The Poetry of Revolution: The Legacy of a Written Rebellion

"It Matters What You Call a Thing"

By

Eva Erickson

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Abstract

In Solmaz Sharif's debut poetry collection *Look*, she incorporates United States Department of Defense terminology in order to simultaneously revolt against forced erasure and reclaim words that were once used for violent and oppressive purposes. This thesis argues that poetry is an inherently politicized, revolutionary tool that possesses the ability to radicalize and incite rebellion against silencing, dismissive power structures. Sharif's identity, as an Iranian-American immigrant woman, is omnipresent in her own interpretation of familial trauma at the hands of American imperialist forces. In addition, the events of the late twentieth-century Iranian revolution that resulted in the deaths of many family members is instrumental to Sharif's theories of collective trauma and subsequent written rebellion. I argue that Sharif's position as an Iranian female poet is crucial in understanding the impact of her writing in which she stresses how the acts of composing and consuming poetry are intrinsically political and can lead to a greater understanding of the oppressors' tactics. Sharif's purposeful construction of a poetic collection that acknowledges personal and communal suffering at the hands of international, institutional forces is a tool, poised in its revolutionary potential.

This thesis is divided into three sections that engage the roles of *Look* as an entity and Solmaz Sharif as an author. In "A Political Existence," I prove that poetry is not only inherently political, but can help form communal bonds and mobilize communities threatened with forcible erasure. Through critical analyses of Audre Lorde's and Angela Davis's works on art as a revolutionary tool in conversation with Sharif's essay on the politics of poetic erasure, it is evident that poetry is a multidimensional phenomenon capable of inciting tangible change. "Looking Inward" is centered around two poems within *Look* that exposes internal side effects of American international imperialism. While much of Sharif's criticism of the United States is

targeted at the consequences of militarism abroad, this section engages with the institutionalization of racism and misogyny throughout American history. The final section, "Reaching Guantánamo," exposes the quiet violence of redaction and erasure in a series of letters to an imagined prisoner within Guantánamo Bay. Overall, this thesis joins Solmaz Sharif in a call for rebellion, searching for truth and finding strength in revolutionary poetry.

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A Forward

As author Solmaz Sharif writes in *Look*:

This book is in immeasurable memorium.

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge and thank Professor Jen Mitchell, Professor Lori Marso, and Professor Claire Bracken. Without their combined, endless network of support and encouragement, this project would have never been. I would also like to thank Professor Jordan Smith for his 8am poetry lectures that united me with Solmaz Sharif. Lastly, I would like to thank Solmaz Sharif for her work that inspired not only my thesis, but my entire academic career.

Thank you.

When I was first introduced to *Look* my freshman year in an Introduction to Poetry course, I read it four times in a row, cover to cover, in one sitting. It broke my heart. It was one of those books that I would think of in dreams, in mirrors, in my Political Science courses on the ethicality of war and torture. It wouldn't budge.

I grew up believing that poetry could change the world. It delighted and moved me to tears and made me feel emotions I did not have the life experience to understand. In my attempts to write about Solmaz Sharif's endlessly complex and passionate collection, I often found myself pining for her kind of talent, the kind that could incite a revolution and stand up tall, confronting systemic injustices in defiant opposition. It felt like this kind of poetry, the kind that moves mountains and screams and stands its ground, was not for me. Instead, I relegated myself to writing about other people's life's works, admiring how they changed the world in their own right.

Writing intensively about and in *Look* for the past year has taught me a lot about how I grapple with the existence of inequality. While I understand that there is not a direct correlation between writing about revolution and actual revolutionary action, I do believe that their relationship is both significant and underutilized. I completed my thesis with the backdrop of a global pandemic, a violent insurrection against democracy in the capital, and extensive human suffering on an international scale. The concept of revolution was incredibly, distinctly real to me and I witnessed incredible mobilization through the written word. Viral tweets, bystanders' video footage, and individuals' demonstrations shaped the political landscape and resulted in real, palpable change.

Even my own writing about the revolutionary potential of Sharif's work demonstrates my belief that poetry can create change. *Look* has changed me, at least. I hope it can change other people, too.

Solmaz Sharif: Poet, Revolutionary

Published in 2016, Solmaz Sharif's poignantly political and crushingly haunting debut collection of poetry was printed under the title *Look.* Sharif was born in Istanbul, Turkey to Iranian parents as they were in the process of immigrating back to their home country during the Iranian Revolution in the 1970s. Istanbul to Texas to Alabama to Los Angeles, all before the age of eleven, and, as Sharif settled in California, she was greeted by the largest population of Iranian people she had ever remembered seeing. Despite being surrounded by those who looked like her, Sharif remained ostracized, struggling to comprehend how and where *home* truly manifested itself within (Clemmons 2016). While attending the University of California, Berkeley, Sharif continued to write and publish poetry that tackled conceptions of exile, familial trauma, and forced movement. Her first collection of poetry, *Look*, articulates the dichotomy between the banality of bureaucratic militarization and intimate narratives of sanctioned murder, interwoven in defiant love and trauma. Through the incorporation and recontextualization of United States Department of Defense terminology, Sharif challenges our notions of the language of war and power and how personal their consequences can truly become in individual existences. The infiltration of military language into civilian life is a war in itself, silencing and rewriting the stories of death and conquest only from the point of view of the oppressors. Her poetry is undeniably political and revolutionary in its articulation of dissent; even its evocative title, "*Look,*" is a conscious interruption of what is seen by whom through what lens. While Sharif provides the United States Department of Defense's definition of "LOOK," the collection surreptitiously incorporates multiplicities of the word itself, further emphasizing its turbulent and complex translation:

Look (1). *Look* (2). LOOK (3).

(1). Transitive Verb: “To make sure or take care”; “To ascertain by the use of one’s eyes”;
“To exercise the power of vision upon”; “expect, anticipate”
(1.1). Intransitive Verb: “To exercise the power of vision”; “to have the appearance or likelihood of being: SEEM”; “to gaze in wonder or surprise” (Merriam-Webster).
(2). “Let me *Look* at you/Let me *Look* at you in a light that takes years to get here” (Sharif 5).
(3). “In mine warfare, a period during which a mine circuit is receptive of an influence” (U.S. DoD).

To look to the future, to *look* into a lover, to LOOK at a point on a radar halfway across the world, receptive, unknowingly, aware of collateral damage.

As a poet, Sharif is incredibly conscious of every word placement and the multitudes of burdens each word carries. While look (unspecified) is most commonly incorporated as a verb to articulate an action of visual examination, Sharif also understands its weight as a noun, separate from assumptions of movement, activity, and consented ownership. To look does not necessarily imply to comprehend. The collection commences with the United States Department of Defense’s definition of the word LOOK, which transcends the limitations of verb or noun; LOOK is simply a state of being, a condition on which an executed action triggers a subsequent reaction. “A period… receptive of an influence,” is a threat. The minefields buried beneath dusty, cracked soil in LOOK, looking for a wayward step to provoke forgotten war. Sharif’s collection is also in LOOK, purposefully poised to incite those who read it to *look* not only at tangible oppressive regimes but *look* into the words they take up in arms as well.

In demonstrating the multiple definitions for a single word, Sharif suggests that even language itself has been colonized by the oppressor and can be used for destructive purposes. What was once a simple verb--“to see”--is now intertwined in mines, warfare, and implied death.

Throughout readings of the collection, we become privy to the fact that words are neither stagnant nor objective, and they never have been. Sharif directly challenges her readers to *look* beyond surface-level definitions not only of words but also of preconceived conceptions such words create. Revolution is calculated and deliberate, and Sharif's subversion of weaponized language seeks to explicitly undermine the assumed validity and power of American imperialism and a culture of mass destruction through violent erasure and smothered stories of dissent. By using the oppressor's language in her own manifesto of opposition, Sharif's *Look* incorporates elements of post-colonial resistance to undermine the political linguistics of the U.S. Department of Defense. Through revolutionary conceptions of bodily movement and autonomy, ownership of one's own stories, and identifying and challenging layered oppression as it relates to race and gendered influence, Sharif's poems are given a more tangible role in their greater purposes to unite and create authentic change amongst her readers. Revolution is produced and disseminated in multiple forms, whether epistemologically conscious of its potential, or purposefully suppressed through the necessity of survival. By this, I mean to assert that revolution embodies multiplicities of forms dependent on its makeup and overarching goal. I believe that the intent of *Look* manifests itself in the revolution of our perception of language, belonging to a marginalized community that is co-opted by oppressive forces, and the ability to identify the tangible violence that results from corrupting the vitality of communication. When we cannot speak freely, openly, and within our own language, the potential for authoritative control is heightened. Sharif's blend of personal narrative poetry intertwined with interpretations of critical postcolonial thought provokes an evocatively new expression of protest. *Look* unequivocally speaks beyond the language of the colonizer and within an internal dialogue of suffering, trauma, and the embodied hope of change.

Chapter One: A Political Existence

Poetry, Politicized

In order to more holistically comprehend the revolutionary weight of *Look*, I first turn to an account of Solmaz Sharif herself in her roles of author and activist. In her short essay entitled "The Near Transitive Properties of the Political and Poetical: Erasure," published in 2013, Sharif articulates her musings on the conceptions of erasure and state-sanctioned violence: "Every poem is an action/Every action is political/Every poem is political." By this, she seems to indicate that not only are poems inherently political in nature, but they possess innate movement and power in their action-potential. To write on its own is an action and that action is intrinsically political; therefore, the tangible object of *Look* is political not only to its author, but to all those who read it. Because Sharif is writing about everyday actions within her poetry, I believe that her intent is to intertwine their significance into one. It is incredibly overwhelming to consider the political nature of one's everyday occurrences, but Sharif implores her readers to understand *why* it is not a common daily task of ours as American citizens: "A lover, once: You can't say every action is political. Then the word political loses all meaning. He added: What is political about this moment? I was washing his dishes. I had left the water running" (Sharif 2013). This conversation between Sharif and the lover emphasizes how commonplace moments are politicized beyond our control and realm of consciousness, and how writing about the political nature of said moments is inherently political.

In recognizing and writing about the political implications of one's actions, one opens themselves up to political repercussions. Living in the United States, especially as white, birthright citizens, does not force a consistent recognition of the political nature of daily actions simply because there are rarely identifiable consequences. We are so far removed from the

unpleasant results of any actions themselves: mountains of trash shipped to developing nations, technologic wastelands tasting of battery acid and soldered metals, the weary fingers of factory laborers stitching tiny seams. There are some things that are assuredly political: politics itself, the government, voting. However, the definition of "political" tends to get blurred when the institution, action, or moment has no direct reference to politics as we know them today. Is science political? Are charities political? How about where you choose to live, to go to school, to work? To wash a dish, sticky with food particles you cooked on your stove powered by your electric bill, groceries that were bought at the store down the street that you took the public bus to get to. To turn the faucet on and pump dish soap onto your sponge, paid for by your paycheck, manufactured in some faraway country. To speak to your lover in your own home. To have a lover. To have a home. Every action is both political and non-linear in nature, deafening the visibility of exploitation and erasing suffering so you can enjoy your meal; non-linear as in disjointed from our limited perception of reality, *looking* from a singular angle. Sharif even acknowledges that to write of such mundane actions within the poetic form is political; to not write of them, either through purposeful choice or external suppression, is political as well, willfully ignorant and blind.

To not acknowledge poetry as political and to reduce it to individualized and ignorant conceptions of the world, separate from larger institutional and communal influences, ignores the revolutionary potential of the medium. Throughout my studies, it is my opinion that poetry, both the genre of the written word and the tool of communication, is treated as something to be enjoyed and analyzed. While enjoyment and analyzation are important interactions with poetry, I also believe that poetry is relegated to constrained spaces within academia and other sources of power that determine the worth of a thing. By this, I mean that creative, personal works are not

traditionally taught alongside more "objective" sources of political action and efficacy, such as political theory and policy, because poetry is considered intimately theoretical. In *Poetry Is Not a Luxury*, Audre Lorde also articulates the relationship between the instrument of poetry and the significance of external cultural forces that diminish its societal worth, particularly for female authors and readers:

> When we view living, in the european mode, only as a problem to be solved, we then rely solely upon our ideas to make us free, for these were what the white fathers told us were precious. But as we become more in touch with our own ancient, black, non-european view 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 2)

Poetry, especially written by women, is not customarily viewed as revolutionary simply because it is interpreted as representing the entirety of the female gender rather than understood as an individual's assessment of the world around them. Lorde is articulating the system by which written works are interpreted and valued, and that system, in "European mode," is based heavily on identity. When Lorde writes of becoming, "more in touch with our own ancient, black non-european view of living," I believe she is exposing how contemporary evaluations of poetry are based in white, western standards and archetypes that do not see non-white perspectives and introspections on institutional corruption as worthwhile. In particular, works that emerge from female authors and thinkers are suppressed by underlying patriarchal motivations, deemed them either too emotional or too angry. Here, Lorde draws upon the conception of western individuality that determines one's worth and potential based solely upon what they can offer under capitalistic values, what they can produce. For female authors, this value is already

diminished. The desire to depoliticize poetry stems from a simultaneous fear of its capacity to mobilize disenfranchised masses and the urge to discount women's opinions as personal fantasies, uninformed by reality and governed by fleeting emotion.

Sharif herself challenges such assumptions of equated weakness in her personal essay, instead critiquing westernized views of "progressive activism" for their inability to consider more than the individual, manifested in more than traditional structures of dissemination. By this, I mean to say western activism is customarily balanced upon uplifting a single story that perfectly fits the narrative of oppression, of being a palatable victim, in lieu of exerting the effort to view revolutionary writing that does not necessarily make for convenient reading: "I believe failure in activism is often a deficiency of lyricism—an inability to collapse time and distance, a refusal to surprise or "make it new," a willingness to calcify into rigid and limiting expectations, a closure to self-transformation, an unconsidered *we* or *you*" (Sharif 2013). Here, I believe Sharif is echoing Lorde's sentiments that writing poetry requires consciousness of how it will be interpreted within the cultural and sociopolitical contexts of the world in which they write. Both Sharif and Lorde beg their readers to consider that revolution will not emerge from current institutional formations; revolution requires an acute comprehension of the tools used by those in power in order to subvert and undermine their influence.

Poetry, Weaponized

While there is personal danger in calling a thing political, there are underlying *consequences of staying silent*. The danger can be real, tangible in its destruction. Amnesty International's 2019 report of Iranian human rights violations cited trends of speech and assembly suppression that have plagued citizens since the 1980s. In November of 2019, nationwide protests occurred as a result of exponential increases in fuel prices and demonstrators took to the streets, calling for the overthrow of the current government, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Within 3 days, over 300 individuals were murdered and thousands more were subjected to arbitrary detainment and "enforced disappearance," [*you mean I should be disappeared*] resulting in internet shutdowns and direct persecution of journalists and activists: "At least 240 were human rights defenders, including lawyers, labour rights activists, environmental activists, minority rights activists, women's rights activists, anti-death penalty campaigners and those seeking truth, justice and reparation for the mass extrajudicial executions and enforced disappearances of the 1980s" (Luther 2019). Journalists and media workers were specifically targeted for their campaign to expose past and present human rights violations, subjected to imprisonment without trial and forced disappearances, leaving relatives and loved ones searching for clues at vacant police stations and in scribbled margin notes. It is not just in the "faraway" country that there is personal danger in engaging with the political, even unconsciously: "*You mean I should be disappeared because of my family name?* and he answered *Yes. That's exactly what I mean*, adding that his wife helped draft the PATRIOT Act" (Sharif 4). An artificial binary is thus presented under the illusion of choice and autonomy, (record, revolt or silence, hide) ending in similar results: protest, write, scream, fight into enforced disappearance or stay quiet until your story has faded into the background. Therefore, it is critical to

acknowledge the politicization of everyday actions and to identify a desired medium to channel resistance, defiant against oblivion.

For Sharif, the process of writing poetry is actively a struggle towards revolution and away from forced erasure. In "The Near Transitive Properties…" Sharif recalls her own personal conflict with telling the stories of her family in Iran. There remained multiple degrees of separation, not only in physical distance, but in language as well, calling her transcription process, "a mimicked attempt to translate, with my own broken Farsi, letters an uncle wrote from the frontlines of the Iran Iraq War shortly before he was killed in said war (one of a million)" (2013). Sharif was burdened by the trauma of working with a letter written by her uncle shortly before he was murdered as well as the barrier of language, rendering communication, even after his death, laboriously painful:

> With my uncle's letters, sounding the words out Arabic letter by Arabic letter was, well, humbling. There was so much I could not access. I could have had a family member translate it word by word, but that felt inauthentic. My inability to translate was like my inability to speak to him physically and that inability, I thought, should remain. At one point, however, I recruited an Iranian friend and asked 'What is m-y-n [I can never recall the proper names of the letters, just their English near equivalents]?' 'Meen,' she said, worried. 'Meen' means 'landmine'. So that in the middle what I could not access—his fear, his longing for home, his food cravings and jokes—a mine appeared, right in fraught space between us. (2013)

The process of translation adds another elemental layer to what resistance through writing requires. Considering the path *Look* took to reach me, a reader, is astonishing. Sharif's family chose the political action of recording their lives and their stories as well as passing down said

archives through generations. In a place where writing could be interpreted as treason, these records of everyday life were an act of resistance. As her uncle's letters made their way across enemy territory, simultaneously threatened by Iranian law and American military interference, they remained a rebellious force. Sharif's description of the barriers that reminded between her uncle's letter and her comprehension of his holistic life further emphasizes how the politics of translation remain omnipresent. Despite multiple definitions of a word, constructed from personal translation and outside influence, there still remains a gap in understanding that was torn by colonial forces, unmendable and unmistakable. As I read Sharif's poetic translations, I cannot help but think about what I am missing, what is just out of grasp. I often find myself searching for the perfect word to describe the evocation of the distinct loss embedded within *Look*, but it does not exist in my own vocabulary. However, I do not claim to experience a similar loss of personal narratives in the way Sharif does, purposefully violent in its abdication. As Audre Lorde writes, there are no new ideas, only old ones that have been buried deep in an attempt to silence past revolutionaries, accessible through the courage to find what has been disappeared (Lorde 2). "Poetry is not a luxury," nor is it even safe in itself, fraught with mines in LOOK amidst memories of love and loss. I argue that the act of writing not only requires purposeful, political intent but linked, shared consciousness that spans generations and language barriers.

In theorizing Sharif's impact on revolutionary texts, I turn to American author and activist Angela Davis. Her work concentrates on the necessity of creating and consuming progressive art that provides agency and articulation in reference to the Black populations of the United States, and how their own understanding of past (political) trauma shapes collective resistance. I believe that acknowledging the work that exists in and by marginalized communities

within the United States, such as Davis's, is critical to viewing how the American process of linguistic colonization can be detrimental to the communication that exists in its opposition. In describing the action-potential of art and poetry in "Art on the Frontline: Mandate for a People's Culture," Angela Davis writes:

> Art is a form of social consciousness – a special form of social consciousness that can potentially awaken an urge in those affected by it to creatively transform their oppressive environments. Art can function as a sanitizer and a catalyst, propelling people toward involvement in organized movements seeking to effect radical social change. Art is special because of its ability to influence feelings as well as knowledge. (1985)

Here, Davis articulates the multifaceted political capacities stored within the medium of art. Art has the power to bring attention to oppressive environments and advocate for social change as well as motivate and radicalize marginalized communities into action. What is significant about these observations is Davis's dichotomization of sanitize and catalyze; if we assume that every action is indeed political, then such artistic actions possess the capability to sanitize or catalyze both the actor and the world around them. Sharif writes of sanitization in the context of "erasure as an aesthetic tactic" rather than simply the traditional understanding of state-sanctioned violence within silence: "The proliferation of erasure as a poetic tactic in the United States is happening alongside a proliferation of our awareness of it as a state tactic. And, it seems, many erasure projects today hold these things as unrelated. Still, when it comes to erasure, this very form of palimpsest, the ghost is not only death or the degradations of time—the ghost is the state itself" (Sharif 2013). As citizens of a state begin to recognize patterns of erasure that originate from institutional, political structures, awareness of individualized obliteration to textual and artistic methods of resistance passes by unnoticed, blamed on natural deterioration. Sharif asks

her (white, American) readers to consider the historical records of erasure within their own communities and structures of power, equating the striking of text to the obliteration of human lives. *It matters what you call a thing*, Sharif echoes, and it matters if that thing is able to be said at all.

Poetry, Personalized

Many of Sharif's writings attempt to bridge the gap between the public and private natures of art and poetry and the accompanying implications of both. Personal writing that struggles with the conception of the self in conjunction with the surrounding world is often labeled feminine and therefore culturally irrelevant as a social commentary, existing only in locked diaries and cursive journals. While she writes of her familial trauma and the consequences of it that have persisted throughout every area of life within *Look*, Sharif shifts the focus of the narrative from the inside out, acknowledging the source of such pain and its widespread effects. Sharif writes of the movement from the self to other overlapping networks, challenging the predisposed concept that women are only able to write about themselves. By spinning a web of interconnected narratives, potential for revolt and revolution amongst shared suffering becomes tangible in its power: "Bourgeois aesthetics have always sought to situate art in a transcendental realm, beyond ideology, beyond socioeconomic realities, and certainly beyond the class struggle" (Davis 2010). In order to separate art from its influence to radicalize subjugated masses, dominant ruling groups attempt to treat art forms as unrelated to the political climates of the time, relegating them to fantastical realms. As Davis theorizes, artists and poets are treated as otherworldly beings as if their creations could not possibly have been inspired by real-world experiences. This mindset is particularly pervasive in perceptions of female authors, as their work is either undervalued or infantilized. However, Solmaz Sharif is real. One could look at her, *look* to her poems. One could also LOOK and see a threat.

In "The Near Transitive Properties," Sharif writes, "The political is not topical or thematic, it is tactical and formal. It is not, as its strictest definition supposes, something relegated to legislative halls, but something enacted wherever power is at hand, power being at

hand wherever there is a relation, including the relation between text and reader" (2013). Here, Sharif describes the intense pervasiveness of the political. In opposition to privileged understandings of politics, the political is everywhere, particularly in spaces that have been or are dominated by the current holders of political power. While *Look* belongs to Sharif and her readers and critics, it is important to understand its origins as a critical analysis. Because Sharif has previously established that her written works are inherently political, she is consistently conscious of the power dynamics that exist between authors and their subject matter; therefore, the collection explores the complex relationships amongst personal and public spheres of political resistance. In a 2016 interview with *The Paris Review*, Sharif detailed her own complicated narrative surrounding the Iranian Revolution which displaced her parents from their home country in the mid-1980s. Although Sharif was born in the midst of their immigration to the United States, there remained an intricate relationship between her roots and what was now considered home:

> It's been important for me to write down as many narratives as I can, other narratives around… the Iranian presence in the U.S., and also the possibility for Iranians to build coalitions with other Third World groups, as Iranians did in the seventies and eighties. That's the community I come out of. There's also a rift that happens between first and second generations, because the second generation has woken up to the fact that assimilation is not just a matter of your accent or class or education—there's an "in" that you'll never be in because of who you are. (Clemmons)

Throughout the form and composition of Sharif's poetry, there exists such an allusion to themes of not only orientation to the culture of the predominately white United States population, but the necessity of tangible organization with other marginalized groups subjugated to a similar,

minoritized status. Contemporary revolution demands an intersectionality of populace with a diversity in method; through the unification of victims of U.S. militarization and the incorporation of poetry as a palpable embodiment of dissent, Sharif seeks to redefine resistance in a familiar language, that which was once weaponized for their very own destruction. Because of Sharif's unique and multidimensional identities of a woman, an immigrant, and a person of color, her poetry reflects the importance of speaking to people in ways they can understand. True revolution is nothing without the purposeful inclusion of all impacted groups, including specified language, organizing techniques, and acknowledgment of varied histories.

Sharif is writing through the experience not only of an Iranian-American with immigrant parents, but within the intersection of those identities and her prescribed role as a woman. The poetry of *Look* challenges the assumed simplicity of the passive position of women in wartime, particularly those displaced and left in the aftermath of U.S. invasion. Within the context of westernized warfare, "Women are often purposefully brought into descriptions of what war is—to justify the rescue of a nation, or to justify its decimation by showing its entire people as despicable or threatening" (Clemmons 2016). Whether it is for the ulterior purposes of forced victimhood or rationalization for hatred and violence, women have been subscribed to the passivity of pawns at the will of the colonial, patriarchal institution of war. However, it is when women are not allowed the power of expressing their own intricate, multifaceted narratives that their revolutionary capabilities are reduced to malleability and exploitation. Misogynistic and suppressive impulses on the individual level are also exemplified within institutional action on the larger scale. This is particularly evident in a foreign power exercising control over a "submissive" nation, demonstrating the gendered sexist economies that prevail in colonial, military environments: "When you're told that you're overreacting… this is how the U.S. largely

deals with warfare. That's something that's natural to my experience as a woman… I want to talk about how far-reaching these effects are and how intimate these effects are and how there's no part of our bodies or desires that are not somehow informed or violated by these atrocities" (Clemmons 2016). Labeling a vulnerable population feminine exasperates the binary options of victimization or oppression as well as silencing the personal narratives that emerge from female revolutionaries. Sharif's *Look* demonstrates that out of the bodily and mental trauma stems defiance and resistance.

Chapter Two: Looking Inward

Solmaz Sharif's criticisms of America's destructive tendencies are not limited to international stages. While Sharif was born abroad and the majority of her family remains in Iran, she has spent a significant portion of her life living in the United States. Sharif has cited on multiple occasions that her "foreignness" has allowed for a critical, outside perspective on the traditions that govern daily American life, albeit with social consequences [*I try not to think of what my neighbors would say. They have yet to learn to pronounce my name]* (2013). While *Look* heavily concentrates on addressing the modern consequences of American militarization and its subsequent violence, Sharif also focuses on the origins of oppression within the country. She asks her readers to consider how the American legacy of global domination and minority subjugation have been sustained over centuries and what is still fueling its authority today. Many poems in the collection address how the United States has practiced and perfected racism and oppression within their own borders. This chapter will examine two of these poems, "Dependers/Immediate Family," and "Mess Hall," through the lens of their respective revolutionary potentials in upsetting the pervasive apolitical nature of American society.

"Dependers/Immediate Family"

Throughout Sharif's *Look*, the definition of womanhood within the context of wartime fluctuates on unsteady ground. The military industrial complex that was born from within the United States is particularly ubiquitous in its categorization of human beings in black and white terms: either enemy or friend, useful or worthless. Sharif often writes from the point of view of the collective woman in an oppressive, militaristic environment, whether living in Iran or the United States. The intertwined nature of shared feminine trauma is evident both in the form and narrative construction of *Look*'s poems as well as the generational consequences of a repressive regime on marginalized populations. In the poem entitled "Dependers/Immediate Family," Sharif expands the concept of non-linear narration in the context of familial damage and cross-cultural exemplifications of mutual pain. While her influences are often personal in their origins, Sharif also seeks to articulate a larger feminine experience during times of war, throughout different settings and movements. In particular, Sharif acknowledges the artificially constructed environment of conflict and how it affects daily life. "Dependers/Immediate Family" attempts to unravel the impact of an all-consuming war effort on a child that is too young to understand and a mother who bears the substantial burden of the nuances of nationalism and international violence. While it is often the men who are required to sacrifice their lives and physical bodies for their country, women and children were expected to bear the emotional burdens of witnessing their loved ones die and continue their lives as productive, contributing members of society. The opening lines of the poem read, "At the WWII Memorial, FDR thanks women/for sacrificing their sons/and their nylons./Mothers oil supply lines/of parachutes/and what weighs chutes down,/sailing toward tall grass or rock,/a sky delivered by God" (33). The historical assumptions of the intersection of wartime and women are centered around the production of future sons who

would become soldiers, manufactured to sacrifice themselves for their country. Amidst the destruction of the World Wars, the introduction of women into the workplace found its roots in the economic freedom of sustainable careers outside of the home; yet, this fiscal revolution remained undermined through patriarchal constructions of the definition of motherhood. "Dependers/Immediate Family" initially retains multitudes in its very title; while original implications of dependents signify a relationship built upon inequality and reliance, the subversion of gendered expectation is radical in itself. Oftentimes, those who depended on the woman of the family were her husband and children alike. The irony exists in the gap between their dependence on the woman of the house for physical and emotional support, yet said woman was not publicly viewed as the leader or provider of the family unit. For women to act as the sole economic provider distorts definitions of both the depender and the dependent as well as the categorization of who can be considered immediate family, especially in times of war and turmoil.

The beginning lines of the poem demonstrate the movement between expectations of femininity and familial values across cultural boundaries; the initial setting is centered around imagery of war memorials, presidency, and motherhood. While Sharif's poetry is often non-linear and fragmented in its perception of time and space, there is foundation in representations of FDR and war memorials, thereby evoking themes of antiquated American patriotism. While "FDR thanks women/for sacrificing their sons/and their nylons," the ownership of the sacrifice lies not within the mothers themselves, but in the acknowledgement of their service of providing men for fighting while still remaining feminine and beautiful for objectification. Despite the revolution of the modern U.S. workplace during times of war in the twentieth century relying heavily upon women's labor and leadership, men remained at the

forefront of perceived innovation and success. The poem devolves from tangible, contrasting images of monuments and stockings to more abstract conceptions of movement in the "oiling of supply lines" and the "deliverance to God." The setting moves beyond preconceptions of a romanticized American warfront to a more foreign embodiment of motion and war preparation; its implications tell that there is the United States and then there is Other, in this poem's case, the other side of the war. However, it remains unclear who is visualized as the enemy as the imagery remains fluid and ever-changing, amidst the intersections of weaponized terminology and colloquial language.

Sharif's narrative shifts in perspective from the mothers to the sons bred into a society manufactured by militarized turmoil:

> I want to say mother put a GUN
> there, blocks and blocks of boys
> with pistols in their lunch pails,
>
> lined up at the Army Experience Center
> playing Call of Duty beneath the pacing of recruiters,
> shit-talking into microphones in select US malls
> while mothers shop the bed linens or grind coffee, grateful
> for the quiet home, for the empty backyards… (33)

It is initially difficult to identify the type of revolutionary writing that would mobilize women and other marginalized groups of people to fight back within the lyrics of domesticity and gendered expectations, yet it is the purposeful articulation of such stereotypes that aim to subvert and reform classic ideals of both feminine and patriotic duty. Again, the responsibility of providing soldiers for the nation is designated to the mothers, going as far as placing the actual weapon of destruction into their own child's hands, thus normalizing American militarism into the private, familial sphere. Layers of "othering" emerge within Sharif's writing; initial interpretations view the unseen enemy of the U.S. military as Other, the enemy the young boys

are taught to despise and prepare to fight against, yet the women themselves are relegated to the margins as well, viewed publicly as a means of production in a military state. In examining the incorporated diction in relation to movement, the men described possess authoritative violence within their actions: playing, pacing, shit-talking.

Sharif alludes that there is more than a singular enemy; the young boys are preparing to combat the invisible antagonist with weapons of destruction in their inexperienced hands, yet they are a threat even to the women surrounding them, positioning the boys in a place of "undeserved" power. However, I believe that Sharif is careful with her criticism here. It is the burden of the military state that these boys are groomed to be filled with hatred and intolerance, born with a loaded gun already in hand. To look as well as to be seen is a luxury that not every individual is afforded. In some sense, there is privilege in untangling the conditioning from the human being. It becomes clear that the pattern of "othering" is deeply ingrained through cultural routines and habitual subjugation, in terms of race, nationality, and gender. The question must then be asked: If Sharif is attempting to dismantle this supposed black and white narrative of both victimhood and visualization of the definition of the enemy, wherein lies the tangible possibilities for revolution and the restructuring of the oppressive institutions internationally?

Throughout her poetry, Sharif chronicles the reality of her family and others like them, the horrors endured and the losses withstood. The orientation of the author is to record, to write, and to evoke others into action, yet individuals are not often privileged with the platform to be listened to. In order to understand Sharif's nuanced stance on war, victimhood, and revolutionary potential within "Dependers/Immediate Family," it is crucial to acknowledge her own position as author. In an interview with the Kenyon Review, Solmaz Sharif discussed how the presence of her physical body in different countries affected not only the way she was perceived but the

position of her own psyche versus those around her. As an Iranian born in Turkey living in the United States during the Iran-Iraq conflict, Sharif's orientation and identity has been subjected to constant scrutiny, both internally and externally. In the midst of comprehending the conflicts in her personal existence, Sharif turned to what could have been:

> As an Iranian abroad, this experience was quintessentially American—the warfare was happening over there… Being from an elsewhere forced me to cultivate an image, as many have, of the home they left. An imagined place. This imagination-building happened to coincide with a war that killed 1,000,000 people. My father's brother, a draftee, was one of those killed, shortly before I was born. I have often wondered about him—his taste in food, his crushes, his bikes—and had tried many times to write about him, resulting in many failures. (Kenyon)

Here, Sharif illuminates the difficulties of simultaneously belonging everywhere and nowhere, orienting herself in an intertwined dimensionality of multiplicities. Throughout *Look*, Sharif maintains diction that is reminiscent of such disorientation, gendered in their portrayal not only of family values and feminine expectations, but of victimhood itself. War succeeds when there exists a clear distinction between who is defined as the adversary and who is the ally, dehumanizing the opposing side until no longer recognizable as human. Yet, Sharif challenges her readers just as she had been challenged in understanding her role in a conflict that plagued her very identity. The "imagination-building" of remembering a life that was never permitted to be hers upsets the implied binary of friend or foe. Although Sharif is oriented in a multi-dimensional plane of existence, stuck between her conflicting alliances as an American resident and daughter of Iranian parents, there is reclamation in the space that is left over. That space is primed for revolution. It is crucial to acknowledge the privilege of writing a revolution;

as Sharif articulates, many individuals had their lives taken from them without warning, such as her uncle. What military propaganda and Americanized revolutionary writing have in common is the glorification of sacrifice and expressed nobility of dying for a greater cause. However, I believe Sharif constructs a new definition of what revolutionary writing is, informed by the context of the many who lost their lives in the Iran-Iraq war, who were not allowed a choice in their deaths. Revolutionary writing does not require tangible violence or martyrdom, only the questioning of authority and assertion of freedom and peace.

In "Dependers/Immediate Family," the American children play on green, manicured lawns with toy guns, dreaming of the power their future holds. The American mothers gaze out curtained windows, hoping their sons stay alive long enough to make the family proud.

> Boys, they dream
>
> of invisibility suits, explosive inks,
> then grow up to work
> in weapons research labs,
> formulating rays to knock you out,
> rays to make you puke, rays to activate
> each nerve ending, gas to make you laugh
>
> and boil (Sharif 33-34)

The combined and intertwined influences of patriarchal authority and normalized military violence are impossibly enduring, from childhood to old age. This section of the poem acknowledges why these desires for war and brutality are so pervasive; children, particularly boys, are taught from birth that it is their duty to protect the country and themselves from external enemies, and to do so is an honor. As Sharif articulated in her 2016 interview with "The Paris Review," "aesthetics and politics have a really vital and exciting give-and-take between them" (Clemmons). "Invisibility suits," and "explosive inks," possess inherently compelling

aesthetics to children, which then translate, with age, to the compelling aesthetics of military technology. The poem concludes its revolutionary movement with these lines:

> I'm old enough now to hear:
> someone has to identify and
> someone removes the shrapnel
> and someone says not a scratch
> when they pulled you out the fridge.
>
> I imagine my father
>
> looking into your cool face,
> the difficult work on his knees
>
> staying locked in that frozen place. (34)

Even within the imagination of her father's brother and his unjust death, there remains movement and the assumption of responsibility for such movement. The line, "I'm old enough now to hear," suggests the possibility of inherited trauma, unwittingly transferred over generations. Although Sharif herself was not yet alive to witness the brutal death of her uncle, she is both metaphorically and literally burdened with the pain and anguish of surviving what he was not able to. While the speaker of this poem is overloaded with this responsibility too heavy for their young body and mind, the Other children, the American children, are burdened with the forces of military indoctrination that resulted in the death of individuals like Sharif's uncle. In this sense, the movement does not concern the tangible body nor is it representative of mass rebellion; movement also exists in the cycle of birth and death, intertwined in family trees, and is passed from brother to brother, father to daughter. Sharif imagines the indescribable ordeal of her father identifying his brother's lifeless body and the inherent movement that exists even within death; there remains the burden of the survivors to bury and to mourn and to continue to live. Such dichotomy is articulated in the opposing diction of the father versus the corpse of the brother with one absorbing the flow of motion and energy while the other lingers in place. However, this

is not to imply a lack of suffering that persists within the absence of movement. The last few lines of the poem can be interpreted in a multitude of different ways; “I imagine my father/looking into your cool face/the difficult work on his knees/staying locked in that frozen place” (Sharif 34). The “difficult work on (the) knees,” can be referencing the father physically bearing the tangible agony of witnessing the death of his kin, the pain his brother endured transferred across unspoken familial bonds. In an alternate analysis, the knees can be referring to the corpse of his brother locked away in the morgue, stagnant in the death of his bodily agency. While the “frozen place” is most instantly recognizable as a morgue or coffin, it can also be interpreted as the world that is in dire need of a revolution, stagnated in the cruel and unfeeling tyranny of governmental oppression. What is clear, however, is that Sharif’s poem, “Dependers/Immediate Family,” is a movement in itself. Sharif’s poetic criticism of the American military industrial complex emphasizes the necessity of recognizing the severe consequences of an ignorant, apolitical American existence. There is bravery and sacrifice in producing revolutionary work that is purposely intended to upset and disorient the oppressor, and Sharif remains resolute in ultimate, written rebellion.

“Mess Hall”

While “Dependers/Immediate Family” traced the influence of military propaganda from the World Wars on, the poem “Mess Hall,” digs deeper. In considering the interwoven connections between poet and poem, rebel and rebellion, and soldier and enemy, Solmaz Sharif implores her reader to think beyond the conventional expectations of such relationships. In discussing war, particularly the complicated dynamics between Iraq, Iran, and the United States during the troubles that plagued the Middle East for decades, it is evident that there are no clear winners and losers, nor is there right and wrong. Sharif herself represents the intricate, and often conflicting, politicized identities one individual can possess. These identities, such as Sharif’s overlap of Iranian and American backgrounds, are not inherently confrontational in their existences; it is only when one asserts fabricated dominance over the other within a binary expression that the concept of superiority amongst humans is constructed. In the poem “Mess Hall,” Sharif departs from the Iranian-American perspective that is articulated in “Dependers/Immediate Family” to consider the history embedded within the continental United States and the roots of colonialism that buried themselves deep into the culture of genocide, minority suppression, and white supremacy. There is a habitual nature of marginalization, and the United States practiced its imperialism on its own claimed territory long before expanding into countries such as Iran in the twenty-first century. “Mess Hall” confronts the longevity of omnipresent themes of enslavement and race superiority within the United States and the notion that we live in a post-racial country. The poem begins with these two stanzas:

> Your knives tip down
> in the dish rack
> of the replica plantation home,
> you wash hands
>
> with soaps pressed into seahorses

and scallop shells white
to match your guest towels… (41)

If the highly weaponized word "plantation" was disappeared, this poem would be quite deceiving in its feigned innocence; despite the presence of knives, the first stanzas read as All-American, peaceful, and domestic. Yet, this is exactly Sharif's intention. The general consensus of many (white) Americans is that racism and racial slavery are remnants of the past, outdated in their historic nature. Here, Sharif is suggesting that biased violence lurks within our own homes, hiding in plain sight amongst clean dishes and scented guest bedrooms. Every residence built on American soil is a replica of a plantation manor home because this country was founded upon the broken backs of slave labor and indigenous genocide, a profiteering that will never be repaid. No matter the extent of "washing hands," some sins and their ultimate penalties are irreversible.

Significance also lies within the assertion of the color white in the first lines of the poem. The purposeful whiteness of the soaps and the towels instantly associate white with cleanliness and purity, ironic in its declaration. Here, "whiteness" can come to embody multiple representations, whether it be race, gender, or class, representing privilege and ignorance. Because "Mess Hall" is written in the second person, there are palpable calls for introspection to realize how their "whiteness" is influencing their interpretation of this poem. Whiteness is the beginning point for interpreting the world that revolves around it and individual consciousness is necessary for understanding the poem's simultaneous centering and destabilization of privilege. In the poem "Mess Hall," Sharif is attempting to upset this circumference of superiority rotating around whiteness, undermining the practiced theory that "coloredness" is Other when it, in fact, is simply an addition and distinction from whiteness with no value placed upon its difference. When everything is white, it is easy to not realize there is a lack of color. While the poem is incorporating race as a variable of American hierarchy, Sharif attempts to articulate how the

supposed supremacy of whiteness is embodied throughout contemporary society, hidden in plain sight:

> ... America,
> you have found the dimensions
>
> small enough to break
> a man-
> a wet rag,
>
> a bullet, a bullet
> like a bishop
> or an armless knight
> of the Ku Klux Klan,
>
> the silhouette
> through your nighttime window…
>
> America, ignore the window and look at your lap:
> even your dinner napkins are on FIRE. (41)

Sometimes, movement does not necessarily imply the existence of progress. Modern America is still plagued with the remnants of slavery, Jim Crow, and indigenous genocide, and here, Sharif is suggesting that while they have not disappeared, they have simply changed forms in their continued rotation around white supremacy. The poem also alludes to the presence of more enemies than racial whiteness; from the disguised disgust at the oversized houses designed like plantation homes to the guest bedrooms and napkins specifically designated for dinnertime, it is capitalism and consumerism that are now weaponized. Whiteness is also represented in the culture of excess and material possessions normalized as markers of success while the ever-present social problems fade behind the draw of extravagance and luxury.

“Ignore the window… (you’re) on FIRE.”

Chapter Three

Authority, Autonomy, and the Power of Redaction in "Reaching Guantánamo"

Guantánamo Bay is, essentially, "a patch of dust" (Reitman). A byproduct of President George W. Bush's War on Terror, the detention camp stands as a physical reminder of the United States's futile and expensive prophetic desire to simultaneously contain and eradicate suspected terrorist threats from the outside in. Its symbolism is almost too difficult to look in the eye, menacing and extravagant in its assertions of strength and projected patriotism. To be allowed to enter the compound, one must seek approval from the Pentagon's Office of Military Commissions, carry only one pen and one notebook, walk through abandoned and useless displays of million-dollar technological graveyards, and wear closed-toed shoes (Reitman). It is both arbitrary and a threat. Journalist Janet Reitman detailed her experiences in 2015 as one of the select-few civilians allowed to witness the inner-workings of the prison, writing of the crimes against humanity executed by the United States government in an attempt to prosecute and detain suspected criminals that may have committed crimes against the country: "During proceedings, every word that is spoken is heard in the visitor's gallery after being filtered through speakers on a 40-second delay, which enables a judge to ensure nothing classified slips out. There are no laptops, phones or recording devices allowed... and no cameras" (Reitman). The filtration of communication that is considered standard policy is not unique to Guantánamo nor the methods of the U.S. military. In addition to the artificial delays in speech, the language utilized by the authority figures of Guantánamo Bay is purposefully subverted and distorted beyond recognition, allowing for loopholes in internationally standardized law surrounding the detention of foreign individuals.

When Reitman published her article in 2015, forty-nine prisoners within Guantánamo were subjected to the state of "indefinite detention," in which the government determined they cannot be tried but are also too dangerous to be released. Indefinite detention, as if the traditions of time had been lost, existing, imprisoned, in a space void of present or future. It matters what the prisoners are defined as by their captors, what linguistic explanation is provided to determine fate amongst nonsensical terms and labels, prevailing only to constrict rather than to communicate. The language disseminated from Guantánamo is not meant to provide clarity and understanding. Reitman writes of an eight-year prisoner by the name of Hadi al Iraqi:

> His lawyers consider him to be a 'prisoner of war' – and by most conventional standards he is, though the Bush administration believed that officially referring to their captives as such would entitle them to the corresponding Geneva Convention protections. Instead, Hadi, like all Gitmo prisoners, is called an 'unprivileged enemy belligerent' – indicating a fighter who, while a member of an organized armed force, is not covered by the standard international protocols as he does not wear a uniform or carry his weapon openly and is thus classified as 'unprivileged.' As a detainee, the Department of Defense can in theory hold him forever. According to a recent JTF-GTMO Fact Sheet, 'detention of unprivileged enemy belligerents … [is] not an act of punishment'. (Reitman)

In breaking down the term "unprivileged enemy belligerent," it becomes evident that it means, essentially, nothing. Words are given power through their contextualization, by those populations that breathe life into uninhabited semantics. However, just because a word or phrase has an "objective" definition, it does not mean that it inherently possesses meaning. While such phrases are composed of words that do carry significance in the barest sense, the phrase itself is purposefully constructed to be devoid of comprehension, resulting in the simultaneous

dehumanization and disorientation of the phrase's subject. Essentially, the U.S. government has artificially manufactured terminology such as "unprivileged enemy belligerent" outside of internationally-prescribed recognition and meaning in order to "legally" deny prisoners their human rights. The term "prisoner of war" carries international implications as it has been defined, agreed upon, and put into practice, its translation derived from communal use and experience. By purposefully not referring to Guantánamo's detainees as POWs and essentially constructing their own terminology, weaponized in its defiance of international standards of human rights, the U.S. government has effectively synthesized a label that exists outside of cultural comprehension. In the gap between one three-word phrase to another lies a fair trial and perhaps a future lived beyond unfathomable detention.

I.

In a seven-part series of letters entitled "Reaching Guantánamo," Solmaz Sharif writes from the perspective of an unnamed partner whose husband has been indefinitely detained in Guantánamo Bay. As critic David Baker succinctly states, "*Look* is about power." Throughout Sharif's collection, she experiments with language from the perspective of the oppressed that incorporates redaction and linguistic colonization as weapons, designed to strike, maim, and undermine anything and everything deemed as resistant, in resistance. However, this phenomenon does not exist only in an attempt to avoid international protocol as described in the differentiation between "unprivileged enemy belligerent" and "prisoner of war." *Look'*s purposeful subversion of language expands to virtually every mode of communication: detainees to family, the United States to colonized countries, communities of marginalized peoples to each other. Baker writes, "Sharif's project examines the language available to us—and everywhere denied us—from our most intimate or erotic relationships to our most social and cultural ones. How often we are compromised by the limitation of our language, and how often those limitations are forced on us. One of her sustained effects of this limitation and loss is the literal erasure of language." Sharif's collection tackles the misuse, appropriation, and disconnect of language that has plagued her entire life. From immigrating to the United States to her ongoing career as a poet, Sharif has studied the varied applications and coercions of language in hopes of understanding her family's past sabotaged by outside military interference. In the section entitled "Reaching Guantánamo," Sharif composes a series of imagined letters to demonstrate that, while redaction at the hands of the oppressor can initially seem arbitrary and random, their motivations are much more purposeful and sinister: "[Sharif] enacts the removal of language—the purposeful redaction—even in the most unlikely or apolitical of gestures" (Baker). Through the redaction of

seemingly benign words within these letters, Sharif demonstrates how even the most apolitical phrases are deliberately disappeared. The first poem in the series begins:

> Dear Salim,
>
> Love, are you well? Do they you?
> I worry so much. Lately, my hair , even
> my skin . The doctors tell me it's
> I believe them. It shouldn't
> . Please don't worry.
> in the yard, and moths
> have gotten to your mother's
> , remember? (45)

It is instinctual to wish to fill in the gaps, mend the torn seams, and read the letter in its entire, true form. As a reader, I have to hold myself back from inserting my own narrative, words from my personal lexicon; I do not wish to assume- I only wish to understand. As it is with every poem that emerges from Sharif's consciousness, it is difficult to identify the boundary between the real and the imagined, the assumed. However, in critically analyzing Sharif's poems, it becomes evident that such binary interpretation is inadequate; therefore, I take a multidimensional approach, conscious of translation politics and trauma-informed methodologies, in deriving meaning in the works in this section.

The subject of every letter is a man by the name of Salim while the sender's identity is redacted. Based upon the Arabic word *salīm*, meaning "perfect," "faultless," "safe," "secure," the name "Salim" has significant origins in Muslim and Jewish cultures (Family Education). It has been established that Sharif is painstakingly conscious of every word that appears on her pages, achingly entrenched in their multiple definitions and nuanced usage. The cruel irony of the prisoner's name supposedly rooted in peace and security while the sender's name is simply void, purposefully lost in translation, primes the reader for simultaneous disorientation and the devolution of communication that plagues these letters. In examining which words have been

redacted, a curious pattern develops: “Love, are you well? Do they you? I worry so much./ Lately, my hair , even/ my skin .” While the primary purpose of redaction in correspondence sent between high-security facilities and the outside world is to keep confidential and dangerous information from falling into the wrong hands, Sharif’s redactions expose the arbitrary exertion of power over personalized, sentimental messages. Do they beat you? Do they feed you? Do they speak to you? It has not gone missing. It has been disappeared. It is critical to understand the ownership and purposefulness in arbitrary redaction; while it appears oxymoronic in nature, the intent of the redaction follows a pattern of hierarchical assertions of power, both over the tangible, individual prisoner and the outside world.

In Reitman’s account of Guantánamo, she observes the devolution of communication that its prisoners are subjected to. In speaking to the judge presiding over his case, the aforementioned prisoner, Hadi, is conscious of the thinly veiled methods incorporated by the U.S. government in suppressing and deleting his reality through the abolition of his own language:

> ‘It took a whole year for the government to bring charges,’ he says through a translator. ‘Then they were changed, and my meetings with my defense were spied on.’ Hadi offers no explanation about how he knows his meetings were spied on, and the judge doesn’t ask. It’s seemingly just one of an endless series of controversial, yet essentially peripheral, issues facing the war court, which has yet to address either the facts or the merits of the case, though it has addressed a wide variety of other topics over the years, ranging from whether the accused can wear camouflage vests in court to which shadowy government entity controls the hidden censor button. [More] recently, there have been allegations that the government read the 9/11 defense attorneys’ e-mails and listened in

> on attorney-client conferences through a device disguised as a smoke detector. (In a lengthy response, the Department of Defense denied all of these allegations.) During one recent set of 9/11 hearings, an attorney for one of the defendants said she couldn't advise her client of his rights 'because I frankly don't know what they are.' The judge didn't seem to be sure either. (Reitman)

Here, the layers of redaction and disillusionment are contorted to the brink of an absurd existence. (1). Hadi's only mode of communication with his captors is through a translator provided to him under the laws of the same state that has arbitrarily detained and tortured him. The translator is tasked with the virtually impossible undertaking of comprehending the proceedings of the facade of a justice system before attempting to inform Hadi of his "rights." As if the dense padding of an isolation cell deafened the entire boiling island perched atop a boiling sea, igniting delicate words to vaporize before reaching land. (2). Nothing is said in confidence; there is no safety in communication, only in silence. From bugged smoke detectors to the monitoring of defense attorneys' emails, detainees' own words are stolen and weaponized, either to further incriminate themselves or give reason to validate their inhumane treatment. (3). Even the judges, who are supposed to act as impartial interpreters of the law, are unable to rule on what rights, if any, are extended to their prisoners. Here, we can witness the devolution of linguistic communication; it becomes virtually impossible for the detainee to use words, even those provided by their captors, in the enemy's language, to gain useful information about their status and accused crimes.

Within the physical and metaphorical walls of Guantánamo, language is not inherently arbitrary; it is artificially arbitrated. For Hadi, for Sharif's imagined Salim, for the nameless individuals who continue to rot in prisons that don't speak their language and do not even try, the

words levied against them are not frivolous nor subjective. The arbitrary distinction between "prisoner of war" and "unprivileged enemy belligerent" is no longer arbitrary when it is the deciding factor between life and death, freedom and captivity, comprehension and darkness. The poems within "Reaching Guantánamo" pose an opportunity to read the letters as if they were complete without assuming what has been disappeared. By this, I mean to assert that the blank spaces do not detract from the reader's comprehension of the letter itself- the piece is meant to possess voids in which we imagine the endless possibilities of what a grieving partner could write, and what the redactors considered vanishable. I assert that throughout Sharif's collection, there is an inherent expectation that her readers will be constantly aware of the deconstructive tendencies that language possesses in order to find their own personal meaning within. It is not the redacted gaps in the letters that result in deconstruction; it is the layered litany of definitions and unwritten subtext that produces the necessity of decoding what one is allowed to say at all.

As the crumpled paper, worn from travel and worried with love, bends and groans, it reaches one last barrier before fulfilling its purpose. While the majority of the public documentation of military redaction, or sanitization, is concentrated on government documents that contain prisoners' names and their supposed crimes, the redaction that occurs from the outside-in directly targets detainees' morale and quality of life. Without correspondence from the outside world, incarcerated individuals were left with little comprehension of time and space as well as the lives and families they left behind:

> "I have enclosed some — made this
> batch just for you. Please eat well. Why
> did you me to remarry? I told
> and he couldn't it.
> I would never " (Sharif 45).

In the next few lines of the letter, the sender continues on to juxtapose the mundane with the significant, yet both substances are fractured into eminent incomprehensible phrases: “I have enclosed some — made this/batch just for you. Please eat well”. In taking these lines about a package full of familial, comforting meals out of context, they are reminiscent of the banality of loving and caring for someone. They could have been taken from a postcard or letter sent to a loved one, only significant to those who uniquely receive and provide care in that specific language. Hence, the mundane becomes personal, not only to the receiver, but those who perceive the personal as a threat. I have previously established that the inherent political nature of written poems and spoken words stems from multiplicities of environments: the intent of the writer, if they are deliberate in their revolutionary weight, but also the dominating hierarchy of power that exists in the specific setting, and what they recognize as a challenge to their authority. The phrase “please eat well” does not carry political significance until it is a suggestion that there is something preventing the receiver, Salim, from eating well, such as the domineering and oppressive forces, both literal and metaphorical, that are imprisoners. Salim’s own agency is siphoned before him, in blanks and in chains.

The letter continues: “Why/did you me to remarry? I told / and he couldn’t/ it./I would never .” Here, the drastic shift in tone lies within the interplay between what is redacted and what is left visible. Which is crueler: receiving a letter from home in fragments, enough to be reminded of the ones left behind, or to receive nothing at all? Guantánamo Bay is structured to isolate and deteriorate their detainees, asserting domination and demanding subservience through tangible torture and emotional manipulation. When the body is imprisoned and lacking agency, the mind is able to wander; however, this letter provides only enough information to worry and assume, weaponizing Salim’s own familial

language against him. In this piece, Sharif reveals the hypocrisy of Guantánamo's policies of redaction, demonstrating how they emerge for the distinct purpose of withholding personal information from their prisoners. It concludes, "Love, I'm singing that you loved,/remember, the line that went /' '? I'm holding/the just for you./Yours, " (45). As the letter progresses from the beginning to the end, the redactions simultaneously appear more arbitrary and abstract until it becomes difficult to even guess what has been disappeared. On the collection of letters as an entity, Baker writes,

> As the sequence continues, the losses accrue, becoming by paradox more visible, made palpable by the terrible gaps in experience and communication we witness, suffer, and inflict. What remains of the language feels like code, while the evacuated gaps are charged by our imaginations as we inscribe our own guesswork into Salim and his never-named wife's intimate exchange. Nowhere is there an account of any direct political narrative or observation, yet even the most "innocent" of comments—the natural, the familial—are compromised and altered, torn by military oversight and redaction. Nothing has gone untouched. (Baker)

As we continue to read the letters in their partiality, the essence of an entirely new interpretation of language develops organically. It is an act of resistance to attempt to uncover what the military has deemed unseeable; while it is not my intent to romanticize or trivialize the pain and loss that accompanies these redactions, it is important to recognize its revolutionary weight. Sharif is requiring her readers to *look* at the structures of power used to dehumanize and erase human lives straight-on. While this series of letters demonstrates the sheer force of loss on a human consciousness, Sharif reminds us that there is also power in recognizing and subverting attacks on language and critical communication in one's own words. There is political significance in

every correspondence between people: in the moths and dying hair, in favorite songs and lost lyrics, and in a letter of love. How else could they be too dangerous to read?

Despite efforts at suppression, words have escaped from Guantánamo Bay. They hid in the shadows and learned the guards' favorite sayings and bided their time. In 2015, one year before Solmaz Sharif released *Look*, a man named Mohamedou Ould Slahi published *Guantánamo Diary*, his account of detainment in Guantánamo for fourteen years without being charged with a crime. Slahi wrote five hundred pages, documenting the torture and isolation he experienced during his imprisonment, choosing to write in English, his fourth language and one he picked up from his captors. Slahi's diary chronicles his "journey through the United States' far-reaching military-legal system," passing through Jordan and Afghanistan before being detained in American military bases (Pappalardo 21). Before the diary's publication, it was forced to undergo an intensive declassification process that resulted in over 2,500 black-bar redactions, drastically altering both content and style. Author Mary Pappalardo tackles many unanswerable questions that both Sharif and Slahi raise in their narratives of life behind American-made bars and the global implications of telling a declassified story in "Writing from the New Colony: Place, Subjectivity, and Textual Production in *Guantánamo Diary*." While Salim's account is simultaneously imagined and told from an outside, familial perspective, it has also been subjected to erasure tactics at the hands of the U.S. government due to the perceived weighted danger it inherently possesses. Pappalardo writes:

> *Guantánamo Diary* is a document whose very existence can, and perhaps should, be read as a successful challenge to the imperial power that would otherwise silence its author's voice. However, the multiple layers of mediation between the author and his eventual audience create a language that is unique to this new imperial power and the colonial

> subject it creates. The relationship between the linguistic and geographical conditions by which Guantánamo Diary was produced demands a cautious reading; it disrupts the otherwise complete, totalizing victory of the imperial power, insofar as it articulates the voice of the subaltern" (Pappalardo 23)

Slahi's writings are both political and revolutionary in addition to, not in spite of, the sanitization of language that attempted to ravage them void of meaning. Instead, a new genre of literature is told through a new language, unique in its fluid conflict for autonomy and authority, for the right to define truth and reality. By incorporating Pappalardo's theorizations of the global consequences from the United States' far-reaching military legal systems in tandem with Slahi's records of punishment through syntactic erasure, Sharif's letters hold significance far beyond the confines of personal loss. Salim's hypothetical existence is now grounded in painful reality, priming Sharif's readers to *look* towards tangible connections in the real world that shape the context of her written reality.

II.

In the first poem in the series "Reaching Guantánamo," Sharif introduces two characters, Salim and the unnamed author of the letters, poising the dynamic of their relationship as husband and partner. Furthermore, the sender breathes humanity into the otherwise voiceless role of Salim, reminding both him and the reader that he is deserving of love and care and acknowledgement of his existence. While the United States military seeks to dehumanize their victims beyond recognition of their personhood, the sender challenges this erasure through their letters, contextualizing Salim not as a prisoner but as a husband and someone who is missed and will not be easily forgotten. The letters are for Salim but they are also for his captors, for those who seek to construct realities that exist beyond compassion and established regulation. The letters are rebellious and they ask of their readers to join in their revolutionary intent just as Slahi's diary allows its readers to be exposed to the torture and abuse that happens when communication is forbidden, when language is artificially erased. As Sharif's series of letters progresses, they simultaneously become devoid *and* hyperconscious of reality and the world that exists for the sender. By this, I assert that the gaps in meaning are heightened as redaction continues in an attempt to void the letters of any substantive meaning, despite not possessing inherently dangerous or sensitive content. The continuous and unrelenting sanitization of language results in a broken comprehension of what the sender is attempting to communicate, left only with the vague aftermath of frustration and loss. However, I also assert that as Sharif's readers continue to read the letters, they become receptive to the possibilities of a new language, a modified dialect, that dwells within what is missing. These letters hold within a quiet resistance, aware of imminent alternation and even destruction, yet they are still written and able to communicate intense and unapologetic emotion.

The third letter in the series begins:

Dear Salim,

At the store, they bought
already, bruised on the
but still juicy. I pitted sour
all day, the newspaper
went with their juice. I save you
jars of preserves for your return. (47)

It appears that time has passed. While the first letter contained poorly disguised desperation and shock at the state of Salim's detention, the third letter holds details about daily life and the monotony that still exists amidst the loss. Sharif entitled this series "Reaching Guantánamo," which, upon first glance, relates to the sender's attempts to correspond and communicate with their husband despite the physical barriers of distance and incarceration. However, I believe Sharif is trying to reach her readers as well, using poetry as a vessel of proposed self-reflection; where do we position ourselves within this narrative of personal casualty intermingled with trips to the grocery store? How distant are we really from the sensation of struggling to communicate with loved ones through invisible and seemingly impenetrable barriers? In the beginning lines of this letter, the sender details how even banal, everyday tasks remind them of what is absent. They buy and pit and preserve fruit, enduring the commute to and from the store, read the newspaper, and write a letter to their husband to detail what he is missing. We, too, brave the crowded aisles of the grocery store and select the ripest fruit, hoping to find the perfect piece before other shoppers snatch it away. We tell our partner about the day, how the lines stretched across half the storefront and that dates were on sale today. In this letter, Sharif is imploring her readers to understand that while Guantánamo and its prisoners seem foreign and unfamiliar, their lives and the people they were forced to leave behind are not alien despite physical and linguistic barriers. Sharif and the sender are *reaching* out in tandem, attempting to bridge the gap between what is

imagined and what is real. The outward banality of the beginning of this letter demonstrates how truly remarkable our modes of communication can be despite outside pressure to silence and sabotage. Within Guantánamo Bay, a team of U.S. military operatives read Salim's letter line by line, word by word, and decide what is allowed to keep existing on the page and what must be destroyed. They read of the sour fruit and the waiting preserves and sanitize the letter, scrubbing it clean, yet its message remains. It says, "I miss you," and to, "come home soon." It says, "I have not forgotten."

As I have previously claimed, *Look* was not written only for audiences that could envision themselves within its poems. Reading as white American readers, it is critical to understand the lens through which we are reading Sharif's work and the subconscious influences we possess simply by existing in a colonial, authoritarian state. On interpreting Slahi's diary, Pappalardo writes, "If Slahi, in his status as detainee, is a colonized, subaltern subject, then how are we to understand the articulation of self evident in the creative act of composing a memoir? How does one textualize subjectivity in this new colonial space? This mode of life writing has implications not only for its author, but also for its audience; how we understand and read Slahi's mediated voice bears heavily on the way we conceive and think about our role(s) in neocolonialism" (Pappalardo 25). While it is not my intention to center my analysis of *Look* on what it means to privileged American readers, I do believe that Sharif's intentions involved necessary introspection on how we read her work. Sharif herself is a byproduct of a colonized country, articulating self-expression through creative acts. The sender of Salim's letters is also situated in a neocolonial environment in which their most expressive mode of communication is through love notes that will never be read in their unaltered form. Henceforth, it is important to not read *Look* in isolation of additional social ills that plague the United States. The hierarchy of

authority that governs reactionary policies within Guantánamo exists in tandem with and under the direction of the same governmental agencies that perpetuate racist and xenophobic policies in virtually every area of American life.

In reading this letter, I cannot help but think of Eve L. Ewing's poem, "I saw Emmett Till at the grocery store." The similarities are striking and unrelenting in their depictions of the simultaneous banality of loss and desperation of imagination. Who among us has not driven to the grocery store in silence, not even permitting the radio to interrupt the quiet, and stood in the produce aisle, scrutinizing the shelves for the perfect piece of fruit. Drowning sorrow in plums. Searching for something that will fill us without disturbing our cracked molar- too sweet and it will burn. In Ewing's poem and in Sharif's letters, the two authors create realities that beg to exist beyond the confines of legitimized language. By this, I mean that traditional structures of the English language do not always allow for the type of work that challenges norms of time and space. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, Sharif's collection confronts her white, American readers and asks them to consider how deeply embedded racial inequality is in their country. Even time itself is centered around whiteness, and Ewing's poem is in defiant resistance to whiteness's absolute influence. Both authors seek to redefine tragedy, not to romanticize or infantilize, but to find a way to continue to tell the stories that are systemically silenced. The poem deserves to be read it in entirety:

I saw Emmett Till at the grocery store

looking over the plums, one by one
lifting each to his eyes and
turning it slowly, a little earth,
checking the smooth skin for pockmarks
and rot, or signs of unkind days or people,
then sliding them gently into the plastic.
whistling softly, reaching with a slim, woolen arm
into the cart, he first balanced them over the wire

before realizing the danger of bruising
and lifting them back out, cradling them
in the crook of his elbow until
something harder could take that bottom space.

I knew him from his hat, one of those
fine porkpie numbers they used to sell
on Roosevelt Road. it had lost its feather but
he had carefully folded a dollar bill
and slid it between the ribbon and the felt
and it stood at attention. he wore his money.
upright and strong, he was already to the checkout
by the time I caught up with him. I called out his name
and he spun like a dancer, candy bar in hand,
looked at me quizzically for a moment before
remembering my face. he smiled. *well*
hello young lady

hello, so chilly today
should have worn my warm coat like you

yes so cool for August in Chicago

how are things going for you

oh he sighed and put the candy on the belt
it goes, it goes. (Ewing)

It is often in moments of communal, mundane experience that we are reminded of what is missing. Eve Ewing's collection of poetic works entitled *1919* focuses on the conceptions of time as they relate to the Black American experience, proposing that understanding existence as linear does not account for the circular patterns of racist violence and oppression that plagues the Black community. Throughout Ewing's work, she concentrates on the interactions between the body and the world enveloping it, particularly the bodies that are either condemned or disappeared. In a 2019 interview, Ewing discusses her inspirations: "The way memory also manifests in the body…And I think that it's one of the ways in which our bodies are incredibly adept at trying to tell us things that maybe our conscious minds are not quite ready to to ascertain ...You know like

what does it mean when your body is trying to tell you something that your brain hasn't figured out yet" (Cannariato 2019). Herein lie the similarities between Sharif and Ewing's works; they both write of subconscious desires for permanent, personal bodies despite the knowledge that they are impossible. The sender writes to her partner as if they will soon be reunited, falling back into routines of canning fruit and staining today's newspaper before anyone has a chance to read its contents. Ewing writes a world in which Emmett Till, the child victim of an unforgivable crime, was allowed to grow up enough to pick out his own plums and buy them with his own money, as if he was alive to feel the chill on his upturned face. However, I believe both of the narrators in both poems to be conscious that these desires for permanence are futile and serve only as an imaginary outlet in order to grapple with their personal lack of agency. Sharif and Ewing think in circular time, memories mixed with illusions of loved ones just out of grasp, reliving the same moments in which they were taken from them by dominating forces that steal life with arbitrary proceedings. Sharif writes, "I haven't opened/a since they/ you" (47). Ewing writes, "*how are things going for you/oh* he sighed and put the candy on the belt/*it goes, it goes*" (Ewing). Life should not be moving along with such an absence- how could it- so, it loops over and onto itself, upsetting past and present until the day it is unrecognizable. Sharif's diction exposes this theoretical interruption of time as the sender's letter speaks of concrete reality while the emotions that accompany it are redacted. They write a scene complete with tangible objects, ripened plums and their juices and a wordless newspaper, yet the moments in which the sender attempts to communicate anything other than abject, objective reality are missing. The letter concludes: "I hope I don't make you me./ I hope they allow you some " (47). An existence without *feeling* is not a real life just as a letter redacted of emotion cannot entirely communicate. In both poems, the narrators subconsciously

understand that forces of authority based upon racism and oppression have shaped their current realities, yet their imagined, dactylic lives conceptualize an alternate space in which their ability to communicate is not monitored or reduced by such discriminatory sources of power.

"I saw Emmett Till at the grocery store" attempts to answer the question of how to live within the suffocating confines of time governed by whiteness and its inherent violence. In conversation with Ewing, interviewer Cannariato writes:

> The speaker identifies Till by his porkpie hat from a well-known photo of the boy. Then they speak briefly, exchange pleasantries, and talk about the weather. And really, that's one of the most remarkably tragic things about the poem: a vision of comfortable normalcy stolen violently, senselessly, over and over again. Ewing thinks the poem resonates with readers because "it's one of the few times that folks have been asked to reflect on what it would have looked like to envision a futurity for Emmett Till…and to think about him not in terms of the past but in terms of the future, in arrested future or an alternative future." (2019)

In an alternative future, pieced together despite blacked words and missing details, the sender is reunited with Salim, and they embrace. They spread jam, thin and all the way to the edges, and they speak to each other in their own home. Heard. Understood. And it is normal and it is beautiful. Ewing speaks of an exodus of Black Americans, escaping from the ceaseless circles of racial violence, and the ability to progress through both time and language uninhibited by colonial, patriarchal constraints. Perhaps this departure exists, even for a moment, in its written potential, for every poem holds within the possibility of revolution, of communal resistance, of the strength of masses and the endurance of linguistic hope.

What becomes clear in reading Ewing's poem in conversation with Sharif, and what is critical to remember, is that the lives and experiences of the poems' subjects are neither trivial nor theoretical. To not possess the agency to write of the victims of America's white supremacy and militarization is to be erased, real bodies and real lives either forgotten or co-opted by the very institutions that obliterated them. There is revolution in writing about a forbidden existence, revolutionary in a way that erasure could never make disappear.

III.

'The president knows that Guantánamo is wrong, legally and morally,' says Wells Dixon, senior attorney for the Center of Constitutional Rights, who has represented clients at Gitmo since 2005. 'But the failure to ensure accountability for the sins of the prior administration is like trying to avoid treatment for mental illness with the hope that it will go away,' he says. 'The more you ignore it, the more it comes back to haunt you.' (Reitman 5)

Journalist Janet Reitman's account of touring Guantánamo Bay lingers throughout my readings of Sharif's collection, providing insights into exactly how purposefully human rights violations are executed, and how calculatingly they are justified. I have already discussed how United States government officials legitimize unlawful detention to the international community through doublespeak, fabricating authoritative terminology such as "unprivileged enemy belligerent", yet the bureaucratic falsification of reality endures even within the walls of Guantánamo. Reitman describes her experience touring the facilities, paraded around by armed guards through constructed barracks and passing posters with encouraging sayings such as "DON'T BE A SPY, TURN ONE IN": "[this] only further reinforce the sense of Camp Justice as a hermetically sealed, if fake, combat zone, which is required to legitimize the military commissions, an equally bogus 'battlefield' court" (Reitman 7). The construction of the military installation itself synthetically creates an environment in which its soldiers are meant to believe they are in chronic danger, nobly fighting back against unnamed, faceless terrorist forces that dream of the downfall of the United States. The soldiers that man Guantánamo are disillusioned into believing their cause is just and right, that their prisoners are a threat, just as American citizens are taught to accept that human suffering and injustices are a small price to pay for freedom:

> As of this writing, there are 97 men who will never see the inside of a courtroom, let alone be charged with a crime. Six have been there since the prison opened in 2002.

> These prisoners are the larger and, in many ways, more important story of Guantanamo, though they are also the ones Americans tend to forget. The government has helped significantly in this process by staffing Gitmo with a majority of National Guard and reserve troops on nine-month rotations, who've been programmed to see the men in their charge as not only dangerous but guilty. (9-10)

Americans are encouraged to forget about what is not right in front of them and look away when told to shield their eyes. The foundation of Guantánamo rests upon warped definitions of guilt, perceptions that defy traditional American beliefs, such as "innocent until proven guilty." Reitman writes how this brainwashing of military officials through tailored language is necessary in order to maintain the facade of a warzone within Guantánamo itself; either through purposefully meaningless terminology or weaponized, emotional concepts, the U.S. government speaks in nonsensical ways. However, these tactics feel unsustainable, and I believe Sharif is writing within this context of instability. Sharif's decision to incorporate United States Department of Defense vocabulary exposes the hypocrisy of devolved methods of communication just as her series of letters to Guantánamo demonstrates the futility of communicating through the oppressor's own language. The sender is continuously attempting to reach Salim, to reach Guantánamo, to reach themself, but we as readers know they will never get there. Time exists on a feedback loop within the prison as soldiers and detainees alike relive the same day again and again, reaching towards something they do not possess the words to articulate.

While *Look* is about erasure, the collection is also about its opposite, the insertion of things where they do not belong. Sharif is mimicking the Department of Defense's erasure tactics by redacting her own poetry, but she is also adding in a strategy literally weaponized to silence

language and crush resistance, thereby subverting the power that redaction holds in rebellious reclamation. This coupled existence of synthetic addition and subtraction of both language and people reaches its breaking point in the last two letters of the series. The sixth letter in the series begins:

> Dear Salim,
>
> The neighbors got an apology
> and a few thousand dollars.
> They calculate based on
> and
> and age. The worth of a , of a human
> . (50)

This letter is almost beyond comprehension, bearing a poignant absence of concrete nouns and adjectives past the first statement. I believe the sender to be writing about the worth of a human life, calculated in numerical values, determined by systems of power that view both money and bodies as disposable, as replaceable. Just as the United States' military constructs realities in which it is perfectly legal and moral to imprison and torture human beings, they also designate monetary amounts as worth a human life; in the text of the letter, the word "calculate" is particularly destructive in its implications. An entirely new system of communication is born out of arbitrary numbers, classifying the worth of humanity in dollar amounts, further exacerbating the connection between language fabricated for the purpose of dehumanization and the addition of weaponized insertion. Here, I believe Sharif is illuminating the hypocrisy of the outward goals of the United States' military industrial complex. We have not yet explicitly discussed the motivations behind not only Guantánamo but the broader system of imperialism and international violence. On the surface, it is about money, gathering capital and resources in order to amass wealth on the global scale. While this is true on some level, Sharif is acknowledging within this letter that monetary values act as a conduit for the real motivator of the various

structures of oppression that seek to commodify and abuse human life. It is about power and influence; wealth and affluence simply quantify authority into comprehensible parts of a whole. The words and phrases that have been redacted within this letter expose how the government weaponizes tangible wealth and their attempts to replace freedom and livelihoods with money in a sort of uneven, forced exchange. The letter continues:

> . She took it out front
> and ripped it . a little pile
> and set fire to it right there, right in front of
> .
> says they'll send me
> a check for . I would
> ! !
> ? Never. (50)

Because of, not in spite of, the gaps in the sentences, revolutionary intent is balanced on the precipice of authentic action. It is no longer only about the sender and Salim; now, their neighbors have been implicated as well, expanding this series to acknowledge and identity communal narratives that coexist under the same hierarchy of power attempting to oppress them. As discussed previously, Sharif's call for revolution within *Look* incorporates the existence of shared trauma and experiences and the ability to collect and capitalize off of such mutual ordeals. Here, she articulates a tangible act of resistance through action: the assumed ripping and igniting of a check meant to replace or repair the suffering that was inflicted upon them. Revolution is now palpable in its potential. While the vast majority of this letter has been forcibly disappeared, its sentiment remains visible and comprehensible. It is also significant to acknowledge that entire sentences were taken away from both Salim and us as readers, most likely as an indulgent exercise of power committed by a vast hierarchy of powerful people and institutions. As the letters in the series continue to physically devolve, their clear sense of urgency increases

exponentially, illuminating how alternative methods of communication have developed despite external interference.

The final letter in the entirety of the series concludes with simultaneous defiance and destruction in its closure. It reads:

> Dear Salim,
>
> I read some Hikmet,
> *Human* *Country.*
> The wife sends letters to her
> like I do. I don't read
> now. He was like you.
> I've the books,
> all of them. Can't stomach their
> . All
> those spines lined up on my shelf. How you
> would stand there, smelling the pages.
> them. They all say
> the same story
> and none tell ours. (51)

There is no hint of a signature, no "yours." While this lack of a personalized conclusion can be interpreted as an abandonment of the sender's dedication to Salim, I believe that this absence of an intimate ending expands the letter's sentiments as voiced by a collective rather than an individual. No longer is this about one man locked away in one cell mourned by one individual. Sharif is challenging her readers to not only consider what has been redacted, but what is being said in tandem across the globe in countless different languages; just because we do not hear and read of revolutionary works that challenge our same oppressor does not mean they do not exist and wield rebellious intent and power in their own right. Sharif references one particular radical voice by name within this letter: "Hikmet," who I believe to be the Turkish writer Nâzım Hikmet Ran, internationally recognized for his publications in leftist literary magazines and political

activism (Foundation 1991).[1] Within the letter, the sender compares Salim to Hikmet, writing, "The wife sends letters to her/

like I do… He was like you" (50). Here, I believe that the sender finds simultaneous comfort and apprehension in Hikmet's works because of the similarities in their situations. The sender recognizes similarities within Hikmet's life of imprisonment enforced by tyrannical governments afraid of his revolutionary potential, yet that is precisely the problem. Hikmet's existence was one of few triumphs interspersed with long bouts of suffering before he died of a heart attack at age 61 in Moscow, far away from his beloved home country of Turkey, where his publications were banned until 1965, after his death. I believe the sender no longer found as much comfort in Hikmet's works because of the context of his life, swollen with injustice and institutional oppression. However, I choose to interpret Sharif's inclusion, as an author, of Hikmet in her collection because of his legacy of the political prowess that poetry can possess. Hikmet's poetry has been translated into over fifty languages and he has become a revered figure within Turkey, the country that once demanded his silence and imprisonment.

Even within this single letter, Sharif herself establishes a collective of revolutionary writers who understand the power of communal narratives, challenging oppressive forces with the strength of the many. The conclusion reads, "All/those spines lined up on my shelf. How you/would stand there, smelling the pages./ them. They all say/the same

[1] Hikmet was born in 1902 in Salonika, now Thessaloníki, Greece, and spent a vast section of his life imprisoned or exiled for his radical written works. While studying at the University of Moscow, Hikmet became a devoted Marxist spent his early years between Turkey and Russia where he was periodically arrested and imprisoned. He quickly outgrew traditional, versed styles of poetry and began to develop free-form techniques that incorporated traditional folklore and linguistic lyricism. In 1950, Hikmet was awarded the International Peace Prize for his activism in Turkey surrounding the addition of amnesty laws and voter protections, along with other notable revolutionary artists like Pablo Neruda and Wanda Jakubowska. Sharif's letter references his work entitled *Human Landscapes from My Country*, which was an epic novel in verse written during Hikmet's thirteen year sentence as a political prisoner during World War II.

story/and none tell ours" (50). They all say the same story and none tell ours. *Love, are you well? They all say the same story and none tell ours.* From start to finish, Sharif is writing of collective loss in which the characters themselves, the sender, Salim, the redactors, the prison guards, the neighbors, a dead poet, and herself, weave an account poised to upset powerful implemented tactics of isolation and individuality. While this written defiance does not erase or even ease the personal loss the characters encounter and experience, the testimony memorialized within "Reaching Guantánamo" is beautifully, tragically, bravely resistant. The series forces Sharif's readers to face the atrocities that occur on American territory in the form of unlawful detentions and legalized torture. It asks difficult questions that demand complex answers, such as how do we address exclusionary aspects of our language and how do we communicate across linguistic barriers and arbitrary boundaries? Although it may seem obvious, Sharif is also demanding that her readers acknowledge and understand that she is not writing fiction. In "Inside Gitmo: America's Shame," journalist Janet Reitman concludes her article with a snippet of her conversation with chief public affairs officer Chris Scholl:

> 'The entire reason for this place is 9/11,' I tell Scholl.
>
> 'We don't dwell on it,' he says.
>
> This attempt at message management is tragic. Terrible and deeply un-American things happened at Guantanamo as a result of 9/11, which Rosenberg, along with the men she calls "captives," bore witness to. Though the abuse and brutal interrogations have ended, there is still the ongoing, if silent, torture of being interned without legal recourse at the end of the world. Gitmo exudes this sickening and unsettling reality. It is impossible to be anywhere within the Detention Zone, in particular, without being reminded that what the

> place is really all about, hidden from public view and outside the realm of memory, is suffering. (14)

In particular, the line, "Gitmo exudes this sickening and unsettling reality," poignantly illustrates how the truth has been distorted past reasonable comprehension. The average American citizen does not understand, challenge, or even think of the institutions that founded and uphold systems of oppression like Guantánamo Bay because they do not have access to the necessary language nor communities instrumental to revolutionary intentions. In returning to Pappalardo's account of a real-life memoir that emerged from Guantánamo, it remains clear that the redactions that Sharif employs possess significance far beyond mimicry of those in power. Pappalardo writes of contemporary receptions of Slahi's work:

> We might view the redacted edition as perhaps a more powerful condemnation of the US's state apparatus of violence insofar as its stark visual evidence of their censorship disallows readers from forgetting the control they exert over Slahi even in his telling of his own story. However, the fact that the subject audiences seem to require in order to potentially reflect on that state violence must be silenced to some degree carries troubling implications for the kinds of demands we make on victims and their narration of trauma. (33)

We, as American citizens, should not have to read heartbreaking accounts of state-sanctioned human rights abuses in order to poise ourselves in LOOK, receptive of revolutionary intent. However, Sharif equips her readers with the language and context necessary to begin our own paths to resistance. *They all say the same story and none tell ours* simply because *it matters what you call a thing*. And it matters if that story is able to be told at all.

Poetry, Poised

In my junior year of college, a Political Science professor told me that poetry was useless. As an academic, their expertise lies in fascism and identifying authoritarian themes in supposedly democratic countries. They said that poetry was beautiful escapism at best and purposefully ignorant at its worst. Ever since then, I have been absolutely defiant in my opposition to this sentiment, but, mostly, I am insistently curious why this ideology is so prevailing in spaces of political theory and academic activism. Anecdotally, my personal experiences with political engagement and advocacy emerged after prolific amounts of reading in my younger years; because my basic needs were met and I did not appear outwardly Other, I learned of widespread oppression and suffering through written narratives of those who actually experienced it. Reading these specifically creative and autobiographical works allowed me to begin to understand persecution and marginalization in a way that did not center myself as the subject of these critical conversations simply because I was learning from the perspective of another who clearly possessed intimate knowledge and insight. Consuming and analyzing poetry granted me the introduction to empathetic and informed political activism and I see critical value in expanding its influence and prominence in academic contexts.

In *Look* and her other works, Sharif articulates how poetry offers more than just a lesson in empathy. Poetry is not relegated to victims to mourn and self-indulge. It is political- always has been- even in its individualized, personal state. Poetry seeks to bridge natural and artificial gaps in language and community, uniting people across the world. Poetry can also be dangerous. Poetry can be dangerous enough to be redacted, erased, belittled, co-opted, poisoned. However, the language that poetry is composed of can be manipulated and weaponized by the state, corrupting its unifying power. It can be claimed and repurposed to harm, to silence, to pacify.

This thesis is about many things: poetry, revolution, language, and loss, to name a few. Nevertheless, this thesis would not exist without Solmaz Sharif, and I wish to allow her some of the last words:

> There's the old personal-is-political adage. But then, to be a woman is also to know that your body and yourself and your mind are subject to and delimited by power at every turn, even in your own house, in your own lovemaking. There is no part of your life that has not been somehow violently decided for you by a narrative that was established before you were even born. This is not only true for women, right? It cuts across various identity strata—queerness, race, class, ability, et cetera. But to have that sense of precarity or vulnerability questioned and challenged by misdirection—for example, when you're told that you're overreacting, that what you think is going on isn't actually happening—this is how the U.S. largely deals with warfare. They say, The war is no longer happening on this block, what are you talking about? That's something that's natural to my experience as a woman, and something that seems necessary to expose over and over again. I want to talk about how far-reaching these effects are and how intimate these effects are and how there's no part of our bodies or desires that are not somehow informed or violated by these atrocities… Somehow, I want the work to show that every time you're washing the dishes, every shower, every grocery trip—that's all informed by this violence, whether we're seeing it or not.[2]

The war of violence and erasure and supremacy is here and has been and, for the foreseeable future, will continue to be. Sharif and other poets do not write to end the war- although some might. They write to show the war exists, to challenge where we look and who we trust, and to

[2] The excerpts featured here are taken from Solmaz Sharif's 2016 interview with "The Paris Review," in conversation with Zinzi Clemmons.

realize who has been forgotten. I continue to cling to the idea that poetry will change the world and choose to see the beauty that remains.

I LOOK.

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