around 3:00 pm on March 16, 2002 and started beating them indiscriminately – Sairabhen Shaikh, Faridabanu Shaikh, Hamidabibi Pathan all aged between 30 and 45 were among those who were beaten so badly that their wounds are still visible. Faridabibi was hit on her chest by a laathi, and Hamidabibi in her pubic region. In Bahaar colony, women were pulled out of their homes by dragging them by their breasts. Even 18 year old girls were not spared – they were threatened with swords and sticks by the police. Rukiabibi, a 70 year old woman in Kasamala Kabristan, who went out to prevent the police from taking away her young son, was hit by the laathi so hard that her head split open" (People's Union of Civil Liberties).

The gendered nature of these attacks is aimed at acutely manipulating and altering gender dynamics within and outside of Muslim communities; these attacks are notably directed at disarming Muslim masculinity.

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<sup>22</sup> baton

“There were conscious displays of acts of violence as acts of bravado. Killings were accompanied by verbal abuse, beatings, mutilation, castration and rape. Stories of babies and fetuses being killed and mutilated abound. Verbal taunting and gang rape in public seemed to be a preferred method of violating women and through this of humiliating Muslim men (see Chenoy et al. 2002). These public displays can be understood as acts to terrorise Muslims, to violate their communal honour (which is seen as the burden of women in all patriarchal systems), to emasculate Muslim men and show who the ‘real men’ are” (Anand, 264).

With the violation of communal honor as the objective of rape and sexual assault, as Anand states, the entire community is also stigmatized as impure (Sarkar, 2875), furthering objectification and ensuring perpetual ostracization. Aliasghar Engineer, a Dawoodi Bohra scholar activist on communal violence, further articulates how women and community become synonymous. "By sexually violating the women of the 'other' you are destroying their honour and humiliating them as a community and treating body of women as body of the community. Woman's honour must be destroyed to destroy the honour of the community" (Engineer).

Sexual assault against Muslim women was intended to discipline the men of the communities. According to scholar Rustom Bharucha, “Manhood...is proved through forced sex on Muslim women, which is emblematic of the physical and sexual prowess of the macho male, and an inverse kind of imaginary castration of the Muslim male” (Rustom, 1610-11). It was a strategic attempt at emasculating and disarming Muslim men, considered hypersexual and aggressive. Tanika Sarkar points out that during the 2002 communal violence “There is also the perpetual fear of a more virile Muslim male body that lures away Hindu girls. [Hindu men have]

a kind of penis envy and anxiety about emasculation that can only be overcome by doing violent deeds” (Sarkar, 2873). These violent deeds serve to renew and affirm Hindu masculinity.

"The volcano which was inactive...has erupted

It has burnt the arse of miyas and made them dance nude

We have untied the penises that were tied till now

We have widened the tight vaginas of the bibis..."<sup>23</sup>

Hindu supremacist discourse has positioned a morally-sound Hindu masculinity against a lustful and perverted Muslim masculinity. Islam, intrinsically, according to this Hindutva ideology, holds a regressive attitude towards reproduction, one that encourages an irresponsible sexuality that consequently leads to excessively producing children (Anand, 260). Anand further connects unruly sexuality with overpopulation and a demographic battle: “However, Muslims are stereotyped as dangerous not only through their association with terrorism/crime/ violence, but also through their sexuality. Muslims have ‘too many children’, they ‘breed like rabbits’—the spectre of overpopulating Muslims is used to convince Hindus that their dominance within India is under threat” (259). Scholar Tanika Sarkar further argues that high Muslim fertility rates can imply and stir up the fear of the inverse for Hindus: infertile Hindu females, which could mean a decline in Hindu supremacy and numbers (2875). A participant in the Kalaashakti workshop with

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<sup>23</sup> A poem recited by Hindu mobs during communal violence. Miyas refer to Muslims whereas bibis refer to Muslim wives, particularly. (Anonymous author in Sarkar, 2874).

Sahiyar youth, as we were discussing discrimination based on religion, shared the following story about Hindu anxieties about Muslim reproduction.

"If there is a Muslim girl and she is pregnant, this happened with my aunt (on my father's side). So my aunt is pregnant and we took her to the hospital. They said, you are a Muslim, you have 6 daughters, if you lose one then it's no problem. She says this because she's Muslim and with Muslims in one house there are more girls. But sometimes there is just one girl. They say this because if she loses her child then their community will become bigger, the Hindu community will become bigger. Like this there is a lot of discrimination" Khadija).

South Asian feminist scholar Amrita Basu states in "Women's Activism and the Vicissitudes of Hindu Nationalism," that Hindu men portray themselves as self-disciplined and able to practice bramacharya<sup>24</sup> through sacrifice and dedication while Muslim men are seen as promiscuous, sexually excessive, deviant rapists (Basu). Post-partition narratives are full of coercive, lust-hungry Muslim men abducting Hindu women without their consent through black magic, what is often called "love jihad" (Ayesha bibi). In the aftermath of partition violence, Hindu nationalist politicians publicly and urgently called for the recovery of all abducted and "forcibly" converted Hindu women: An Indian MP exhorted: "As descendants of Ram we have to bring back every Sita that is alive" (Menon and Bhasin, 6).<sup>25</sup>

Genocidal attacks operate on a demographic battle ground, as demonstrated above by Anand, and so interrupting and halting the future of a people is predicated upon control of

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<sup>24</sup> Imposed celibacy which is an essential prerequisite for Hindu spiritual practice as outlined by classical Sanskrit texts

<sup>25</sup> This is a reference to the Hindu epic the Ramayana, in which the prince and Hindu God, Ram, rescues his bride Sita from the villain demon Ravana. (Constituent Assembly of India (Legislative) Debates, December 1949 in Menon and Bhasin).



women's ability to reproduce those future generations, biologically and culturally. Native American scholar Andrea Smith discusses David Stannard's argument which reinforces this idea. Stannard states that, "control over women's reproductive abilities and destruction of women and children are essential in destroying a people. If the women of a nation are not disproportionately killed, then that nation's population will not be severely affected" (A. Smith, 78). With reference to the genocidal attacks against Muslims of 2002, Sarkar elaborates on the patterns of gendercide (my usage): "The pattern of cruelty suggests three things. One, the woman's body was a site of almost inexhaustible violence, with infinitely plural and innovative forms of torture. Second, their sexual and reproductive organs were attacked with a special savagery. Third, their children, born and unborn, shared the attacks and were killed before their eyes" (2875). But, as Hale, Engineer and other scholars attest, this violence is not merely geared towards desecrating the physical body. "The defiling of women's bodies becomes both symbolic and material/physical... The culture itself, through the bodies of women, becomes defaced and deracinated" (Hale, "By Any Other Name," 203). These defilements affect the growth of the population by impairing women's ability to pass on rituals, religion, knowledge, language, and art, all the essential features of culture. Women are positioned both as the site of culture ("By Any Other Name," 204) and the carriers of it as well (Deniz Kandiyoti, 2004 and Yuval-Davis and Anthias, 1989). Targeting a culture for extinction, then, must be gendered and so the term "cultural gendercide," or men of a group attacking specific women of another group for a specific reason with the intent of destroying unique characteristics of the persecuted group, is necessary to describe this. "If what is different about a culture—that is, how a culture distinguishes itself from others—is seen by members of that culture (male members) to reside in the bodies of women, then violating the bodies of women becomes a violation of that" ("By Any Other

Name," 209). Therefore, violence against women and children is not just a side effect of genocidal attacks, it is central in ensuring the success of genocidal campaigns.

Anti-Muslim communalism and communal violence was and is in the service of preserving a monolithic, superior Hindu people (read: male, upper class, Brahmin (127), as Bacchetta states) and civilization (Hindu nationalism and supremacy) and dispelling and annihilating the threat of Muslim masculinity is at the heart of this project. Sudhir Kakar, a scholar of psychology, in *The Colors of Violence: Cultural Identities, Religion, and Conflict*, explains communalism as “associated with exclusive attachment to one’s own community combined with active hostility towards other communities that share its geographical and political space” (Kakar, 56). In this case, hostility is directed at a virile and uncontrollable Muslim masculinity. Also, it’s key to note that contention over space and territorialization have been theorized as masculinized efforts by many South Asian, postcolonial scholars, including Gayatri Spivak and many of the Subaltern Studies collective.<sup>26</sup> Anti-Muslim communalism uses gendered violence to carry out its mission, both ideologically and physically, attacking the men and the entire infrastructure of the community through targeting the women while simultaneously asserting ownership and control of space and place.

Smith discusses gendered violence and the logic of genocide in her article, “Not an Indian Tradition: The Sexual Colonization of Native Peoples.” Smith discusses the intersectional nature of violence against Native women. This sheds light on the parallel experiences of Muslim women as their identities as both women and Muslim are an affront to the integrity of Hindu, male identity just as Native American women are an affront to male, European, settler colonial identity. Smith states that, "within the context of colonization of

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<sup>26</sup> See Gayatri Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* and Vandana Shiva, "Women in Nature"

Native nations, sexual violence does not affect Indian men and women in the same way.

However, when a Native woman suffers abuse, this abuse is not just an attack on her identity as a woman, but on her identity as Native” (A. Smith, 71). In contrast to Native experience of genocide, however, both Muslim and Hindu populations in South Asia were colonized by the British, so violence against Muslim women perpetrated by Hindu men can be read as a reaction and reenactment of the humiliation and subjection they felt at the hands of the British. Desai states that Muslim women became the supreme symbol of disgust for Hindu masculinity and the dumping site for the frustration and humiliation at being colonized (Desai, 297-300). As is true with most post-colonial contexts, a majority (here male, Hindu nationalists) step up as the primary builders of a new nation-state, now rid of Western colonialism. Public health scholar and founder of the NGO SAHAJ (Society for Health Alternatives), Renu Khanna, states that it is this majoritarian nation-state building that increases conflict amidst a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic setting (Khanna, 142). Hindu men attempted to distance themselves from the characteristics of the colonized male, the characteristics of being effeminate, subservient, and dominated, and this lead to a resurgence of masculine aggression directed at the women of a potentially more abject community, Muslims.

The particular ways the communal violence of 2002, and the everyday violence leading up to it, has penetrated and distorted Muslim women’s lives is contingent upon the fostering, branding, and selling of Hindu nationalism and communalism within Gujarat as a model for the rest of India. I have explored how misogyny and gendered violence was and is an avenue in which Hindu nationalism sought to eliminate multiple facets of difference. Hindu supremacy, itself driven by masculinist ethics, positions Muslim masculinity as a looming menace to its desire for a sanctified and exclusive Hindu state, the realization of which, would rid its superior

civilization of undesirable elements. These Islamophobic representations of Muslimness were both pervasive and gendered and set a framework for understanding the 2002 Gujarat genocide in which Muslim women were uniquely and acutely affected. This battle of masculinities that has landed on the bodies and psyches of Muslim women in post-2002 Gujarat.

### *State Violence, Neglect and Accountability*

Another very important feature of genocidal attacks, that distinguishes them from random outbursts of riots, is the joining together of multiple actors, and especially, the cooperation of state power. Gujarati state officials, from government to law enforcement to judicial branches, failed to intervene in, and often committed themselves, acts of violence and, even in the aftermath of the genocide, blocked victims from adequate rehabilitation and some form of closure through legal recourse. When Narendra Modi<sup>27</sup> instructed the police to permit the mobs to “vent their anger” (Human Rights Watch) the unique and exceptional nature of this violence became clear; it was mired in state collusion, brutal gendered violence and popular silence.

Sarkar elucidates on this state collusion and disregard:

"So magistrates sat quietly while the state burned, the police refused to help at best, and at worst, shot, tortured and raped Muslims. Fire brigades did not come to help, Hospitals turned away Muslim victims, Muslim ambulance services were systematically disrupted by the police. FIR's<sup>28</sup> were either not registered or registered at a collective level which left no room for individual complaints. Arrests were not made and relief came from

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<sup>27</sup> At the time Modi was the Chief Minister of Gujarat and currently he is the Prime Minister of India.

<sup>28</sup> First Information Reports, when the victim of an offense or their advocates lodge a complaint with the police, this report is written and filed

mostly Muslim, Christian or non-governmental organizations. There are no rehabilitation plans, compensation claims are impossible to establish, and if established, are either not paid or paid fractionally" (2875).

Again, evoking Desai's argument that violence exists on a continuum, even after the two-month offensive on Muslims, both the lack of accountability and consequence for perpetrators and the post-conflict neglect of survivors' needs exacerbated and continued the war on Muslim survival. Post-conflict reconstruction failures merely amplified feelings of uncertainty and alienation as internally displaced peoples (IDP's) were moved into the precarious and dilapidated environments of the relief camps. The intensified vulnerability of female IDP's was apparent - the aftermath of gendercide. Women suffered moderate to severe reproductive tract infections, delivered in unsanitary conditions in relief camps, and, often, due to insecurity and lack of access, had premature deliveries, miscarriages and abortions (Khanna, 142). Civil society organizations in Gujarat and (mostly Islamic) international NGO's lead the reconstruction efforts at these camps, with little to no state initiatives. The Gujarat government tried to withdraw what small amount of funding and support they had provided to the camps just two months after the communal violence but, due to pressure from the camp organizers, kept them open until July 2002 (Jasani, 439). Islamic organizations filled the void of material support and in exchange imposed harsh moral codes. "Women were reminded that shame came to the community in the form of sexual violence because the promise made to Allah by them had been forgotten. Women were also reminded that they had a very special role to play in restoring the community's lost *izzat* (honour) by adhering to an Islamic way of life..." (Jasani, 435). Survivors of violence, along with not receiving adequate care, were scathed again and again with the fiery lashes of

religious leadership. Victim blaming was gratuitous and those pronouncing judgments were the only ones showing up to "meet" material needs.

Just as corporeal violence is intimately connected with psychological violence, safety, nourishment, and integrity of the body are vital to the wellness of the mind and spirit. During my visit to Juhapura,<sup>29</sup> the largest Muslim ghetto in Ahmedabad rife with relief camps, I observed the conditions of water deprivation and its role in physical, psychological and spiritual survival of communities. The following is a reflection after my first time walking through the colonies with Zohra bhen, an organizer with Saath, a microcredit collective with mostly Muslim women staff and members.

### ***Rain water and wells***

*Rain water isn't free here. What falls from the sky turns to sludge in a second. What falls is freer than this ghetto could imagine being.*

*Across the bridge they dance in the rain. After weeks of surveying the skies from terraces, watching birds fly backwards and the clouds heavy, pregnant, and aching to set down their loads, the monsoons arrive. The wait is excruciating but the arrival has masses rushing the streets.*

*I wonder if you dance in Juhapura when it rains. The rain takes on a different quality here. It is wicked and slippery. Try to catch it and it'll fill your mouths with mud. A taste like rusty blood and the Sabarmati River. Useless mud. What could be planted since gravesites monopolized your*

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<sup>29</sup> Juhapura is a Muslim ghetto in Ahmedabad with over 300,000 Muslim residents, the largest concentration of Muslims in India

*dreams and your spades turned into shovels to bury your dead. No bees visit feathered in yellow powder. Flowers' have been pitted of their pistils. Translucent skin, stretched over hollows of eyes deprived of light.*

*When rain falls, what are you reminded of, life giving or fading away?*

*Hindu high rises collect and contain the rain's flow while the separation wall between their privilege and your frantic grasps, unleashes an uncontrollable torrent. Their tanks are intact, have their fill and forsake the rest. The remainder, the outliers, whose bellies and barrels are pierced with bullet holes. The rain doesn't wash away; it reveals the residues of displacement, foraging for hope in enclosed, tightening ghettos, gullies that don't connect, that don't lead anywhere. It is deceiving, this downpour, because even in its abundance it never touches thirst. These throats itchy and bare have learned not to crave.*

*What they're piled with, the channels of bodies and of the earth, are corpses. The well stuffed with your own sisters, uncles, cousins, mothers. Floating, bloated, if only we could lower tree limbs, wrap them in white muslin, let them rest. They've made the blood of our own kin toxic to us. Repulsive to us. What if we cupped our hands, our lifelines etched too deep to be diverted and dried, and revived rivers. What if water could awaken, again, our dancing spirits? (Diwan)*

“Water overflows with memory . . . emotional memory, bodily memory, sacred memory” (M. J. Alexander, 292).

Water, a contentious resource for Muslims and all marginalized communities living in post-genocide Gujarat, has been used as a tool by Hindutva to drown lives and the stories they

hold. As each current flows from memories of mass murder to displacement to deprivation, these stories are shaken into public consciousness. The medium of water, its significance for life and growth, carries with it possibilities of remembering and telling of the paradoxical flow that oscillates between life and death.

While walking through Juhapura with Zohra bhen, she spoke of new floods (Bansuri and Thakkar).<sup>30</sup> Without drainage or paved roads, monsoon rains flood the streets and residents watch futilely, without the equipment to store it for future use. In Juhapura, there is literally nothing to divert the rain and harness its life-sustaining potential. Gujarat's technological advancements do not apply here. There are no sewer or water lines, no consistent or reliable source for drinking, washing, cooking or hygiene. Water outages often last a few days (Zohra). The people of Anjum colony, built after 2002 for displaced peoples, had even applied to the government for a water line and later found out their request was canceled (Anjum colony women). There are no underground rechargeable pits in order to harvest rainwater. The conditions of these ghettos are such that an abundant flow of water, without state provided tools, become abject and a further emphasis of their poverty of resources. Witnessing the rains could become menacing, for it revealed the chaotic and transitory status of their lives.

The mass violence of February to June 2002 left corpses in its wake and, often, the dead were deliberately placed to refuse those still living life as well. Zohra bhen showed me the well near the edge of her mohalla where Hindu mobs had piled body upon body (Zohra) so that what was once a place to derive nourishment and health was transformed into decay, loss and mourning. With no sewer or drainage in Juhapura, and nothing to harness the power of the rains,

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<sup>30</sup> Juhapura was developed, initially, for people who lost their homes in the floods of 1968. It is argued that these floods were largely due to unethical and inequitable dam construction. According to scholar activists, the construction of dams alone has led to the displacement of anywhere from 20-40 million people in India.



the first rains of the season, though relieving for some, caused unimaginable smells to waft through the streets and brought with them a torrent of disease and rot. A strategy of genocide is very clearly established with living on the margins of the living, one that contorts the conditions of life and flips them on their head so that abundant water flow can now signify death and decomposition.

Preventing survivors from receiving nourishment halts the restoration of wellness, in both the physical and psychological body, to which all citizens of India are theoretically entitled. The responsibility to provide these basic needs during post-conflict reconstruction naturally fell to women, the guardians of nourishment, and so they acutely felt not only their dispossession but the dispossession of those in their care. The separation, loss, abandonment, and especially the lingering traumas of brutal violence witnessed and experienced which seemed to be a calculated outcome of a particularly gendered type of genocidal violence, also seemed to plant fissures in the individual and collective Muslim psyche. Emotional stability and integrity is another battleground for the termination of unwanted populations. Renu Khanna connects physical terror to psychological terror through extensive interviews and fieldwork with women survivors of communal violence. Her analysis is one that makes an assessment of Muslim women's well-being, holistically. As she recounts stories of women being targeted through gang rape en masse, the mutilation of their bodies, particularly their breasts and pregnant bellies, forced nudity and the branding of their bodies with Hindu religious symbols, she also discusses the mental and emotional impacts of these acts of violence. A Human Rights Watch report echoes this.

"The psychological impact on victims of the communal violence is immense. Aid workers have cited an urgent need for counseling to help the victims cope with their trauma. Sociologist Susan Vishwanathan told *Channelnewsasia*, 'The psychological

degradation that comes from watching people closest to you being killed, raped, mutilated, ravaged. These are far greater than that of loss of material possessions" (Human Rights Watch).

Khanna looks at Medico Friend Circle reports that show the lasting fear planted in Muslim women's psyches long after witnessing and/or being subjected to sexual violation themselves. Often women experienced a continued psychological threat long after the physical threat of violence dissipated; they were afraid to leave home, be out in public, and walk through the streets (Khanna, 146). Women also had to deal with the very real possibility that sexual assault would be followed with sexually transmitted diseases, such as HIV, which just furthered shame and isolation. Their fear of not being socially accepted as survivors of rape and potentially as carriers of "disease," as a result of these violations, reportedly lead many to further repress and hide their experiences (Khanna, 147). The lack of public redress, even and especially with health care providers, added another layer of trauma as the crimes committed against them were not recognized as such. The conditions for these women in the aftermath of the 2002 communal violence, in terms of proper medical response and the resources available at relief camps, had dire consequences on their physical and mental health. According to Principle 19 of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, "all wounded and sick internally displaced persons shall receive to the fullest extent possible and with the least possible delay, the medical care and attention they require without distinction on any grounds other than medical ones. *When necessary, internally displaced persons shall have access to psychological and social services.*" (emphasis mine). Principle 19 (2) adds that, "special attention should be paid to the health needs of women, including access to female health care providers and services... as well as appropriate counseling for victims of sexual and other abuses" (OCHA).

Khyati Mehta, Ganpat Vankar and Vikram Patel offer a rare study of Post-traumatic stress disorder amongst women survivors of sexual assault in Gujarat, especially since, as Khanna's study reveals, medical professionals often failed to report or adequately address cases of PTSD (Khanna, 148). The objective of their in-depth ethnographic study, involving trained medical professionals and counseling services during and after the interview process, was to "document the mental health of women living in these relief camps, and to elicit open-ended descriptions of their experiences of emotional and cognitive worlds, in their own language" (Mehta, Vankar and Patel, 585). This psychosomatic investigation further provides evidence of the altered psychological states of Muslim women survivors of the 2002 Gujarat genocide. Their questions focused on the lasting and recurring sensory experiences of women, post-incidents of physical terror. The researchers presented three case studies from their ethnographic work that were most typical of the narratives collected. In the first case study presented, a woman whose house was torched experienced visions of the two men responsible, had trouble sleeping and often woke with night sweats and screaming, and, when telling her story, felt dizzy and had tremors all over her body. She stated that she lives with the intense fear that someone will kill her, which keeps her extremely vigilant at all times and prevents her from going outside (Mehta, Vankar and Patel, 585). In the second case study, a woman witnessed her neighbor being cut to pieces during the 2002 riots. She experienced flashbacks of people wielding swords and her neighbor's murder along with the cries of those neighbors being attacked. Along with these flashbacks, she has frequent nightmares and shortness of breath. In the third and final case study discussed, a woman was accosted by men who undressed in front of her and her family and demanded that she send her daughters to them. Since the incident she has had trouble concentrating and has suicidal ideations. From these three case studies, the researchers concluded

that the symptoms of PTSD, particularly re-experiencing, hyper-arousal, and avoidance, were present (Mehta, Vankar and Patel, 585).

From the evidence posited by scholars and experts of violence against women and women's health, there is an inextricable link between physical safety and mental safety and recovering from trauma. Also, the immediacy and short-sightedness of “post”-conflict rehabilitation efforts often miss the unraveling of trauma as it “registers as trauma belatedly” (Chatterjee, Desai and Roy, 13). If trauma does, in fact, arrive belatedly, I am interested in what the consequences are for Muslim women in Gujarat ten years after the most severe physical manifestations of violence and how the methodologies of liberatory arts, spiritual activism and community engaged research can be employed as a response.

Observations of the nature of trauma that Muslim women have faced since the 2002 genocide in Gujarat, point to a connection between the communal experience of violence and the communal experience of trauma and community rebuilding. Jeffrey Alexander, for example, through his critique of both psychoanalytic and Enlightenment readings of trauma, states that collective trauma damages the bonds between people and the way a community functions. Cultural trauma, another term he employs that again affects the collective but describes this impact with relation to the psyche, “occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves...marks upon their group consciousness...” (J. C. Alexander, 1). What are these “marks” and can being in the present moment through methods of mindfulness and artistic process temporarily relieve survivors from marks of the past? Further, Dominic LaCapra states, “The after-effects – the hauntingly possessive ghosts – of traumatic events are not fully owned by anyone and, in various ways, affect everyone...” (LaCapra in Chatterjee et. Al). How does this observation of the sociality of trauma by LaCapra resonate with

Muslim women post-2002? How do their experiences, at once particular and unique, connect with a larger experience of collective trauma shared by the Muslim community in Gujarat? Kakar coins the term “chosen trauma,” one he defines as provoked by “an event which causes a community to feel helpless and victimized and therefore embedded in communal identity” (Kakar, 50). Though I would question his terminology, I am interested in how a more rigid community identity, as a result of shared trauma, affects Muslim women’s sense of belonging, connection, wellness, and interest and ability to engage in community organizing and social justice struggles.

Further, Alexander discusses intra-community experiences of trauma, recognition or dismissal of these collective traumas and the blurry lines between victims and perpetrators. He says that when speaking of “the nature of the victim,” the trauma a group suffered is considered less compelling and less severe if other groups incurred trauma as well, or if the victim group could have encouraged or precipitated a traumatic event for another group, thereby being both victims and perpetrators (J.C. Alexander, 14). In the case of the 2002 genocide in Gujarat, Muslim mobs in Godhra, who were accused of setting fire to a train of Hindu pilgrims, were named provocateurs for the subsequent attacks against Muslims all over Gujarat. The rhetoric of neutrality of Indian nationals or those in the diaspora often evokes a refusal to “take sides” simply because the violence occurred from both sides. This discounting of power differentials and dynamics makes it impossible to view the communal violence from the framework of genocide.

Unlike the mental health scholars and clinicians that conducted this research, I was not and am not interested in diagnosing or correcting mental and emotional health ailments. I am interested in how, as social justice organizer Mordecai Ettinger states, these traumas “impact our

ability to connect” (Zimmerman, Pathikonda, Salgado and James) and therefore affect our integrity as individuals and a community. I am interested in what Muslim women organizers are already doing to cope with these compounded traumas and how the Kalaashakti workshop spaces had the potential of contributing moments of connection and integrity. In the following chapter, I conduct a survey of trauma and healing literature, looking at how scholars from a wide range of fields, among them psychotherapy and violence against women, theorize recovering from trauma, and then juxtapose my methodological responses to these theories. I insert my own praxis as an anti-violence intervention, one that centers women's story-telling process, not just the stories themselves, as subversive indications of resilience. I make a case as to why I chose liberatory arts as a platform to collect stories that were, in fact, not primarily about the 2002 genocidal attacks, but rather about everyday life, visions for the future, fun and play. The Kalaashakti workshops are my feminist praxis; they are an extension of the theories I survey and a reflection of the tenets of critical ethnography that call us to not only observe suffering but address it.

## **Chapter Two: Liberatory Methodologies: Trauma and Healing, Critical Ethnography and Spiritual Activism**

In this chapter, I introduce critical and holistic, ethnographic methodologies that are aimed at eliciting holistic, self-epistemologies from the participants -- different modes of knowing, expressing, and witnessing trauma that stretch beyond intellect and speech and perhaps allow inaccuracy, partial disclosure and partial anonymity. Mary Watkins and Helene Shulman state in *Psychologies of Liberation*, that witnessing is important to reverse the original situation of trauma where no one was there to understand and validate the experience of violence (Watkins and Shulman, 240). Perhaps, the simple act of being seen and heard can bring a survivor out of isolation and make them feel their struggle is shared or at least acknowledged, in its magnitude, as a significant and life-altering experience. I am interested in how and under what conditions effective and ethical testimony and witnessing can take place and how the Kalaashakti workshops used art and mindfulness as a medium for these disclosures and receptions. How can the tenets of art and mindfulness achieve the objectives of critical and holistic ethnography? The Kalaashakti workshops themselves were an attempt to answer the call of critical ethnography by creating a space of non-violent activism that sought to not only uncover oppressive, unjust conditions but allow space to tell stories of interconnection, belonging, empathy and re-embodiment, qualities that indicate recovery and spiritual consciousness. In line with the tenets of critical ethnography that urge a conscious response to the suffering we witness as researchers, the stories and poems of the Kalaashakti participants offer concrete applications for addressing suffering through personal and relational transformation.

## *Towards Methodologies of Liberation: Integrating Critical and Holistic Ethnography*

“...labor for an emergent liberation where the limits of what one can be are cracked open”  
(Foucault in Madison).

The Kalaashakti workshops are a response to what I understand as the impacts of communal violence and trauma: a dissolution of a whole and integrated Self<sup>31</sup> that has the potential to affect an organizer's ability to work for social change. Over the course of two years, I facilitated five Kalaashakti workshops in Gujarat, India: three at Sahiyar, a women's rights organization, one with the girls at M.E.S. Boys School and one with Samerth Trust, a development organization. For the purposes of this dissertation, I focus on the workshops with Sahiyar, one with the majority Muslim field workers, another with the majority Hindu staff and one with Muslim youth. I don't claim to be offering treatment, guaranteed and definite healing, liberation from suffering and trauma, or expert mindfulness and meditation guidance. I was, however, compelled to offer a service, tools, without a foreseen result or product, and embark on the methodology of liberatory arts, spiritual activism, and community engaged research. It is important to emphasize that this project was by no means introducing spiritual activism into the lives of these organizers, I merely offered the project as a different way to record their practices through the generative and insightful medium of the arts. Watkins and Shulman evoke Anzaldúa's naming, "nepantlera," to describe facilitators of the liberatory arts. "Facilitators for liberation arts projects restore the connections between power and freedom, speech and silence. For Gloria Anzaldúa, such people are "nepantleras" -- those who know how to live in transitional

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<sup>31</sup> I use Lata Mani's scholarship to define the "integrated Self" as one that recognizes their interconnection with all living beings and the phenomenal world.



and liminal spaces betwixt and between" (Watkins and Shulman, 241). I do not consider myself fully initiated into the virtues, fluidity and prowess of a skilled nepantlera, and the exciting possibilities to chip away at the disconnections between power and freedom, speech and silence drew me into this role, as best as I could occupy it. I intervened, maybe not with the intention to restore, but to live in the in-between for a fixed time, carrying the hope that my methodology could remain process-oriented, one that could reawaken expression and value the means of reviving stories, not the ends of data collection.<sup>32</sup> There was a dual function of this project: to witness stories of self-transformation, interconnection, belonging, and empathy and perhaps enhance and aid these processes through the medium of art; art was a means to collect data and to stir the inner work of reflection.

As the facilitator of the Kalaashakti workshops, residing in the in-between as nepantlera, witnessing the stories of trauma of these women and girls carried with it possibilities of my own transformation. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub bring in the positionality of the one witnessing the testimony, often times in institutional settings, a researcher, therapist, state official, judge, as one with a level of assumed knowledge or authority, and the crisis of this witnessing. Felman and Laub state that one cannot listen to a testimony of trauma without their own life experiences being stirred up, struggling with boundaries, feeling separate and disconnected from the speaker, or physically disturbed. Felman and Laub ask if it's possible to bond with the narrator of the testimony in a common struggle (xvii). This transference of trauma opens up the potential for co-

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<sup>32</sup> During Spring and Summer of 2012, I was trained and received a Certificate in Social Emotional Arts Education from UCLArts and Healing, which is an organizational member of the UCLA Collaborative Centers for Integrative Medicine. The objective of the training was to train participants in maximizing social-emotional benefits through arts experiences while minimizing anxiety and self-judgment. The training featured "the use of sound, rhythm, movement, and other creative approaches to group behavior management, verbal and nonverbal communication, managing special needs and integration with typical students, identifying and responding to trauma, strengthening personal presentation skills, and evaluating program outcomes." Through this training we learned to develop process-oriented therapeutic arts workshops; we made a distinction between "arts therapy" and the "therapeutic arts" which can ethically include a broad spectrum of practitioners.

compassion and a shared empathy that brings the listener into a greater state of awareness and stake in the testimony. Transference within group storytelling and sharing does not just occur between researcher and subjects; subjects are at once, testifiers and witnesses, walking the delicate line between asking to be seen and rendering others as seen. During the Sahiyar girls workshops, many girls spoke in third-person about experiences of violence; they spoke about a story relayed from others, one witnessed and passed through many hands and mouths. It was often unclear who the subject and the witness actually were, and yet, there was a resonant familiarity that rippled through the group during these meta-witnessings.

"I heard a story too, in my school, with my girlfriends. Her father used to rape her and when he impregnated her, her mom supported her. And when her friends found out, they went to the police and when the police asked the father he said that Allah mia came to him in his dreams and said if you do this with your daughter you will get a lot of things in this world. So now the girl had a break down after a year. And she's the mother of a child. And she was a 20 year old girl. We read it in the paper in school. Her own biological father was raping her saying that 'Allah mia came to me in my dream' and that he would get this and that. So the girl was saying yes. Her mom was even saying yes, but her brother didn't know. He was working and was younger. And then her friends started a police case. Now her father is in jail. The girl is with her mother" (Radia).

Transference could break down the assigned roles of researcher and subject (and potentially amongst workshop participants/subjects) and draw upon the researcher's interconnected experiences of trauma and subjectivity. Although when there is a power differential between speaker and listener transference can potentially upset this disparity and the listener's privileged distance, unchecked transference, without the appropriate boundaries and

support for the researcher, could interfere with the researcher's objective of data collection. There could be something profoundly subversive in a sharing that awakens consciousness and subjectivity, dormant before the release of the story, in the position of one who wasn't immediately affected by the violence. But, as Marianne Hirsch cautions, there is also a risk of appropriation. In her discussion of intergenerational witnessing, she defines, "retrospective witnessing by adoption" as an identification with, instead of an identification as, and also asks whether it is really possible to have this transmission without the appropriation of a trauma that one didn't experience first-hand (Hirsch, 76-77).

With my positionality as a part of the Indian diaspora in the West, specifically Gujarati Muslim, these transmissions could have taken place although a direct bloodline didn't link me with the participants. The challenge will remain to differentiate our life experiences just as I resonate and connect with anti-Muslim violence in the diaspora. The potential to bond with the narrators of the stories I have witnessed in a shared struggle, as Laub and Felman suggest, is an alluring and romanticized desire for connection and, yet, I cannot fully imagine the stakes for these women in their struggles for healing, as the contexts, extent, and continuance of our wounds differ greatly and my temporary, transnational presence is too ephemeral for engaged solidarity.

### ***Only in Translation***

*I remembered the word  
for communal violence  
in Gujarati.  
It came to me.*

*Subliminal.  
As if  
my memories were  
detached from my tongue,  
prayer from my hands.  
I typed my fear  
with careful spelling  
Because I don't live it.  
I asked  
with concern  
because I can sleep  
without fire  
lapping at my dreams.  
I remembered  
hatred and agony,  
but only in translation.  
Red soil.  
Separated.  
Too long  
from my feet. (Diwan)*

These Kalaashakti workshops aimed at creating a circle of witnesses that could absorb and sustain despite and because of transference. The workshops were guided by a commitment to ethics, critical theory in action (Madison,14) and the blended methodologies of critical and holistic ethnography, ones that move the researcher as witness to conscious and empathetic responsiveness. Dr. Soyini Madison defines critical ethnography as beginning, "...with an ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular lived domain. By "ethical responsibility," I mean a compelling sense of duty and commitment based on principles

of human freedom and well-being and, hence, a compassion for the suffering of living beings” (Madison,5). Veena Das poses this question to the field of Anthropology as well, asking what it means for anthropological knowledge to be responsive to suffering (Das, 207)? Critical ethnography places the onus on the researcher to not just be in dialogue with theory for theory’s sake, or to delve into an investigation of how hegemonic systems operate, but to imagine alternatives to these hegemonic systems. In this sense, the critical ethnographer synthesizes research and activism as mutually constitutive and as equally necessary for one to contribute to a more just human condition. Michelle Fine discusses the activist stance in qualitative research as one in which, “...the ethnographer takes a clear position in intervening on hegemonic practices and serves as an advocate in exposing the material effects of marginalized locations while offering alternatives” (Madison, 6). In this application of qualitative research and feminist praxis, the researcher is not merely a witness and documentarian, a note-taker and testimony-collector, they are an engaged and informed advocate for the rights and the voices of their subjects. And in advocating for the communities they research, they serve those communities, as well, in imagining new worlds, moving from “what is” to “what could be” (Madison, 5).

In order to be fully effective in critical ethnography, to show up and switch between and embody many roles and address many needs, I believe what I call "holistic ethnography," which is intimately aimed at eliciting a holistic epistemology, sheds light on *how* to address human suffering and care for our subjects. Holistic ethnography celebrates multiple intelligences, corporeal and emotional, and hopes to send ripples from individual self-knowing to collective transformation. Gloria Gonzalez-Lopez, a Chicana, feminist scholar, applies Anzalduan theories of revolutionary knowing that, as Foucault states, “...reinvent epistemological certainties that foreclose possibilities of reordering authoritarian regimes of truth...” (Madison, 6). Just as

Lopez does with her study of incest survivors in Mexico, I move beyond an isolated intellectual process to one that celebrates the multiple intelligences of my participants, corporeal and emotional, and hopes to send ripples from individual self-knowing to collective transformation. Lopez brings in Anzaldua's concept of "conocimiento" as "an epistemology that tries to encompass all the dimensions of life, both inner—mental, emotional, instinctive, imaginal, spiritual, bodily realms—and outer—social, political, lived experiences..." (Gonzalez-Lopez, 6). According to Das, "...to grasp a love or a tragedy by intellect is not sufficient in having real human knowledge of it" (Das, 76). This is where a holistic approach to gathering stories of trauma and healing is absolutely crucial. In her praxis of critical ethnography, Gonzalez-Lopez is committed to moving between and amongst different modes of feminist activism. Gonzalez-Lopez describes her methods of effecting change: "I have become a curious researcher who persistently looks for deep human wounds of sexualized abuse and pain in order to immerse myself in and identify the social complexities and interconnections that produce and reproduce such forms of social injustice and inequality in the country I was born and raised" (Gonzalez-Lopez, 4). These are the hegemonic systems that must be revealed, questioned and critiqued for alternatives to be dreamt up. My motivation for choosing expressive arts workshops instead of straightforward, traditional interviews or observations stems from my commitment to exalt concealed and discounted knowledges, incomplete knowledges, stories that exist only in relation. My central question: How can the tenets of art and mindfulness achieve the objectives of critical and holistic ethnography? I believe these workshops push the researcher and the subjects to speak and listen, holistically, with all the senses and aspects of self, mind, body and spirit, and dig into and summon self-reflection and knowing that subvert the boisterous "regimes of truth" that have drowned out alternatives.

Revolutionary knowing seems to need autonomy of thoughts in order to flourish and residual trauma passed down by elders can impede that process. Marilyn Charles, a scholar who works on intergenerational trauma within Aboriginal communities in Australia, strongly asserts the need for younger generations that inherit trauma from elders to excavate their truths, voices, and self-conceived ways of knowing the world in order to heal.

Many of the girls in my Sahiyar workshop series of Spring 2013 were daughters, granddaughters, chosen nieces of the Muslim women field workers with whom I conducted my first workshop series a year before. Many of them were just toddlers when the violence broke out in 2002. Although it seemed they had no conscious memories of the conflict, at least ones they could access and verbally share, transference of intergenerational trauma seemed a definite possibility. Marilyn Charles states that "unresolved grief has been found to be a key factor that impedes a child's development. Even otherwise attuned and responsive parents with unresolved grief issues are less accessible as resources to their children and may even impede development through disorganized or disregulated behaviors that are frightening to the child" (Charles, 133). Intrinsically, in the inheritance of trauma, parents (and I would venture a broad network of elders in India's communal, social arrangements) pass along their strengths and deficits, their aversions and inhibitions, and this imposition often blocks children from their own independent self-reflection, their own formations of truth (Charles, 136). The following incident, though of course it cannot be confirmed or proved, gestures at an instance of intergenerational trauma and how it enforces inner group identity, isolation, and separation.

*Excited by how out of place I was in the tight gulleys, amongst the topi-adorned heads, how unusual I, and the work I had come to do, was, the neighbors ushered me into their home before I could even step onto my Feyji's threshold. Chai and questions followed.*

*They flattered and praised me before they knew my story; the dadi (grandmother), the matriarch of the house, telling me she'd send her granddaughter to participate in my workshops the next day. I was so excited by this reception, by this acceptance, since every day, as I stepped onto the streets, I doubted the value and relevance of my work. The dust and the heat coated my feet and my brow just the same as everyone else but I noticed how much I sweat. My pores were unaccustomed to taking in the elements and recycling them, maintaining a sturdy equilibrium despite harsh conditions. I quickly flushed them out. I didn't wear my Muslimness the same way; I melted under the unfiltered, tropic sun and the memories of violence I didn't live. I felt fragile there; my presence momentary and fragile and entirely afflicted.*

*Basking in the neighbors' outpourings of attention I didn't detect the terrible misunderstanding they were based off of: they assumed the workshops would be cultivating a Muslim femaleness, an essential Muslim femaleness that was opposed to all that was Hindu. A call to arms. And then they launched into their defensive strategy. Muslim girls had to be vigilant, and so did the women who watched over them; they had to be careful to guard their honor against the jadu, black magic, of Hindu men. There had been more and more reported cases of runaways; these girls were obviously tricked and lured into lust. IstagfarAllah<sup>33</sup> if they had willingly chosen these marriages. I came out, once again, with my choice of partner. I was engaged to a Hindu man, a Gujarati Hindu man, and I, sitting and sipping chai in front of them, had no glazed over, entranced zombie eyes, no spell led me to that decision. Respect and awe shifted into something like pity and betrayal and I knew my work's actual objective: to seek and*

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<sup>33</sup> God forbid



*uncover the complex ways of being a Muslim girl, self-chosen ways. It was challenging more than Hindu suppression. It was confronting intergenerational trauma within the Muslim community that may have stifled and snuffed out articulations of being and belonging that deviated from what was prescribed to bring back unity, what was prescribed to empower in the often helpless aftermath of violence. The granddaughter averted her eyes from mine. Her dadi didn't send her to my workshops the next day.*

*(Diwan)*

Rerouting the unsolicited and profoundly impactful inheritance of trauma, and the judgments and certainties about the world that follow, requires a recognition of one's internal experience and an ability to stay present to these experiences and the emotions that they elicit (Charles, 137-8). It is self-knowledge, then, that disrupts the lineage of trauma, often passed through subtle, unseen undercurrents. Charles considers art an effective modality with which to pursue the self-exploration that is crucial to responding to the damage of intergenerational trauma, one that obfuscates one's own perceptions and truths while insidiously internalizing those of older generations.

***The Liberatory Arts and Spiritual Practice: Self Transformation through Self-Epistemology***

"...physical pain destroys meaning, since pain has no object: it is not 'of' or 'for' or 'about' anything. Therefore... the opposite of pain must be creativity. Every human act of 'making' is a movement away from pain. The antidote to pain is imagination: our ability to make meaning" (Scarry in Garrett, 330).

Liberatory arts embodies the practice of the holistic and critical ethnographic frameworks that guide my study; it is a life-affirming artery of my chosen methodologies leading to a pulsing and alive praxis. "The goal of liberation arts projects is to resurrect resources to transform oppressive structures of language and society, and to de-ideologize understandings. They make space for resymbolizing and resignifying the world, enlarging possibilities for restructuring economic, social, and personal realities" (Watkins and Shulman, 234). This resurrection begins with the personal, ever-spiraling out to the collective, "restoring capacities for meaning making" (Watkins and Shulman, 234) that may have been co-opted, obscured or destroyed by hegemonic narratives along the way.

Art is a natural vehicle for the self-exploration and self-epistemology that I advocate for, one that is linked to spiritual connection and awakening which, I will argue, is crucial to sustaining organizers and movements. The trajectory here is creative expression => spiritual connection as laying the inner work for => societal transformation and social justice. At the heart of this project I am committed to a holistic self-epistemology, both my own and the participants'; the methods of liberatory arts that I employ span the spectrum of knowing by conjuring, encouraging and valuing "conocimiento," an epistemology that draws from the mental, emotional, instinctive, imaginal, bodily and spiritual wells of intellect. Because, as Das states, "to grasp a love or a tragedy by intellect is not sufficient in having real human knowledge of it," I choose art as it grants us access to a deep excavation into a world of knowing.

Sharon Goodill, scholar and one of the leading thinkers in creative arts therapies, says, "Artistic expression is a way to know one's own state of mind and heart, a way to check in with the self, and a way to communicate the inner experience" (46). With the unique expression each participant has to offer, recognizing that their perspectives are needed and that they are the most

suited to speak them can facilitate pride and value in their contributions to the group. Goodill goes on to connect the wellness of the body to that of the mind, bringing in an integrated concept of self, and asserts that checking in with uncomfortable emotions can be crucial to healing and unloading embodied traumas. Art is a way to check in with oneself and communicate the inner experience, even if it is 'negative,' because constraining these feelings affects the functioning of the nervous system and places continual stress on the body if it is not cycled out or released (Goodill, 47).

Art can also allow victims to feel like agents in their survival. In the article, "Art as Spiritual Practice," a multi-authored interview with artists convening to reflect on the traumatic impacts of 9/11, Cage states how the artistic process can affirm that "we are all in the best seat" (Cage, et. al, 20), possibly reinserting meaning and worthiness in participants' testimonies. As Norman K. Denzin states, these are "the storied performances of life experiences from the selves of the person and inward to the persons and groups that give them meaning and structure. Persons are arbitrators of their own presence in the world" (Denzin, 4). A story that has been hidden or silenced (by law enforcement or the stigmas of society), such as the stories of Muslim women survivors with PTSD, discussed in the previous chapter, may come to light with a surge of empowerment instead of shame. These "subjugated knowledges" (Foucault in Watkins and Shulman) can be unconcealed and then channeled into affective experiences through public arts. bell hooks emphasizes the liberatory potentials of speaking back to hegemonic structures of power: "Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side, a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of "talking back," that is no mere gesture of empty words,

that is the expression of moving from object to subject – the liberated voice" (hooks in Watkins and Shulman, 264-5).

Artistic expression can be like a testimony of one's life experiences; making visible and circulating knowledge of violence and trauma through testimony and memory. These have been presented by scholars as vital, albeit often problematic, paths to recovery. In the introduction to *States of Trauma*, Chatterjee, Desai and Roy remark, "Cathy Caruth has insisted that knowledge and trauma exist in a difficult relationship with each other, in a 'complex relation between knowing and not knowing'" (Chatterjee, Desai and Roy, ii). Chatterjee, Desai and Roy go on to critique the overly-romanticized perceptions of feminist testimonies of gendered violence in that these testimonies carry with them fetishized assumptions of authenticity. The assumption is that "the testimony which emerges from suffering is 'mimetic' of trauma—therefore more authentic. But as Caruth, La Capra and other scholars of witness, trauma and memory have shown us, the nature of trauma is that it deranges; that the texts of witnesses-survivors are not 'mirrors' of the event/wound/condition precisely because the traumatic condition is itself "unstable," wrenched to spaces that simply cannot be safely defined as 'mimetic'"(Chatterjee et. al, iii). Can there be value in testimony for the sake of testimony and reception through witnessing and not for the purposes of evaluation? Caruth still advocates expressing traumatic accounts alongside witnessing these retellings; she argues that even in the impossibility for trauma to be read and fully known, there is an ethical responsibility for trauma to be witnessed regardless of how slippery the process can be. Expanding on Caruth's quandary, I question whether knowing can actually be confirmed and who has the authority to confirm the 'truth'; does knowing need external affirmation to be a valid expression that can contribute towards self/community recovery?

Jeffrey Alexander insists that healing is dependent on the accuracy of memory, of the recollection of trauma. Alexander recounts the psychoanalytic understanding that “trauma can only be resolved when truth and accurate memory surface” (J.C. Alexander, 5). Alexander states that in order to undo the repression of memory, survivors of violence must engage in the work of political struggle, commemoration, and cultural representation (J.C. Alexander, 7). He draws his argument from Freud, stating that suffering must be addressed through the cultural work of recollecting, reworking and mourning for the past. This psychoanalytic understanding can be problematic in how it stresses the victim’s responsibility, already in a marginalized position to have incurred violence to begin with, in not just determining an accurate narrative of trauma, but externalizing it for societal evaluation and approval. It is fair to ask if it is even possible to recover repressed memory fully, to neatly resolve present traumatic effects with past cause. And, whether accepted by the listener as accurate, as mimetic of traumatic experience, the recollection of memory, in whatever state it resurfaces, can be an empowering process, according to Achille Mbembe. His call is to, "address suffering in history in a way that can lead to the birth of a subject—self-recovery through being an agent of memory rather than a victim" (Mbembe in Das, 212). Recalling memory intentionally could possibly reinsert agency for the survivor of trauma. Tzvetan Todorov introduces the concept of "exemplary memory," one which relies on, "protected spaces where recollection can occur, [that can be] successfully contain[ed] so that it doesn't take over a person's life completely" (Todorov in Watkins and Shulman, 236). Todorov envisions processes of uncovering and facilitating "exemplary memory" as bringing to the fore multiple perspectives, visions of how to repair, restore and build new solidarities. For him, memory is essential to imagining and manifesting exemplary futures.

I am interested in fostering and promoting a "community of self-declared truths and untruths" that, though stemming from the instability of traumatic experiences, are embraced in their entirety or fragmentation, in their first-hand accounts or as inherited narratives. Multiple testimonies speaking from multiple sets of knowledge can co-exist and yet, will the affirmation of each, despite contradictions, have the propulsion towards healing? Is the recovery of accurate memory really intrinsic to a recovery of an authentically integrated self? Regardless of the accuracy of testimony and memory, it is the actual articulation of self through the expression of once-concealed experiences that can mitigate healing, according to liberatory art scholars, and this truth-telling happens in community. The journey of self-knowing, of self-epistemology, is not an isolated endeavor, it can, as Parama Roy reflects on her research subject's testimony, "move away from the individuality of pain to a collective sharing....to create another kind of moral community..." (Roy in *States of Trauma*, 20). I consider spirituality a connection beyond the material and the mundane, a belief in a deeper meaning. I do not, however, link it to a particular religion or faith tradition. Art and spirituality integrate the self and the other, connecting the art-maker to something bigger than oneself to facilitate interconnection (Lacy). There is a breakdown of individuality and sense of separateness and isolation that, according to the healthcare workers and clinicians I referenced in the last chapter, are an outcome of trauma. Art can facilitate finding the divine within, as some Buddhist scholars put it, internalizing an ability to re-create and re-birth oneself (Knowles et. al, 29) through the creative power to self-define.

I define mindfulness as sinking into the here and now as the only reality and being aware of the quality, texture, emotions, and felt senses of the moment. "Art as Spiritual Practice," emphasizes how art can bring the practitioner into the present moment, one that is ephemeral and

constantly changing (Knowles et.al, 23); it is, itself, without a meditation cushion, an entry into mindfulness. Both engaged art and engaged Buddhism focus on being present to everyday life experiences (Lacy, 100), which some scholars of trauma propose as a way of coping, processing and releasing trauma. Veena Das states that, “violence can only be repaired by descending into the (everyday) world and mourning for it” (76). Therefore, for Das, it is not resurfacing memories of past afflictions or discovering a truth about a perpetrator or sexualized crime that can lead to resolution or peace for a victim, but the resolve to live in the everyday despite it. For Das, survival is in the “making of {the} self {that} is not located in the shadow of the past but in making the everyday inhabitable” (216). It is in expression that this transportation is possible. Denzin concurs: "In writing about trauma, violence and betrayal, in reliving the trauma... [the participants] are pushed out of the past back to the present..." (Denzin, 5). There is a possibility here, then, to transcend, even for a moment or the duration of an exercise, the cycle of reliving trauma. I introduce liberatory arts methods in an attempt to interrupt cycles of retraumatization, bringing to the fore Muslim women's stories of resilience and thriving in the present moment.

### ***Spiritual Activism: Healing the Self, Healing the Whole***

Kalaashakti is about healing the self towards community transformation, recognizing that spiritual action needs individual consciousness. The consciousness possible through liberatory arts and storytelling methods and through participants' own methods and practices of spiritual connection and descending into the everyday, could also contribute to collective consciousness and collective transformation. Because, as South Asian scholar Lata Mani says, this contemplative work, this spiritual journey, isn't separate from the social -- each practitioner is

part of a social web. She states that there must be a “transformation of institutions, but also of the consciousness of each person in society and of the culture as a whole” (Mani, 144). With this in mind, are the sites of the Kalaashakti workshops potentially ripe for anti-violence activism through deep reflection and excavation of the human experience? Mani states that suffering exists because we feel separate from the entirety of ourselves and all beings; we neglect to see everything as one and as inherently divine. This suffering, spawned from a disconnection from spiritual integration, is the origin of dehumanization, the absence of compassion and empathy, and the distance from the wounds of others. I again ask the questions: How can and does Kalaashakti make an intervention, however momentary and brief, by practicing empathy and compassion through storytelling? How does the remembering/recalling/reciting of stories of humanity aid in our reunion and the recovery of a meaningful belonging to each other?

Scholars and community activists who insist on the integration of spirituality and activism seek to revive the alignment between the two, which has sometimes been muddled or dismissed, and often emphatically state that not only are spirituality and activism not contradictions, they are one in the same. Although there are many stigmas against spirituality in academia, I agree with Mani when she argues that spiritual consciousness is not mutually exclusive of critical analysis and in fact allows us to be more introspective researchers and scholars. The significance of spiritual activism to this work is in how self-knowing and self-transformation impacts communities and facilitates connection in the face of the divisive logic of communal violence. To understand spiritual activism, one must grapple with the seemingly elusive definition of spirituality. Spirit and spirituality have been defined as a trust in mysterious sources, in otherness that is oneness, and an inextricable link to something beyond and above and often unseen. These beliefs don't have to be specifically drawn from one set of rituals or



practices or confined to a particular religious community and it is this sometimes nameless, fluid, living of spirit and spirituality that I seek out in the stories of the Kalaashakti women. My analysis is not one of Islamic spirituality, ritual, ablutions and ceremony; it is not of spirituality fused to formal and institutionalized religious pronouncements. My analysis is of the way spirit weaves its way into stories, our shared presence together, and the subtle and mundane experiences and emotions we recount. Jacqui Alexander speaks of Spirit as "...the repository of consciousness that derives from a source residing elsewhere.." (298). With this understanding of Spirit, our possibility towards consciousness is not sought out through our will alone nor are we fully to thank for its awakening. Catherine Garrett adds that "across many cultures, 'spirit' implies connection. Spirit is most richly understood as that which binds the cosmos together and ties us all to each other within it" (Garrett, 335). It is this connection, the reframing and absorption of the external, that social movements scholar Laura Pulido emphasizes. "Spirituality refers to consciousness and connection—our connections as individuals to our souls, other people, places, nature, spirits, and in some cases, connections to a creator" (Pulido, 721). Here, a spiritual experience does not have to be felt uniformly; it is diverse and diffuse, highly personal and yet impactful to the collective. Pulido further states that spirituality can refer to a connection to the supernatural or to community (Pulido, 721), both being equally profound, equally powerful. This anchor of connection beyond the self-as-independent easily leads to a mobilization of spiritual ethics within social justice struggles. Spiritual activism is born out of this integration.

“spiritual activism begins with the personal yet moves outward, acknowledging our radical interconnectedness. This is spirituality for social change, spirituality that recognizes the many differences among us yet insists on our commonalities and uses

these commonalities as catalysts for transformation. What a contrast: while identity politics requires holding onto specific categories of identity, spiritual activism demands that we let them go” (Anzaldua in Lopez, 5).

The stigmas against spirituality, by both academics and activists alike, often preclude its entry as a tool compatible with transforming systemic oppression. Pulido discusses the marginalized position of spirituality in academia as not merely amongst the traditional natural sciences. She states that even with feminist strides in methodology that broaden fields of inquiry away from empirical research, there is still little room to talk about emotions, soul and spirituality (Pulido, 719). This is because, despite these strides, materialism is privileged while religion is dismissed (Pulido, 719) and knowledge based on scientific rationality trumps religious knowledge (Mani, 2). Again, it is a question of epistemological accuracy and validity, of how we derive knowledge and whether our sources are deemed credible. What if our sources are ourselves or the unseen? Pulido calls out the biases of social scientists who study social movements, asking, that despite our personal relationship to spirituality, "how do we as social scientists treat the spiritual beliefs of those who are the focus of our research" (Pulido, 719)? Can secular scholars accept the interweaving of spiritual practices and activism of the subjects that they study? Jacqui Alexander particularly points to feminism saying that "...[it] has perhaps assisted in the privatization of the spiritual...[its] dichotomization from organized political movements" (326). The question is whether spiritual practice and social justice activism are, in actuality, mutually exclusive and in opposition or whether there can exist a public spirituality, one that moves beyond the individual.

Mani contrasts the seemingly incongruous agendas of secular social justice and what she calls contemplative critique, a combination of spiritual inquiry and critical theory. Secular social

justice, according to Mani, is premised upon the notion that society makes false hierarchies that lead to inequalities and that, to bring about change, the goal is to eradicate inequalities and challenge and reform the institutions that create them. While a secular scholar of social change, such as Gramsci, is interested in political and cultural hegemony, the spiritual practitioner is interested in the hegemony of the ego. Are the secular social justice activist and the spiritual activist fighting different battles? Are their understandings of oppression fundamentally different or is it merely their approaches to addressing it? Mani looks to dismantle these dualisms by shifting consciousness and accepting the external, social conditions of the world as also present in her, in us all. She does this by arguing that spiritual consciousness is not mutually exclusive of critical analysis and, in fact, it allows us to be more introspective researchers and scholars, evaluating structures and how we mirror those structures of power, privilege and control in ourselves. She calls for a revolutionizing of consciousness of each individual as a prerequisite to a transformation of collective political consciousness. Mani states that secular social justice and spiritual activism differ in what they identify as the root causes of oppressive conditions that prevent equality, inclusivity and interdependence, though the actual identification of these root causes are central to both philosophies of change (148). Mani insists that contemplative practice and secular activism must be interwoven; she insists that activism is about *both* systems of domination and socioeconomic conditions as well as "existential questions like the human capacity to endure, the inspiration and courage that enable so many to live not just survive" (148). There is a tendency for contemplative critique to focus on personal/individual liberation and for secular activism to not focus on the self but on the collective. Both, she says, are detrimental (Mani, 146-7) which is why a new paradigm of social change must fuse the two into mutually reinforcing and constitutive practices of transformation.

If, according to what the scholars and practitioners of spiritual activism suggest, individual consciousness, transformation and healing must forego social transformation, like a spiral extending outwards, how do we understand this process of self-transformation and self-healing through a spiritual lens? Scholars of spiritual activism center healing the self as a radical undertaking, one that is decolonial, feminist, and, in fact, collectivist in its ripples and intent. Elisa Facio states that “to only resist is to remain in a male-energy mode; to heal is to transform, and transformation involves the feminine principle. The decolonization of our bodies and the reclaiming of our spirits is a struggle for our human rights as women” (69-70). Jacqui Alexander states, in no uncertain terms, that "healing work is the antidote to oppression" (312). So, what are the qualities of this revolutionary journey towards healing, as described by Facio and Alexander? Garrett states that "the true meaning of ‘healing’ is not the elimination of pain, but its transformation into an occasion for connection, not loss" (339). As discussed earlier, within the trauma and healing literature, trauma elicits a sense of isolation and here it is suggested that spiritual practice can facilitate its repair: not an erasure of pain, but a connection with others that share that same pain, "a means of ‘being with’ others who suffer; of recognizing their own pain as part of human suffering in all its forms." A return to Spirit, much like the personal narratives recounted by Lata Mani, Jacqui Alexander and Elisa Facio, could alleviate the symptoms and loss of isolated suffering and instead, reintegrate, rehumanize, reinsert compassion and empathy, and bring us closer to the wounds of others as reflections of our own.

My research methods grew out of an intellectual and human compulsion to embed collective, empathetic witnessing in my ethnographic study. When conceiving of Kalaashakti I thought of Audre Lorde when she implores us, "the visibility that makes us most vulnerable is that which is our greatest strength" (42). The Kalaashakti workshop circles documented

moments of spiritual transformation, not as an end to be reached and accomplished, but as tiny sutures sewn and sometimes undone but remembered and told, nonetheless. The liberatory arts and mindfulness methods drew out stitches made by the participants very hands, ones that interrupted the torrential, cacophonous current of trauma, through stories, poems, movement, drawing, song and theater.

***Beyond Romantic Notions of "Safe" Space: from Methodologies to Practice in the Conception of Kalaashakti***

In total, over the course of my years of fieldwork in Gujarat, I planned and facilitated five workshop series: one with Sahiyar field workers, one with Sahiyar staff, one with students of MES High School, one with Sahiyar youth and one with the organizers of Samerth Trust. For the purposes of this dissertation, I draw mostly from the winter 2011 workshop series which met weekly for 3-4 hours at the Sahiyar office from October 2011- January 2012 and was conducted with the majority Muslim field workers. I also briefly draw from a two-day intensive workshop that I was invited to give to the mostly Hindu, Sahiyar staff. I was often asked by Hindu academics in India, my Hindu partner at the time, and acquaintances, why create a space solely for Muslim women; wasn't that just perpetuating communal divisions? In an interview with Sophia Khan, director of SAFAR, an NGO that focuses on pluralism and peace in Ahmedabad, she poignantly articulated the need for spaces for Muslim women. She cited the lack of participation of Muslims in many feminist organizations in India, as well as, the lack of consciousness of many non-Muslim organizers that this problem of representation must be addressed (at the time of Kalaashakti, there was only one Muslim staff member in Sahiyar). She

shared with me that early Muslim feminists in India related more to Hindu elites and distanced themselves from the Muslim community, and that this ushering into the mainstream ultimately did not serve Muslim women's interests or needs. She stated, "Why only for Muslim women? We need that space. If it's only Muslim women then it wouldn't be a sensationalized space" (Khan). Here she was referencing the frequent tendency for Muslim women's stories to be extracted, co-opted, manipulated and turned against their communities in, yet another, attempt to stigmatize and churn up Islamophobia.

My early interviews with Sahiyar staff provided further insight into the vulnerable situation Muslim women were in post-2002 and how this led to more and more withdrawal from public space. This early evidence propelled the vision of Kalaashakti, as an alternative public forum, forward. During my first visit to the Sahiyar office, I met with Rita bhen, Sahiyar's resident counselor of 22 years, and she explained the structure and purpose behind the counseling services they offered to the community. Rita bhen described counseling as an alternative to the police, stating that 70% of the time counseling solved the family dispute in question and culminated with a contract signed by all parties without involving the authorities (Rita bhen). However, she said, because of the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, she is still sometimes called to court to testify. Rita bhen recounted the conditions that altered Muslim women's relationship with and access to public space, community and support. After 2002, she says, Muslim women stopped coming to counseling -- she asks me, rhetorically, did domestic violence disappear? When she met with the Muslim community she realized that women stopped coming because of their fear of the police; if Muslim women filed complaints, the police would use that excuse to beat their men. And yet, in the camps, Muslim women were afraid of their own men, according to Rita bhen -- girls of 15-16 would be married off to men

twice their age (Rita bhen). In an intersectional analysis, Rita bhen illustrated the confounding dilemma Muslim women face at the juncture of Hindu supremacy and patriarchal misogyny, "On this side a lake, on the other a well" (Rita bhen). It would become clear, however, that as much as Muslim only spaces were called for and needed, there was no utopic, "safe," alternative public space I could conjure, especially as a Western academic. Kalaashakti, from the start, was imbued with power dynamics that flattened any claims to horizontalism.

Rita bhen told me, "foreigners would come and keep asking about 2002, keep picking scabs, and survivors didn't want to talk about it again....[sometimes] after having to talk about it again they stay in a trance for a week" (Rita bhen). Other Sahiyar activists I spoke with would often say they didn't want to "bring the dead from the graves" and would then explain the rationale behind their campaign shift towards communal harmony trainings in schools. This drive to consume, that Rita bhen and others articulated, fully exemplified Linda Tuhiwai Smith's assertion that "the term "research" is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism" (L.T. Smith, 1) and that after recounting their traumas these Muslim women "insiders have to live with the consequences of their processes on a day-to-day basis forever more, and so do their families and communities..." (L.T. Smith, 137). With Rita bhen's words, I flashed back to my first week in Ahmedabad, in pre-monsoon May, arriving with my father to meet Rihanna bhen of Saath, a microfinance NGO working in Muslim ghettos.

*After leaving Gandhi Hall and a meeting with Muslim women working on "children's education post-riots," we arrive in the Muslim quarter and in the thick crowd of thopias and ornis, Rihanna bhen, with dark kohl outlining her bright, intense eyes spots us and leads us to the Saath office. She motions for us to take a seat and wait, straightens her pant cuffs and, draining a metal cup into her throat, looks to a group of gathered women:*

*Han Bol (Yes, speak). I watch her dust off a calculator with the edge of her khemis, dirt settling and unsettling quickly here. She designates a group leader and they arrive at a sufficient loan for this month and its layered on top of the small and large tragedies of the last few years. While signing a stack of requests, Rihanna bhen glances up long enough to tell me she's taking me to Anjum colony, one of the buildings where displaced Muslims were relocated after the 2002 riots. I know I'm not ready but have no idea what preparation means. I brace myself and say, "It's a way to begin" (Diwan).*

Rihanna bhen assumed I was just another foreign, riot-tourist, wanting to see the afflicted colonies and be regaled with tales of tragedy and escape, and, with the stream of "foreign do-gooders" Rita bhen mentioned, it was not surprising. I did want to hear stories about the communal violence but, I quickly learned, not through haphazard gatherings with women randomly assembled in the relief colonies to perform for Western researchers. As I awkwardly stumbled through my first group interview, 8-10 women gathered on an open balcony with men leaning in from doorways and my dad sitting next to me to help translate, the responses to my questions about gendered violence and its effects were brief and vapid and I felt foolish and reckless in my approach. Even if there were no truly safe spaces, this was not the mode and environment in which I wanted to engage and build with these women. In this first and only experience conducting traditional interviews with Muslim women survivors, I realized that neither would they be an effective method to gather information nor allow for the compassion and ethics I held as core values in my research. The seeds of Kalaashakti were being planted.

Several months after my first visit to the relief colonies, after shadowing Sahiyar organizers in their communal harmony trainings and counseling sessions, I pitched Kalaashakti to Trupti Shah, the director and one of the co-founders of Sahiyar, and we launched the



workshops in October 2011. There were seven participants during that first Kalaashakti workshop series with Sahiyar field workers: six Muslim women and one Hindu woman. These field workers were working part-time with Sahiyar and received a monthly stipend of 1,000 rupees, approximately \$20 U.S. The weekly Kalaashakti workshops became a part of their mandatory training and yet another duty to fulfill in order to receive their pay. I thought it was interesting that they were called field workers, in some senses, because it seemed to imply that they had access to or were from the Muslim ghettos, neighborhoods with less than optimal living conditions. The field workers were tasked with local initiatives in their muhallahs (neighborhoods) – income generating craft making and selling, recruiting local women to join Sahiyar campaigns, and envisioning new collaborative ventures which included talk of beginning a coalition of female, rickshaw drivers. Their training with Sahiyar was for one year and generally meant meeting 2-3 times a month. It consisted of trainings in public speaking about gender equity and learning about how police and court systems work as well as strategies to utilize their knowledge about local traditions, social mores and the Quran.

During our first Thursday gathering, which coincided with my 28<sup>th</sup> birthday, after introducing myself and the nature of the workshops to elicit storytelling and provide material for my dissertation, I asked the women what their relationship was to writing, what they hoped to gain from the workshops and lead them in the first activity: life maps. I asked them to map out, visually, the most significant moments in their life, so far. Bilkis bhen, the one illiterate participant, drew her self-portrait as floating and free-standing in the middle of the page. She said that even though she had all sons, she was the only one she could rely on and that is how it's been her entire life. She told us she got pulled out of school early, learned carpentry and even how to drive a rickshaw (she was the first woman I had met in India that possessed that skill).

Upon hearing Bilkis bhen's story, Fatu bhen shared hers with tears in her eyes; she too had her education cut short with the rationale of marrying her off young. Although she was able to dodge an early marriage and appeal to her sister in law for support, she never returned to school. Maria bhen's life map showed her tangled up in court proceedings; her husband had married another woman without her consent and, though her brother had been the one who forced her to drop out of school and marry early, he was now supporting her fight in court for maintenance costs for her and her daughters. During this first meeting, I realized how significant it was that these seven women could attend every Thursday and participate in Sahiyar altogether, considering a common consequence of the anti-Muslim communal violence and its gendered nature was withdrawing Muslim women and girls from public spaces not sanctioned by the family. Sophia Khan has argued that it is a misconception that religious conservatism leads to girls not being allowed to go to school, stating that, in reality, it is because of the frequent incidences of sexual violence community members have witnessed and fear will continue (Khan).

When I first conceived of and constructed Kalaashakti, during that first iteration in Baroda in 2011, I had a different set of research questions and a different framework for the methodological and activist intervention I hoped to make. I was interested in alternative ways of collecting ethnographic data, ones that centered storytelling and creative expression in a communal setting. I was interested in self-epistemology and reflection and had a certain intuition of its resonant effects on society though I had no idea what themes and signs of transformation would emerge. What was clear was that I was there to gather knowledge for the Western academy and at the same time attempt to trouble power dynamics between researcher and subjects. I had no intention, however, of directly impacting these women's organizing relationships or skills, improving or interfering with their campaigns. Although these women

were field workers, although the workshops were held at the Sahiyar office, although they were now integrated into their mandatory training meetings, I created the workshops as a space separate from the hustle of meetings, brainstorming, phone calls, and rallies. It wasn't until I read Lata Mani and "Out of the Spiritual Closet" that I connected self-transformation with social transformation, individual resilience with collective resilience.

When first constructing the workshop curriculum, knowing that we would be exploring sensitive and potentially triggering topics, I began searching for a Muslim woman therapist who could make herself available to the women if a need should arise. In India, where mental health is not prioritized and resources are slim, finding someone who fit this particular profile was challenging and proved unfruitful. Luckily, and as a recourse, Sahiyar had a staff counselor who was also the coordinator of the field workers, Rita bhen. Rita bhen attended every workshop session and made her presence known; she often clarified my instructions to the women and interjected her opinions and feedback. Although she was present to support the emotional well-being of the participants, I never witnessed a participant reach out to her in that capacity, during or after a workshop, and, perhaps, just her familiar presence provided comfort in itself. It's important to note that Rita bhen is both Hindu and full-time, paid staff, and that this position with relation to the Muslim field workers definitely contributed to a power dynamic and assumed authority; at times it seemed Rita bhen was a reminder that they were still on the clock. During the first Kalaashakti workshop, I asked the women what brought them joy and many of them responded that their work at Sahiyar brought them joy. And, as they articulated what feminism meant to them, Rita bhen interrupted when their articulations didn't match the Sahiyar vision. Fatu bhen said with a smirk and a glow to her eyes that one day women will surpass men and men will be considered subordinate and inferior. Her bubbling laughter and that of the other

women was quickly reigned in as Rita bhen took on the role of disciplinarian, redefining and reframing what Fatu bhen expressed to fit a feminism she and Sahiyar would approve of, that was about equality, not hierarchy. It became clear, in moments such as these, that as strong as my desire was to create a space for open discussion and creative freedom, the space was entangled in the politics of a mandatory training. It became important for me to reflect and ask myself how the organizational power dynamics that were amplified by religious and class privilege, affected disclosure and if my methodological ideal of a holistic, self-epistemology could be fully applied under these conditions. Was the workshop space, with its very ambitious and righteous intention to subvert colonial dynamics of information extraction from native experts, truly "safer" than traditional, one-on-one interviews, especially considering that no space, no matter how nobly intentioned, was devoid of power? And, if the objective was liberatory speech through the liberatory arts, and the liberatory arts held the power to de-ideologize understandings to resignify the world, how was this possible under the pressure of careful supervision by both Rita bhen as a supervisor and myself as a "highly-educated," Western researcher?

About a month into the Kalaashakti workshops with the Sahiyar field workers, Rita bhen pulled me aside. She told me she was concerned about the performance of the field workers; she said they lacked initiative. "There has been a kite lorry<sup>34</sup> set up for two years, " she said, "and only Sahiyar staff sits to sell and manage it" (Rita bhen, Nov. 18, 2011). She said that sometimes they would bring in cases that required mediation or advocacy to Sahiyar but that they were also supposed to be organizing women in their neighborhoods and this wasn't happening. Rita bhen asked for my help. She wanted me to help push them to make this work their own and to take it

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<sup>34</sup> cart

seriously. "It would be a shame to withdraw their stipend. We don't want to do that" (Rita bhen, Nov. 18, 2011). She wanted to find a way to reconfirm their loyalties and commitment instead.

Rita bhen's frustration was a catalyst for my own self-reflection and critique. In her complaints about their performance I saw a mirror of my own expectations – I was also evaluating and making assumptions about their investment in Kalaashakti based on a set of Western standards. I was also allowing my privileged position to blind me to their lived realities at the intersections of state violence, Islamophobia and misogyny. Forgetting that Kalaashakti was now absorbed into mandatory training, forgetting a stipend was attached to them being there, I wanted the women to enjoy the workshops; I wanted them to be enthusiastic about the time we shared and find it valuable. It was an egoic desire and in it was a misguided inference that full consent and choice could be compromised in forging community and solidarity. In my methodology there was a guise of innocuity, with alternative methods that drew us into a circle instead of traditional interviews, and yet, my own Western, colonial thinking that "knew best" and wanted to convince them of the same was alive and well. With Rita bhen's request I felt the weight of a role I wasn't expecting; to be positioned as an intermediary, to push them to be "responsible" and "productive" might mean that I could be directly or indirectly involved in determining whether or not these women stayed on at Sahiyar. It was not a power I wanted to hold and, at that moment, I doubted that Kalaashakti, and especially my presence and intervention, could promise that outcome. And in pondering what was being asked of me by this senior, Hindu staff member, I also found that her assessment neglected to take into account the structural inequalities that may have contributed to the field workers' "sub-par performance." As evidenced in the previous chapter, the state-directed violence of 2002 and beyond has had lingering traumatic effects on Muslim women and the literature on spiritual activism and

transformative movement building that I would encounter later would elucidate how and why communal violence could affect an organizer's ability to organize. This literature would also convince me that self-transformative practices were vital to increase an organizer's effectiveness and capacity when it came to engaging in social justice work.

### ***Caught Between Process and Content: Preparing Kalaashakti Curriculum***

In preparing the Kalaashakti curriculum, determining what mediums of art to employ and what prompts to pose, I searched and poured over every social justice, creative arts or mindfulness workshop I had facilitated or participated in. Heeding Rita bhen's words, and the words of countless activists I had interviewed, I didn't want to run a workshop focused solely on dredging up stories of communal violence. As Veena Das states, violence of the past can be repaired by descending into the everyday, so I asked myself how I could balance retaining a liberatory arts framework that allowed participants the freedom of open prompts that were process-oriented and centered in the present moment, while also operating as a researcher that held specific research questions and a desire to explore them. I decided that most of my activities would be aimed at encouraging participants to get to know their creative voice and only a few exercises would direct them to examine their past experiences, with only one workshop session focused on state violence, Islamophobia and communal violence. Also, to ease them into potentially triggering topics, we would read and discuss the writings of Gujarati poets first. In constructing the Kalaashakti curriculum, I moved between activities that touched upon the past and those that were grounded in principles of mindfulness.

In the loose skeleton structure that followed, I decided we would begin each session with check-ins, sitting meditation and pranayama (breathing exercises), sometimes followed by a reading and discussion of a Gujarati poem, art-making and sharing. The first few art-making activities, the life-map and the first memory exercise, were meant to establish, for each participant and for the collective, what was and is significant in their lives and how they make meaning from the moments that have shaped them. It was also intended to reveal commonalities, patterns, places of intersection and connection. I credit the life map exercise both to an INCITE! L.A. retreat and to a South Asian friend and colleague with extensive experience facilitating writing workshops.

In addition, engaging with the creative works of other Gujarati poets allowed us to broach the themes of gendered violence through writing that was, at once, personal and specific but also tapped into a collective experience and consciousness. We read and discussed a poem by Gujarati author Nita Rameya called "The Kite," in which the author compares the trajectory and journey of a kite to that of a woman's life. In the resulting discussion and analysis, participants made comments such as, "from the moment women are born they are burdened..." and "they are stuck in a situation without a choice...like a kite they are just pawns in someone else's game" and "they can't take a breath because the air is burning..." In these readings, the participants entered the experience of violence from a distance and when expressing compassion for the author's experience, it was possible they were also practicing compassion for themselves and the ways their stories were mirrored back to them through the poem.

I also constructed activities geared towards expanding perspective and realizing connectivity. I asked participants to bring in an old photo of themselves and their loved ones and then asked them to exchange their photo with another participant. I then asked them to write a

fictional story based on how they interpreted the photo. In the participants' reactions to this activity I observed intimacy and tenderness, playfulness and appreciation, in how they ventured into another's life and honored it and the characters that filled it. Upon hearing their photos narrated, the women lit up and giggled, nodded and were surprised at the twists that were both in line with their story or took it in different and hopeful directions. Inspired by *The Book of Surrealist Games*, I composed activities that were variations on the "exquisite corpse," asking participants to write a few lines of a story based on a theme, idea, or prompt and then pass it onto others to add to the story and complete it. I found that these activities sparked creativity, diverse, yet relatable, perspectives, and play and innovation.

Other prompts I crafted were motivated by bringing them into the present moment and asking them to describe and express what was true for them with as much sensory detail as possible. As a warm up to further writing exercises, I asked them to conjure up the five senses: touch, taste, sound, sight, and smell. During the first round, I asked them to bring to mind the last thing they touched that was pleasant and to describe that experience fully, in as much vivid detail as possible, through a free-write. They continued like this with the other senses. Then they brought to mind their last contact with unpleasant sensations as well. During this exercise I paired myself with the one illiterate participant, Bilkis bhen, and, while taking dictation, noticed that she chose to combine the prompts for an unpleasant sound and taste and speak about an "unsavory use of the tongue," a perversion of the truth. She described the twisted tongues of politicians, particularly of Modi, and how the ability to speak could be used to inflict harm or to heal. She spoke in detail about deception and how powerful, boisterous voices that could command audiences were dangerous and prone to deceiving those who listened. In another open-ended activity, I cut out simple Gujarati words, words that were concrete objects and not



abstractions, such as "window," "tree," and "lightning," and placed them in a bag. The only instructions I gave the women were that each of them was to choose one word and use that word to both begin and end their story. Maria bhen selected the word "vijli," or lightning. In her story, she shared that as a child she used to be afraid of lightning but when she was older, and it finally struck her home, she wasn't afraid anymore. The five senses exercise and the "Beginning and End" exercise had open-ended prompts that allowed the women to interpret them based on what was relevant and present in their lives while refraining from pushing them towards divulging or disclosing painful memories.

At the end of each session, I gave participants time to reflect on what worked, what was effective and what they enjoyed. I asked them to reflect on insights, inspirations, and feelings generated and any lessons learned. I used this feedback to continue crafting the next week's workshop plans and that was the extent of collaboration in terms of workshop curriculum. Although I drew from various sources, creative and social justice alike, I always made the final decisions with regards to the themes, activities, and content of each session. We closed each session with a ritual, such as an affirmation circle, one word check-out, or joining or clapping hands.

In the next chapter, I have selected a few of the stories and poems that were created during the Kalaashakti workshops with Sahiyar field workers and staff in Fall and Winter of 2011 in Baroda, Gujarat. I specifically draw from the medium of writing because those were the easiest for me to read and interpret and by far the most cohesive and revelatory compositions. These *spirit tellings* demonstrate the resurgence of qualities of interconnectedness, embodiment, mindfulness, and empathy often lost or obscured after violence and trauma. These creative pieces are reflections of the internal contemplation, exploration and decolonization that can propel us

beyond a narrow self towards an integrated Self, internalizing the interconnectedness of all things. And, although it was not something I witnessed myself, or found a way to evaluate definitively, I also examine how this process of self-knowing necessarily transforms relationships within the collective and could mean organizational transformation, or increased capacity and effectiveness in their campaigns to transform society.

### *Chapter Three: Spirit Tellings*

In this chapter, by introducing the written work of the Kalaashakti workshop participants, I build on the theoretical frameworks of trauma scholars Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, Lata Mani's work on contemplative critique and the Movement Strategy Center's work on transformative movement building in interpreting, what I call, the Kalaashakti women's *Spirit Tellings*. I crafted these workshops with the following questions in mind: Instead of my previous focus on violent institutions, could anti-violence be in the stories we tell and in our transformation of silence? Could it be in how we connect when institutionalized violence says we're supposed to remain silent and divided? How do Muslim women survivors relay stories of belonging, empathy, and connection despite and because of what they have endured? What has inspired these women to thrive and not just survive? How can the methodologies of critical and holistic ethnography and liberatory arts allow ethnographic work to be responsive to suffering? What effects can transforming the self and interpersonal relationships have on social justice organizing work? And finally, how is it possible for mutually-beneficial transnational knowledge production and allyship to be fostered within feminist ethnographic research? I have selected just a few examples of the incredible stories and poems shared by the women that all speak to themes of empathy, belonging, interconnection, mindfulness and embodiment, elements that I have interpreted from the literature on trauma, healing and spiritual activism to be signs of reintegration, healing, and spiritual consciousness. Within these spirit tellings, I am interested in how the participants of the Kalaashakti workshop series make meaning from the suffering they have endured, because, while Elaine Scarry states, "the antidote to pain is imagination" (Scarry in Garrett, 330), Jacqui Alexander brings in a collective stake and states that "healing work is the

antidote to oppression" (312). I ask how, then, is healing found in these imaginings? Where do individual and collective pain meet, intersect and join forces for recovery—embodying the true meaning of healing, according to Garrett, which is transforming pain into an occasion for connection (339)? Using Scarry, Alexander and Garrett's theories for healing, I offer that the spirit tellings of these Kalaashakti women hold in them the antidote to their own pain, a pathway to healing and therefore to combating oppressive systems.

### ***MEDITATION AND EMBODIMENT***

As I defined in Chapter Two, meditation was a tool to enter into mindfulness, into sinking into the here and now and being aware of the quality, texture, emotions, and felt senses of the moment. Every workshop session began with sitting meditation, often accompanied by pranayama, breathing exercises, and we often took meditative moments and pauses, when resurfacing stories caused overwhelming emotional responses. Through touch, holding hands or sitting back to back, there was an intention to re-establish connection, presence and grounding in the moment, with attention to the sensations and experience of the body. In light of the congested and cramped living conditions and social and familial networks, I initially took pause in incorporating meditation into our meetings, assuming that this would be the first time they encountered this practice. As I brought in meditation as a ritual to begin each workshop, the women, without explanation, shared with me their own practices. The Muslim neighborhoods in which these workshops were conducted were infused with consistent and unwavering calls to prayer, five times a day, every day. During the Azaan<sup>35</sup> there was a pause I was not familiar with,

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<sup>35</sup> call to prayer Islam. In the Muslim neighborhoods where I conducted these workshops, we could hear the call to prayer being recited from the local mosque. The call to prayer is recited five times a day.

a pulling on of ornis<sup>36</sup> in respect and a profound interruption of preoccupation and busyness of mind – a reconnection to stillness, spiritual meaning, and perspective. This was their meditative moment, one that I was now being invited to share with them as a daily and reliable ritual. As Lata Mani asserts, and countless meditation teachers have further supported, “meditation is an attempt at emptying the mind to cultivate stillness and [is] especially helpful in countering oppression, violence, dominance, lest we get caught up in its repetition and persistence and its logic” (134). Meditation, in multiple modalities, could facilitate "descending into the everyday," a process that Veena Das says is crucial to repairing the violence of the past. In "Out of the Spiritual Closet," Jidan Koon, a social justice organizer in the Bay Area, shares the profound impacts of meditation in her healing process. She states, “meditation gave me a taste of liberation in the present, not a future utopia" (Koon in Zimmerman et. al, 20).

Mediation is about the epistemology of the now; it asks participants to reflect on the current state of their emotions and body. It is a return to the sensory experiences of the body and encourages the body to speak and express its inherent intelligence. In applying the framework of holistic ethnography, one that celebrates the multiple and multi-dimensional intelligences of the participants and storytellers, I grounded many of the writing and art exercises in embodied epistemology. Jacqui Alexander states that "...embodiment functions as a pathway to knowledge..." (298). I believe that embodiment is even more relevant and necessary with survivors of trauma. As seen in Chapter Two, Muslim women's bodies were targeted in the genocidal communal attacks of 2002 in calculated and cruel ways. This assault on bodies has

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<sup>36</sup> head scarves

been an assault on the integrity of the entire Self,<sup>37</sup> mind, body and spirit, with the aftermath of trauma being inscribed into violated bodies and psyches alike. When one incurs trauma it is literally inscribed into one's cells, into one's biological body (Braddock). Thus, communal violence can have lasting impacts on the thriving of an "integrated Self,"<sup>38</sup> one that recognizes their interconnection with all living beings and the phenomenal world. And, as Elaine Scarry states, this "...physical pain destroys meaning, since pain has no object: it is not 'of' or 'for' or 'about' anything. Therefore... the opposite of pain must be creativity. Every human act of 'making' is a movement away from pain. The antidote to pain is imagination: our ability to make meaning."<sup>39</sup> Since the Muslim woman's body is the site for both egregious anti-Muslim attacks as well as healing and, according to Elisa Facio, "healing involves radical transformation in the body" (Facio, 67), I combine meaning-making, art exercises with re-embodiment through writing reflections to ask how being attuned to one's present senses can aid in re-patterning bodily inscriptions of trauma.

The sensory writing exercises that I introduced were a way to enliven the senses and make meaning from the everyday traumas inscribed onto these women's bodies. The short writing prompts asked women to reflect on pleasant and unpleasant sensory experiences, engaging the five senses in re-embodiment. According to Nancy Scheper-Hughes, "Embodiment concerns the ways people come to inhabit their bodies so that these become in every sense of the term 'habituated.' All the mundane activities of working, eating, sleeping, having sex, and getting

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<sup>37</sup> I want to distinguish here between "Self" with a capitalized "S" and "self" with a lowercase "s." I capitalize "Self" to indicate one that recognizes their interconnection with all living beings and the phenomenal world, drawing from Lata Mani. I use the lowercase "self" in opposition to this "Self" that recognizes interconnection.

<sup>38</sup> this understanding is derived from the scholarship of Lata Mani and Sharon Goodill

<sup>39</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (1985) in Garrett, 330.

sick and getting well are forms of body praxis and expressive of a dynamic of social, cultural, and political relations" (M.J. Alexander, 298).

Aisha bhen, one Muslim field worker, shared a disturbing sight that she witnessed: a man hitting a woman and then taking her behind closed doors, with her left watching but feeling futile to stop it (Aisha bhen). As organizers with Sahiyar and self-identified feminists, it is tremendously vulnerable to admit when one, in the course of everyday life, does not and cannot make an intervention in an incident of violence. It can seem like an admission of failing to follow the organizational tenets and mission and, yet, is incredibly human and likely to resonate with the experiences of all the other women in the room. Aisha described the heavy responsibility that often accompanies witnessing another's suffering, the empathetic compulsion to respond, and the terror, fear and guilt in a truncated narrative, one in which the safety and survival of the woman incurring the blows is not known or guaranteed.

Another field worker, Zeinab bhen, recalled a memory of touch – giving her elderly mother a bath (Zeinab bhen). She described how that touch of bath water and wrinkly, worn flesh evoked tenderness, respect, and giving back. In this sensory reflection, she summons the significance of caretaking for elders and a demonstration of daring vulnerability by both elderly mother and adult daughter in confronting the cycles of change, growth, and life and death. In Islam, after a person passes, the closest relatives of the same gender bathe that family member, no matter the age, before adorning them in white linen. The ritual of bathing oneself in ablutions, called wudu and done before praying namaaz, or bathing those we love, is one that signifies preparing ourselves to meet Allah and reunite with the divine. This reflection also shows how interdependence between generations, not solely in terms of physical needs but also spiritual needs, is not just culturally accepted but honored as ritual.

Hajjar bhen wrote about the curious sound of the airport loudspeaker when sending her mother off to Hajj, an epic and celebratory moment (Hajjar bhen). Hajj, one of the five pillars of Islam, is the pilgrimage to Mecca, the site where the Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham) built the Ka'aba, and is required only for those that are physically and financially able. With the low socioeconomic status of most of the women in the workshops, being able to afford the journey is not an easy feat, thus intensifying the momentous departure. This pilgrimage may be the only time they embark on a trip outside of India and perhaps their first and only trip to the airport. In her telling, Hajjar bhen describes the muffled static of the loudspeaker announcement as a modern beckoning to a reunion with an ancient land and structure. The field worker and her mother were crossing over into the territory of the elite, most of which, like me, can claim multiple homelands and fluidly maneuver between them. She would return from this momentary subversive act of mobility a Haji.<sup>40</sup>

Meditation was the foundation of the Kalaashakti workshops and was just as integral as art-making and storytelling. Meditation as a gateway to mindful awareness of the body and its sensory experiences in the world, opened a platform for the participants to tell their stories, simultaneously mundane and significant. Based on the interpretations of scholars Jacqui Alexander, Elisa Facio and Nancy Scheper-Hughes, my central exploration in employing these sensory exercises is to assess whether embodied epistemology can allow women to make meaning from pain, create space and distance from violence and create beauty and connection where connection may have been lost.

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<sup>40</sup> Muslim who has performed the pilgrimage to Mecca.



## **EMPATHY:**

### ***Pineapple Lorry***

*This story is about the riots that started up in Surat City when the Babri Masjid (mosque) was destroyed in 1992. I was young then and didn't know what riots meant. Then I learned that when riots happen, everything goes under curfew. One time in our neighborhood they put us under curfew. When it was lifted, one brother came into our neighborhood with a pineapple lorry. He was really poor and what came into his mind was that if the curfew was lifted, he could come out and sell his pineapples. But in that time, the curfew was back on. How was this brother to know that the curfew would start up again? The siren of the curfew rang and a police car came. That brother left his lorry and hid in someone's house.*

*"The police car stopped and the police officer asked: "Whose lorry is this?"*

*So the brother came out and said, "Sir, this is my lorry. Curfew was lifted so I came out to sell my pineapples but how would I know that the curfew would be reinstated?"*

*Without listening to this brother's words, the police officers began hitting his lorry with their baton. They hit it so hard that it broke in half. How hard would they have to hit it that it broke? Think about how much this must have hurt this brother" (Maria bhen).*

The agents of state violence in "Pineapple Lorry" are also the propagators of trauma; the police officers, "without listening to this brother's words" and pleas to spare his lorry, a symbol of self-preservation and survival amidst the precarious conditions of communal violence, destroyed his attempts to rebuild and live despite the threat of extinction. It is ironic and hopeful

that Maria bhen, in her witnessing the scene through a keyhole in her door as well as in sharing this in the Kalaashakti workshops, relayed a story of dehumanization and disconnection, of lack of compassion. In her retelling, however, she reinstates the empathetic exchange that was lacking.

In "Pineapple Lorry," Maria bhen contemplates the extent and severity of injury and pain inflicted upon the brother and his means of livelihood. She states: "How hard would they have to hit [the lorry] so that it broke? Think about how much this must have hurt this brother." These questions, aimed at understanding and entering the experience of another's suffering, minimize the distance between the "other" and the "self" while increasing intimacy and connection. Mani delves into the root causes of human suffering and states that socially constructed divisions that distinguish between the "self" and the "other" also distinguish between the injuries, afflictions and pain we experience. She maintains that this distinction robs us of interconnection, blocks empathy and, in insisting on possessing or dispossessing wounds, continues the cycle of suffering. "Pineapple Lorry" ventures into the trauma of someone deemed "other." It ventures into the trauma of someone with whom Maria bhen does not share a body, kinship, or even conversation and yet, in her empathetic witnessing, there is a moment when the self/other binary is exposed.

I consider this empathetic witnessing, by Maria bhen and then by us all, a profound anti-violence intervention. The conjuring of empathy in witnessing, recognizing and validating another's experience of suffering is the opposite of the violence inflicted. Empathetic witnessing has the potential to humanize and grow flesh onto abject and marginalized instances of brutality. In rendering what was at the time dismissed as seen and felt, Maria bhen opens up the path to positive transference, one that Laub and Felman argue can unite the narrator (or perhaps

protagonist when told in third person) of a testimony with the witness in a common struggle, bringing the listener into a greater state of awareness and stake in the testimony and the unjust conditions that surround it. This could, perhaps, make the Kalaashakti women critical ethnographers in their own right, first investigating the oppressive conditions and root causes of violence and then, later, imagining alternatives. The key premise of critical ethnography, as Soyini Madison defines it, is to address suffering of the subjects of our research; in the case of Maria bhen, perhaps passing on the story of the pineapple lorry wala and attempting to understand and relate to his pain are actions within themselves. By recognizing another's story as a human experience and a mirror of shared emotions, barriers can melt, strata of interconnection are realized, suffering is seen, and future suffering can possibly be prevented.

There were moments between the Muslim field workers and Hindu staff, in which these same empathetic questions were asked about one another's suffering: how did it feel to be apart of a community targeted by state violence? How did their co-organizers' suffering manifest itself in everyday organizing work? A few weeks into the Kalaashakti workshops with the Muslim field workers of Sahiyar, the mostly Hindu staff members requested I conduct a two-day, intensive workshop for them as well. Sahiyar is an organization that was founded by a Hindu woman, Trupti Shah, and, with its mostly Hindu staff, holds communal harmony as one of its major commitments and campaigns for change. It is largely an organization of those with religious privilege who work towards being allies to those most severely targeted or affected by communal violence. Sahiyar, instead of allowing communal tensions to dictate their organizational composition, rejects the "...highly polarized us-versus-them stance [which has] isolated [many] movement[s] from potential allies and partners...ultimately decreas[ing] influence and power" (Zimmerman et. al, 14). Sahiyar instead demonstrates that being open to

unexpected coalitions, partners and collaborations (particularly from groups that are thought of as oppositional, privileged, or in power) can help movements grow and expand and reach more people. Building and strengthening empathy in interpersonal relationships between Hindu and Muslim staff members is the foundation for solid allyship in social justice movements, according to scholars of transformative movement building.

The following two stories are about the recognition of suffering as a pathway to empathy and allyship and were collected during our two-day, intensive workshop with the majority-Hindu staff members. I juxtapose Radha bhen's story with Rashida bhen's story; the first from the perspective of a Hindu colleague who has witnessed the emotional toll communal violence has had on her Muslim colleague and the latter the first person account of her Muslim colleague. "My Dilemma," though mired in Radha bhen's feelings of confusion, ambivalence and futility, also carries with it empathy with the trauma Rashida bhen has and is continuing to endure.

### ***My Dilemma***

*In 2002, when I heard about the communal violence after the burning of the Sabarmati express and the death of karsevaks [volunteer for a religious cause], women and children, a panic was generated in my mind. On the very next day riots broke in our locality also. The atmosphere was such that I felt that humans have turned brutal. Listening to many rumours everywhere, I was worried about myself and my family. Every moment I was thinking: who is responsible for all this, Hindus or Muslims? I never got any clear answer for that. Everyday I read the newspaper and keep on worrying about what will happen next. When will the next riots take place and what will be the impact on my everyday life?*

*In 2006, once again riots broke out. This time, several people set a Muslim man and his car on fire and he was burnt alive and died on the spot. Rashida bhen saw this incident happen herself. Trupti bhen also knows about it. I have only heard about it. Everybody was talking about the event. In our neighborhood a few people even tried to justify it. They said that that person tried to kill Hindus by running his car into them and that's why people burnt him, in self-defence. After this incident Muslims organised a sit in (dharana) for justice near Mahavir hall.*

*I think the impact of this event was severe on Rashida bhen. She always looked worried and fearful. As a colleague I could only give her verbal consolation. I was deeply hurt but could not grasp the truth. Till this day I am not sure who perpetrates communal violence. Who is to blame? I have heard that it is all about politics but I do not have any evidence. I feel handicapped as I am not able to resolve this dilemma (Radha bhen).*

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### ***My Experience of Communal Riots***

*On 1-5-2006 the Vadodara Municipal Corporation demolished a 250-year old historical dargah [shrine to a Muslim saint] with the excuse of widening the road. This issue was discussed in the city for days. It is said that on that day the officials and elected representatives of the Municipal Corporation had organized a meeting with the Muslim leaders to find some middle path, that while the meeting was still going on, they ordered the demolition.*

*As an aftermath of the demolition, communal riots broke out in the sensitive areas of Baroda. I reside in the Vora Colony near Ahimsa Circle at Ajwa Road, near Mahavir hall. I fail to comprehend why the name Ahinsa Circle (Non Violence Circle) is given to this crossroad because whenever communal violence takes place in Vadodara, it happens here. On May 2<sup>nd</sup> our*

*housing colony was attacked. A 2500-3000-person mob encircled us and was continuously throwing stones on our colony from 9:00 pm to 2:00am. First, the mob tried to break the shops owned by Muslims in the 'Shri Vihal Complex' opposite our colony. Then they burnt cloths and other material from a laundry shop in a nearby complex, outside the shop, because Hindus were residing above it. Our housing colony and the one next to us, Kismat Colony, had about 100 houses with about 400-500 people total. From those, some of the houses were empty. The mob started throwing stones at our colony. They continued for about 3-4 hours. The mob was so big that it was not possible to confront or stop it. Men started shouting "ladies come out of the home!" If we didn't go out to stop the mob, the mob would enter the colony. Everybody was shouting and screaming with fear. Small children and elderly people were absolutely frightened, "What will happen if they enter the colony?" Everyone was thinking about the communal violence of 2002. What if it is repeated??? Even men were frightened thinking about that.*

*We called the police. The police replied, "Go to Pakistan..."*

*We called the police several times giving different names and different addresses but they did not respond. The situation was getting worse. Then I contacted Trupti bhen and conveyed the realities on the ground on Ajwa road. She contacted the Police Commissioner and various police officials. I was in constant phone contact with her and she was also continuously following up and pressurising police to take action. There was screaming and shouting in the housing colony. The young children were in distress.*

*My nephew asked me, "Reshu foi, will these people kill us? What will happen to us if they enter the colony?" Every child was probably asking these very questions to their elders (Rashida bhen).*

Mordecai Ettinger, a social justice organizer interviewed in "Out of the Spiritual Closet," discusses the impacts of trauma on collectives working for social change. He expresses that trauma can lead to disconnection and "when we are disconnected, we don't know how we are impacting others or how we're being impacted" (Zimmerman et. al, 16). Within an organization, this lack of awareness of our impact on others can have resonant effects; dynamics between colleagues, the unsaid and unacknowledged, does more than hinder interpersonal harmony, it can hinder movement building as well. Communal violence in Gujarat is premised and fueled on division and the danger of difference and, as Claudia Horowitz argues, this "hatred, division and separation get[s] internalized in us. We see it so much that we take it in and manifest it in our organizations and collaborations" (Zimmerman et. Al, 14-15). "My Dilemma" and "My Experience of Communal Violence" are examples of countering these default tendencies to detach, disconnect, silence, and hide from those with whom we seek to build and imagine a more just present and future.

Radha bhen is quoted above as pondering the impacts of witnessing violence: *"In 2006, once again riots broke out. This time, several people set a Muslim man and his car on fire and he was burnt alive and died on the spot. Rashida bhen saw this incident happen herself...I think the impact of this event was severe on Rashida bhen. She always looked worried and fearful. As a colleague I could only give her verbal consolation. I was deeply hurt but could not grasp the*

*truth.*" In witnessing and recognizing Rashida bhen's experience of trauma and how it continues to articulate itself through her emotional states and expressions at work, Radha bhen offered empathetic connection, one that is a crucial part of the model of organizational transformation that the creators of "Out of the Spiritual Closet" introduce.

Transformative movement building provides a framework to support groups to move through crisis, learn through reflection and cultivate sustainable practices. By integrating transformative practice into movement organizations, organizers have a method for cultivating the qualities and capacities they need for interpersonal and group transformation. This, in turn, leads to healthier and more effective organizational communities that are better able to communicate, manage conflict, be self-aware and self-reflective, evolve and change. It also leads to changes in organizing models and social change practice as organizations reorient their goals and strategies to match the values they want to cultivate in the broader world, such as compassion, equity, love and non-violence. (Zimmerman et. al, 10).

The self-reflection apparent in these stories could gesture towards a growing sense of trust that the organizers' emotions will be received and accepted and this acceptance, in turn, can lead to the strengthening of affective bonds and organizational growth. Although the organizers of Sahiyar are not actively engaged in something they would label as "transformative movement building," I would argue that it is clear through these testimonies and witnessings of Radha bhen and Rashida bhen, that the foundational work of recognizing one's own and others' traumas, and consequential suffering, is being carried out. Again, as positive transference brings the listener and witness into a greater state of awareness, perhaps these stories could unite organizers to rally



around the root cause of injustice that has led to these conditions of suffering. And, to address suffering, it is necessary to see it first.

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***BELONGING:***

***Brothers and Sisters***

*When I was growing up we were living in a Gujarati neighborhood<sup>41</sup> in Surat when the communalism broke out. We used to celebrate religious holidays with our neighbors. When the riots broke out everyone in our house was scared. “In this area our house is the only Muslim house and our children are small; if these people don’t help us then where will we go?”*

*But there was one neighbor that lived across from us that was very nice and on Raksha Bandan<sup>42</sup> she would tie a Rakhi [bracelet] around my father’s wrist.*

*She said to us, “Don’t worry. Nothing will happen. If something does happen, we are with you. Send your children to sleep at our house.”*

*At that time we placed more trust in this neighbor than we did our relatives (Maria bhen).*

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<sup>41</sup>In Gujarat, labeling something as Gujarati is often synonymous with labeling it as Hindu. This is commonly used by both Hindus and Muslims.

<sup>42</sup> 13 Raksha Bandan is a holiday, predominantly celebrated by Hindus, in which sisters honor their brothers by tying a bracelet around their brother’s wrists, thereby demonstrating their respect, devotion and appreciation to their brothers (biological or otherwise).

Communal violence, as evidenced in Chapter One, not only creates fractures in community identity but petrifies them in ancient grudges, occluding syncretic overlaps and borrowings. Rituals, ceremonies and festivals that were shared become steeped in trauma and divided between the survivors. There is an amnesia and disavowal of the proximity, not just of houses and neighborhoods, but also of language, culture, and faith, all the miscegenetic mixtures of South Asian heritage, which are often the very things that communalists artificially separate into rigid categories of difference. Much of this post-violence distancing is reactionary as the genocidal attacks of 2002 targeted not just Muslim people, but also Muslim cultural artifacts. Intending to erase and assimilate, with each dargah burned or Quran torn to shreds, the concept of *community* became fixed and less complex. According to Sudhir Kakar, the communal violence of 2002 can be characterized as “an event which causes a community to feel helpless and victimized and therefore embedded in communal identity” (Kakar, 50). I believe that in a narrowing sense of community, there is also a narrowing of belonging, of where to belong and with whom. LaCapra argues that collective trauma damages the bonds between people and the way a community functions. I would argue that community functions to provide for the needs of its members, to serve each other and keep each other safe, to share cultural practices and traditions and is made stronger through compassion, empathy, and interdependency.

"Brothers and Sisters" presents a more expansive sense of community and counters the narrative of community fragmentation and solidified differences; it allows for an integrative imagining of identity and subjectivity in relation and not in individual isolation. Maria bhen's story flips the popular narrative of neighbors turning on neighbors in integrated muhallahs<sup>43</sup> on

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<sup>43</sup> neighborhoods

its head and shares a moment of reassurance, belonging and solidarity. I evoke Aime Carillo-Rowe's words again:

Belonging is about where you long to belong, whom you want to nestle beside at the end of the day, who you call when you are in pain, or who accompanies you in ritual-in-signifying practices that give life meaning, if by no other means than to call mindful attention to the awesome beauty of now. It is a concept that permits us to imagine life beyond our own skin because what is foregrounded is a space of "yearning to make skin stretch beyond individual needs and wants" (1996, 6). In other words, belonging helps us imagine "identity," subjectivity, and a sense of self that goes beyond the (interiority of the) self, that strives to connect, that yearns to live (Probyn in Rowe, 27).

Maria bhen tells the story of a neighbor who included them in ritual; she tells the story of a neighbor who rebuilt the parameters of family and belonging via rakhi-tying. The neighbor in the story, in the repetition of symbolically placing a rakhi around Maria bhen's father's wrist, year after year, was inviting him to be a chosen brother and expanding her network of kin despite the narrowing identification with community communal violence provokes. The rakhi-giving and its acceptance through reciprocal gifting, establishes an affective bond; in this case, the bond that is formed between a Hindu woman and a Muslim man defies the expected divisions and disavowals that follow communal violence.

"Brothers and Sisters" demonstrates how affective bonds and mutual belonging are transmitted past the symbolic realm of ritual to facilitate allyship and solidarity. When the neighbor said: "Don't worry. Nothing will happen. If something does happen, we are with you. Send your children to sleep at our house," she "stretched her skin" beyond her and her family's

individual needs of safety and survival. It was an expansive sense of belonging that was built and nurtured through shared celebration and ritual, through shared meaning-making, that allowed for the powerful declaration: "we are with you." Symbolic ritual was followed by concrete allyship, causing Maria bhen to say, "At that time we placed more trust in this sister than we did our relatives." As Maria bhen's family experienced the fear and uncertainty of the riots and the imminence of reprisal attacks, as they sank into their extra-vulnerable position in an all-Hindu neighborhood, as they cried out, "where will we go?" their call was answered. The sister became an ally when she recognized their pain, made it human and three-dimensional and implicated herself in their survival. Maria bhen's story is a radical account of belonging beyond and despite communal tensions that aim to split open and apart; it is a telling that involves a "sense of self that goes beyond the (interiority of the) self, that strives to connect, that yearns to live."

While "Brothers and Sisters" offers a profound moment of expansive belonging and carefully built solidarity and allyship, the poem, "We Are All Sisters," by a Hindu- Gujarati poet, assumes automatic solidarity and unity through totalizing experiences of violence. As Audre Lorde states, it is not in erasing or ignoring our differences that we as women come together, it is in the understanding and acknowledgement of the different ways we are perceived, raised in families and society and experience and treated by the world. According to her, flattening how we are differently oppressed and our unique intersectional identities and feigning sameness cannot lead to unifying under a common banner and common struggle. There are commonalities, overlapping passions, investments, and advocacy but we must begin with acknowledging our differences ("Age, Race, Class and Sex"). During the workshop with the mainly Hindu staff of Sahiyar, I had the participants read and respond to the following poem by Gujarati poet, Saroop Dhruv.

## ***We Are All Sisters***

*Robbed, Burned, Sliced, Killed, We are all sisters I say*

*Yes, Yes, sisters I say---Ho, Ho sisters, I say*

*Everyone's problems are one*

*And everyone's conditions are one*

*We all suffer from the same hurt, everyone stays in the same conditions*

*All of us sisters will come together*

*And to communalism, {we will} pay no heed*

*We will rest only after we end it. (Dhruv)*

The Saroop Dhruv poem, “We Are All Sisters” was written in response to the 1992 demolition of the Babri masjid at the provocation of Hindu nationalist political parties claiming it to be the historic site of the birthplace of Ram. The resulting discussion with the workshop participants spoke to the politics of feminist solidarity, recognition of difference as intrinsically related to power and privilege, and diffusing blame to avoid personal complicity. Upon reading the poem with the staff of Sahiyar, there was no resistance to the totalizing and homogenizing concept underlying the poem that women suffer the same effects of communal violence. The poem, which had been set to music and sung at rallies in Ahmedabad, was embraced by the staff as an indication that as a vulnerable population during conflict, women’s differences crumbled under the weight of the collective burden they were meted out. And when women were not victims, or at least when they were also perpetrators and agents of violence themselves, the Sahiyar staff distributed the blame evenly between Hindu and Muslim women with no distinction made of differing power, privilege or access to resources within society. When I

further pushed the question of assumed solidarity, one staff member consented to one marker of difference, that the area in which women lived determined their safety from and exposure to threat. The largely Muslim fieldworkers of Sahiyar did not need much prodding to find objection. When I asked whether the statement, “We are all sisters” posed a problem, immediately one field worker opposed it, naming Hindu and Muslim dynamics, experiences, and tension as melting away pretenses of prevailing commonalities. Only one Hindu field worker further exposed the contradiction in the premise, speaking of the betrayal, disconnection and dehumanization felt when women do not support each other during such violence because of being bound to the difference amongst them.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> The mostly male-driven Hindu nationalist movement expanded its reach to include Hindu women into its folds, who upheld Hindu supremacy and patriarchy. Hindu nationalist women's organizations were a front for the deployment of ideologies and strategies to attack Muslim masculinity while, at the same time, propping up morally sound constructions of Hindu masculinity. Hindu women spoke with the authority of the ultimate keepers of tradition and family through maintaining the image of being superior and more civilized than Muslim women. The Rashtra Sevika Samiti, a Hindu Nationalist Women's organization founded in the 1930's, particularly, played a pivotal role in fanning communal hatred. Their reenactment of their private (family) roles in the public sphere had significant impact (sending off kar sevaks, religious pilgrims, to Ayodhya for the riots by blessing them through ceremony and garlands and food; going door to door to talk to housewives instead of public speaking for campaigns). Hindu nationalist women stepped in line with Hindu nationalist male rhetoric positioning Muslim men as rapists and wife-beaters while positioning Hindu men as intact and fundamentally good (Bacchetta and Basu). And yet, it is important to note, Hindu women were not simply pawns of Hindu male propaganda and lunges at power; in their participation, they were able to call for social reforms and more rights for women that Hindu men neglected to pay attention to. The self-defense trainings of karate and gymnastics that aimed to protect them from Muslim male aggressors also instilled a sense of autonomy and confidence and new freedoms. As a Sevika asserted: "because [we] can 'bash up any man', [we] are free to travel unaccompanied." And even with these self-empowering

The reading of these two pieces, "Brothers and Sisters" and "We Are All Sisters," together highlights the role of ritual in establishing meaning-making practices, subversive belonging and genuine allyship as well as the danger in assuming sisterhood without established trust and shared experiences. Difference is socially constructed and yet it very much dominates, molds and guides our daily lives. A myopic focus on difference can and does omit the beautiful syncretism of Hindu and Muslim cultures and communities and yet, ignoring differences altogether does not dismantle their construction and reproduction. Maria bhen's poem, "Brothers and Sisters" is an example of recognizing that the threat of communal violence lands differently on Hindu and Muslim communities in Gujarat and of using Hindu privilege to challenge the menace of anti-Muslim attacks meant to further religious fissures. In this sense, allyship, when bolstered by the demonstrated qualities of empathy and belonging, can melt built divisions of "self" and "other" and make the struggle to end suffering shared by all and for all. This conjuring of allyship leads to interconnection amongst communities and organizers as well as with nature and the phenomenal world.

### ***INTERCONNECTION:***

#### ***Chand***

*You are beautiful like the moon*

*The moon has spots but you don't*

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moments, the self did not "stretch beyond skin" to include Muslim women's safety, agency and growth. (Paola Bacchetta, "Militant Hindu Nationalist Women Reimagine Themselves: Notes on Mechanisms of Expansion/Adjustment," *Journal of Women's History*, 10.4 (Winter 1999).)

*The moon has blessings of light*  
*The sea has blessings of the waves*  
*And you have blessings of the moon*  
*We get light from the moon*  
*We look at the moon to keep fast and to celebrate Eid*  
*Children are born according to the moon*  
*And I like the moon very much*  
*My daughter is like a moon (Shamim bhen)*

Duality of self<sup>45</sup> and other, self and nature, nature and divine can dissolve in the moment of poetic prose, the rhythms and cadence at once grounding and liberating our false separations. As I have discussed in the previous chapter, Mani explains that suffering exists because we feel separate from the entirety of ourselves and all beings; we neglect to see everything as one and as inherently divine. The connection and reunion with our true selves and others present in this poem, is a moment of creative, constructive intervention in violence. In "Chand," the author compares a loved one, her daughter, to the moon, to an important and essential source of light when night falls and a marker of time and change. The moon in this poem can be a beloved and the beloved the moon. Just as "the sea has blessings of the waves," she states that her daughter carries with her "blessings of the moon." This metaphor elicits her merging with this phenomenon of nature, a celestial object that orbits the earth and is in synchronous rotation with it. The moon pulls and recedes the tides in its gravitational force, bringing to fore the height of the waves of which the author speaks. The moon, in this metaphor, is a powerful agitator of cycles of change and movement, its own and those on Earth; the moon signifies interconnection

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<sup>45</sup> I want to distinguish here between "Self" with a capitalized "S" and "self" with a lowercase "s." I have previously capitalized "Self" to indicate one that recognizes their interconnection with all living beings and the phenomenal world, drawing from Lata Mani. I use the lowercase "self" here in opposition to this "Self" that recognizes interconnection.



and interdependence -- its directional path in space follows the Earth's; it is illuminated by the Sun; and, at the same time, it draws out the ebbs and flows of the Earth's oceans. Her daughter is at the center of these interlinkages; this dissolution of self into a chain of mutually dependent and constitutive forces of nature. The moon is, at once, at the center and at the margins of all these phenomena of the universe; without the Earth it would not exist and without it neither would the ocean waves. The moon as daughter and the moon as bearer of gifts and connection, dismantle the myths of duality and reunites these aspects of existence and creation as equal in their significance.

The judgments and constructions of "perfection" and "imperfection" are also challenged by the poet's pronouncement, "The moon has spots but you don't." In my reading, though it may seem she is endowing her daughter with exceptional qualities that supersede the moon, because the two cannot be separated, the transcendence is in how imperfections are considered perfect. The moon still gives us light even with these spots, and so, the disfigurement, cracks, scars, both visible and not, that are vestiges of trauma, can be embraced as perfect imperfections that allow for light to shine, not impede it. It can be surmised that her declaration of the moon's beauty is not undermined by her spots. It is my assertion that "Chand" offers a hopeful expression of the beauty, worthiness, perfection and integrity possible after gendered violence, resulting in a profound realization, for themselves and future generations.

Both scholars of trauma and healing as well as those of arts and spirituality, that I discuss in the previous chapter, emphasize how settling into the present moment can disrupt reliving past experiences of violence. This descending into the everyday and moment-to-moment can and will demonstrate the ephemeral and impermanent quality of all human experiences, which makes the present the only reality. The moon is evoked in this poem with a predictable rhythm, phases that

are constant and consistent that communities, Muslim communities in particular, rely on to mark and measure and align with major life events. The moon's quality of change and return could potentially be a comforting anchor during tumultuous and unstable sociopolitical conflict. The author speaks to how Islamic tradition and rituals align with the moon's movement, visibility, and expanding or contracting shape. "*We look at the moon to keep fast and to celebrate Eid / Children are born according to the moon.*" The Islamic calendar is a lunar calendar and because of this, with the moon being both fickle and reliable, certain holy days are not fixed and instead fluctuate between one or two days depending on moon sightings. Ramadan, the Islamic month of fasting, commences, for most Muslim communities, only when the moon signals its time with its appearance; festivities begin for both Eids, Eid al-Fitr<sup>46</sup> and Eid al-Adha,<sup>47</sup> after the ritual searching for and sighting of the moon. Sighting the moon is auspicious in that it prompts a shift towards celebration or discipline, another phase, another season of Islamic practice and sighting it with a loved one is double the blessings.

The powerful medium of poetry and the poignant and profound themes articulated in "Chand" demonstrate how art-making, as Suzanne Lacy indicates, can restore, even momentarily, connection to something bigger than oneself, breaking down the sense of separateness and isolation that have been reported by the mental health experts I reference as an outcome of trauma. This participant's homage to the moon and her daughter express the cycles of violation, scars and healing, of death and life, of darkness and light as universal and experienced and embodied by all living beings. This homage inserts meaning and beauty into an existence often riddled with pain and, through dissolving self and other and individual frailty with enormous natural phenomena, reclaims worthiness and power.

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<sup>46</sup> the holiday after the end of Ramadan

<sup>47</sup> the holiday at the end of Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca

The spirit tellings of the Kalaashakti women are products of a holistic epistemology aimed at privileging their knowledge and creative expressions of emotional, spiritual and bodily insight and integration. I have read their stories and poems for sources and signs of power, agency, reclaiming meaning from pain and self and community-directed healing. In their writings, I have found powerful interventions in violence through empathetic witnessing, connecting to others' suffering, and making and realizing beauty. These moments of personal awareness and awakening, I argue, through testimony from social justice organizers and literature on social justice and spirituality, can contribute to endeavors towards collective healing and justice. The personal growth and healing apparent seems to have strengthened the Sahiyar organizers' capacity for allyship; an intrinsic ingredient for allyship is recognizing differences reproduced by power dynamics and social constructions while, at the same time, recognizing the interconnectedness of all suffering and then uniting to confront and dismantle unjust systems at the root. These *spirit tellings* gesture at increased capacity for social justice work though no specific evaluations were made regarding the Sahiyar organizers' capacity and effectiveness to incite change. I argue that mindfulness and art-making are connected to social change and yet the efficacy of these methods have not been tested in this particular context. Instead, I read these written works as hints of individual spiritual consciousness that could spiral out to the collective and are, in and of themselves, subversive expressions that challenge domination, violence, communalism and fragmentation.

**Conclusion: Community-based Art: Gujarat Genocide and U.S. Solidarity event  
in South L.A.**

In this dissertation I borrow the emblematic feminist credo, "the personal is political" and expand it to say that personal transformation is political transformation. Instead of presenting it as a direct equation, however, I concur with Mordecai Ettinger when he claims that, "While the relationship between individual healing and collective healing is not linear, the impacts are profound...This is how all living systems change. We impact the people in our lives and the people we work with" (Zimmerman et. al, 20). The previous chapter, *Spirit Tellings*, reveals shifts in interpersonal dynamics amongst Sahiyar field workers and staff, beginning with internal explorations of the intersectional, relational experiences of suffering, privilege and witnessing. It is my conjecture, that, at their core, personal and relational transformations require self-inquiry and self-epistemology. My chosen methodologies and methods of holistic epistemology and liberatory arts facilitate these processes of reflection. The narratives of each Kalaashakti participant are rooted in collective belonging or estrangement because, in the communal context of Gujarat, the personal is not only political, but, as Nato Thompson states, the interpersonal contains seeds of political conflict inherently (Thompson, 26). In examining the ways in which genocidal logic seeks to distort group belonging and identity, I select personal narratives from the Kalaashakti women that offer evidence of how they are empathetically connecting with each other despite and because of the trauma that long endures after the physical manifestations of genocidal violence.

The Kalaashakti workshops offered a platform to express alternative experiences that counter the logic of communal strategies to divide, alienate, and destroy meaning. Before

beginning the Kalaashakti workshops I shadowed Sahiyar organizers for months, observing their work in the community. I decided that instead of an ethnographic study of their community-organizing work, I would like to delve into their internal processes of healing, recovery, and spiritual consciousness that, I proposed, could possibly heighten and expand their capacities to organize effectively in their communities. Through the Kalaashakti women's poems and stories, I analyzed traces of empathy, belonging, interconnection, and embodiment, which I consider anti-violence interventions in themselves as they interrupt and re-route the trajectory of communal violence and its aims to create a polarized society. In focusing on these indications of self-transformation, I also looked for signs that this self-healing renews and strengthens relational dynamics within the religiously mixed environment of Sahiyar and beyond. I argue that the other vital aspect of my methodology--critical ethnography-- which challenges the researcher not only to investigate hegemonic systems, but imagine alternatives to them, is taken up by my participants in how they recognize and respond to the suffering they witness. The key connection I hoped to make is how self-epistemology and inquiry are linked to social justice work. It is important to make the disclaimer that I do not attempt to evaluate or measure how the Kalaashakti workshops, and the art exercises within them, affected the Sahiyar women's abilities as organizers. Even as the major data collected for the purposes of this dissertation have been focused on personal reflection, growth and transformation, it is my claim that this is never fully isolated from the political sphere and social change. I plan to develop a longitudinal study that will involve returning to the field and trying to discern if these methodologies of liberatory arts and mindfulness deepened and enhanced the Sahiyar women's organizing skills.

In this concluding chapter, I venture into examining how the self and collective-reflexive, art processing by the Kalaashakti women was externalized in society, transnationally, and

whether this example of art activism can be considered a catalyst and indicator of transformative strategies for social change and new organizing methods. Partially I do this by analyzing the conception, execution and post-event reflections of *Gujarat Genocide and U.S. Solidarity*, an event hosted by South Asians for Justice, Los Angeles to commemorate the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Gujarat Genocide on April 22, 2012. The event was a hybrid public art and awareness-building event; it featured the stories, poems and performances of the Sahiyar field workers and staff as well as voices of the South Asian diasporic communities in the U.S. I propose that art activism can serve as a tool for critical cultural work, work that aims at subverting dominant narratives and configurations and paving the way for new cultures of resistance and justice.

I use community based, art activism and socially engaged art as somewhat synonymous methods of social justice interventions that all carry within them, I argue, the intention to dismantle cultural stigmas and blocks and reconstitute culture based on more just and expansive visions and inclusions. In *Living As Form*, socially engaged art is that which presents new ways of life and living that emphasize participation, challenge power and span multiple disciplines (Thompson, 19). Lata Mani discusses the role of cultural work in social transformation claiming that, “this objective [enabling individuals to exercise rights and privileges afforded to them as equals] requires not merely the transformation of institutions, but also of the consciousness of each person in society and of the culture as a whole. Cultural work is thus integral to social activism” (Mani, 144). Art activism is a catalyst for the deep unearthing and re-rooting of culture in that it visibilizes subjugated and silenced epistemologies, ways of experiencing, knowing, seeing and re-creating the world, and takes a critical look at the complexes of hierarchy, inequality and oppression that dominant cultures foster and protect. Art activism can usher the alienated back into recognition and render them as belonging not just to the old collective that

thrives off of disparity and deficit, but also to a new collective of their own imagining. It can reveal the silenced and marginalized as art activists, as agents and vanguards of new configurations of collective culture through the public displays and exhibitions of their visions. Socially- engaged art stems from the desire to make art that is living, breathing, performative and action-based (Thompson, 19), and therefore challenges any perceived distinctions between artistic expression and movements for social change.

We can begin with an understanding of the role of culture in reproducing inequality, unjust conditions and hierarchy in society to explore the possibilities of reclaiming culture as a platform for social change. Henry Giroux defines culture as the “site of multiple and heterogeneous borders where different histories, languages, experiences, and voices intermingle amidst diverse relations of power and privilege” (169). In this definition lies an inherent complexity of voices, presence, and means and modes of articulation. Also, in this conceptualization of culture, the axes of power and privilege collide to enforce which identities are valid and visible, define who belongs and identify agents of power. These differentials of power and representation make "culture...a contested terrain, a site of struggle and transformation" (Giroux, 165). Queue critical cultural work as an intervention of possibility. Just as Soyini Madison defines critical ethnography as not only a revelation of deeply embedded systems and dynamics of hegemony through scholarly inquiry but also, and necessarily, an active and conscious response by researchers to the suffering these unjust systems reproduce, critical cultural work takes on that same mandate. Giroux states that it “offers a way ... to challenge hegemonic ideologies, to read culture oppositionally, and to deconstruct historical knowledge as a way of reclaiming social identities that give collective voice to the struggles of subordinate groups” (165). Important to the work of reclaiming marginalized social identities as vital,

contributing parts of culture, is creating and investing in alternative public spheres that will participate in visioning and resistance. The space of critical cultural work can “serve as a context from which to organize sites of resistance; that is, they offer opportunities for creating critical public cultures where the necessary conditions can develop for people to believe that they can make a difference in constructing a society that exhibits in its institutional and everyday relations civic courage, compassion and cultural justice” (Giroux, 232). Here I explore how community based art events are a setting of critical cultural work that allow for neglected social identities to take the stage, reframing dominant discourses of history and cultural validity and envisioning new configurations of community and conjurings of resistance.

Community based art performances, installations, and events derail mainstream discourse and propose a new public culture, one inhabited by artists and audience alike. Through the display of artistic expressions of the marginalized, set in marginalized venues, a cultural remapping can take place, one that gives "voice to those that have normally been excluded and silenced...creating a politics of remembrance in which different stories and narratives are heard and taken up as lived experiences” (Giroux, 174). bell hooks discusses the powerful implications of coming to voice, which means “moving from silence into speech as a revolutionary gesture...the idea of finding one’s voice or having a voice assumed a primacy in talk discourse, writing and action....only as subjects can we speak” (hooks, 12). I infer that coming to voice for the oppressed and marginalized can invert power structures, and the ways in which society and culture categorize, discipline and function, because those once stripped of subjecthood are now the harbingers of new dialogue and community. I believe coming to voice within chosen spheres of witnessing widens the circles of voice beyond the art activists who have created and displayed



artworks to all those who dare to consider themselves apart of new formations of culture and community.

The public reveal of community based art exemplifies the feminist credo the "personal is political" which, as Nina Felshin states, has "guided much activist art in its examination of the public dimension of private experience" (Felshin, 18). The journey from an isolated endeavor to subjecthood for the individual artist to one that uplifts a collective voice, requires that community art be participatory. "Participation is thus often an act of self-expression or self-representation by the entire community. Individuals are empowered through such creative expression, as they acquire a voice, visibility, and an awareness that they are part of a greater whole. The personal thus becomes political, and change, even if initially only of community or public consciousness, becomes possible. With activist art, participation, as Jeff Kelley puts it, can also be 'a dialogical process that changes both the participant and the artist'" (Felshin, 12). Participation as a prerequisite of art activism, according to Felshin, thus facilitates inclusivity and belonging and can increase audience investment in and connection to whatever social justice issue is being centered. I am interested in what qualifies effective participation in community based art interventions and in what ways the public art event that I co-organized and hosted did or did not engage widening circles beyond the artists featured.

I returned from my first field work visit to Gujarat in February of 2012, on the eve of the 10th anniversary of the Gujarat atrocities. Fresh out of the first series of Kalaashakti workshops, I felt compelled to attend commemorative events in the South Asian diaspora but found that outside of North American cities with a broad South Asian base and deep histories of organizing, Gujarat solidarity events were sparse. Serendipitously, I also returned at a time South Asians for

Justice, a national collective of radical South Asians organizing in the U.S., was forming its first chapter in Los Angeles, known as "SAJLA." Their founding document stated,

*South Asians for Justice is formed with the clarity that the voices of radical South Asians living in the United States are critical to the political, social and cultural landscape here, given our history here dating back to the 1600's, and our ever-growing numbers in the present. We trace our roots to the nations of the South Asian subcontinent and to diaspora communities worldwide, including the Caribbean, South America, Africa, Southeast Asia, Europe, and the South Pacific. We recognize the multiple paths that have led our people to the United States and the complex positions we have occupied as people facing oppression and experiencing privilege in various contexts worldwide.*

*We root ourselves in the rich and powerful histories of resistance and resilience among our people, including (but not limited to) struggles for independence and an end to colonialism, racial justice, labor rights, and gender justice, as we reach for true social transformation that can only come from confronting and challenging the root causes of institutional and interpersonal oppression. As a network in the United States, we seek to continue this legacy through the formation of a transnational platform, inspired by radical South Asian and South Asian diasporic perspectives that are central to local, national and international dialogues and actions about social and economic justice (South Asians for Justice).*

As a transnational feminist who has committed herself to living in transitional and liminal spaces betwixt and between as a *nepantlera*, I felt responsible for making the Gujarat communal

violence relevant to South Asians in the diaspora and bridging the chasm of lived experience and fantasy by exposing the realities of intergenerational trauma and global patterns and perpetuations of genocidal violence. With SAJLA's support and sponsorship, we hosted *Gujarat Genocide and U.S. Solidarity* at the South L.A. venue of Mercado La Paloma, with an emphasis on art activist approaches to awareness-building and transnational allyship. Focusing on various strategies of community engagement and education, our event structure included both linear narratives and art performances. As people entered the space, an art installation called *Writing Trauma* lined the walls featuring the stories of the Muslim field workers of Sahiyar and the photography of Sahir Raza, the son of prominent, Indian anti-communal violence activist, Shabnam Hashmi. A local LA band, Elephants with Guns, established the ambience with South Asian fusion music and we had a spread of South American food from the local Mercado vendors. We were firmly rooted in the in-between. Yasmin Qureshi, a Bay Area-based human rights activist and writer, first situated the Gujarat communal violence in the larger historical context of South Asia. Next, poet, activist and politico, Taz Ahmed, and I performed a collaborative poem in which we weaved her grandfather's experience of the partition of 1947 with the assault on masculinity and mental wellness in the aftermath of 2002 Gujarat. Following this, Trupti Shah, the Executive Director of Sahiyar, gave a video talk on the status of current grassroots organizing work in Gujarat that is founded in Sahiyar's philosophies of feminism and communal harmony. Hamid Khan, former founder and director of South Asian Network, introduced the audience to a local struggle, the Stop LAPD Spying Coalition and its aims to unite brown and black communities in LA towards a common objective of fighting state-sponsored surveillance and brutality. After the awareness-building portion of the event, we divided the audience into small groups and facilitated processing and discussion.

As SAJLA's inaugural event, *Gujarat Genocide and U.S. Solidarity*, centered artistic expression as the medium with which to examine and interrogate overlapping systems of injustice and oppression. However, incorporating public art into the event agenda is not the same as doing the critical cultural work of imagining alternative, inclusive and subversive cultures, composed of voices at the margins of mainstream society. I also contend that the transformative potentials of critical cultural work and art activism share the essential ingredient of participation which is crucial to creating a new collective culture premised on social justice. How is *Gujarat Genocide and U.S. Solidarity* an effective example of critical cultural work by route of community-based art? Within the confines of the event was a new culture created and, if so, what were its transnational elements? What were the event's limitations in exposing, interrupting and countering dominant cultural narratives of power?

To quote Giroux again, critical cultural work “offers a way ... to challenge hegemonic ideologies, to read culture oppositionally, and to deconstruct historical knowledge as a way of reclaiming social identities that give collective voice to the struggles of subordinate groups” (165). First, the *Writing Trauma* art installation was effective at revealing the destructive power of communal violence, centering Muslim subjectivity and suffering, and shifting attention to inter-community solidarity and allyship that fall outside the scope of sensational media representations. Sahir Raza complicated popular tales positioning Muslims as the aggressors with photographs of the charred artifacts of violence: ordinary objects left miraculously whole in ash and humanizing portraits of Muslim families estranged, disoriented, perplexed with grief in the aftermath of displacement. Ultimately, these photographs show human loss and the struggle to reclaim the everyday. In the context of widespread communal segregation in most Gujarati cities, the Sahiyar women's narratives of shared struggle and feeling, of challenging corrupt authority

across communal lines, undo the myth of ancient communal hatreds and provocative media reports which focus on inter-religious, feuds rather than hopeful moments of compassion and care. The photo installation, coupled with the stories of the Sahiyar field workers, derail the Hindu-centric ideology that paints Muslims as foreign to India, by foregrounding how what was left behind, the daily habits interrupted and the suffering recorded are all relatable, familiar and universal. The abject and the othered, through Raza's photos and the Sahiyar women's testimonies, enter as subjects. One SAJLA organizer stated, "as a US-born south Indian and a Hindu, it was one of the first times I fully heard reflections of the genocide in Gujarat since 2002" (Kishore).

The spoken word piece, "Tracks Back Home" also deconstructed historical accounts of communalism in South Asia. In it, Taz Ahmed and I recounted the stories of two Muslim men, one Bengali and one Gujarati, while grappling with how the divisiveness of South Asian Partition and communalism affects masculinity, mental health and a sense of belonging and home. The piece exposes the disorienting effects of political borders and confronts popularized heroes, such as Gandhi, who advanced a duplicitous rhetoric of non-violence. Through the installation and performance, subjugated knowledges and voices were not only present but the neat sutures of hegemonic history were pried apart, uncovering the dominant ideologies that wrote and preserved the hierarchy of speech and silencing.

Beyond the hangings on the walls and the two microphones, it is crucial to evaluate the community engagement piece of this art activist event, including who had agency in creating an alternative, critical public culture and assessing this new culture's sustainability. Widening the circles of voice and empowerment is essential to more socially just futures, according to both scholars of critical cultural studies and socially engaged art, alike. The audience was given

multimedia input throughout the event and not many artistic modes to internalize, react, interact and contribute to countering hegemonic histories and the clampdown on knowledge production. Voicing was relegated to talk-processing; the event did not offer creative tools of meaning-making for the audience themselves which makes the conditions questionable in order to make the leap from audience to participants. One SAJLA organizer reflected: "And I absolutely loved the photographs hanging on the walls and the text accompanying them. That might have been my favorite part -- just walking around and looking at the pictures, taking in the stories, and having the opportunity to do so with others who were also reflecting on and contemplating the event" (Hampapur). In this reflection, though there are definite indications of engaged presence, there also seems to be a clear distinction between artists and witnesses, which limited the participatory nature of this form of art activism. Since art activism exemplifies the "personal is political" through a "public dimension of a private experience," I question whether we were able to expand the net of the personal enough to draw the audience in as co-collaborators and co-conspirators in the political mission to dismantle communal violence. The voices of those who had experienced Islamophobic violence were privileged over the need to reclaim the marginalized social identities through cultural transformation for all participants in the room, especially those who did not share a Gujarati or South Asian lineage.

"Your lives and your work are very connected to the lives and the work of so many people of color around the world, including in the United States, in California, in South LA" (Kishore).

Felshin states that participation as an act of self-expression, in these community forum settings, can be empowering for individuals in not just attaining voice but in feeling connected to a larger community and a greater cause. In what ways did *Gujarat Genocide and U.S. Solidarity*

fall short in harnessing the potential of engaged participation to lead to transnational community-building and solidarity and in ushering in new transnational, critical public cultures? Were the impacts of the 2002 communal attacks against Muslims rendered as relevant to the communities of South L.A., as the SAJLA organizer above claims? Did they surpass the illegibility of the violence Muslims of Gujarat endured enough to be compelled to rise in solidarity to a cause that was also theirs?

Hamid Khan, the founder of Stop LAPD Spying Coalition, discussed community fractures resulting from the violence of South Asian Partition and new law enforcement efforts in L.A. He discussed how Islamophobia intensified the policing of all brown and black communities in L.A. through Suspicious Activity Reporting, which operates under the protective guise of national security but affects all deemed undesirable by the state. This is why, he explained, the Coalition is based in Skid Row and works to move beyond identity politics. And yet, the transnational connection was tenuous; how exactly did state violence in L.A. mirror tactics used to eliminate undesirable, Muslim communities in South Asia, half a world away? Implicit in Hamid Khan's call for solidarity, "we must become the collective other," is the idea that the marginalized, silenced and oppressed can and must unite in empathy and engagement to reroute cultures of destruction; that they must share the vitriol of their struggles to combat a tendency towards separateness. During our organizers' debrief, a few organizers mentioned the weak link between the oppressive mechanisms at play in Gujarat and South L.A.

*"Being a Latino/Black space, some folks thought that we didn't make the necessary inroads to connect the genocide to their community (in Los Angeles)" (Sharma).*

*"maybe we could have placed our work transnationally, and locally, in some of these larger issues of being policed and criminalized - etc" (Patel).*

*"We did talk about trying to connect it to LA, policing, surveillance - so I think the connections of talking about different South LA communities - that is one thing we could have done better with" (Mittal).*

Building transnational community and reframing public culture from a transnational lens is not a linear, formulaic process. To move in the direction of that inclusive scope requires a critical understanding of interconnected systems of oppression. Along with an incomplete analysis between the impacts of state-sponsored violence in Gujarat and South L.A., even the alliances within South Asian diaspora in the U.S. were tenuous in that there was no solid interrogation of the transnational reach of Hindu fundamentalism and how South Asian Americans can be complicit in the crimes against Muslims in their homelands. The discussion about Western accountability for genocides in the Global South and the relevance and weight of the concept of "transnational genocide" for that particular configuration of community went missing. An introspective and expansive reflection on oppression must also be coupled with collective visioning of cultures of resistance in order for critical, public cultures forged through socially-engaged art to emerge. We, as the SAJLA organizers, did not provide the local communities present, particularly the South L.A. community, with a creative space or platform to externalize any connections made to Islamophobia in Gujarat or to articulate a commitment to mutual and enduring allyship. A transnational "dialogical process," that, through mutual and reciprocal self-expression, can "change both artist and participant," was lacking in this transnational forum and so, even though we did not emerge at the end of the event with the



collective birth of a new, critical, transnational culture, we did emerge better equipped to facilitate a fuller process in the future.

*Gujarat Genocide and U.S. Solidarity* was the product of my first effort at integrating my life as a social justice organizer with my life as a creative arts workshop facilitator, at directly letting my intellectual inquiries guide my organizing initiatives and, even before that, allowing my longing for transnational belonging to guide my trip to India and eventual research project. The public art and awareness building event that followed was an effort to externalize the Kalaashakti testimonies of personal transformation with the aim of tapping into our universal need to belong, thereby engendering and imbuing new, critical cultures with the conditions ripe to move us toward social change. Instead of merely putting the intimacy of Kalaashakti on display for public consumption, what would it mean, in the future, to encompass all witnesses at *Gujarat Genocide and U.S. Solidarity* in that intimacy conceived of over months, collectivizing personal stories of struggle, expanding the radius of connection, empathy, and revolution? When considering new directions to take my work after this event which took place nearly four years ago, and after this dissertation, I am determined to create a blend of intellectual, spiritual activist and artistic endeavors. This dissertation has been, from the beginning, an integration, not compartmentalization by introducing methodologies that examine and address social suffering, holistically. As I dive deeper into the field of critical cultural studies, I aim to explore transnational participatory approaches to knowledge production and textual analysis that initiate all participants into the role of cultural workers. I will definitely grapple further with the central ethical dilemmas of transnational feminist research concerning how and for whom knowledge is produced, especially in crafting the terms for transition from workshop space to public art event, and articulate new strategies for inclusive voice and decision-making in every part of the

knowledge - disseminating process. I would like to explore reformulating my praxis, finding a balance between an open-ended, process-oriented storytelling and writing and the action-driven undercurrent of art activism. In workshop formation or an ensuing public art exhibit, I have learned from Kalaashakti and *Gujarat Genocide and U.S. Solidarity* that resistance must be a consensual undertaking and solidarity cannot be assumed. I am interested in acquiring new scholar-activist approaches to ensuring that imagining and creating are not relegated to the designated spaces of reflection; and that borders between scholar, activist, artist are constantly challenged, reframed, blurred and decolonized. In that vein, widening the circles of voice from personal testimony to public event, and from public event to cultural shifts, will require a solid foundation and unified vision. Such foundation can start with an on-site artistic collaboration, which represents a concrete manifestation of a new sphere of critical public culture.

The toxic ideology of communal violence distorts connection, relationships and capacities to collaborate. In this dissertation I ask what it could mean to tell stories of wholeness instead of fracture, to continue to interrogate systems of oppression but not get caught in their logic. In this dissertation I privilege contemplative critique as much as critical theory, and self-transformative journeys as much as marches to dismantle corrupt institutions. The aim of this project is to complicate the terms and conditions for social justice, calling attention to the healing power of a connection to beauty, art and Spirit. And, yet, this dissertation is incomplete, as most articulations of voice often are.

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