'Art is my language': Afghan cultural production challenging Islamophobic stereotypes

Bilquis Ghani and Lucy Fiske

University of Technology Sydney, Australia

Abstract

Afghans and Afghanistan have, since September 11, risen to prominence in Western popular imagination as a land of tradition, tribalism and violence. Afghan women are assumed to be silent, submissive, and terrorised by Afghan men, who are seen as violent patriarchs driven by an uncompromising mediaeval religion. These Islamophobic tropes also inform perceptions of Afghans seeking asylum. In transit, identities are further reduced; asylum seekers lose even a national identity and become a Muslim threat – criminals, terrorists or invaders. These narrative frames permeate political discourse, media, and reports of non-governmental organisations (seeking donor funds to 'save' Afghan women). Drawing on fieldwork in Afghanistan and Indonesia, this article looks at how Afghans in Kabul and Indonesia are using art and other forms of cultural production to challenge over-simplified hegemonic narratives in the West, to open spaces for dialogue and expression within their own communities, and to offer a more nuanced account of their own identities.

Keywords

Afghanistan, art, asylum seeker, cultural production, Indonesia, Islamophobia, Kabul, orientalism, refugee

In this article we focus on Islamophobia as a particularly salient manifestation of xenophobia. Islamophobic discourses have been used to justify both military intervention in

Corresponding author:
Bilquis Ghani, University of Technology Sydney, Sydney, Australia.
Email: Bilquis.Ghani@uts.edu.au

Muslim-majority countries including Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, and border closures to repel the refugees caused by those interventions. We first look at Islamophobia broadly and the dominant tropes it relies on, and then examine the ways in which Afghan artists in Kabul and Indonesia are using art as a form of visual communication to disrupt Islamophobic narratives, re-present themselves, and generate new social realities and social relations. In doing so, we are caught in the trap of using sociological methods to understand a humanistic practice. As Pierre Bourdieu (cited in Zolberg, 1990: 1) stated 'Sociology and art make an odd couple', as the medium of art encompasses magic, mystery and ways of being that defy words, while the central task of sociology is to demystify, theorise and explain. With awareness of the limitations of our method, we argue that art holds a power to provoke dissensus, a disruption to established ways of knowing, in the pre-cognitive moment when a piece is viewed and before the viewer has begun the cognitive process of decoding. It is in this moment that Islamophobic stereotypes can be unsettled. As Kabul-based artist Shamsia Hassani explains, the viewer's 'soul listens without their body finding out' (interview, 10 Jan. 2018).

Islamophobia

Academic interest in Islamophobia has risen sharply in recent decades, linked to public, political and academic concern with Islam and Muslims, both those among 'us' in the West and those still living in the 'Islamic world'. These concerns around Islam and Muslims have been particularly salient post-9/11 and have been deployed as justification for a range of policies and practices in foreign and domestic policy in the US, Europe and Australia, including the 'War on Terror' abroad and immigration restrictions at home. While the terrorist acts committed in 2001 undoubtedly did much to convince politicians and citizens alike of the threat that Muslims presented, the Muslims-as-inherent-threat discourse was able to attain the status of common sense so rapidly and completely because it drew upon a long legacy of Orientalist, colonial 'knowledge' about the 'Islamic world'.

Scholars have traced the continuity of beliefs about Muslims and Islam from at least colonial times through to the present day (Kumar, 2010; Meer, 2014; Zebiri, 2008). Colonial-era Orientalist beliefs present Western civilisation, distinguished by rationality, law, science, progress and freedom, as both fundamentally different from and superior to the 'static, barbaric and despotic' 'Islamic world' (Kumar, 2010: 258). While representations of Islam and Muslims as irrationally violent have proliferated in the last two decades, the linking of Islam and violence pre-dates the War on Terror with Samuel Huntington arguing in his 1996 tome, *The Clash of Civilisations*, that Muslims have a 'propensity towards violent conflict' (cited in Meer, 2014: 503), or Edward Said in 1980 identifying the trend to represent Muslims as 'an undifferentiated mob of scimitar-waving oil suppliers' (cited in Ahmed and Matthes, 2017: 222). The belief that Islam is inherently violent and is 'spread by the sword' goes back to at least the eighth century with 'Muslim incursions into Southern Europe' seen as a threat to Christendom (Zebiri, 2008: 10). This is a theme that has been repeated across centuries such that it has now become 'commonsense and naturalized' (Kumar, 2010: 267) into Western 'knowledge' of Islam,

so that each repetition of Islam-violent is unquestioningly absorbed into a pre-existing body of 'truth'. Such 'truths' are relied upon to justify the necessity, under the rhetoric of 'national security', to turn back asylum seeker boats and imprison refugees in offshore detention centres on Manus Island and Nauru. Muslims come to embody the ever-present threat of impending violence, and so represent a profound threat to 'us' and 'our way of life'.

As with so many struggles of identity and superiority, women's bodies are invested with symbolic importance and become the grounds upon which battles are fought. The oppression of women is presented as a core tenet of Islam; the perception is that Islam is a fundamentally sexist religion, that Muslim women are oppressed victims and that their oppression is immediately visible through their forced veiling – that veiling might be a decision made by a woman is rejected as this would acknowledge Muslim women's agency and disrupt the oppressed victim narrative (Ahmed and Matthes, 2017: 233; Kumar, 2010: 262). The veil has, at times, been seen as a symbol of 'mystique, exoticism and eroticism' (Donnell cited in Ahmed and Matthes, 2017: 233), particularly when used to support either Orientalist fantasies of the East (and its conquering by colonial explorers), or representations of Muslim men's 'lustfulness' and insatiable desires (Zebiri, 2008: 9). These highly sensual and sexualised fantasies of the veil coexisted alongside the veil as symbol of women's oppression and served as grounds for colonial intervention and occupation. Lord Cromer, who upon arriving in Egypt in 1882, reported back that 'Islam as a social system has been a complete failure . . . the degradation of women in the East is a canker . . .' (cited in Kumar, 2010: 262). It is this image of Muslim women as degraded and oppressed that has been dominant in the post-9/11 era, with the liberation of Afghan women prominent in the US' and allies' justification of their invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, and the protection of 'our' women as a reason to restrict Muslim presence in the West, including when fleeing from wars in which the West is engaged.

Islamophobia has proven discursively powerful; invoking almost spectral horrors and fears. Much of this power comes from the imprecision with which 'the Orient' was once known; Edward Said (1979: 49) gives many examples of dispatches from the Orient spanning from Lord Cromer in the 19th century to Kissinger in the mid-20th century, that generalise from specificity or anecdote, and are received in the Occident as expert truth: 'No merely asserted generality is denied the dignity of truth.' Orientalism is marked, according to Said (1979: 50), by 'its confusing amalgam of imperial vagueness and precise detail'.

This 'imperial vagueness and precise detail' has continued into contemporary Islamophobia, enabling 'Islam', the 'Islamic world' and 'Muslims' to remain spectrally vague, yet the violence of 9/11 and the impact of that violence on 'us' is presented in precise and repeated detail. One of the effects of this imprecision is that 'Islam', 'Muslims', 'Afghans', 'refugees' and 'terrorists' become powerful yet poorly delineated categories and each can easily slide into another. Each label is routinely and uncritically conflated, so Muslim and terrorist become one and the same, as do Muslim and refugee, refugee and terrorist, Afghan and refugee. This imprecision makes the fear and threat highly mobile and enables politicians and other public commentators to draw upon a genealogy of inherited and generalised Islamophobic 'knowledge' and deploy it against

refugees, Muslims, Afghans or any population resembling the imperial-era Oriental. Muslim migration is viewed in the West 'as a Trojan horse' that would destroy Western societies from within, erasing all rights and freedoms gained in the last 200 years (Aslan, 2009: 7–8). It is little surprise then, that Muslim lives lost in the 'Islamic world' are rendered 'non-grievable' (Butler, 2004), while 'The Arab/Muslim asylum seeker arriv[ing] at the door-step of the West [is] always already a transgressor of national and class borders and a socially and culturally ungovernable body hovering between states of "cockroachness" and "wolfishness"' (Hage, 2017: 45).

Artists disrupting the narrative

Kabul is known in the West primarily as a site of war and violence, and while Omaid Sharifi, co-founder of ArtLords,[1] an art collective, hesitated to describe Kabul's art scene as 'vibrant', there is a rich culture of artistic production in Kabul, ranging from street art to film, music, poetry, painting, performance and revival of traditional art practices. Similarly, a community of Afghan refugees living in transit in Indonesia are actively engaged in sketching, painting, photography, dance and film-making. This article draws on fieldwork conducted with artists in Indonesia and Kabul to explore the ways in which Afghan artists are challenging both conservative forces within their communities and Islamophobic forces acting upon them from outside. While the work of Kabul-based artists interviewed is aimed primarily at fellow Afghans, most artists were keenly aware of a global audience and wanted their work to challenge Western stereotypes of Afghans and Afghanistan. The Indonesia-based artists aim primarily at a Western audience, seeking to unsettle Islamophobic narratives underpinning policies and politics that keeps them outside of refuge.

Testimony, argues Said (1984), challenges the ideological consensus, makes Islamic lives legible and bridges the distance that geopolitics forces between us. It is through self-narration that the ungrievable can become grievable. Omaid, whose work with ArtLords has led him to travel widely, is determined to create opportunities for Afghans to represent themselves to the world and sees art as an important medium through which human connections can be made.

> I think we are the most misrepresented people in the whole world. The world really does not know about us. We are always misjudged, looked at very differently. I think there is so much room for writing about us, knowing us, and that also applies to us. The responsibility is on us to connect with the world and the people who we really are. (interview, 2 Feb. 2018)

This is a challenge that many artists in Kabul are rising to. For Roozi, a poet, her work is an act of self-narration and self-representation to an outside world, and a 'way to break that order' of the global media that looks for 'the specific story that you know, that "oh we are looking for this success story we are looking for a victimised story"' (interview, 20 Jan. 2018). However difficult this might be, she sees it as a necessity for a more 'authentic' relationship based on 'talking about ourselves instead of someone else talking about us . . . make it real you know, not giving what they want to hear but giving who we are.'

Afghan artists both in Kabul and Indonesia are acutely aware of how Afghans are represented by Western media and politicians, and seek to challenge the dehumanising and disparaging perceptions of Afghans as 'backward', poor and oppressive to women.

> People who have never come to Afghanistan, and have seen only TV . . . they have seen these things and they have created an Afghanistan in their minds. They see two women with burqas and they say 'that's all Afghan women,' they see a couple of tents and say 'these must be Afghan homes' . . . Bits of information in everyone's minds exist and they don't think that in a situation, in this environment, it is possible that someone might be an artist, and they might be a woman. They see on TV all the negative things are highlighted, that's why in their minds they only have those negative things.. . . I want to show people a new Afghanistan, to show people something that until now they didn't know about. (Shamsia, interview, 10 Jan. 2018)

Shamsia's studio and gallery are the walls of Kabul upon which she paints large murals of women in bright colours, holding a guitar, a keyboard or another musical instrument.[2] Her graffiti art has caused her to become somewhat of a celebrity both in Afghanistan and abroad, with outlets such as the *LA Times*, the *Guardian* and *Kabul Times* running stories on her and her work (Ahmadi, 2019; Nikoubazl, 2014; Vankin, 2016). Shamsia believes resolutely in the power of art to 'affect people', 'influence people' and 'make them question.' This is why she paints graffiti art outside:

> If it was in an exhibition, then maybe someone will go to the exhibition and see it, but when it is in the street, everyone sees the piece.. . . When my work has an idea in it, it must impact on people's zen [thinking], it must change people's zen.. . . What's the point of hanging a picture on a wall inside? I will work on the walls outside. At that time there were many war-torn walls, old walls, broken walls . . . (interview, 10 Jan. 2018)

Shamsia sees that artists play a crucial role in society and in public debates. She hopes that her work beautifies a city marked by decades of war, but – beyond the aesthetic gift to passers-by – she hopes that her work prompts people to think and to question. While her art is partly directed at people living in Kabul – she hopes her work gives expression to the thoughts and feelings of her fellow Afghans, brings them joy, and that her presence on the street as a woman artist with spray can in hand will subtly shift gendered expectations – she is also acutely aware of her global audience. Shamsia travels to Europe and the US whenever she can, and in between times is an active social media user, posting both her sketches and her murals online for 'all of humanity'.

> One of the reasons why I travel is that I want to show people a new Afghanistan, to show people something that until now they didn't know about. I don't want to come and say again there is war, politics has problems, like this and like that. Everybody knows these things from the news, and I always tell people that of course you know about all the bad things of Afghanistan, then I have come to tell you the good things. (interview, 10 Jan. 2018)

Shamsia, who lived as a refugee in Iran for the first 16 years of her life, knows that both her work and her self disrupt established tropes about Afghanistan, Afghans and Afghan women, at home and abroad. Shamsia's work sits at a complex intersection of public

debate, seeking to challenge both conservative patriarchal beliefs within Afghanistan and Islamophobic tropes outside. Noorjahan, who coordinates Free Women Writers, an online platform supporting and disseminating Afghan women's writing, articulates the tension as being caught 'between this hard place and a rock. You either confront sexism in your Muslim community and be used by Islamophobic right-wing crazies or you don't confront it and be oppressed by your Muslim brothers. And those are not choices' (interview, 18 Dec. 2017). For both women, art provides a more nuanced form of expression, one less likely to fall into traps embedded within two powerful and established discourses (Afghan conservative nationalism and Western Islamophobia) and one which may provide a way out of this conundrum through its generative, rather than merely reflective potential (Clammer, 2014: 5).

Power of art

Communication and self-expression

Much of the early sociological work on art avoids engaging with art's communicative power, focusing instead on the institutions, cultures and patterns of consumption which form around art as a social product, leaving the 'soft' theory of aesthetics and critique to cultural studies and art theorists (Eyerman and Ring, 1998). Only recently has sociological attention sought to rescue art from 'the production doghouse' (Molotch cited in de la Fuente, 2007: 419) and begun to interrogate the sociological processes at work that 'give that object (or situation) an air of "transcendence"' (de la Fuente, 2007: 419). This transcendence lies in the fact that its presence testifies to 'a kind of unwritten agreement' that exists between artist and viewer, and that while the two may never meet, 'there must be a certain fund of experience common to both' (Newton, 1961: 71). The task of the artist is to represent or give form to an idea, experience or feeling, while the task of the viewer is '*reading* a language with which [s]he is not yet familiar with the aid of a context with which [s]he is familiar' (Newton, 1961: 72, emphasis in the original). Both artist and viewer are engaged in a shared project of meaning making. To do so, they draw on a common 'fund of experience' and so come in to a mediated relationship with each other. Art, in this way, is able to bridge the distance that Islamophobia cleaves. The viewer may never have visited Afghanistan or met a Muslim, but the emotional response to Shamsia's or Omaid's work testifies to a shared fund of emotional experience, of knowing love, fear, agony or joy.

Many of the artists in this study saw their art-work as a mode of communication, a visual, poetic or musical way to express and communicate ideas, feelings and identities that are difficult to communicate through more conventional means. Maxine Greene (2013: 251) expresses the importance of finding one's own outlets for expression as 'one of the crucial ways in which people might connect with the world'. For many Kabul-based artists giving expression to the traumas and grief of war, hope and fear for the future, the struggles over national identity currently under way within Afghanistan, or simply communicating across literacy divides, are prominent themes. Whereas Afghan refugee artists in Indonesia focus more on changing the narratives around asylum seekers as threatening, or irregular migration as a national security issue. Humanising refugees,

telling their own stories, and introducing themselves as legible, knowable, non-threatening individuals and families are key themes.

Much of the work of Kabul-based artists is aimed at fellow Afghans, and the artists see that art enables them to give expression to deep emotions, press against social norms, transcend political, gender, ethnic or other differences or, build trust and togetherness. For some it is the different norms and conventions that art operates within that enables expression and communication that might otherwise be considered transgressive. Noorjahan sees that poetry opens a space for questioning and critique that 'would cause so much backlash . . . if it was written out as prose . . . Poetry gives you the cloak of invisibility, it allows you to say things that you wouldn't say otherwise' (interview 18 Dec. 2017). Shahnaz is both a poet and a visual artist, and is strategic in her use of different art forms as communication for different audiences. She explained that 'many people in Afghanistan would not be able to read what I am writing. That's why by using visual images, one can give a message very easily', and that she also has a blog that 'attracts global attention because outside of Afghanistan, most people know English and easily know what my intention of a poetry or piece I write is about, that's why most of my writing is English' (interview 26 Dec. 2017). Whereas Hafsa, a visual artist, focused more on the medium itself as being a different language, 'the language of sight', and a language through which she can 'show my feeling, my mind, something that is on my mind but I can't tell the people' (interview 24 Jan. 2018). In each of these examples, whether explicitly or implicitly, the artist is aware of an audience and their art is produced to be viewed, heard or read by another. In each, there is a desire for recognition from another, whether a fellow Afghan or spectators in the West.

The Afghan refugees living in Indonesia have had their journeys towards safety interrupted, first by Australia's 'Stop the Boats' policies and, more recently, also by the Trump administration's Muslim ban and halving of the US refugee program (Lynch, 2017). Khadim Dai was aiming for Australia when his journey was halted in Indonesia. He described his frustration at hearing the Islamophobic public debates around border protection and refugees in Australia, and the population-level representations by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR):

> I couldn't find myself in the narratives that others were producing. I was following all the news reports from Australia, from the UNHCR and I was asking 'Where am I in this story? Where are we in this story? Where is us?' And I was frustrated. This is why I believe it is so important that we have to tell our own stories. (interview June 2018)

Khadim decided to use his mobile phone to make short films about his and other refugees' lives. He posted his films online, accompanied by his voiced narration and clearly directed at alleviating Western audiences' fears. In one film, titled 'The Heart of Our Community', Khadim directly addresses Western concerns about women wearing the veil, and acknowledges the 'more conservative dress' and 'traditional family dynamics', before going on to show women teaching, playing football, running, laughing and dancing (Dai, 2017). In another, he focuses on his young male friends, showing them in a range of mundane and non-threatening activities; cooking, playing music, and talking about their families. Through his films, Khadim hopes to connect directly with people living in the countries to which he and his community seek entry.

Khadim has since been resettled to the US, but other members of the community have continued to use photography and short films, disseminating them through social media. This community's success in building human-to-human relationships notwithstanding, refugees are commonly the object of global and national politics, but are rarely able to participate in debates about who they are and what ought to happen to them. Islamophobic political discourse around asylum seeking renders Afghan (and other Muslim-majority) refugees doubly silenced – by their non-citizen legal status and their popular representation as only quasi-human. Their confirmed status as outsiders makes speaking for themselves and telling their own stories a difficult task indeed. As Hannah Arendt (1976: 296) wrote, a refugee's 'freedom of opinion is a fool's freedom, for nothing they think matters anyhow'. It was the difficulty, not of 'speaking', but of being heard that prompted Farahnaz to begin painting. 'When no-one listens to you', Farahnaz explains, 'you are forced to change your language. Art is my language. It gave me a voice that I was denied. Though it is silent, I feel it is very powerful' (cited in Morani, 2017: 62). Farahnaz hopes that through her art she can present herself and other refugees in a way that sidesteps the barriers erected by national borders and Islamophobia to connect through shared emotion and aesthetics.

Kabir Mokamel, also co-founder of ArtLords, describes this capacity of art as 'a soft power':

> It's non-intrusive. And especially with visual art. Visual art does not talk to you. You feel it. It's something to do with your senses. A politician can sit there and talk to you for hours, and you won't remember much of it the next day. (interview 3 Jan. 2018)

Shamsia was similarly aware of the power of art to build an emotional connection between people. She explained that art 'makes a person feel things, a feeling that reflects the feeling of the artist when doing the work, and when they feel it they can imagine the situation and feel for it'. For both Shamsia and Kabir, and most of the other artists interviewed, art gave them greater capacity for expression and emotional connection with other human beings across divides that the world of politics puts between us. Through their art they 'stage the scene and provide the narrative means by which "the human" in its grievability is established' (Butler, 2004: 38).

Chicago-based artist, Richard Florsheim (1955: 55) identifies this 'intense need to communicate' as fundamental to the human condition, as necessary for survival as water, food or shelter, as it is through communication that humans interpret the world, make meaning and give form to intuition, emotion and sensory experience.

> Art is the language for that area of emotional experience which cannot be communicated or satisfied in any other way.. . . In every case where a work of art has enduring value it has something for which we cannot use words, a mysterious permanence of plastic meaning. This is the very quality of the object, the thing inherent in it. A Malraux can write eloquently, hundreds of learned pages, yet he cannot say it. Only the work of art can communicate it, in its own way. (Florsheim, 1955: 55)

This emphasis on how art can make one feel, was repeated by artists in several different mediums – whether poetry, graffiti, traditional folk arts or music. Nasrin, a musician with

the Afghanistan National Institute of Music, saw that music held a key to bring Afghans together, to heal the wounds of war and division, and also to cut through the negative stereotypes about Afghans in the West. She likened music to medicine, saying that 'our society needs to hear music especially and feel each nafz that is played, each beat that is played', while imploring non-Afghans to listen to her music and then 'just once, empathise. Empathise that "Afghanistan, what is it? Women of Afghanistan, what does it mean? Men of Afghanistan, what does it mean?"' (interview 8 Feb. 2018). It is precisely this sentimental experience that Rorty (1999: 73) believed could 'sufficiently acquaint people of different kinds with one another so that they are less tempted to think of those different from themselves as only quasi-human'.

As a medium of communication and self-expression, art provides space for expression and connection that is difficult to achieve through more conventional means. As Bourdieu identified, however, the language of sociology is ill-equipped to articulate the ways in which art works upon both artist and viewer. Sociological methods fail to capture an inarticulable key element of creative works that connect strangers who, despite distance, difference and even antagonism, find lines of sight and recognize one another. Art works as 'a source of magic, myth and alternative visions of the world' (Clammer, 2014: 8). Berger et al. (1972: 21) similarly emphasises the irreducible affective work of art, saying 'the spiritual value of an object, as distinct from a message or an example, can only be explained in terms of magic or religion'. It is to this magical power of art that we now turn.

Magic and enchantment

John Berger (1972) opens the seminal *Ways of Seeing* with the claim that 'Seeing comes before words'; we see images before we form words to describe or interpret them. It is in the pre-cognitive, emotional power of art; the space between feeling and words, that art's magic lies. And it is this moment that Afghan artists seek to create. Berger et al. (1972: 8) go on to explain that through the act of looking, 'what we see is brought within our reach – though not necessarily within arm's reach' and becomes slightly more legible, knowable, familiar. Art-objects produced in Indonesia or Kabul are delivered to the world through exhibitions, social media, news pages, blogs and artists' own websites. While the artist may at times travel with his/her work, more commonly the art-work, or an image of it, travels unaccompanied to encounter the viewer. The art-work 'lends its meaning to their meaning.. . . In its travels, its meaning is diversified' (Berger et al., 1972: 20). The art-object has a life that may originate with its creator, and which may attest to something of its creator, but which exists beyond and independently from its creator.

Art anthropologist Alfred Gell (1998) argues that art cannot be understood through any method that focuses analytic attention on artists, viewers, dealers and markets, while ignoring the art-object itself. It is the art-object, argues Gell, that provokes a response in the viewer, and the art-object needs to be approached as having agency itself. This requires a new understanding of agency, which Gell (1998: 16) defines as being 'attributable to those persons (and things . . .) who/which are seen as initiating causal

consequences'. In this conception, art-objects become 'social agents' which are 'extensions (indexes) of their maker's or their user's agency' (Layton, 2003: 451).

In this way, art can be thought of as transcending the categorization of just communication or even self-expression. Rather its role transcends the artist's intent and becomes imbued with the viewer's response. Thus, the connection between the artwork and observer is a relational hermeneutic. The art elicits a reaction from the observer who projects a meaning, originating from a pre-cognitive affect, onto the art-object. This reciprocal interaction occurs in the physical absence of the artist. In the pre-cognitive moment, the art has 'the capacity to "abduct" the agency of the viewer' (de la Fuente, 2010: 5). Jagodzinski (2014: 70) refers to the moment before cognition as 'the 0.3 seconds of presence that are not registered consciously. It is here that the asignification and asemiotic processes become political, ethical, and pedagogical questions.' It is only after the viewer's cognitive processes begin, after the pre-cognitive moment, that the artist may be brought back in to the relationship as the viewer begins to wonder 'Who made this?', 'What are they saying?', 'Who are they?' The art-object has acted to introduce viewer and artist, and it is only after the shared emotional connection has been made that the artist's identity as Afghan, Muslim or refugee comes to the fore.

There is something about art that reduces distance between people. It transcends temporal divides too, proving timeless in its ability to evoke a response. People across the globe from different realities know what it is to be moved by a piece of art, whether it be musical, visual or poetic. To feel is universal and art's ability to exploit this human attribute is its power. The moment's affective force precedes the moment of rationality. We have all been touched by art, and when it comes from distant people in distant places, its valence holds the weight of representation. Weaving through the discourse of Islamophobia, art creates ruptures through politics, economics, and established 'common sense'. As Kabir explains:

> when you see a picture, the picture stays with you. And art is like that. Music is like that. It's everything to do with your senses.. . . It touches your subconscious, changes you from the subconscious. Because what it does, it introduces beauty. It's about the refinement of your soul.

The lasting effect of art reflects the continuing and relational experience between art-object and viewer. This experience includes an initial pre-cognitive experience before the viewer's rational mind begins to rationalise, explain, and form a value position. It is this first and ephemeral response that resists reduction to words and language.

Islamophobia creates an omnipotent, spectral fear which cannot be adequately addressed by logic alone. Statistics, law or reasoned argument draw upon a well that Orientalist and Islamophobic tropes have declared belongs exclusively to the West. These cognitive tools of argument do not reach deeply enough to touch the centuries-long roots of Islamophobia nor its contemporary manifestation in asylum seeker discourse, but emotional connection, or Rorty's sentimental recognition, may unsettle it. Soft power is the power to elicit a response through intangible and pre-conscious means without engaging in words and the 'knowledge' that scaffolds them. Art is a language which precedes words. Shamsia calls it the 'friendly protest', adding, 'That's why in my

opinion art is one of the best ways of protest since always you change the audience and the audience heeds it, their soul listens without their body finding out. That's why it has an effect on everyone.'

To xenophobic anti-Muslim debates, art offers its own rebuke, not in words but in the intangible connections it can forge. Alexander (cited in de la Fuente, 2010: 7) calls this process 'aesthetic immersion', that 'when objects are aesthetically engrossing, we both draw these objects into ourselves (subjectification) and lose ourselves in these objects (materialisation)'. Nabila talks about the relational attribute of art-object and viewer, 'when they [the viewer] form a relationship with an art-work, they enter a world they had not thought of before, they had not experienced before'. The viewer, through feeling, draws the art-object into themselves and at the same time the art-object draws the viewer into the world and subjectivity of the artist. The art-object enters the viewer's thought before it is formed, bypassing established Islamophobic beliefs and initiating a new relationship. Art, according to Gell, 'is defined by the distinctive role it plays in advancing social relationships constructed through agency' (Layton, 2003: 448). In this way, art needs to be understood as doing much more than representation or reflection, and in fact as generative of social relations and social configurations. 'The image does work: it is not something floating above society, but the very means through which society perceives, represents and thus constitutes itself' (Clammer, 2014: 9). Art creates a sentimental relationship that previously did not exist, it reconfigures 'the emotional structures of society' and, 'is the primary means to prepare for the emergence of another "mode of being"' (Clammer, 2014: 13, 15). Art may represent that which already exists, but it also creates that which might be. An emotional openness to the shared humanity of Muslim and non-Muslim, to an ontological equality and connection across difference is a necessary first step in unsettling Islamophobic beliefs. Or, as Shamsia simply states, 'I come from the same blue planet.'

From emotion to thought

Gell (1998: 6) advocates for a conception of art that is more than symbol and aesthetics. He writes: 'In place of symbolic communication, I place all the emphasis on agency, intention, causation, result, and transformation. I view art as a system of action, intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it.' If art is to have any power – communicative, transformative or magical – it requires not only the creativity and agency of the artist, but also a receptive, critical and active viewer. The artist and art-work may be able to disrupt the ordinary or the expected, but the potentially transformative moment of dissensus cannot be realised without an 'emancipated spectator' (Rancière, 2009).

Papastergiadis (2014: 8) explains that for Rancière, art is 'a means of breaking down pre-existing habits of association and categories of classification', adding that, 'Art is part of a system of interpreting the world and it contributes to understanding by offering alternate ways of seeing and speaking.' While the artist may offer an alternative configuration, the viewer must also be willing to draw from that 'shared fund', and participate in rethinking established orders.

> The experience of art and literature is not one of organising movements or even building 'communities of sense', but rather lays the foundation for such organising and building by first throwing the individual radically back upon him- or herself. But this is to say that art and literature do not *build* communities, but rather work primarily by *taking them apart*. (Lampert, 2017: 191, author's emphasis).

In *The Emancipated Spectator* (2009: 49), Rancière articulates this potential to challenge the common sense (or what he termed the 'sensible'), explaining that, 'every situation can be cracked open from the inside, [and] reconfigured in a different regime of perception and signification'. Rancière (2009: 49) explains that the moment at which the sensible is 'cracked open' is a moment of dissensus, 'which brings back into play both the obviousness of what can be perceived, thought and done, and the distribution of those who are capable of perceiving, thinking and altering the coordinates of the shared world'. Rancière challenges art theorists and the hegemonic norms of the art world that see the capacity to interpret art (to make meaning) as lying exclusively with an aesthetic elite. He argues instead that the capacity to interpret, to think critically is distributed evenly among all people, but that institutionalised and socialised norms persuade us of our ignorance and incapacity (Szczelkun, 2013). Art can act as a provocation to break out of passive reception into active interpretation and rethinking. While this outcome may not be assured, it is a necessary pre-condition for the establishment of community; of an authentic relationship in which different knowledges, habits and meanings are accommodated. Put otherwise, a community that enjoins 'them' and 'us'.

The relationship between artists, art and audience is one of active dialogue. Thus, the distribution of the sensible, in creating hierarchy, also creates potential for its own dissolution. As such, for Rancière, political action occurs when 'the reigning configuration between perception and meaning is disrupted by those elements, groups or individuals in society [the insensible] that demand not only to exist but indeed to be perceived' (Panagia, 2014: 96). Jamila's comments about what her art means for her echoes this sentiment when she states: 'I want to tell everyone, through my work, that I exist, that I'm here in a destroyed Afghanistan as a female artist, with great thoughts' (interviewed 10 Feb. 2018). At the site of the art-work the *insensible* (the Muslim Other) is able to be in dialogue, either as artist or audience, with the sensible.

Conclusion

Contemporary Islamophobic discourse presents Muslims and Islam as inherently violent, misogynistic and irrational, and Afghan asylum seekers in particular as exemplars *par excellence*. These tropes continue a genealogy spanning centuries and have been largely disconnected in public discourse from their Orientalist imperial roots, entering the public discourse as established 'fact'. These negative 'truths' about Muslims at home and seeking asylum are circulated daily with such repetition, consistency and regularity that Muslims are rendered irreparably foreign and the impossibility of dialogue, coexistence and inclusion becomes common sense. This common sense encompasses both dubious imperial 'knowledge' and powerful emotions of revulsion and fear, and so is unlikely to be challenged through rational argument and the presentation of more reliable 'facts'

alone. Afghan artists' works can bridge the distance created by contemporary geopolitics by stepping over entrenched narratives and speaking to emotion with emotion.

The artists interviewed here recognise the need for a language that can operate beyond everyday social and political convention, to touch the viewer before their cognition sets in, and to establish relationship. Art can be understood as a different language, one which 'touches your subconscious', builds empathy and holds the possibility of a new politics of friendship and welcome. Indeed, the intention in this research reflects what Barone and Eisner (2012: 1) have deemed arts-based research, namely, 'an effort to extend beyond the limiting constraints of discursive communication in order to express meanings that otherwise would be ineffable'.

By leveraging the magic of art, the testimony of people deemed otherwise only quasi-human, can reach across divides and touch people from different places. Herein lies art's soft power, the ability to bypass cognition, rationality and conditioning, to access a common humanity through affect.

The richness of the creative process offers the current research a broad direction for future investigation. For artists and audiences, only time will reveal the ways that the examples of cultural production presented here will suture the cleavages between people created by contemporary politics and Islamophobic discourses. By centring the perspectives of artists and audiences, we can access a subjective experience that will nourish a sociology which, as Bourdieu indicated, struggles to articulate magical things. For many people in the West, it is likely surprising to discover people producing art in Kabul or during refugee journeys. That people are directing their energy and creativity into cultural production in such contexts testifies to a shared existential life concerned with love, hope, fear and magic. Further work needs to be done on creative production in unexpected places, and on how audiences in the West, in global sites of power, receive and interpret these art-works. Bringing together sociologies of art, Islamophobia and forced migration opens up new and fruitful ways of approaching Muslim lives in sites of international intervention, refugee lives in transit and the geopolitics that underpin Islamophobia.

Funding

Notes

1. ArtLords projects in Kabul can be viewed through their facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/ArtlordsofAfghanistan/) or their website (https://www.artlords.co/).
2. Shamsia is part of a group called Berang Arts. Her works can be viewed on the Berang Arts Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/BerangArts/) or her own website (http://www.shamsiahassani.net/)

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Author biographies

Bilquis Ghani is a PhD Candidate at University of Technology Sydney (Social and Political Sciences). Her doctoral work focuses on cultural production among young artists in Kabul including visual art, music, poetry, graffiti and traditional art forms.

Lucy Fiske (Senior Lecturer at University of Technology Sydney, Social and Political Sciences) researches and publishes on refugees, asylum seeking, gender and human rights. She has been working with a community of refugees in transit in Indonesia for several years.