LIVING IN AN UNFINISHED AMERICA

Shared Experiences of Discrimination and Resilience by Arab, Muslim, and Sikh Americans

A PHOTOVOICE PROJECT

City and County of San Francisco
HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION
Theresa Sparks
Executive Director
Edwin M. Lee
Mayor

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A Photovoice Project Sponsored by the San Francisco Human Rights Commission

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CONSULTANTS

Edward Mamary, Dr.PH, MS: Principal Investigator and Professor, San José State University
Steven DiVerde, Photography Trainer
Auj Mohammadi, San José State University Student Intern

PARTICIPANTS

We wish to extend our gratitude to the Arab, Muslim, and Sikh community members who shared their life experiences.

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A PHOTOVOICE PROJECT

Welcome to "Living in an Unfinished America," a Photovoice project on the lived experiences of Arab, Muslim, and Sikh Americans in the San Francisco Bay Area. This project brings together ten participants from diverse communities and shares their personal stories about Islamophobia and anti-Arab prejudice. The participants come from a wide range of backgrounds (age, race/ethnicity, religion, and language), but here they demonstrate what they share—resilience, strength, and a sense of common values.

Although Arab, Muslim, and Sikh communities have long experienced Islamophobia and anti-Arab prejudice, hate violence toward these communities markedly increased after 9/11. Today, Arabs and Muslims, and those perceived to be Arab or Muslim, continue to experience hostility in their daily lives.

This project provides a forum for community participants to examine their lives and communicate their reflections through photographic images and narrative. Together, they serve to document challenges they have faced and the strengths they have drawn upon in their day-to-day lives. From the novice camera user to the more experienced photographer, all participants were able to use photography as a tool for both individual and collective expression.

With the recognition that the human experience is often complex, and with the belief that any particular phenomenon can be deeply understood only by those who actually experience it, we chose Photovoice (a community-based participatory research method) to explore the lived experience of those coping with Islamophobia and anti-Arab prejudice.

Our goal is to provide a venue for participants to communicate important issues to policymakers and the community at large. We invite you to explore and gain insight into how this powerful and thoughtful group of people sees the world and how they have responded to prejudice and discrimination with resilience, cultural pride, and self determination.

The Photovoice Method

Photovoice is a community-based participatory action research method. It was developed by Caroline C. Wang of the University of Michigan and Mary Ann Burris from the Ford Foundation, and is widely used in public health and other related disciplines. For this project, community participants took photographs representing their everyday experiences as they relate to Islamophobia and anti-Arab prejudice. These images served as a basis for participants to engage in discussions on issues that are important to them. The ultimate aim of the project is to bring awareness of these issues to policymakers, health providers, educators, and the general public.

Extensive outreach was conducted to recruit participants, with assistance from eight agencies that served as community partners. A standardized screening protocol was used to ensure participant eligibility and a sample that would reflect diverse demographic backgrounds. Participants were Arab, Muslim or Sikh individuals who had reported experience with discrimination or bias. Participants were asked if they would be comfortable with photography and be willing to discuss sensitive topics of critical importance in a group setting.

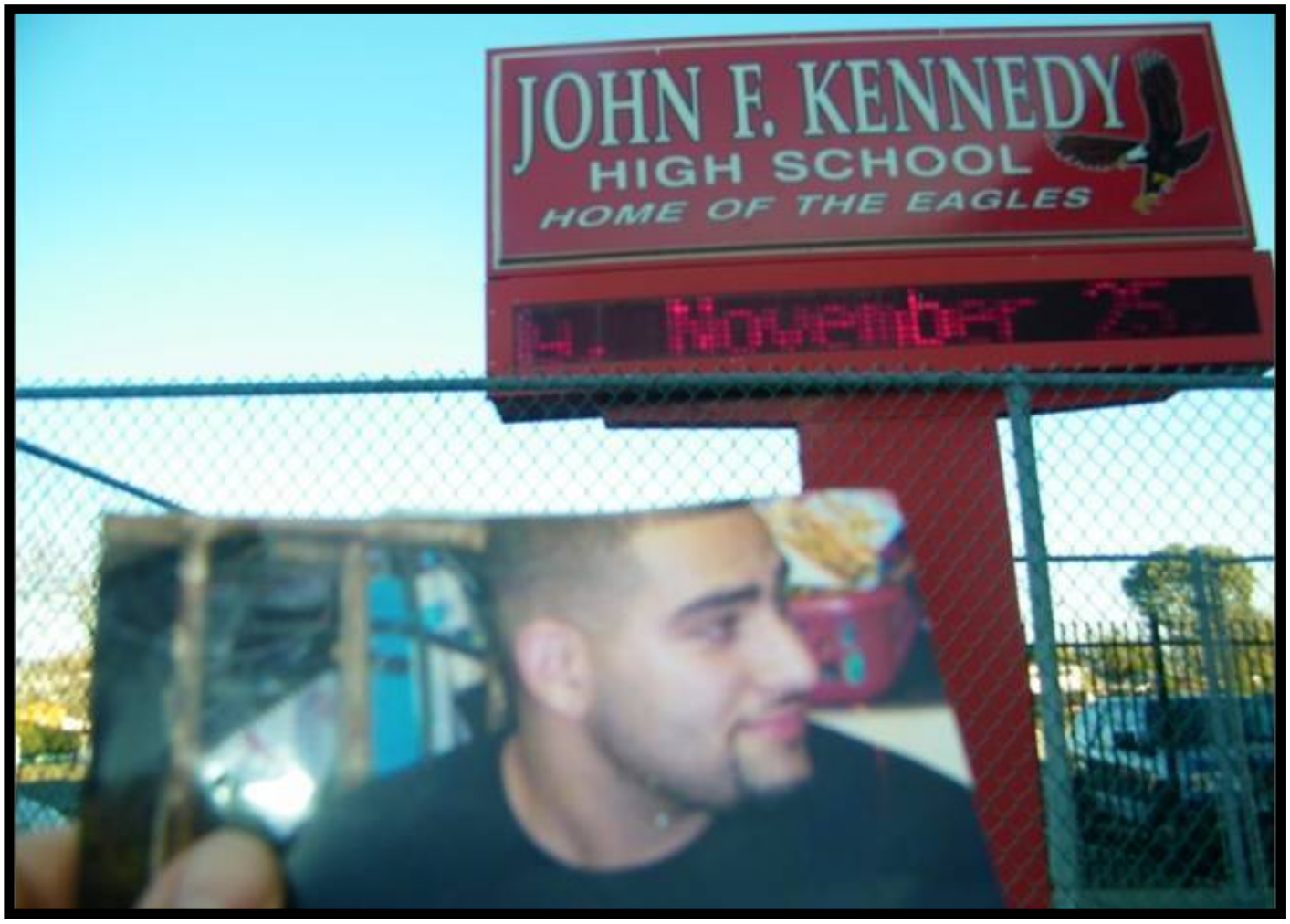
The project included 10 Arab American, Muslim, and Sikh participants who came from a wide range of backgrounds (age, gender, race/ethnicity, religion, and language). Participants attended four group workshops (4-6 hours each), where they participated in small group discussions and photography trainings. The 54 photos and narratives that emerged share several major themes: including coping with discrimination, cultural identity and assimilation, importance of faith, and resiliency.

POINTING FINGERS

Racism isn't just bad for the people it is directed towards. It is also bad for those directing it. After 9/11, I fell into the same trap as most Americans in hating and mistrusting my fellow Muslim brothers and sisters. Eventually, that pointed finger I held out at them came back towards me because without realizing it, I had started to hate all that was perceived as Muslim, which included my own Sikh heritage. Day by day, I slowly changed the way I looked, the way I spoke, the places I went, and what I said. Eventually, I felt a great degree of comfort in the identity I had put on, but I didn't realize the cost of what I had taken off. I had lost myself and the rich heritage of both our cultures. This photograph is a reflection of that loss. Behind me, you can see my parental figures facing and fading away from me. Their language, now inverted, is unintelligible, and I can't quite make myself out either. My struggle to undo my racism is my struggle to not let myself or my family disappear.

—Nick, Sikh American man

DEFENDING MY SON



This is my son. His name was Osama. I chose a picture of his school to show with his picture. After 9/11, many people at his school (students, teachers, and staff) tormented him. One teacher in particular continually called him Osama Bin Laden. He had nothing to do with his name and we had nothing to do with what happened on 9/11. They made it like it was his fault. He was 20 years old when he got shot. They said it was mistaken identity, but he got shot because he's a Middle Easterner, because he had Arabic writing on his car. And they tried to make it seem like he just was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Every time I pass that school, I wish I could see if someone needs help or is being discriminated against. I would want them to know that nothing is wrong with them. I joined this project because of my son. He is not alive to defend himself. I raised my kids to defend themselves. I was raised to stand up for what I believe in and for my religion—how to behave, how to act, how to respect, how to love.

—Fayza, Palestinian American Muslim woman

KEEPING MY HEAD DOWN

This picture shows part of a stone figure, with its head down in prayer. I think it is beautiful, but it also represents the discrimination and harassment I suffered at work after 9/11. My co-workers knew that I was Arab American, yet they openly made discriminatory comments. It was a very hostile work environment. I regularly heard: "Arabs are barbarians;" "The only thing Arabs understand is violence and terrorism;" "Arabs need to be killed before they kill others;" and "Torture is needed in dealing with Arab people." My supervisor retaliated against me for reporting what I was hearing and experiencing. She assigned me more than twice the amount of work required of my co-workers. I kept my head down just like the statue in the picture has its head down. I was harmed physically, spiritually, and emotionally at that job. This picture may remind us to breathe, meditate, pray, and do whatever we need to do to nurture our souls and spirits.

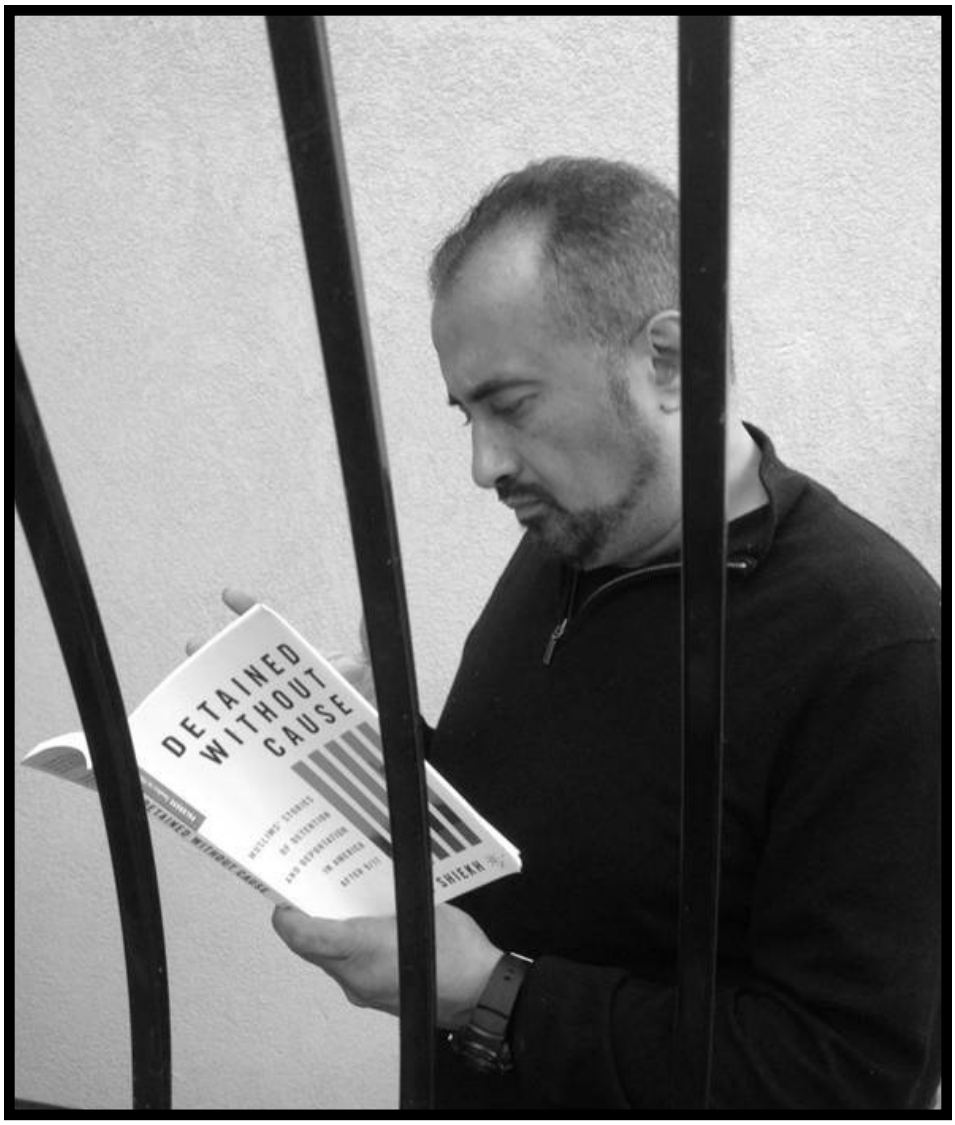
—Sema, Palestinian American woman

RETREATING WITHIN

This picture of a forest has a lot of darkness in it. It also shows rays of light (which I think of as rays of love) beaming through the darkness onto the forest floor and radiating out everywhere. The mix of darkness and light in the picture parallels my realities of "darkness," in my experiences with anti-Arab/anti-Islamic discrimination, and "light" where my strength and resilience shine through. It was sad and ironic to me that even as I participated in a "healing" retreat, I was further harmed. During an introduction meeting, the organization's leader (who called himself a man of peace) began by making hostile remarks and asked me discriminatory questions like "What kind of a Palestinian are you anyway?" and "Are you a Muslim?" He asked questions about my sister, who was shot during a peace vigil in Jerusalem. I was shocked into silence. When I experience bigotry and discrimination couched and hidden by "kinder and gentler" sounding people, it harms in deeper ways, especially when those people are in positions of power. I hope this picture will shed light on this reality that many face.

—Sema, Palestinian American woman

RESISTANCE BEHIND BARS



This is a picture of my husband. I took it at home. This is a symbolic representation of the people who were wrongfully arrested after 9/11 in connection with terrorism. Through this picture I wanted to capture the spirit of resistance and resilience and how the individuals behind bars used education to become stronger. They knew their Islamic identity had led them to their imprisonment. Instead of turning away from religion, they chose to assert their Muslim identity. Their Islamic identity seems to have provided them with a sense of power and strategies of resistance in an utterly disempowering place.

—Irum, Pakistani American Muslim woman

INSCRIBED LAYERS

I migrated from Pakistan to the U.S. some 30 years ago with the hope of belonging to a place that was open and free. The journey to belong has been arduous. The superimposed, tilted double image of me standing at the edge of a door reveals my belongings in multiple locations and spaces. At one level, my presence is surreal, as if I don't belong here. At another level, I am firmly present and standing, asking you to take a deeper look to find me. Somber and reflective, my image is split into many pieces. The broken panes and edges of the doors reflect the impossibility of being able to capture me in one dimension. The superimposed reflections of sky, trees, open area, and balcony railings reveal the pierced and inscribed layers on my body—warrior marks. This picture represents the multiple and complicated layers that I carry within myself. I am a Muslim woman who can be anything and everything.

—Irum, Pakistani American Muslim woman

ACTIVIST IDENTITIES

I wanted to bring into perspective my Palestinian and my gay identities, because they both seem to function in activist communities in parallel—rarely do they intersect. This graffiti shows how reactionary much of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict discourse is in the Bay Area. I cannot seem to find one side of the story, without the other. I appreciate that neither street artist defaced the other's graffiti, so both messages are retained, one being pro-Palestinian and the other pro-Israeli. This photo describes the constant need to frame Palestinian issues in the context of Israel and vice-versa, instead of simple discussions of singular points.

—Hytham, Palestinian American Muslim gay man

THE INTERIOR OF RACISM

Most people think that racism is something that happens to people, like when people called me a "sand nigger" or "Osama," but racism happens in many ways. One of those ways was one I committed against myself everyday with the instruments you see here. I realized that having facial hair made me seem more "Arab," so I constantly kept my face shaved, not because I enjoyed the labor of having to do so or the way that I looked, but because I feared being seen as a Muslim, along with the ridicule and insults that would come with it. Besides, with my face shaved, I could pass as Mexican. It took me a long time to get the courage to finally grow my beard out, and it wasn't until after the massacre in Oak Creek, where a white supremacist opened fire on a group of Sikhs in a temple that he believed were Muslim, that I decided that I would never entirely shave it again. Not all racism is visible, and me being comfortable with my beard is a small step in ending the racism I had towards myself.

—Nick, Sikh American man

I AM A NORMAL WOMAN

This picture represents a Palestinian woman wearing Hijab. Hijab is not accepted in most Western communities. And so everybody watches her and thinks, "Why are you wearing that thing?" Although she may not hear anyone say it, she feels it. This woman goes to school, she does her work, and she does everything normally. But she is wondering what kind of life she's having. How she is going to face all these kinds of things in front of society and tell them, "I am a normal woman like other women. I am just wearing this because of my religion and because of my view of life."

—Moodi, Palestinian American Muslim man

NOT A PERSONAL CHOICE

This picture portrays myself either putting on or taking off a scarf. I used to wear the hijab, but I ended up taking it off. To this day, I still struggle with the choice I've made, and I hope to one day put it back on. We live in a society that encourages personal choice, just as long as it follows the norm. But racism, prejudice, and stereotyping took away my personal choice and my freedom of religion. It affected my job, my ability to make friends, my ability to be heard, and my ability to be happy.

—Verdah, Pakistani American Muslim woman

A MOSAIC OF FLOWERS

We deal with cotton in the form of fabric our whole lives. The only times you don't wear it really is when you're in the shower, but other than that you almost always wear cotton fabric. So why is it when you put this few yards of cotton cloth on your head you become alien, you become foreign? As soon as I wear this, I no longer share the same values as you; I don't share the same home as you; I don't speak the same language as you; and instead of you smiling back at me, you worry and you fear me, just because of some fabric. I knew that people feared that cloth when I went out with my grandfather, even though I don't think he noticed it. Later, I realized that my grandfather knew what people were saying, but he didn't care. To him and to his faith, he was born to stand out, so he never cared to fit in. I grew up being told America was a melting pot. But things die in melting pots. That is where you sterilize them of their culture. And I don't want America to be a melting pot. I want it to be a mosaic of flowers, like my grandfather. And so when I wrap a turban around my head, I hope you will learn to see it as another petal of the flower of my identity, of my heritage, of our country.

—Nick, Sikh American man

JUST BUYING SHOES

Here you see glass, wide windows, and shoes. During 9/11 we went inside to buy shoes for me and my children. I was sitting on the chair and one of my children asked me for a piece of gum. I reached to look for a piece and one of the workers said, "Everyone be careful! She's looking for a gun or a bomb in her purse." My kids were looking at me and looking at the person and customers. I wanted to teach them a lesson—not to let anybody intimidate them and to be strong. I explained to the manager what happened and he said, "I'll take care of it"—the employee was fired from his job.

—Fayza, Palestinian American Muslim woman

WALK, DON'T RUN

I still run to grab the mail or to get the door or to do a million other silly things, but I don't do that in airports or government buildings. I remember after 9/11 seeing how people looked at my grandfather, a turbaned Sikh, and how an unease seemed to wash over them. I remember how the TSA agent insisted that he take off his turban for inspection. Why were the few yards of cotton wrapped around his head so terrifying to others, whereas the yards of cotton wrapped around his chest or legs in the form of pants and a shirt were not? Maybe it is because people are not used to seeing men wearing turbans in airports and public places. Whenever they see them, they associate them (as the media does) with terrorism. If I were to run through city hall with a turban on, someone might say, "What is that guy doing? Did he plant a bomb?" But if a white person did the same thing, they would probably just say he was running to a meeting.

—Nick, Sikh American man

I AM AN AMERICAN

I took this picture at a parade in Yuba City. The yellow flags represent the Sikh faith and are accompanied by a U.S. flag. I was eight years old when my family came to the U.S. I basically grew up here, and now I identify myself as an American rather than as an Indian. Two weeks ago, I had tickets to a Shark's game. At the gate, they called me out when they were doing the security check. I had my kirpan on, a religious dagger that is an inseparable part of my Sikh identity. I told them this is an article of my faith and I can't take it off. They didn't let me go inside. I came home and thought that despite being a part of this overall community, I'm still not one of them. It's like seeing everybody pointing fingers at you, "He's not one of us. He's different."

—Harkanwar, Sikh American man

FEAR OF FLYING

These are my parents recently in a plane. This is a normal flight, nothing special about the flight. There's an anxiousness that's already in Sikh and Muslim riders that is above and beyond any sort of phobia or anxiety someone can have regarding a safe flight. Just, you feel like you're being watched. You are being surveilled, and there's no two ways about it. You almost have to internalize that surveillance. Flying in itself is an anxious experience, but to a turbaned, bearded man, it just takes it to the next level.

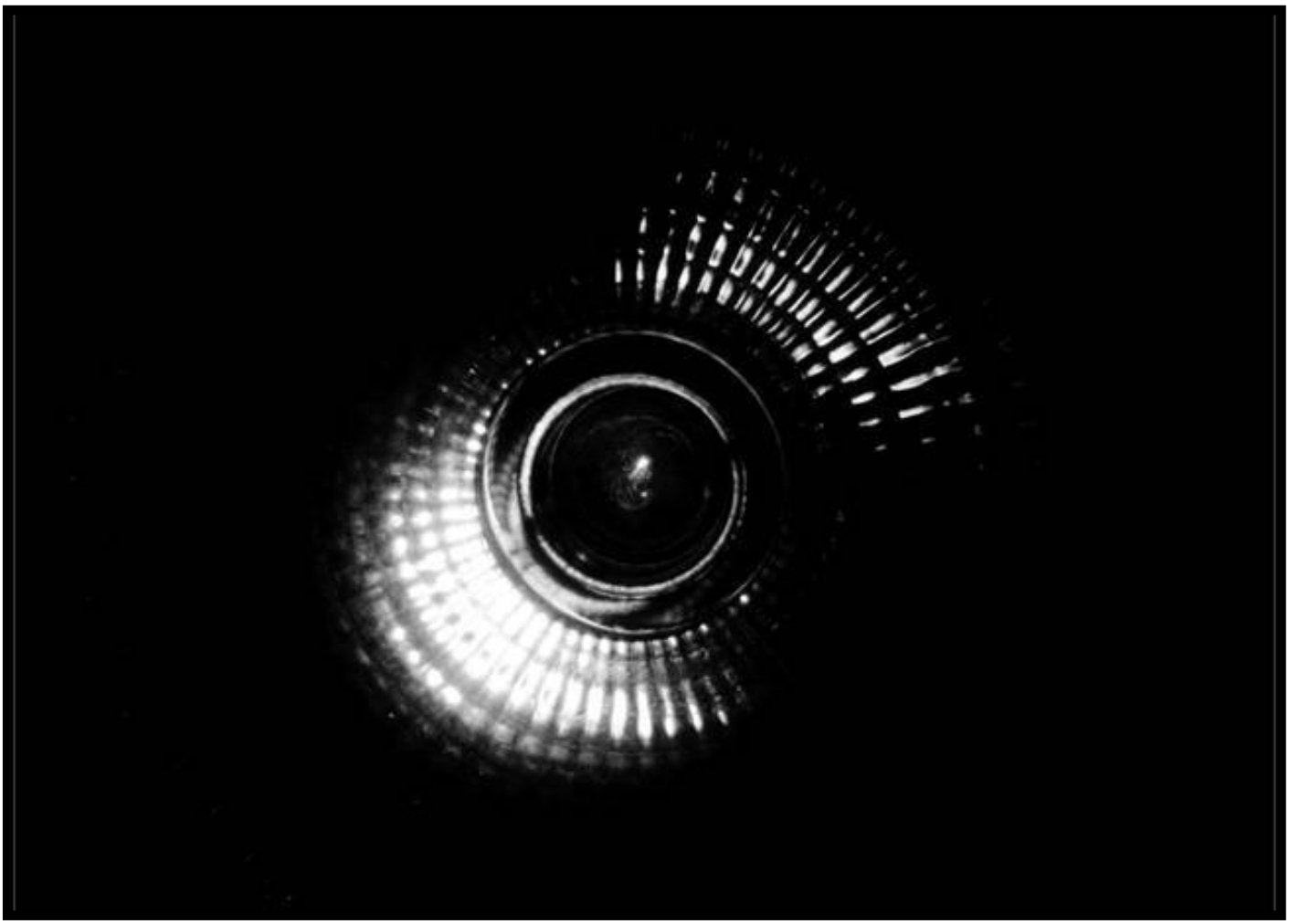
—Singh, Sikh American man

STATE OF FLUX

This is a popular restaurant and café. There is a lot of light and blue, which reminds me of the Mediterranean Sea. About seven years ago, I came here with my boyfriend at the time, who was Afghan. We were there the night before to celebrate, ironically, the Fourth of July. We stayed in a hotel, and the next morning went to get breakfast. When we got to the restaurant after a long walk from the hotel, we noticed that the restaurant staff seated people who were behind us first. We were confused. Why would they be seated first? We were there before them. They wouldn't look at us. They wouldn't pay attention to us. We felt like complete outsiders, and we decided to leave. When I look at this photo, I feel a sense of anger, disappointment, being left out, disrespect, discrimination, sadness, not belonging, not being the norm, being different, and not being good enough. The blurriness of the photo helps show a distortion of the reality we face—on the one hand, we are very proud of who we are and of our culture, but on the other hand, we experience discrimination due to the very things we are proud of. We are in a constant state of flux.

—Kristina, Lebanese American Christian woman

A JUDGING EYE



This is close-up picture of a light bulb. Someone said it looked like a spiral staircase; others had different ideas of what it was. I was inspired to take this picture because it is abstract and could look like a light, an eye, or something else. It evokes feelings of darkness, being watched, surveillance, mystery, magic, and judgment. It reminds us of the surveillance and watching eyes cast upon our community. When others look at this photo, they might get a sense of being watched by a judging eye and might gain some empathy for what we experience on a daily basis.

—Kristina, Lebanese American Christian woman

AN AIRPORT OF OUR OWN

Since 9/11, U.S. airports have become hazard zones for me. Whenever I enter an airport, I feel as if I am a suspect. I can't run at an airport to catch a flight when I am running late. People will think that I am about to blow up a plane. Why do I have this anxiety at U.S. airports? I don't feel the same way at Dubai International airport where almost everyone looks like me. Are they not concerned about security? This airport is a public space. A portion of my airfare went into the maintenance of this airport. It should be welcoming and feel like a home. Security is an issue for everyone; it should not be a privilege for White Americans. Should we build our own airport just like the Chinese immigrants who build Chinatowns to feel safe from racism? An airport for Muslim-looking individuals—a place where they are not humiliated for covering their heads, growing their beards, and having an accent. My dream is exciting and calming my anxiety.

—Irum, Pakistani American Muslim woman

HIDING BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

After 9/11, the FBI investigated my brother, a retired US Air Force Officer and now a commercial pilot, about his links to the 9/11 attacks. After obtaining his reluctant consent, FBI agents searched his one-bedroom apartment for four days. A local news story published, "FBI Investigates Mysterious United Airlines Pilot: Anjum Pervaiz [last name deleted] Vanished Two Days Before Attack." My brother Anjum, a pilot for United Airlines, was on a scheduled business flight to Buenos Aires, Argentina. Listing Anjum's name and address, the article referred to the Urdu novels the FBI agents found as "potential terrorist paraphernalia" that "included pictures of what appeared to be Arab women waving guns." The entire operation was conducted by ill-trained FBI agents running high on adrenaline who didn't give a thought about the lives of people they were impacting. Why was my brother's safety not important? I called the FBI office several times to inquire about my brother's case. No one returned my phone calls. This photo depicting closed doors, flickering fluorescent lights, surveillance cameras, and low ceilings represent the ominous spirit of FBI operations.

—Irum, Pakistani American Muslim woman

ROCK STAR WITH A TURBAN

This is my grandfather standing in front of a huge guitar at Disneyworld in Florida. It was interesting to me because my grandfather has been a musician his whole life, and yet there is a contrast here. There's something inherently American about this guitar that flies in the face of who is standing in front of it. When you see a man, even though he is a musician, there's just a gap there—a rock star with a turban and a beard.

—Singh, Sikh American man

TOO CONTROVERSIAL

This is a statue of Hippocrates at the UCSF Parnassus campus. As a Palestinian Muslim, it doesn't have anything to do with my culture. I found all sorts of other cultures and languages represented in artwork around the campus, but nothing in Arabic. There is no representation of Arab identity at the only medical institution in San Francisco. When I mention such disparities, I am brushed off by other scientists for being too controversial or political. My own parents became doctors to help our community, yet even they warn me to blend in better for the sake of my career. There's this constant divide or void between my culture and my career. In four years of working and volunteering here, I've only met one Arab faculty member, and he was too busy to be my mentor. This anxiety is distracting, but worse, I'm afraid this divide between my culture and my career will only grow as my Arabic disappears.

—Hytham, Palestinian American Muslim gay man

WHAT WE DID TO SURVIVE

This is an image of my family's liquor store in San Francisco. My family is Muslim. We are Palestinian through and through, and yet this image shows this giant American banner that goes all around the store, which was put up after 9/11 to avoid getting their windows smashed in. I added the Palestinian flag to the photo (which is never really there because of insecurity about representing Palestinian culture). Why do Muslims sell liquor? It's capitalism, and it's what we did to survive. I often abandon my culture to assimilate. I rarely wear a keffiyeh (Palestinian scarf). I don't own a Palestinian flag. I even hide my Quran at home. In my family's store, only American symbols are safe. I think we should support other's freedom of expression.

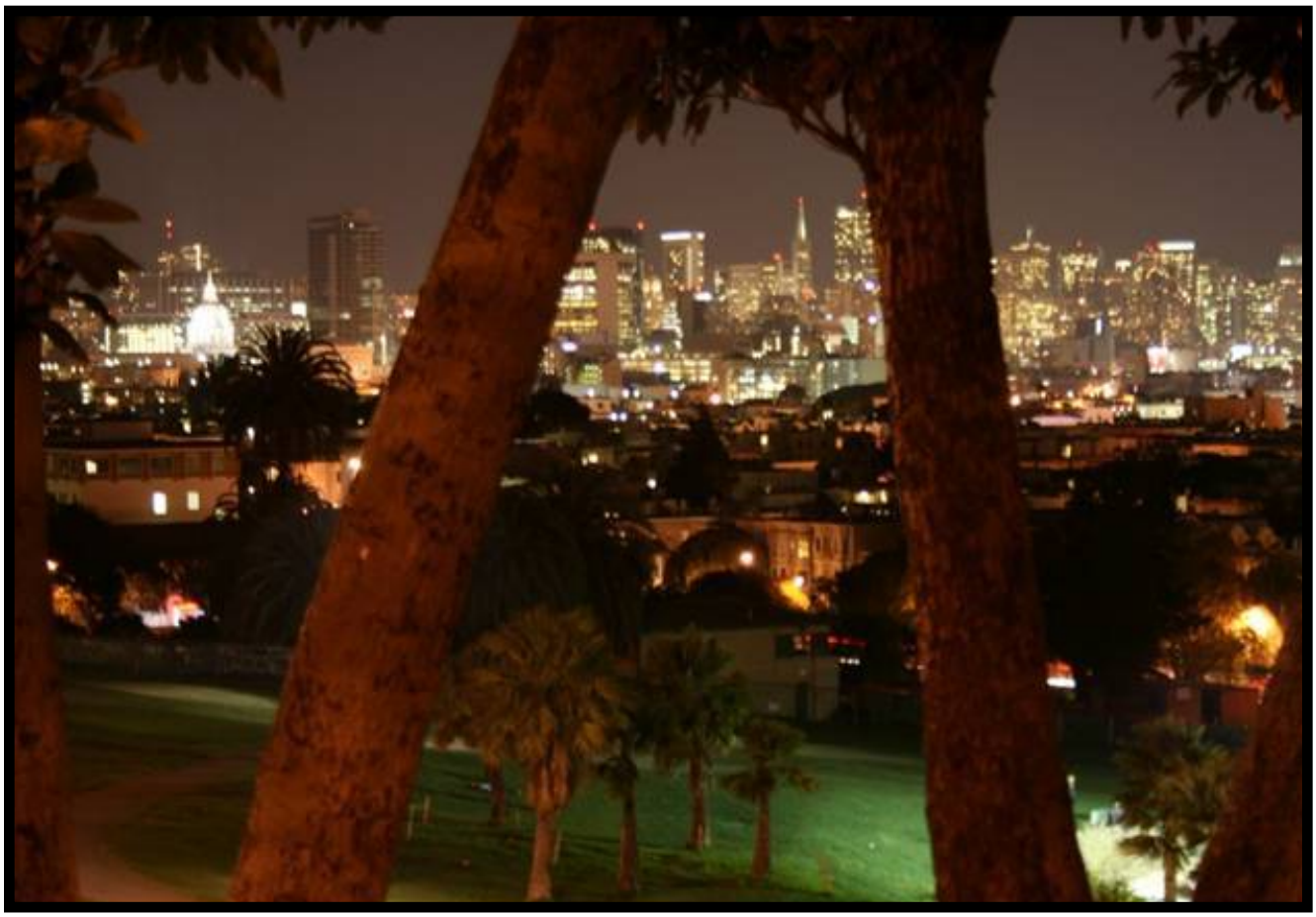
—Hytham, Palestinian American Muslim gay man

COMFORT ZONE

This is an Islamic center in Richmond. It is close to our house. It is my comfort zone, and it makes me very comfortable. Once I enter this gate, whatever is outside doesn't matter to me. So whatever I feel like, once I go there by myself and just sit down and pray and talk, it helps me a lot. We've been through a lot in the past five years. If it wasn't for the center, I don't know if I would survive. My dad raised us to be very strong in our faith, but I want people to know that when we talk to people about our faith, we don't want them to become Muslims. We just want them to understand Islam. "Jihad" for me means to hold on to my faith, take care of my family, and help in the community. We are good people, we have our faith. My faith helps me with my daily life. That's where I get my strength and motivation. I wake up each day and enjoy life and enjoy living and enjoy the people around me. It helps me a lot.

—Fayza, Palestinian American Muslim woman

GAY MECCA



This is the top part of Dolores Park. Some people call it the Gay Beach, as it is a popular hookup spot for gay men. When I see all the buildings lit up at night and the City Hall dome in the background, it reminds me of Jerusalem more than anything. Honestly, the only thing missing is the wall. Seeing the similarities made me think deeply; "Does it matter where I live?" There are challenges for communities wherever I am. On the other hand, as a Muslim, knowing that San Francisco is also referred to as the Gay Mecca, I see a stark contrast between the liberal Gay Beach and the more conservative true Mecca. I rarely find a safe space for Muslim tradition in queer spaces. From a distance, this image reminds me of home, but at the same time, when I am in the park, up close, I don't feel at home at all. Just as I struggle to afford life in San Francisco, I also struggle to remember my home. I can see the whole city lit up so brightly, yet I still feel a dark emptiness like the night sky surrounding me as I long for home.

—Hytham, Palestinian American Muslim gay man

OPPOSITIONAL BINARIES

In this picture, there is an oppositional binary between dark and light, beard and non-beard, and man and woman. Just as these differences help define and describe the other, so does Islamophobia. This oppositional binary between the two that it represents is also the binary that's at play when Western conception of self is being created. It's being created against the backdrop of a Muslim Orient that's always going to remain in the psychology of the West—it's always this other. And so there's no need to look at Islamophobia as a sort of disease that needs to be eradicated, but focus needs to be on understanding that a lot of the conceptions of the West itself are predicated upon a Muslim other and that's really at the heart of the identity issue. Islamophobia is something that is scapegoated in order to create a more positive identity for the West. So, the West is created and sustains itself not in a positive identity but in the negative in that it is not Muslim.

—Singh, Sikh American man

STATE OF WAR

There is a young woman who is washed out in the forefront and a mountain with homes in the background behind her. It looks like there is a fire burning in the bottom right, but it really is just the street lighting. The mountains remind me of Lebanon and the fire reminds me of the wars that happen in different countries in the Middle East. Both the woman and the background are focal points. Even though two completely different things are going on, the red in the background and the red in the woman's hair elicit a sense of danger. There is a joining together of two worlds. This picture evokes danger, despair, wartime, reality, suffering, hatred, violence, youth, and misfortune. This picture can remind others of the struggles we and our families have faced, and the constant sense of violence and war that never leaves us. If others understood our pains, fears, and sadness, they might become more empathetic and strive to treat us better.

—Kristina, Lebanese American Christian woman

PROTECTING OUR FAITH

This is a picture of a man inside the temple. He is holding a sword. This photograph was taken in a special room that is considered the resting room for Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji. This Sikh man is holding the sword out of respect. Historically, kings would have a designated person holding a sword, like a guard. Guru Granth Sahib Ji is our king, the highest authority that we love, serve, honor, and follow. It is our duty to protect our faith because our faith saves us on a daily basis.

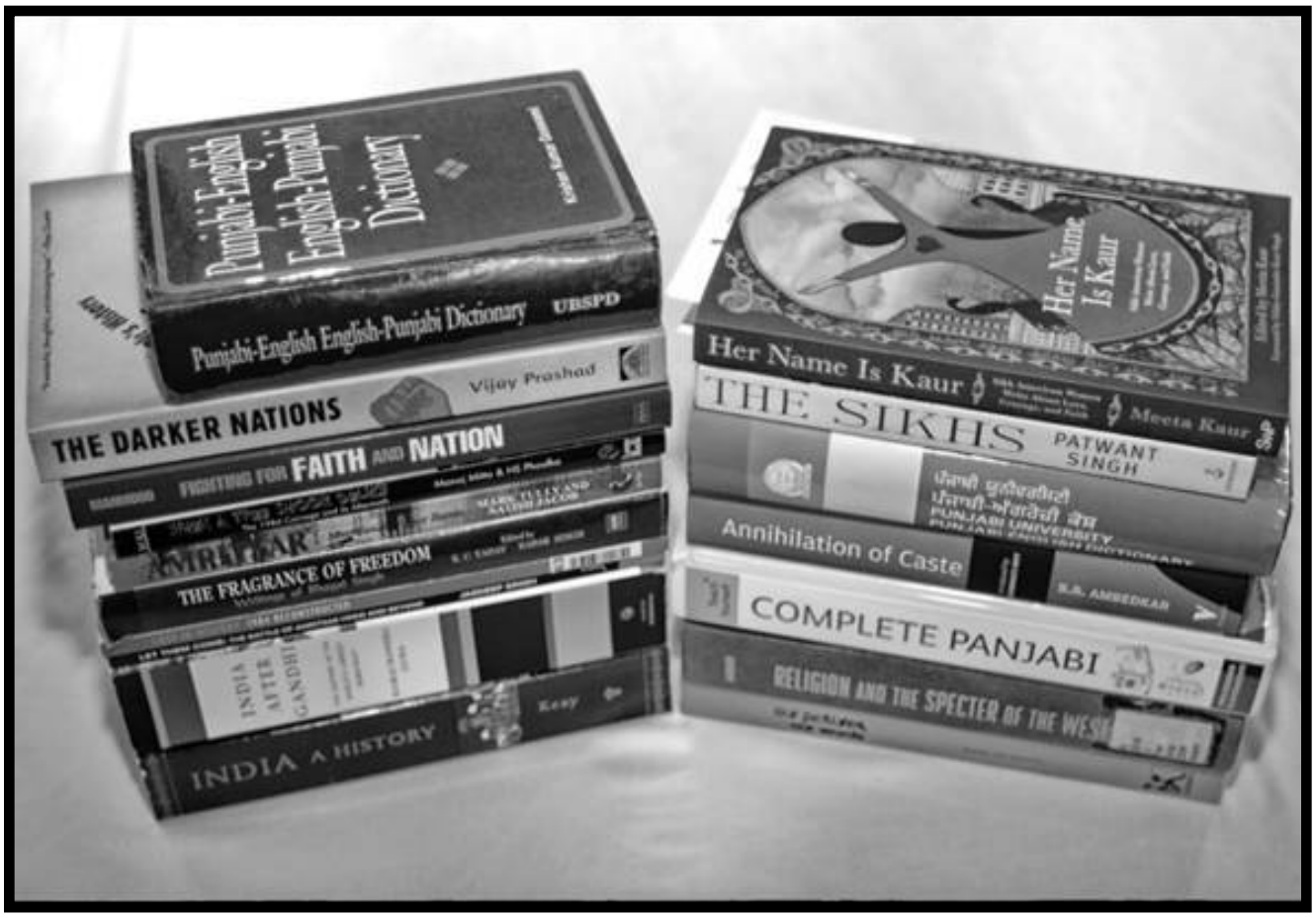
—Harkanwar, Sikh American man

A PERFECT REPRESENTATION

This is Sarban Singh Ji. Every time I go to El Sobrante Gurdwara, I just have to see him. Seeing him is like seeing the perfect model of what a Sikh should look like and how he should carry himself. He has the clothes of a saint but the turban of a warrior. He's got a chakkar on top of his turban. This was used as a weapon by Sikh warriors in history and also represents the equality of all creatures and the never-ending cycle of life. This Sikh is wearing what can protect him. To me, Sarvan Singh Ji is the living example of a true Saint and Soldier.

—Harkanwar, Sikh American man

WE WILL NOT DISAPPEAR



Going through elementary school and all of high school, I don't think I ever read the word Punjab or Sikh in any of my textbooks. I grew up in a world where you can be considered educated and prepared for the world but never learn about yourself. I read a lot about famous White people, there's a few famous Black people, and a few famous Brown people, but my understanding of that was that there was no space for me to be successful. If I was going to be successful it was about how well I erased my identity rather than embraced it. One form of resistance is to start to gain literacy in your own culture, to understand what is there, what happened, how to read and write the language that my grandparents spoke to me instead of allowing it to go silent. These are all the books I have on my culture, on things that are related to my South Asian Sikh identity. If I can learn about my culture and the values that drove its rise, then I can define myself and not have others define me.

—Nick, Sikh American man

MORE THAN A MUSIC TEACHER

This is a picture of kids and their kirtan teacher. I'm also a student of this music teacher. The relationship that a student has with his teacher can be understood as a metaphor for the relationship a Sikh has with the guru. Gu means darkness. Ru means light. So that which gives light into darkness as a metaphor for knowledge. These five boys were born and raised here in America. On Wednesday nights they come to temple and in the back of the temple there's a garage where they learn 500-year-old hymn music. This garage is the center for a lot of Sikhs in Northern California. There have been generations of people who've been through that garage learning from him. He's not a wealthy man, but we give him that sense of wealth that he could have never imagined. He is a resource and role model for these five boys who continue negotiating their identities with their turbans.

—Singh, Sikh American man

A NEW SENSE OF SELF

You can see the temple in the background. It's almost sunset. He's holding a shield. In the back, you see a curved sword. This is a young man who is learning martial arts in El Sobrante. This is a strength for me because after 9/11, young Sikh men and women, in order to negotiate the anxiety around their faith and their place in the world as Sikh, tried to explore a new sense of self by finding a martial arts instructor who could train them in martial arts in a way that their parents and grandparents never learned. When they came to the temple to learn martial arts, they learned a new way to tie their turban in a way that it couldn't be knocked off. So, in response to 9/11, in response to hatred of the way this turban is tied, in the way that during the wars, the Anglo-Sikh wars of the 1870s and also the Sikh wars of the late 1600s, the motto was that, the way these Sikh martial artists tied their turban was that their head could come off before their turban could come off. And what that means is that a sword would more likely decapitate them than the chance would be that the turban would come off. He has this shield, a sword, and this turban to protect himself, if not someone else.

—Singh, Sikh American man

FIGHTING FOR JUSTICE

The is my martial arts teacher; he's an expert in the traditional Sikh martial arts called gatka. The game he is playing here is called Gilla. He has a stick in his hand with a small knife on top. With the stick, he must pick up hay in the middle of the field. To me, my teacher and his practice of gatka are representative of my name, which means lion. He is pouncing on his prey like a lion. The Sikh religion focuses on a concept of being a Saint and Soldier at the same time—someone who is disciplined in the body as well as the mind. This picture depicts a soldier; he has a weapon, and he is practicing so that when the need arises, he can fight for a just cause.

—Harkanwar, Sikh American man

WHAT YOU DON'T SEE

If you're a Sikh, this picture is interesting because of what it doesn't show—you don't see a turban and beard. In the right-hand corner is the altar of a Sikh temple. This picture is on the side of the altar with men and women singing hymns. They're actually using an accordion style instrument called a harmonium and a tabla, which is a huge drum you play on both sides. This relates to me being a Sikh—I find myself singing a lot. I'm a vocalist, I'm a musician. I play both these instruments and others.

—Singh, Sikh American man

TYING TURBANS

Here is an older Sikh man tying a turban on one of my good friends. This captures a very special moment from our culture, when a Sikh dad or father-like figure ties a turban on his son or daughter. It is like slowly tying valuable cultural ideals into each and every fold of the fabric. It helps the younger generation understand who they are and helps them define their identity. This photo reminded me of the time my dad tied a turban on me as a teen. I didn't like it, especially because I got called racist slurs at school. After that experience, I went on to eighth grade and cut my hair. I didn't feel good about myself. My parents would tell me stories of how the Sikh Gurus sacrificed their whole families so Sikhs can wear their turbans like crowns and practice their faith proudly and fearlessly. In eleventh grade, I started growing my hair again and started tying a turban. I feel connected to my roots now and every layer of my turban helps me stand tall in a crowd, proud to be a Sikh.

—Harkanwar, Sikh American man

WARDING OFF THE EVIL EYE

I bought these earrings because of the eye symbol that we see in Middle Eastern cultures. The evil eye is believed to be a curse, and this symbol helps to ward off the curse of the evil eye. In Middle Eastern cultures, blue is a protective color that wards off evil. These earrings remind me of my heritage. They are really beautiful and just make me feel warm. I wanted to photograph something that depicts the opposite of evil. Muslims, Arabs, and Sikhs are often depicted as evil or terrorists. I thought about how this is a bit ironic—how can these same cultures that are afraid of evil and attempt to ward off evil be evil themselves?

—Kristina, Lebanese American Christian woman

THE LOTUS OF HOPE

This picture is detail from a mural titled "Vallejo Rising," that I call the lotus of hope. Each petal of the lotus flower is inscribed with the word "hope" in a different language. I'm an artist and was honored to paint part of the community mural. I was painting it on a Saturday at the farmers' market, and there were many people watching me. They asked, "What are you doing?" I said, "I'm painting 'amal,' which means hope in Arabic." I got a lot of smiles and 'cool.' That was fulfilling for me, because it wasn't safe previously to be identified as an Arab, and worse yet as a Palestinian, due to racism and discrimination. My picture is a symbol of multi-cultural connections and the larger ideal of hope for everyone and the planet when we work together in community with love as our intention and guide.

—Sema, Palestinian American woman

CARDAMOM IN THE CITY

These two flags (at a popular coffee shop in the Mission) are Palestinian and American. They are tied at the bottom, as if they are holding hands. The coffee shop is filled with hipsters who probably don't even notice the flags. It is an attempt by the Palestinian owner to represent our culture here. Their coffee is famous for adding cardamom and mint, just like my mother prepares it at home. It's great to see such economic success come from our culture. This photo represents the resilience of our culture to build new economic opportunities for our community, to empower not only ourselves but other communities, to look for ways to contribute to society with their own heritage. Unfortunately, a few weeks after I took this picture, the owner had to remove the flags due to a customers' complaint about the Palestinian flag.

—Hytham, Palestinian American Muslim gay man

"SAMOUD" AND SOLIDARITY

This is a picture of lights near a mural at San Francisco State University, honoring the prestigious author and professor, Edward Said. The mural project was a catalyst that brought people of all faiths and racial/ethnic backgrounds together in solidarity for Palestinian human rights. Being part of that community is a source of strength for me. This picture represents "samoud," or steadfastness for Palestinian human rights. My hope is that this picture will spark deep feelings and discussion on the question of Palestine, especially in the context of escalating wars in the Middle East. The Edward Said mural and controversy over its creation and existence at SFSU ultimately led to the creation of multiple murals on campus, honoring many diverse communities and cultures. The lights shining around the mural in the photo mirror my desire to shed light on the work of youth and students globally, documenting their advocacy for human rights equality for all.

—Sema, Palestinian American woman

COFFEE CONNECTIONS

This picture represents a very important tradition in our culture. No matter what time of day it is, no matter what is going on around us—war, pain, sadness, despair—we still gather for our tea and coffee. This tradition keeps us connected to each other. It helps us to recharge and to talk about our problems and fears, and it is good for our health. It is a way for us to come together. Also, everyone is invited to drink coffee with us; it is not an exclusive experience. It is inclusive! Sometimes we turn over the cup, let it dry, and read the bottom of the cup to predict our futures. It is a beautiful and light side to our culture, one of our traditions that for me evokes happiness and love. We are so much more than war, violence, or terrorism. We are beautiful people with beautiful traditions.

—Kristina, Lebanese American Christian woman

A FEELING OF SAFETY

I've been to this place several times. It's at the heart of the downtown and it's a little bit scary. I don't feel totally safe when I'm there. Within all these places and the drug dealers, you can see that white door; it's actually to a mosque. It's interesting that after all the bad things that I see outside, when I enter that white door and I get into the mosque, I really feel a different feeling inside; a feeling of safety, a feeling of away from everything. It's like a different world in a very small, tiny place inside the mosque.

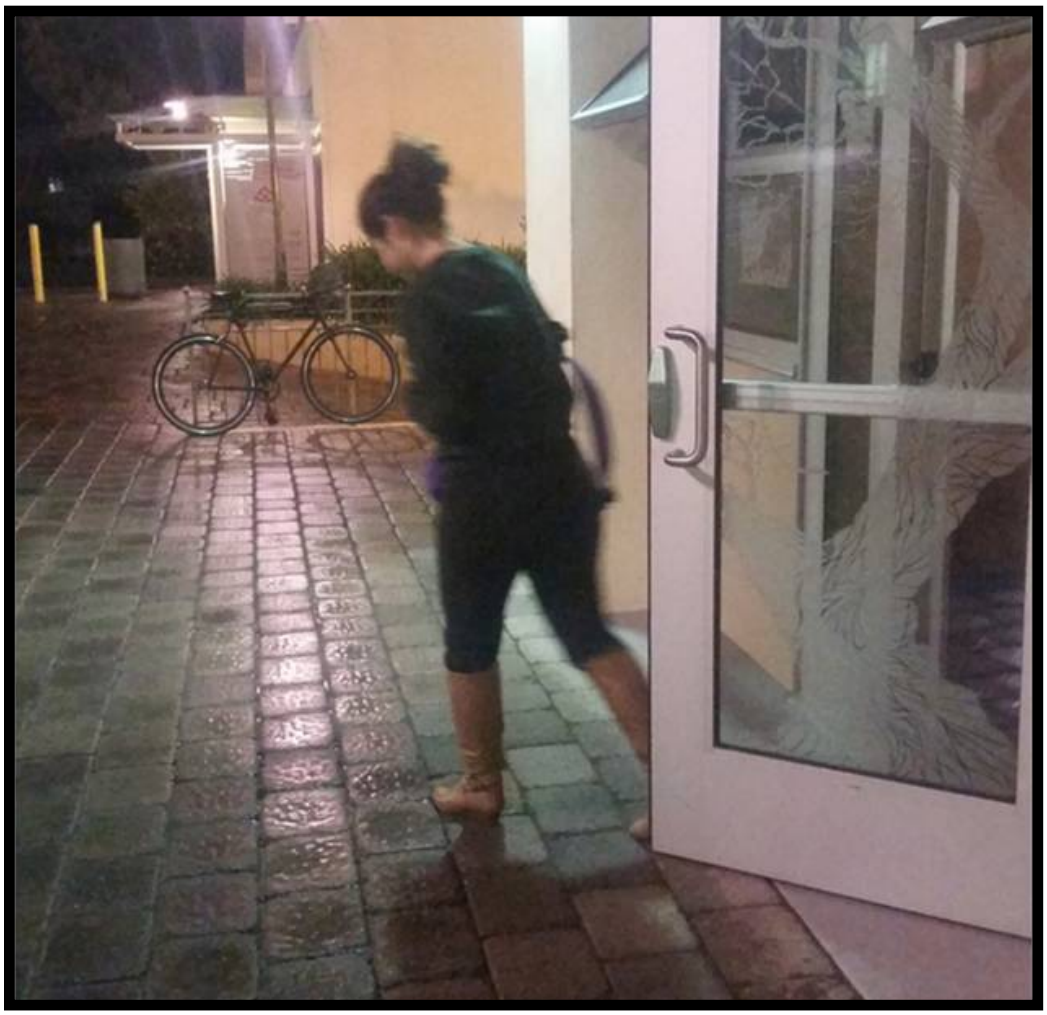
—Moodi, Palestinian American Muslim man

HE'S ALWAYS THERE

I had always believed myself to be agnostic. However, I found myself defending Islam after 9/11. Eventually, I found my path back to Islam, struggling throughout the way. This ayah has always helped me throughout my journey as a Muslim. It begins with God speaking to Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon Him), then suddenly it shifts to "indeed I am near"—and He's talking to us; He's talking to me. No matter how far I turn away from Him, He's always there waiting for me to turn back. And it's not a matter of "if" but a matter of "when" because it says "when my servants call upon me, indeed I am near." It shows that, regardless of my mistakes, I can still go through my journey knowing that He's always there.

—Verdah, Pakistani American Muslim woman

WALKING AWAY



This is a friend of mine walking out of the interfaith prayer room on campus. I tend to go to the prayer room almost every day, but only when people are not looking or cannot see me go in. There are certain situations where I won't voice my opinion because I know people will bash Islam. I would much rather take Islam out of the conversation than actually try to voice my opinion or be the one that defends it. Whenever my friends ask me questions about Islam I just say, "Go ask a scholar because I know nothing." Whenever I get into a difficult situation, I always end up just walking away in order to fit into society and to not be ridiculed. I'm working on that.

—Verdah, Pakistani American Muslim woman

THE POWER OF DUA

This is a picture of myself performing Dua, a form of prayer. This is how I find most strength. Whenever I am in times of weakness and pain, emotional or physical, I always find myself falling onto my knees into prayer. I isolate myself and just pray. I always come out better than before praying, with newly found courage and strength to combat any issues I endure. Islam isn't just some topic in the media that some blindly fear; it provides a lot of happiness and peace for many people like myself. If people tried to find why it brings peace to so many of us, they would see it for what it really is and not what the media portrays it to be.

—Verdah, Pakistani American Muslim woman

JUST ME AND GOD

This is the inside of the interfaith room at the University of San Francisco. I go there all the time to study, to pray, or just to sit there. I find peace and comfort being alone. It's easier for me to be alone. I find strength when I seclude myself away from the rest of the world because then I can just sit and think and talk to God as if He's there right there in front of me, never feeling uncomfortable, or judged. I never have to worry about how to present myself or what to say, because He knows my intentions, and I know He always cares.

—Verdah, Pakistani American Muslim woman

MY FAITH ON MY FACE

So I have some stickers on my face. These stickers have some writings; Prophet Mohammad narratives. Those narratives have different meanings about the importance of work in our life, about being good and cooperative to people, about giving money to the poor, and about not harming people. My mind is always occupied with thinking about how I can reflect my culture and religion to the American community. I've been taught totally different from what is being perceived in this country. Those stickers push me forward to think about a positive way to explain my culture and religion!

—Moodi, Palestinian American Muslim man

LIVING THE FAITH

This is a photo taken from behind a Sikh man. You can see the turban of this guy while he sits inside the gurdwara, the Sikh place of worship. He is reading our holy scripture, Sri Guru Granth Sahib. I really loved the symmetry of his turban—it showed the balanced lifestyle the Sikh Gurus advocated. Every part of me, of this Sikh man, of every human being, is representative of our faith—we are living the faith in every aspect of life and in every role that we take on.

—Harkanwar, Sikh American man

SILENCED AND SHUT OUT

This picture is detail from a mural titled "Maestrapeace," located on the Women's Building in San Francisco's Mission District. I love that an African woman and an Arab woman are sitting together in solidarity. This picture represents the struggles that Third World women face working for peace and justice, and for social, economic, and political equality. It also represents the discrimination that people like me have faced since 9/11, just for being who we are. When we are "out" as Arab Americans, at work or at school, people are afraid of us and are afraid of losing funding for projects and institutions that are perceived to be "pro-Palestine." We are silenced and shut out. The picture illustrates the mosaics of diverse cultures, with lived realities of war, struggle, love, co-existence, strength, and resiliency. We are all linked, wherever we are, be it in Ferguson, Oakland, South Africa, or Gaza.

—Sema, Palestinian American woman

SEA OF SUSTENANCE

This is the Sausalito Marina where the boats are docked. The boats look very peaceful and at rest. But there is also a sense of movement—movement and stillness at the same time. I was inspired to take this picture because Lebanese people love the water. It reminds us of the Mediterranean Sea. It is very traditional to go with friends and family to the beach on a hot summer day. This picture evokes peace, serenity, calmness, comfort, and the love of water and seas and oceans. We are also reflections of one another. Most people love the water, no matter what their background is. This picture shows that we have something in common—that we all find beauty in similar ways. The world is a community, and different cultures must dock in the same harbor and join as one. Maybe all the boats represent different cultures coming together.

—Kristina, Lebanese American Christian woman

WE COOK, WE HELP

This is a picture of my friend. He's one of the helpers at a homeless shelter. It is located near the corner where my son was shot and killed. It is a dangerous neighborhood, but we want to go there and help feed the homeless. I love to do volunteer work. It just helps me relax. It gives me pleasure helping people. I'm trying to make people understand that people like me are no different. We wear the scarf, but still we help. We cook. We're normal people. I try to deal with outside world problems by helping others in our community.

—Fayza, Palestinian American Muslim woman

DON'T MESS WITH ME

I am drawn to faces. They tell stories—untold and complicated stories. This is a picture of myself. Muslim women have been generally linked to oppression and submission, but this photo reveals the face of a middle-aged woman who has experienced struggles in her life and recognized her own strengths in the process. The eyes, especially, give a message: "Don't mess with me." Her face is bold and raw, no pretension; just a simple raw energy. "Take it or leave it." It's not about being very beautiful or attractive, it's just being who you are. For me, this photo represents a sense of determination that a person achieves after having gone through struggles. There is no bitterness—just confronting my own fears, and then becoming stronger.

—Irum, Pakistani American Muslim woman

CONNECTING WITH NATURE

This picture of the Pacific Ocean includes a hiking trail down to the beach as an invitation to the viewer to go there vicariously. My strength and resilience are very connected to nature and the natural environment. One of my favorite places to be is by the ocean. Growing up, my immigrant parents often shared stories of the land back home, its olive trees, and the Mediterranean and Dead Seas. My family and I spent a lot of time by the ocean. Our family outings were often spent there walking on the beach, gathering sea shells, playing in the water, and picnicking. Nature is a sacred reminder that we are all connected to each other and the environment.

—Sema, Palestinian American woman

COMMUNITY HEALING THROUGH ART

Creating art is something that sustains me, especially after I became ill and was not able to work as a peace educator, human rights worker, and violence prevention specialist. I've come close to death many times, and reconnecting with art helps me generate wellness, and celebrate and share life. This picture includes "The Arc of Hope," comprised of Arabic calligraphy in colorful acrylics that may spark interest and stimulate conversation, especially among those who are unfamiliar with the Arabic language. The exhibit has photos of Palestinian/Arab men as they are—loving fathers, with their children and families. The Arab/Muslim man is stereotypically vilified in mainstream U.S. media as a misogynist, sexist, evil terrorist. My art installation debunks those racist myths with pictures of real Arabs. Perhaps the picture will spark conversations on racism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, and the question of Palestine.

—Sema, Palestinian American woman

CONNECTED THROUGH MEDITATION

This picture is inside of a gurdwara, a temple. Our Guru Granth Sahib Ji is in the center, while everybody seated is immersed in meditation. The haze on top shows how every meditating individual is connected to the others through waves and currents that are invisible to the naked eye. Since everyone is interconnected, evil and jealousy cannot exist, because each person is a very small part of a larger supernatural being.

—Harkanwar, Sikh American man

SHE'S STILL THERE

This is a photo of my grandmother. She's in a hospital in West Jerusalem, the Israeli side. She's unable to recognize me any longer due to her Alzheimer's. As a proud Muslim, she still wants to cover her hair and clings to that tattered scarf as a symbol of who she is, and perhaps that she is still alive. She has very little connection to reality, so she probably doesn't realize that she's in West Jerusalem or that the doctors are Israeli or Jewish. She's wearing a hospital gown with little Stars of David on it and the hospital's name in Hebrew, but she doesn't speak Hebrew. She has no idea what the doctors and staff are saying. We take her there for treatment because she needs help, and, politics aside, that's all we have. This is an image of resilience, because despite the geopolitical and socio-cultural barriers to her health care (such as checkpoints and borders that some members of my family can't cross), at least she's there. I believe all human beings deserve quality health care, and that realization can unite communities.

—Hytham, Palestinian American Muslim gay man