

The Reparative Work of the Imagination: Yemen, 'Afiya, and Politics of the *Umma*

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Abstract

This paper explores the psychic implications of nation-state politics on Yemenis and the necessity of repair and restorative justice. It examines some burgeoning work by artists and filmmakers that work on the image of the Yemeni as a reaction to the mental health crisis, ongoing war, and dispossession. For many of my interlocutors, the exploration and reimagining of Yemeni history, identity, and their place within a larger *umma* beyond nation-state formation becomes a necessary act of repair—and a precondition toward broader political aspirations. The essay

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traces the works of art by two Yemeni artists that meditate on the conditions of community, trust, and individual and communal wellbeing in relation to the Muslim *umma*. In turn, it considers how an *ummatic* aspiration is mediated by local political histories, but also the difficult psychic work necessary to articulate this aspiration amid cultural desolation.

Introduction

The short film “The Long Run” revolves around a young boy being sent by his mother to fetch some bread for lunch. As the camera trails behind him, it moves audiences through the corridors of Ibb’s historic old city as the boy attends noon (*dhuhr*) prayer, passes by a funeral procession, and plays marbles with his friends. These mundane scenes of collective life offer viewers a series of visual meditations on ethics, communal affinity, Islamic rituals, piety, divine trust (*amana*), counsel (*nasiha*), and hospitality, reverberating throughout the tower-homes built of rammed earth and mud. The movie culminates with a story that an elder recounts to the young boy as he accompanies him home: a parable of an oppressive man who, having overburdened his donkey, eventually kills it. The unstated referents of the allegorical story are the forms of collective life just depicted, which (so the film implies) have been depleted and undermined by an oppressive, indifferent political leadership.

I had met Yousef, the young Yemeni filmmaker behind the short film, for the first time in 2013 when we were both attending a meeting of the American Association for Yemeni Professionals and Scientists in

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Berkeley, California. Now in his late twenties and having graduated from UCLA's Film school, Yousef had recently traveled to Yemen after losing his job as an assistant writing on a Netflix show. We met at the farmer's market in Los Angeles, a month after he returned from Yemen to discuss raising funds for future film projects. Reticent to speak about his own faith, he nonetheless noted to me that during this last trip to Yemen he was struck by how refuge in the Islamic tradition was one of the few things sustaining people's mental health and wellbeing. As he put it, it seemed a strange paradox how thickly enmeshed and co-identified the Islamic tradition and Yemen are, yet how little this seemed to materialize in either curiosity about, or affinity for, Yemenis from the *umma* (the broader Islamic community).

The tension Yousef gestured to, what he viewed as a paradox, was deeply familiar to me. I myself am a Yemeni-American scholar and researcher, raised between Yemen, Brooklyn, and California. Having conducted extensive predissertation fieldwork in Yemen spanning the years 2009-2013, I was forced by the ongoing conflict there to work outside the country, primarily in Saudi Arabia but also Jordan, during my doctoral fieldwork in 2016-2017, during which time I worked closely with many diasporic Yemeni interlocutors. They repeatedly pointed out to me how Muslims from around the globe flock to Yemen to immerse themselves in historical sites and social forms they experience as most proximate to the early roots of their faith. To them, Yemen is figured (within the *umma* and beyond it) as a contemporary embodiment of religious history. However, this historical binding of Yemen and Islam never led most Muslims visitors to envision Yemen as an extension of the *umma* that requires attentiveness and contemporary political, economic, and social commitments. Instead, Yemen's severe humanitarian crisis and rampant corruption are read merely as problems of the country's political economy, tribal structure, anti-modernist visions, and failure to centralize governance—in other words, its seeming inability to function well as a nation-state. Crucially, the myriad ways in which many Yemenis resist the violence and oppression of neoliberal policies and Western secularization are rarely salient in this way of framing its current distress. As a result, an image of the Yemeni as a conservative

beggar with a premodern soul serves to explain its current stasis. That very image of impoverishment forecloses Yemenis' membership within (and so their ability to make claims upon) the larger Muslim *umma*.

This essay delves into the productive function of the “work of culture” (Obeyesekere 1990), the symbolic transformation or sublimation of affects (depressive and painful), amidst the war and conflict in Yemen. I illustrate how, for many of my interlocutors, the exploration and reimagining of Yemeni history, identity, and their place within a larger *umma* and history beyond nation-state formation becomes a necessary act of repair—and a precondition toward broader political aspirations. This demonstrates not only the deep ways an *ummatic* aspiration is mediated by local political histories, but also the difficult psychic work necessary to articulate this aspiration from within the midst of cultural desolation. First, I note how concerns around wartime mental health and illness have turned Yemeni youth toward art, storytelling, and prophetic medicine. This decided shift illustrates the salience of a discourse on the importance of the imagination and the law to the soul, envisioning new epistemological approaches to psychotherapeutic models. Second, I explore the impact of geopolitics on psychic wellbeing (*'afiya*) and the way discourses on the state of the soul emerge. I end the essay by presenting works by two artists (Yousef and Eman) which examine the role of art, storytelling, and history in the work of the imagination and the fortitude of the soul. This examination of *'afiya* and its multiple dimensions allows us to understand the reparative work of the imagination: re-imagining the Yemeni, the revival of a rich heritage, and the reverberation of a tradition.

On Methods: Reimagining Muslim Scholarship

In recent years, ethnographers working with Muslim practitioners have increasingly acknowledged how centering a non-secular epistemology and framework is necessary to any attempt to write from within the tradition, whether it be about Muslim cosmologies, aspirations and commitment to the *umma*, or moral subjectivity. A consequent centering of divine oneness in turn informs ethnographic explorations of

how Muslims relate to questions as varied as *‘afiya* (well-being), charity, emerging neoliberal policies, migration, psychic and spiritual wellbeing, humanitarianism, self-cultivation and purification, and stewardship of the world (Asad 2009; Hirschkind, 2006; Iqbal, 2025; Mahmood 2011; Messick 1996; Mittermaier 2019; Pandolfo 2018). This methodological and theoretical corrective is often confused in media and academic debates alike for acceding to Islamist propositions (Hamdy, 2012). However, Talal Asad (2015, 212) asks what “politics not focused on the sovereign territorial state might look like” rather than giving primacy to a framework that would position religious versus secular states. Asad argues that considering “nonhierarchical domains of normativity open up the possibility of a very different kind of politics—and policies—that would always have to address numerous overlapping bodies and territories”. He cites *al-amr bi-l-ma‘rūf* (enjoining good) as an example of a tradition that might “form an orientation of mutual care of the self, based on the principle of friendship (and therefore of responsibility to and between friends) not on the legal principle of citizenship”. In interrogating the impact of global geopolitical structures on psychic-well-being, I build on this intervention as well as the above-mentioned emerging anthropological turn in exploring sociopolitical structures from an Islamic perspective.

My ethnographic writing is attentive to the ways Muslims engage and negotiate institutional spaces, textual and conceptual histories and philosophies, affinal relationships, and the poetics and prose of Islamic concepts in everyday practices. It follows a number of anthropological works that aim to explore how Islamic cosmology produces relationalities between humans and God, other humans, animals, nature, and the *umma* (Rahman 2009, Izutsu 2002). These relationalities mediate socio-economic and political commitments that are theologically infused and go beyond the mere assertion of a Muslim polity. I explore these relationalities amongst Yemenis attempting to secure both individual and communal *‘afiya* amidst the congoing conflict.

The conflict in Yemen (in which the United States military is involved) has to date taken over 100,0000 lives, devastated infrastructure, forced migration, and exacerbated suffering caused by an ongoing famine. It has displaced many Yemenis desiring and yearning to continue their

studies, crafts, and careers, forcing them to find opportunities elsewhere. Crucially, the war also threatens to obliterate the country's historical landmarks, architectural heritage, and cultural memory. My broader research agenda (Hauter 2020) focused on ethico-religious practices, medicine, and the role of communal and individual health in securing 'afiya (psychological, physical, and spiritual wellbeing) in Yemen. To be clear, and in contrast to *sihha*, which denotes a more limited notion of physical health, 'afiya is fundamentally a theological concept, especially as paradigmatically employed in the supplication to God, made by both patients and physicians, for pardon and wellbeing. Within hospital settings, for example, the prayer "O God, I ask You for forgiveness and well-being in this world and in the Hereafter" (*allahumma inni as'aluka l-'afwa wa-l-'afiyah fi-l-dunya wa-l-akhirah*), is frequently circulated among patients, their families, and visitors (Hauter 2023a). Amongst my interlocutors, an illness is not seen as an atomistic/individual experience but viewed as relational. 'Afiya itself is about relationality—a relation to oneself, soul, desire, psyche, history, family, community, and God. As seen in the examples detailed in this paper, art is one site for an emerging meditation on 'afiya and its conditions.

Based on twenty-four months of multi-sited field research in Sana'a, Yemen, and with Yemeni refugees and migrants in Amman, Jordan, and Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, my earlier work explored my interlocutors' ideas of health and illness, as they have been inflected and intensified by the war in Yemen. In these three sites, I gave particular attention to the theological concept of 'afiya as it shapes the way ordinary people articulate their demands for medical care: from the doctors at the forefront of the 2011-2012 uprising in Sana'a calling for *islah* (reform), to physicians and imams working with refugees and migrants in Amman and Jeddah, to clinical trials of Prophetic Medicine in Jeddah. Broadening the focus from the medical clinic to wider society, this essay now begins to examine the psycho-spiritual effects of geopolitics on the psyche/soul within the Yemeni diasporas (Jordan, Saudi Arabia, United States) at the margins of war.

On the one hand, certain psychologists and psychiatrists view the tribal structure of Yemeni society as stunting individual progress and

wellbeing. On the other hand, psychologists have turned to art and storytelling to treat both children and adults alike with post-traumatic stress disorders, depression, and depersonalization, exploring various prescriptions for psychic wellbeing. This turn toward art, history, and storytelling may in fact have followed trends manifested during the Arab Spring, when Yemeni youth turned to poetry, folklore, and filmmaking in order to reimagine both their past, present, and future as part of the *umma*. In doing so, these young people reconstructed the image of the Yemeni as part of a collective whole, one that is bound up with Islamic cosmology. Here, I want to emphasize that being in community requires attention to one's placement, one's ability to envision engagements with others, reciprocation, hospitality, and a shared vision, all of which allow individuals to both locate themselves and trust in the potential exchange with others.

Yemen, *'Afiya*, and the *Umma*

Yousef concluded our first interview at the Los Angeles Market by relaying stories about Yemenis' refusal to embrace Arab nationalism. He recalled various claims of why the Egyptian military intervention in Yemen during Gamal Abdel-Nasser's rule had been a failure (Dawisha 1975). Scholars note that the Egyptian army had supported the Yemeni Revolution of 1962 against the ruling Imam Ahmed and his royalist followers; its entrance into Yemen during this conflict was part due to Saudi Arabia's support for the remaining royalists, and its departure was mainly due to what they considered as Yemen's inefficiency. When President Nasser returned to Cairo after visiting Yemen in 1964, he is said to have remarked to John Badeau, the American ambassador: "You would not believe what goes on in Sana'a. Half of the Ministers never go to their offices, and the other half don't know what to do when they get there. Additionally, he was able to witness for himself when he was in Sana'a the near disintegration of the Republican leadership and their almost daily public bickering and quarrels" (Dawisha 1975, 55). Scholars observed that "the Egyptians considered the Yemen to be a backward and medieval country" (Dawisha 1975, 48). President Nasser considered

Yemen to be “Egypt’s Vietnam” in the problems it posed to his agenda, as he noticed the corruption and quarrels of the political factions, and after the supposed gaining momentum of the royalists, who he feared were backed by Saudi Arabia. This image of Yemeni backwardness and anti-modernity proved highly durable.

Many Yemenis tell a different tale of what ultimately drove the Egyptian Army out. Yousef began, “Yemenis have never been captivated by the idea of Arab nationalism because of the customs that bind the community, that secure it and which ensure safety and honor between the people.” His uncle and father would narrate tales of how the Yemeni population grew suspicious of the Egyptian armed forces when women were harassed in public and rumors of rape and physical violence exercised upon Yemeni women began to spread from Sana‘a to the villages. In response, tribesmen began kidnapping officers and revolting against the Egyptian army. The Egyptian government deemed these actions to be politically motivated, but according to Yemenis such kidnappings occurred because of the army’s moral corruption, which contravened Yemeni ethical commitments (which surpass and supersede national identity, local tribal affiliations, and political divisions). Yousef emphasized that the corruption and transgressions that the Egyptian Army brought into the community emboldened the insularity of Yemenis – the sense that they must cleave to customs and traditions for the *‘afiya* of the community, against and above nation-state politics. To be clear, the *umma* here envisioned by Yousef lies beyond identity politics (Egypt vs. Yemen, or even Egypt and Yemen together under advancing the broader cause of Arab nationalism), for the question of *‘afiya* was not simply levelled to secure one particular political affiliation or another. Instead, the question of *‘afiya* here showcases how psycho-spiritual wellbeing cuts through political categories and claims of socio-economic and political equality. In fact, many of my interlocutors long for and recall “aspects of an early community-centered political vision” (Anjum 2012, 61-62).

Yousef explained that this longing is nothing new. Yemenis have always been cast out of the *umma*. To explain, he brought me back to the seventh century: “When the leadership came together to decide on the Caliphate after the Prophet died, Sa‘d ibn ‘Ubadah ibn Dulaym al-Ansari,

the leader of the Yemeni tribe...nominated himself for leadership of the Muslim community. Both 'Umar Ibn al-Khattab and Abu Bakr went to him and said we are the rulers and you are the advisors." The tradition in Sahih al-Bukhari narrated the following event following the Prophet's death:

The people wept loudly, and the Ansar were assembled with Sa'd bin 'Ubada in the shed of Bani Sai'da. They said (to the emigrants). "There should be one Amir (ruler) from us and one from you." Then Abu Bakr, 'Umar bin Al-Khattab and Abu 'Ubaida bin Al-Jarrah went to them. 'Umar wanted to speak but Abu Bakr stopped him. 'Umar later on used to say, "By Allah, I intended only to say something that appealed to me and I was afraid that Abu Bakr would not speak so well. Then Abu Bakr spoke and his speech was very eloquent. He said in his statement, "We are the rulers and you (the Ansar) are the ministers (i.e., advisers)," Hubab bin Al-Mundhir said, "No, by Allah we won't accept this. But there must be a ruler from us and a ruler from you." Abu Bakr said, "No, we will be the rulers and you will be the ministers, for they (i.e., the Quraish) are the best family amongst the Arabs and of best origin. So you should elect either 'Umar or Abu 'Ubaida bin Al-Jarrah as your ruler." 'Umar said (to Abu Bakr), "No but we elect you, for you are our chief and the best amongst us and the most beloved of all of us to Allah's Messenger (ﷺ)." So 'Umar took Abu Bakr's hand and gave the pledge of allegiance and the people too gave the pledge of allegiance to Abu Bakr. Someone said, "You have killed Sad bin 'Ubada." 'Umar said, "Allah has killed him." (Sahih al-Bukhari Book 62, Hadith 19).

According to Yousef, Yemenis have always been considered the soldiers of the *umma*. "They fight for the *umma* but they are continually cast out." Although the hadith reads "ministers" rather than "soldiers," I want to underscore the significance of how a historical wound felt by Yemenis and transmitted across generations in this moment becomes available to explain a twentieth-century phenomenon (i.e., the excluding

of Yemen from the modernizing projects and aspirations of pan-Arab nationalism). This is noteworthy for reflection because it precisely reifies the projected bordering of regional affiliations within the *umma*. This conjunction invites further examination of how imaginaries about what and who makes up the *umma*, in their historically specific variation, are just as integral to the future and possibility of a cohesive *umma* as the institutions built to bridge its fracturing into diverse nation-states. Yemen is a particularly significant site for interrogating this due to its arguably exceptional status within the Muslim geopolitical imaginary, it simultaneously symbolically represents both an originary source and a space of exception. This paradox generates artistic and filmic responses amongst the Yemeni diaspora, which offer a starting point for exploring efforts at repair.

The markers by which one is located, evaluated, and enter into exchange with others depends on institutional, state, and other markers that depend on borders rather than exceed them. How does one engage in community when the ways one is instructed to engage with others are not reflected in the available societal infrastructures?

Yousef, like many other Yemenis I spoke with in the diaspora, spoke about the inhospitality of other regions. He mentioned that when his father, an accomplished novelist, was competing for a literary award his travels were impeded as the Gulf War broke out: tensions between Yemen and the Gulf countries intensified as the government aligned with Saddam Hussein and Yemenis were both expelled from the Gulf states and their movement was rendered illegal. I, too, found myself facing barriers to my mobility during the current conflict in Yemen. Katiba, a Yemeni woman from *Mahweet* holding Jordanian citizenship, who I met alongside her husband while sitting in the office of the president of the Yemeni diaspora center in Amman, laughed when I facetiously said, “Well, it would have been better if there was air to breathe.” The woman responded:

“I know how you feel. We’re here trying to figure out when the airport will open so we can return to Taiz, even though we were staying with my father’s family who are Jordanian. I love my husband’s family in Yemen. They live by the natural disposition (*fitra*). We are one. Here,

there's no hospitality, generosity (*karama*), softness (*teeba*). The souls (*al-nufus*) here in Jordan are different. I would rather sit under flying missiles and shards than live amidst spite (*hagd*) and jealousy (*hasad*). My soul is constricted (*mu'tadiqah*) here."

I asked Katiba whether she found Yemenis in Jordan to keep company. She replied, "How can I receive or invite people when I myself am a guest here?"

Other Yemeni interlocutors I met during my fieldwork stressed that they would not request medical service, help, or aid in Jordan or Saudi Arabia for fear of being rebuffed. Meanwhile their position across my field sites was increasingly precarious. In Jordan and Saudi Arabia they shared stories of being sprayed by water hoses and swindled out of housing. Their marginal position as migrants and refugees was determined by the socio-political structures of the nation-state. At the same time, they noted how Yemen was a refuge for others who came there seeking Islamic scholarly learning, immersion in the Arabic language, and community within the coveted institutions of Tarim, Ibb, and Sana'a. This generated a paradox in which Yemen was at once identified with community, hospitality, and tradition while Yemenis were being denigrated and excluded from modern political and social relations. Beyond merely a psychic problem of identification (idealization), many of my interlocutors noted that this paradox affected their ability to traverse borders and inhabit social institutions in neighboring countries. This inability to request aid or to rely on others was prompted by a fear of the fraying of the *umma* (Hauter 2023)—for which being rebuffed would be a confirmation that the Muslim community has in fact dissolved and that tradition is no more.

To combat this fear and elaborate on this paradox, Yousef and other Yemeni artists meditate on the conditions of community, trust, and individual and communal wellbeing. Yousef's latest project, which was commissioned by the International Bank of Yemen, emphasizes the practice of *amana* that is integral to hospitality and reciprocity within Yemeni society. When Yousef was commissioned to highlight a new wire transfer system provided by the bank (one that could rival Moneygram, Western Union, or even Venmo), he explored that tradition of *amana* within Yemeni society. Although the bank thought that drawing on

amana was an unorthodox strategy for marketing a wire transfer service, Yousef stressed the need to draw on the tradition in order to rebuild trust amongst Yemenis in institutions at time of political factionalism and widespread misgovernance.

Yousef's commercial begins with a family sending a package to a bride who is a member of their extended kin. The package travels from person to person, by bus, by cab, and up an unpaved village road. Each courier holds it tightly in order to deliver it as intended. The commercial ends by noting the many ways an *amana* can still be delivered amidst new and shifting technologies. When I asked Yousef about his inspiration for the commercial, he noted the richness of Yemeni ethico-religious practices that maintain the fabric of society despite repetitions of war and instability. He stressed that invoking *amana* was a way to generate faith in the banking sector at a time of political instability, division in governance between the previous government and the Houthis, and inflation. More importantly, Yousef stressed that his own Islamic faith was waning considering everything that has happened. For him, focusing on *amana* highlighted the mundane within Yemeni society that echoes the ethical structures that maintain the social fabric of the community and the persisting refuge in the Islamic tradition.

Yousef proceeded to note the absence of police in the public streets of Yemen, indicating that the mediation and negotiation of safety and security was still relegated to traditional customs of *amana* and family honor and dignity. Neighborhood disputes are often resolved informally or through a local imam or, and at times through the Shari'a courts. Such practices of informal mediation and negotiation, which can be traced back to earlier Muslim societies, are now viewed by other Muslims as evidence of historical stagnation. Here, the image of Yemen and the image of the *umma's* historical socio-political structures are both debased and become interlinked as anti-modern.

The Image of the Yemeni, Mental health, and the *Umma*

While Yemeni artists have found funding and support in the name of preserving their heritage, much of the discourses surrounding their work

are linked to larger questions of their positionality within a larger history and *umma*. In the following, I explore the works of another artist to show how she links these works of culture to the expansion of the soul/self through a meditation on history, heritage, and the preservation of tradition. I then demonstrate the importance of the imagination to psychic well-being by locating these debates within both the Islamic philosophical and medical tradition as well as contemporary psychoanalysis.

The artist I explore in this section is Eman, who I met and interviewed via Zoom in April 2023. Eman's drawings, a curious mix of abstraction and concreteness in their visual style, immediately drew my attention. A Yemeni woman in her twenties, Eman's university began to cancel more and more of her classes after the breakout of the Yemeni conflict in 2013. In response, Eman began accompanying other artists and photographers who were looking to document life in Yemen in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. They soon ran into trouble with the Houthi regime, which attempted to monitor the image of Yemen and the Yemenis during their takeover of various regions outside of the capital. Facing bombing campaigns from the ten regional countries allied against the Houthi regime on one hand, and a Houthi crackdown on Yemeni youth artists and photographers on the other, Eman set aside her photographic pursuits and began to look to pursue her university studies abroad. One of her only options was to apply to a university in Delhi, India, as it only required tuition of \$600 per semester (Saudi Arabia and other neighboring countries required more than \$5000 for foreigners to study). In Delhi, Eman studied German literature and language in order to increase her chances of undertaking further graduate studies abroad.

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit Eman found herself in India with an expired visa, unable to return to Yemen due to closed borders and increasing tensions resultant from the ongoing conflict. Many Yemenis within the country itself were landlocked already from the war. Alone in a hostel, witnessing most other foreign nationals return to their home countries to be with their families, Eman began to draw to pass the time. Despite having no experience in this medium and never having considered art as a career, she explained that she drew in an attempt to keep her looming depression at bay. The drawing soothed her aches. There

she was, a Yemeni woman unable to return home or to figure out her next steps. She stated that her self/soul had become weary (*nafs ta'bana*). When her visa expired, she couchsurfing with friends and schoolmates. She continued to draw. She began to visit exhibitions as pandemic restrictions began to lift but was unable to rent accommodation and never disclosed to her family her illegal status in Delhi. At an exhibition she met some German art students who vowed to help her to raise money through her art in order to secure funds to travel to Germany and pursue graduate studies or art school. At this point, Eman began to draw passionately as a way to see her statelessness, as well as her malaise and longing.

Eman's story, for now, has a happy ending. One of her German friends found her a venue to exhibit her work and she sold all her artwork. She thereafter renewed her visa and applied for a German student visa. She has been pursuing art school in Berlin for the last year.

Although Eman faced hardships ranging from houselessness to being undocumented to constricting psychic pain, her art exemplifies how she saw herself and other resilient Yemeni women, expressing their role in society and their courage. Her art does not portray impoverishment, but rather exudes complexity and plentitude. In our conversation over Zoom, I asked her to discuss two pieces from her collection.

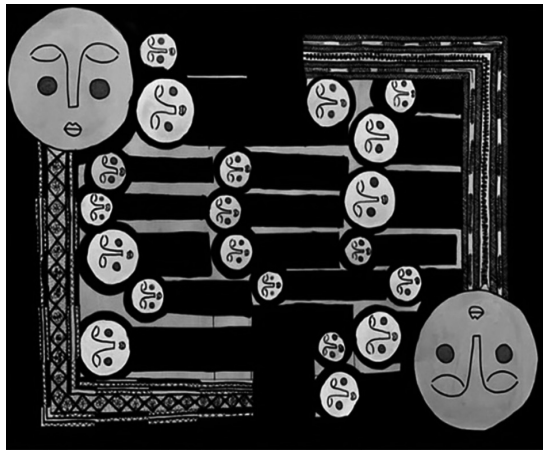


Figure 1. Alifya and I



Figure 2. “The Maze in our Life in a Picture”

The first of these two pieces, *Alifya and I* (Figure 1), is a collaboration between Eman and a Yemeni photographer, Alifya, who grew up in Amsterdam. The two Yemeni women it depicts are dressed in Sabri weaving fabric reminiscent of Eman’s hometown of Taiz, which is now destroyed due to the conflict. The two women yearn for their homeland and heritage. As Eman explained, she and Alifya “both are from Yemen. Alifya was born in the Netherlands and I migrated out of Yemen. The one thing that bonds us together was our longing. From that moment of the conflict, I could not return and she could not visit. She wanted to travel and visit and learn more about Yemen but could not because of the conflict.” She continued to describe their creation:

“The painting begins with the two extenuated women. One woman traverses from my side to Alfiya: she is actually our feelings (*shu‘ur*). I try to illuminate to Alfiya (within my capacity) things about Yemen

and to draw her near to what was. Through my pathways, I attempt to demonstrate the traditions for her. Through this painting I attempt to translate the emotions from my perspective to Alfiya.”

Eman explains that her work sought to elevate the position of the Yemeni woman, her place in Yemeni society, but is also shaped by how the Yemeni woman is viewed from neighboring countries (as inactive and invisible in community, culture, and the sciences).

The second piece was composed of various miniature figures in cubes. From the inscriptions of Himyarite script to the ruling of Sabeen empire by Queen Saba, it dignifies and elevates the role of Yemeni women through the expression of height within the art piece. The Yemeni women sit in squares alongside other symbolic materials that enrich Yemen. Cubes contain the Jambiyya (dagger), the trees of Socotra, superimposing gendered images that invoke histories often elided.

Eman described her inspiration for the painting as recalling images which she suspended:

“I combined everything that reminds me of Yemen and that I am attached to. Images that remain in my memory. The first row contains the maswan fabric, then the Yemeni dagger, then my grandma, then the throne of Bilqis, then the houses of Old Sana‘a. I attempted to bring together these images that I am attached to or suspended by (muta‘alliqā bih) in one image.”

From the remnants of powerful Yemeni women rulers to historic architecture and familial intimacy, Eman etches the richness of Yemen’s heritage onto the canvas and in her imagination. She details the ways these images burst in her memory and massage her aches, illuminating their echo despite her dispossession from her homeland and its absence outside of Yemen.

When I asked Eman if the abaya and the hijab juxtaposed alongside the mosque in the cubed figures entwine the relationship between Islam and Yemeni and membership within the *umma*, she replied in a matter-of-fact manner: “I feel that Yemen is a country in the world that is an

Arab country, a Muslim country, one of the guards of the faith (*hiras al-iman*).”

Eman’s continued to elaborate that her art depicts not only the status of Yemeni women in Yemeni society but also their increasing role in society and the family after the war. It combats their isolation and invisibility and emphasizes resilience within their traditions. There is a therapeutic aspect to her work, which addresses not only her own (individual) depression but also a wider (communal) despair. She explained that in many countries the witnessing of women’s roles after wars is recorded and recalled in history and yet Yemeni women’s contributions are silenced. I asked her whether this was a global phenomenon or particular to Yemen. Eman noted that Yemeni families do not want to portray women as being in need, viewing it as undignified, deprived symbolically by appealing to the imagination. “My family did not care if I drew,” she said; they had asked that she refrain from publicizing her work on social media which would further strengthen the already circulating image of Yemeni impoverishment or lack.

Eman’s family was concerned about reputation but also, more deeply, about having to appeal to the other’s projection of Yemeni impoverishment. The fact that the Yemeni’s elevated position must be sought through art (and that recognition of communal relations was not something that could be taken for granted) only highlighted their common despair about Yemen. Eman and her family shared an understanding that the Yemeni’s place within the *umma* must be demonstrated. For her family, however, this elicited a kind of psychic resistance; in the resistance to articulating demands for recognition, the historical wound becomes visible. More broadly, how it is that an image that fuels the imagination (Yemeni deprivation) can also impact the productive relation to the other? The deprivation that Yemenis already feel is congealed in their concern for the circulation of counter-images (of Yemeni resilience and tradition), which itself speaks to their position within the larger *umma*. Whereas some of the artists I worked with felt it necessary to address this position, their families often worried about furthering the historical wound of this deprivation by doing so. These families share the same historical sense of Yemeni abjection, but they worry that addressing

it would only reinforce and consolidate it. As such, the figure of the abject was not a position prone to transformation or revolution (Kristeva 2009) as Yemenis' yearning for collective *'afiya* is bound to *ummic* aspirations.

The Image of the Yemeni

Drawing on medieval Islamic philosophy and Lacanian psychoanalysis (which itself draws heavily on medieval psychologies of the soul), I now briefly turn to an exploration of how imagination is integral to the impact that the *umma* has on the image of the self. My exploration of the two traditions is in part due to echoes in their theorizations of the psyche, soul, and the importance of the imagination. Most importantly, Lacanian psychoanalysis has benefited from, and is indebted to, developments of theories of the imagination and the psyche, and their impact on the productive function of desire, love, image, and fantasy in medieval Islamic philosophy (Hauter, 2023B; Copjec 2016; Lacan 2011). These overlapping theories prove instructive in exploring how imagination is necessary to the question of belonging (as ethnographically elaborated in the work of Yemeni filmmakers and artists today). This is not merely a question of idealization or fantasy. Rather, this inquiry proceeds at the level of what Ibn Sina considers the intention and estimative faculty. One must be able to anticipate the reciprocity of the other to understand the impact of journeying on with others as well as their projected imaginaries of one's shared—if unequal—place within the *umma*. My interlocutors deploy concepts and theories from within the Islamic traditions of the self/soul and fuse them with modern psychology and prophetic medical regimens (Hauter 2023a). To begin to ask about the proper relationship of the study of the soul to psycho-therapeutic models, as envisioned by my Yemeni Muslim interlocutors, I focus on the importance of the image and imaginary to the self/soul, *umma*, and belonging. In this way, we move closer to envisioning new epistemological approaches toward contemporary Muslim reckonings with abjection and denigration.

As outlined in Ibn Sina's psychology, the imaginary is an internal faculty that processes human knowledge but can also be inverted to

cause delusions. Through the external senses, individuals' perceptions and sensations serve as conduits for human knowledge of material things. These processes involve the activity of the external and inner senses that work through the functions of bodily organs to receive impressions and abstractions of "individual forms present in matter" (Rahman 1952, 19). As these sense impressions coalesce in the common sense (*hiss mushtarak*), producing a unified experience of (for example) warm and edible bread, they are transmitted to the imagination. In the retentive imagination, the bread's brownness, roundness, and fluffiness is separated from its direct sensible materiality through segmentation by way of abstraction. The estimative faculty receives the connotational attributes or intentions such as taste, time, and space directly received by the inner soul, while memory retains them. The retentive imagination stores the segmented images that will be utilized by the compositive imagination, a faculty that "combines and separates giving rise to fantastical images" (McGinnis 115). These segmented images are used by the estimative faculty in animals, but by the cognitive faculty in humans when they are employed by the intellect (McGinnis 115). However, when a soul is weak it is easily distracted from intellection, and its grip on the imagination is released.

When the soul is neither weak nor strong, it puts the compositive imagination to work, inhibiting the imagination from imposing illusionary images on the common sense and overpowering the senses. As Ibn Sina states, "Fear diverts the soul from hunger; appetite hinders it from anger, and anger from fear. The cause in all these cases is the same, namely, the complete absorption of the soul in one thing" (Rahman 1952, 55). However, when the imagination takes hold of the soul, Ibn Sina argues that the former unites with the formative faculty to transmit an 'imaginal form' to the common sense. Therefore, the risk of madness entails the free rein of the imagination projecting images that those at risk of madness experience as real (Davidson 1992). This risk emerged in my fieldwork as a fear of *kasr al-nafs* (breaking of the soul), as when my interlocutors forwent asking for medical care or assistance in Muslim countries abroad due to anticipating being rebuffed (Hauter 2023a).

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the imaginary emerges as an order that is necessary for the structure of the ego. Lacan writes, “the imaginary structuration of the ego forms around the specular image of the body itself, of the image of the other” (1991:95). This means that a subject is necessarily alienated from himself, for he is essentially a split subject. As an infant first utilizes their mother’s body to feel mobile, the subject goes on to build imaginary egos to feel whole. However, these egos are mere decoys or alter-egos. Yet the subject requires “a guide beyond the imaginary, on the level of the symbolic plane... This guide governing the subject is the ego-ideal” (1991:41). The symbolic plane for Lacan is within the realm of the law and sets the ground for the imaginary. Hence the image of the individual is impacted by the work of the imagination, desire, and expansion from within the symbolic. It is therefore not surprising that my interlocutors turn to works of art, echoing *ummatic* aspirations, to respond to the impoverished image of the Yemeni, as the abject is corrosive to social relations and to dignity. The abject as conceived by Kristeva (2024) as transformative in its point to the fragility of the law and the breakdown between self and other is inadequate, as it imagines religion as a mere question of belief, like many psychoanalysts, rather than a tradition with symbolic value (Hauter 2023b). More importantly, Kristeva values humanism and reflection, which she affords the Judeo-Christian traditions and withholds from Islam. Her text is replete with Islamophobic rhetoric in which she considers Islam as devoid of theo-ology and critical thinking as it possessed what she considers a juridical pact between creator and believer (88). Not only does Kristeva dismiss Islam as containing “terrifying and terroristic undercurrents” which leads to an impossible encounter, she fails to consider how in the Islamic tradition the law becomes a ground for the honing and cultivation of the imagination (Kristeva 2009: 88). The developments in Ibn Sina and al-Ghazali’s work on the soul/psyche illustrate how the imagination and its potentiality for practices of reflection, abstraction, meditation, and contemplation produced the necessary conditions for reworking the psyche, desire, and phantasmic potentialities.

For Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, alternately, the relationship between imagination and desire is anchored through the heart and

the law as such. Al-Ghazali notes that as man takes in images, the effect of the image “is transmitted to the heart, so that there is represented in it the real nature of things that have entered into sensation and imagination” (2010, 56-57). Moreover, the world has “four degrees of existence:” the world as it is preserved in the tablet by God; the real (*haqiqa*) existence as it presents itself to man; its existence within the imagination of man as he takes in the images; and the imagination’s existence within the intellectual order (2010, 57-58). Some of the knowledge within the order is immaterial and some is corporeal. Therefore, there is a bridge (*sila*) between revelatory knowledge within the preserved tablet and corporeal knowledge that is transposed onto the imagination and intellect. Within this liminal space there is a veil and its disclosure is dependent upon the aspirant’s purity of heart and closeness to the divine. The closer one is to the divine, the closer one is to the real (*haqiqa*) and knowledge as it is revealed. As one engages in constant remembrance of God, seeks knowledge of God, and purifies the heart, knowledge will come to him from one of the doors of revelation.

These persistent discussions in Islamic philosophy, medicine, and mystical traditions regarding the imagination focus on its role in desire, the heart, and entwinement with the law. Both Eman and Yousef provide us with works of art that reflect a work of culture attempting to transform painful memories by strengthening the fortitude of the soul through the imagination amidst the circulating abject image of the Yemeni reified by the corrosive socio-political material reality that implicates a largely indifferent *umma*. As we trace with Eman, her immobility during the Covid-19 Pandemic in Delhi took a toll on her *nafs* (self/soul) as she felt bombarded and suspended by images of the richness of her culture, Islamic tradition, and identity that combat the reality of being rejected and dispossessed geopolitically and spiritually. She felt revived when she captured these suspended images in a medium that paved the way for her to imagine possibilities for desire beyond what her current political status afforded her. Likewise, the allegories, parables, and immersion in the richness of Yemen’s philosophical and spiritual traditions rectify the abject image of the Yemeni globally and within the *umma*. This focus

on the imagination to revive the soul and its desire and resist stasis echoes explorations within Islamic philosophy and ethical tradition on the power of the imagination and the role of the law. Most importantly, the imagination in these theories demonstrates its necessity in the individual's physical and spiritual health.

Conclusion

When I mentioned to both Yousef and Eman my intentions to write about their work, they were genuinely delighted. Although I expressed my appreciation of their talent and relayed my own beginning to think through the impact of their work, they exuded deep humility in their attempts to hone their crafts. My insistence on recognizing the fruitfulness of their work is necessitated by the urgency to highlight Yemeni voices often unregistered and unheard, which is itself part of the symptom as these voices are often muted, elided, or historical completely overlooked. In turn, a body of the *umma*, who historically entered it through a simple invitation by the Prophet, with a rich sustaining culture lacks circulation and inclusion.

The protagonist in Yousef's short film the Long Run, a rare medium in Yemen, encircles the small neighborhood, disciplined in the main pillars of Islam and the cultivation of ethical virtues through communal practice and personal arbitration by fellow Yemenis. Ahmed is guided on the importance of prayer by a neighbor and the etiquette of tending to the elderly in exchange for life altering lessons on fortifying the soul and resisting oppressions by a local wiseman. Yousef's scenes paint the ways Islamic concepts are taught, shared, and enshrined in Yemeni lives and architecture and sustain individual and communal *'afiya* through oral traditions. Eman's paintings emboss Yemeni fabrics, witness the history of powerful women, and create pathways for those like her longing for memory work to recognize its history. The artwork comes to envelop us within its medium through symbols and allegories to reignite the imagination serving as a witness to resistance of stasis and foreclosure with regards to Yemen, Yemenis, their desire and its potentiality, and the larger *umma* it envisions for its *'afiya*.

Yousef's films are windows into the philosophical richness of everyday ethical engagements in Yemen that do not correspond to western socio-political normative frameworks and the reverberating oral history shared amongst its people that are meant to serve Yemenis themselves while resisting the abject Yemen figure projected by others as deprived of culture and capacity for willful engagements. Eman's art on the other hand began as works of culture attempting to sublimate the affective despair she and others felt that then bears witness to the echoes of longing that is deeply felt by Yemeni youth. Her generation faces similar conditions of malaise given the possibility of the obliteration of culture, memory, and their material reality and the impossibility of access to and archive of the tradition.

These works of art by Yousef and Eman come to then stand as archives and elaboration of a yearning and demand for recognition, community, and inclusivity to an *umma*, both serving as a medium for individual capacity to inhabit a dignified image and its capacious resistance. These works of art as a work of culture take seriously the viability and reality of the *umma* itself and conditions of its constitution. They now attempt to circulate within by circulating throughout the *umma*.

This production of art at a time of culture desolation demonstrates the importance of the reparative work of the imagination and the importance of psychic wellbeing in securing both individual and *ummatic* 'afiyah. As medieval Islamic philosophers demonstrate the role of imagination on the fortitude of the soul and illustrates the importance of the law as serving as a ground for the individual, these works of art also conduct considerable work of culture for the artists, Yemenis, and its audience.

Therefore, alongside securing the socio-economic and political conditions of the Muslim community across borders, difficult psychic work is necessary to articulating larger political *ummatic* aspirations. Solidarity amongst Muslims is predicated on being able to anticipate exchange, reciprocation, and hospitality that links individuals to a larger *umma* (Hauter 2023a). The hadith that often circulates invoking the *umma* as one body, whereby a defective body part ails the entire body, is predicated on a particular understanding of the individual soul/psyche and

selfhood that is not atomistic or autonomous from others, nature, and other beings. Membership within the *umma* requires that one be able to locate themselves, envisioned within the Muslim body, but also be locatable by others.

Repair at the level of the imagination requires taking seriously psycho-therapeutical models that attend to the form and structure of the self/soul conceived and renewed by Islamic scholarship. Therefore, this psychic work requires a reformulation of epistemologies in medical-psychological sciences, but also investment in community centers and artistic endeavors that cultivate material projects articulating such concepts and practices. An *ummatic* orientation will shift scholarship on selfhood (with an emphasis on mental health) to include Islamic writings on the psychology of the soul. What may be borrowed and melded into current theories, practices, and psychotherapeutic models? What type of institutional investments can put into practice these theoretical innovations? The role of work of art and work of culture in restoring individual and communal *'afiya* illustrates both the reparative power of the imagination in reviving the *nafs* (soul/self/psyche) and the necessary inclusion of theories on the imagination, the law, and its importance for desire itself by Ibn Sina and al-Ghazali to read contemporary abjection and *ummatic* aspirations.

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