Practicing the Work of Worms:
Lyric Voice, Grievable Lives, and Exile in Solmaz Shariﬁ’s Look

By

Maria Louise Capecchi

A master’s essay submitted to the faculty of the
Graduate Program in English in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in English

University of St. Thomas
Saint Paul, Minnesota

May 2018
To Florence and Ronan.

May you always find joy in learning.
ABSTRACT

This paper explores the dialectical relationship between Solmaz Sharif’s lyric form in *Look*, specifically her use of lyric voice; her identity as an exile; and the politics of subject visibility and the creation of grievable lives. Her poems break new poetic ground, using erasure tactics, a complex lyric I and the reappropriation of Department of Defense terminology to adapt the lyric genre. Sharif’s work strains against categorization through voicing multiple perspectives. These lyrical voicings are both beneficial and problematic; as an immigrant and intellectual exile, Sharif’s voicing of the other is both useful to create grievable lives as well as problematic as Sharif speaks for the other. Ultimately Sharif’s brutal depictions of violence, grief, and loss require her western reader to look, to engage with the other, to recognize all life in its grievable state, to recognize new possibilities, and to transform.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Kanishka Chowdhury for his valuable insights, critical eye, and deep knowledge. I am grateful for his help and support throughout this project. Thanks also to Dr. Leslie Miller for starting me down the path of lyric theory and Dr. Laura Zebuhr for her mentorship.
Solmaz Sharif’s poetry book, *Look*, is a poignant work filled with carefully crafted lyric poems as well as important analysis of the effects of war. Her poems break new poetic ground, using erasure tactics, a complex lyric I and the reappropriation of terms from the *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (indicated by all caps)\(^i\) to adapt the lyric genre. Sharif’s strong lyric voice combines the emotional intimacy of the confessional lyric with the intense call-to-action of the political lyric. Her voice is commanding: exposing her reader to a lyric world where the very language that makes up her poetry is undermined by multiple interpretations and meanings. Sharif demands that her western reader unflinchingly view the costs of war in the Middle East and experience the shifting realities of a society where categorization defines an individual’s worth. The poems are filled with startling images of violence juxtaposed with moments of intimacy and reflection. By replicating the immigrant experience through her lyric voice, she exposes her western readers to the experiences of exile. Sharif’s text explores what it means to truly *look*, to take in a life in its grievable\(^ii\) state, to see the other and recognize ourselves. This recognition creates intimacy and connection; her poem “LOOK” becomes a rallying cry, an invitation to the exilic state. Rather than asking us to leap into action, Sharif encourages us to pause, to consider, to see the “exquisite face” of the subaltern:\(^iii\)

Let it matter what we call a thing.
Let it be the exquisite face for at least 16 seconds.
Let me LOOK\(^iv\) at you.
Let me LOOK at you in a light that takes years to get here (*Look* 4-5).

Rather than insisting on one sanctioned meaning, one voice, *Look* shares multiple and often contradictory voices. Through these lyric voicings, Sharif asks her western reader to reflect on the wars in the Middle East and experience multiple perspectives
within the conflict, including her family in Iran; her immigrant parents; US soldiers; and
Iranian, Iraqi, and US citizens. Sharif’s title alone, based on the military term “look —
(*) In mine warfare, a period during which a mine circuit is receptive of an influence,”
indicates the importance of being receptive, looking at something, taking it in
(Defense of Defense 318). The title exemplifies this process: to “look” indicates an
ability to receive from someone else (a state Sharif asks the reader to inhabit); mines,
when influenced, explode, referencing the real use of mines in warfare and the cultural
and political metaphorical minefields addressed in the text; and Sharif metaphorically
“explodes” the western concept (or frame) of the Iraqi war. Sharif’s claiming of words
used to objectify western targets gives a new voice to the concepts and people who are
overlooked in the war on terror. Ultimately, within the political and lyrical matrix,
Sharif’s lyrical voicings are both beneficial and problematic. As an immigrant and
intellectual exile, her voicings of these individuals are both useful to create grievable
lives as well as problematic as Sharif speaks for the other. Giving voice to the other is
paradoxical as one must speak for the other, yet speaking for cannot result in a true
expression of the other’s voice. However, this tension is precisely what makes Sharif’s
work compelling. Rather than resolve and classify, Sharif’s work strains against
categorization through voicing multiple perspectives and expanding the lyric genre. This
paper explores the dialectical relationship between Sharif’s lyric form, specifically her
use of lyric voice; her identity as an exile; and the politics of subject visibility and the
creation of grievable lives.
THE POETICS OF ACTIVISM: THE LYRIC FORM AND POLITICS

To understand the politics surrounding Sharif’s lyrical choices, it is important to first address her choice of form, the lyric. The lyric genre is constantly being renegotiated and redefined, allowing poets to adapt and repurpose lyric elements for social critique. Jonathan Culler in “Lyric, History, and Genre” discusses the significance of genre adaptation, stating, “generic transformations involve the negotiation of social meanings, drawing upon the social and cultural implications of genres, but also using popular material to enrich and modify existing genres... Generic transformations can be a social act. Generic transformation reveals the social changes in audiences and the interpretation of popular and polite literature” (65). As a genre transforming text, Look allows for a complex analysis of both voice and form. Sharif’s choice of the lyric by itself is political as the genre has been a traditionally male platform. Look fits the lyric form through its focus on speaker, emotion, and voice and expands the lyric genre through references to global warfare, complication of the didactic/personal binary, and Sharif’s use of erasure and military terminology. These adaptations, along with Sharif’s use of a complex lyric voice, opens the possibility of multiple voices and interpretations in her text.

Essential to the contemporary understanding of the lyric is the voice within the poem, both who is speaking and who they are addressing. Sharif repurposes the lyric voice in order to create subject visibility for individuals made invisible through US conflicts in Iraq and Iran. She uses both the confessional style as well as the lyric mask, where the lyric I is no longer transcendent or impersonal, but rather a mix of personal and persona, to craft her self-described political poetry. Here, an understanding of the
historical conception of the lyric I gives greater understanding to how Sharif alters the form. As Gillian White explains, the typical lyric poem assumes a private audience, and, like the Petrarchan lyric, a distance between the speaker and the addressee (32). In this way, the lyric poem’s reader “overhears” a personal exchange. Recent genre tensions in contemporary American poetry, specifically the Language Poets of the 1970s and 1980s call for “artifice” and “intellect” over “nature and “sentiment” (White 12), where the “lyric [was] defined by unmitigated individual subjectivism, self-absorption, leisured privilege, and ahistoricism” (White 5), have strengthened this distance between speaker, subject, and poet.\textsuperscript{ix}

However, this contemporary conception of the isolated lyric, where speaker, addressee, and audience are separate entities removed from any historical or personal context, is not the only model. Key lyric theorists argue against this limited perception of the lyric voice. As early as 1985 Herbert F. Tucker in “Dramatic Monologue and the Overhearing of Lyric” critiques the Romantic lyric’s insistence on lyric isolation, introducing the concept of the “lyric mask” as illustration. New Criticism, in his estimation, fails to ground the poem in history and establish a link between poet and work:

while texts do not absolutely lack speakers, they do not simply have them either; they invent them instead as they go. Texts do not come from speakers, speakers come from texts. … to assume in advance that a poetic text proceeds from a dramatically situated speaker is to risk missing the play of verbal implication whereby character is engendered in the first place through colliding modes of signification (153).
This interplay between poet, character (the speaker or voice in the poem), and audience is precisely the work of the lyric mask, where the poet is a conscious maker of meaning within their poetry. Rather than “abolish[ing] the poet and set[ting] up the fictive speaker” (152), an understanding of dramatic monologue as a hybrid between romantic lyricism and symbolist and imagist desires (150) allows the critic to understand how the dramatic monologue’s character can neither be seen as a true expression of the poet (as in romantic lyrics) or completely disassociated from the poet’s perspective (as the reactionary modernist view). Rather, the character/speaker functions as a mask, allowing the poet to confront important issues without alienating the reader. White extends this idea when discussing the confessional lyric, describing it as a challenge to the assumption of the “universal, impersonal, transcendent subject,” an “I” the reader feels is “our own” within the lyric (32). Whether through the lyric mask or the perceived personal within confessional poems, the reader is exposed to the differing viewpoints which the poet uses to guide the reader through alternate opinions and realities.

Not only does lyric poetry contain a complicated scholarly history, the concept of political poetry has also fallen in and out of favor throughout the lyric’s long history. Sharif, in a talk at The Loft, described the original assault on political poetry as a focus on didacticism, describing a cultural environment where readers resist poetry that explicitly evokes emotions or teaches lessons: “there’s a perceived shame in learning [needing to learn something], a shame in not knowing” (“Big Ideas...”). Sharif dismisses this didactic critique, explaining that all poems give the reader new knowledge. To read a poem is to step into the poem’s persona, to momentarily experience another perspective. Furthermore, Sharif self-describes her poetry as political, directly addressing the debate
over lyricism in politics and the perceived political/personal binary. This conception follows Adrienne Rich’s insistence on the personal as political: “at the crossover between personal and political, we [women poets] were also pushing at the limits of experience reflected in literature” (The Arts of the Possible 56). While the political/personal, political/aesthetic often are perceived as poetic binaries, Lynn Keller’s essay “Post-Language Lyric...” discusses the interconnected nature of the personal and political, where “the impulse toward the love lyric—is repeatedly thwarted by the experience of twenty-first-century globalized existence, in which violence around the world is instantly broadcast by news media” (76-77). Keller’s assertion indicates that the Petrarchan trope of the lyric speaker, where “the traditional lyric lover is usually separated from the beloved, by either the beloved’s reserve or physical distance, and the poet-lover uses lyric to bridge that distance” (Keller 77), can no longer function in our modern, interconnected society. The Petrarchan lover-from-affar never could exist in reality, but the global military context illuminates their impossibility—one must ethically be present, both politically and emotionally within the lyric: “the afar, in this context, is something [the poet] longs for but rejects, since assuming a distance from current events denies our global connectedness” (Keller 77). In this sense, a denial of politics and global events is a turning from the connection the lyric strives for. The contemporary poet cannot simply turn inward for inspiration; to bridge the gap, the personal must interact with the political in the contemporary lyric.

Sharif also adjusts the lyric form to bridge the physical distance between her western audience and the Iraqi and Iranian subjects of her poems, juxtaposing the personal with the political. The lyric form itself, with its origins in Greco-Roman culture,
contains a long history of political and cultural assumptions as well as aesthetic traditions. The genre’s western and masculine roots make Sharif’s lyric adjustment particularly suited to challenge western hegemony. Section III of Look contains two Wikipedia excerpts describing offensives in the Iran-Iraq war, complete with underlined “hyperlinked” terms set within a larger body of poems about Sharif’s uncle killed in the Iran-Iraq War. A Wikipedia description of Operation Nasr, “The Iranians blundered into the ambush and two tank forces battled for four days in a sea of mud” (82) is both informative and strangely evocative, humanizing the Iranians and adding poetic imagery of mud to the scene. This familiar Western content, when taken out of its online context, becomes a small prose poem. The informative text is laid out to the left of a poem where Sharif describes writing her Amano (uncle), a soldier in the Iran-Iraq war. The physical connection between the passages, bound together on separate sides of the manuscript, effectively bridges the gap between the facts of the war and the people in it. Sharif’s depiction of her uncle informs the reader’s understanding of his war experience, and her positioning of the poem next to a western account of a battle politicizes the personal experience. Furthermore, the poems’ nearness draws attention to proximity: the western account’s distance from the realities of the Iran-Iraq war calls into question western knowledge of this conflict. Even Sharif, despite her personal connection to her uncle, is removed from the events, “list[ing] pocket contents as if filling out an autopsy report” (Look 83). Her physical proximity to her uncle’s letters—“the script in his letters grew tighter, barbed” (Look 83)—and personal experience is still at a remove from the battle. Sharif’s juxtaposition ultimately depicts all forms western knowledge as questionable representations: “I write him daily / And so I learn to ignore him” (Look 83).
Sharif also plays with poetic form; she not only uses found poetry (the Wikipedia entry), but also uses an elastic lyric I to voice the poem. Rather than making her uncle the speaker or addressee of the poem, Sharif instead conflates herself and her uncle. Her reality and Amoo’s blur as she drives by “balloons held down in a net” that turns into “the netting over his helmet.” As the poem continues, the pronouns multiply, and, with a “we,” Sharif invites her Western reader into a moment from the Iran-Iraq war:

And alive we bring up the hands to hold together his neck
And I place in his hands his head
And I place in his hands my hands
And I place in his eyes a LOOK we share in the rearview
And I place between us a bar of laughter
And I place between us the looking and the telling they want dead (83).

In this lyric moment, the reader co-creates Amoo, literally holding him together as Sharif collages images, bridging the divide between her Western audience and her Iranian uncle. Again, Sharif uses the term “look,” creating a receptive, reciprocal interaction. Through the creation of Amoo’s character, Sharif’s mask allows her reader to experience the connecting laughter as well as the “looking and telling,” the personal, “they” wish to erase from the political. While this lyric is removed from the romantic Petrarchan lyric, the love Sharif feels for her uncle binds the political reframing of the Middle Eastern enemy in the reader’s imagination, effectively bridging the gap between the political and personal. Sharif’s mask allows the personal, the death of her uncle, to combine with the political, drawing into question western understandings of the Middle East. Sharif defies western attempts to reframe her uncle in a negative light, using the “bar of laughter” Sharif and Amoo share to voice the “telling they want dead.” Here the poetic mask’s “colliding modes of signification” (Tucker 153) resists western forms of knowledge, creating a political lyric.
This sense of the political recalls Theodor Adorno’s “Socially Antagonistic Poet:” a writer who uses the lyric as a “language game” with the understanding that the lyric subject is a socially mediated construct (343-344). In this understanding, the poet uses her awareness of language and subject creation to “give voice to what ideology hides” (340). For Sharif, her use of DOD terms allows the reader to question held assumptions about meaning and invites her through juxtaposition to view the ways in which war has been normalized in US culture. The multiplicity of meanings in “Deception Story” reflect Adorno’s description of lyrical language as the “medium” that creates the “collective undercurrent” of the lyric work, which is “the subjective expression of social antagonism. ... the objective world that produces the lyric is an inherently antagonistic world” (344).

In this understanding, the poet uses her awareness of language and subject creation to “give voice to what ideology hides” (340). Within this antagonistic world exists many forms of violence, from the casualties of war to the oppression of racism. Sharif’s work connects these forms of violence, linking the immigrant experience to the violence inflicted in the Middle East.

For example, at the end of the poem “Deception Story,” Sharif introduces the concept of immigrant art and questions the idealized narrative of the American immigrant. She uses DOD terms to explore what the American Dream contains for those classified as other:

... My life in the American Dream is a DOWNGRADE\textsuperscript{x}, a mere DRAFT\textsuperscript{xxii} of home. Correction: it satisfies as DRAG\textsuperscript{xxii}.

It is, snarling, what I carve of it alone (Look 15-16).

The military terms embedded in the poem describe a “lower degree of protection,”
"conscription of qualified citizens," and "resistance caused by the violent currents behind the shock front," respectively (Department of Defense 170). Each DOD term suggests separation from the whole, whether the level of protection one receives to citizenship, the creation of insider/outsider status, or a separation caused by a violent action. The colloquial definitions underscore the DOD terms by indicating a suppression of movement or an inadequate copy of the original. Sharif's depiction of the American Dream shows the inability of immigrants, subjects of this antagonistic world, to truly achieve dream status. She resists this cultural narrative, depicting a dream that "snarls," a quiet, threatening, wordless sound. In this state, Sharif's speaker cannot claim her voice. This problem is intensified by the categorization of immigrant art (and all those deemed "other") as innately political, limiting the message and voice of the immigrant. Sharif's poem is both about the immigrant's voice as well as a demonstration of her own immigrant voice that resists this idealized narrative. Without her resistance, the speaker's experience would remain obscured by the accepted narrative of the American Dream where grit alone determines success. Sharif's antagonism creates a new, voiced subject.

Sharif's voicing allows the western reader to see the immigrant within a larger history and experience. Her work straddles these worlds as she is both immigrant and citizen. Her poem "SAFE HOUSExiv" alludes to the tension between appearances and reality for the immigrant. The title alludes to the assumed safety of the US for immigrants, while the DOD term describes "conducting clandestine or covert activity in relative security" (473), describing the racism and oppression immigrants face that is often overlooked and perpetrated by westerners. The DOD and colloquial definitions collide throughout the poem as Sharif describes her father's immigrant experience:
“SHEETLINES" on his face, his hair upright, the sound of SHELLS (SPECIFY)—the sound of mussel shells on the lip of the Bosphorus cracking beneath his feet...” (Look 14). “Sheetlines” and “the Bosphorus” both describe limiting geographic borders, much like the cultural borders Sharif’s father must navigate. Yet Sharif blurs these borders for her reader, responding literally (specifying what type of shells) as well as figuratively (alluding to the sound of projectiles) as the mussels crunch under her father’s feet. Each line of “SAFE HOUSE” begins with a DOD term that undermines the colloquial meanings of the poem, giving the work a doubled voice and underscoring the daily violence the immigrant faces. Sharif’s combination of the personal with the historical and political creates a unique voice that expresses a reality-based account of events, lending credibility to her poetic voice.

THE POLITICS OF SUBJECT VISIBILITY & CREATION OF “THE OTHER”

Within the frame of war, altering western cultural views becomes equally important to halt western imperialism and subject-formation. Judith Butler’s work explores the consequences of predetermined cultural narratives that dehumanize, specifically her books Frames of War: When is Life Grievable? and Grievable Lives. She examines the problem of subject visibility and the recognition of the “other,” focusing on “grievability.” As Butler describes in Frames of War, to reframe and redefine grievable lives is an essential component to recognizing the other: “Grievability is a presupposition for the life that matters. ... Grievability precedes and makes possible the apprehension of the living being as living” (14-15). Butler acknowledges the problematic creation of unrecognizable people, “ungrievable” others. “Precarity,” she argues, needs to be understood “as the politically induced condition that would deny equal exposure through
the radically unequal distribution of wealth and the differential ways of exposing certain populations, racially and nationally conceptualized, to greater violence" (28). For Sharif and Butler, subject-formation is political: the ungrievable subject becomes a tool of war and ungrievable people become “unrecognizable” casualties, effectively ceasing to exist within the western framework. Without a recognition of their personhood, these people are voiceless, their life’s significance invisible to the western gaze. Therefore, institutional acknowledgement is needed to amplify the other’s voice. Butler describes this acknowledgement as a frame, “a field of representability... both jettisoning and presenting ... without any visible sign of operation” (73). Individuals and communities outside of the frame become inhuman, ungrievable casualties of war. Sharif’s political poetry reframes the western gaze by reclaiming subjectivity for Iraqi and Iranian people.

The political poet’s responsibility then is to “learn to see the frame that blinds us,” to break the cycle of turning the “not seeing” into the “visual norm” (Butler 100). The ability to create visible subjects is a political act, and language is the poet’s tool for subject formation. Sharif describes her role as a political poet in this way: “The job of a poet,’ she says, is to be ‘a bane to the republic. Because the republic is built on a destruction of language. A kind of obliteration of language that will enable and excuse violence against bodies. My job is to interrogate and agitate that as often as I can”’ (qtd. in Alex and Er Nazaryan). For Sharif, language becomes key to reverse destruction, to stop violence. In “A Poetry of Proximity” she takes the concept further, clearly linking poetic language with politics and suppression of language with violence:

It is not happenstance that the poet’s job is the job of language itself—to reach beyond the impossible chasm of two minds, of multiple times, and make known
the inner things. And language, like the other democratic things—freedom of assembly, habeas corpus—is among first casualties of war. The maiming and obliteration of language preempts and attempts to excuse the maiming and obliteration of bodies.

Here Keller’s concept of the wartime lyric\textsuperscript{viii} is echoed by Sharif’s understanding of language as a casualty of war. For both, language is the key to connection, and thus the destruction of language is tied to larger violent acts. In this way, to write a lyric during war times is to actively resist violence.

Sharif also literally resists the destruction of language through her reappropriation of DOD terminology, reframing violent terms through recontextualization and placing war terminology within moments of intimacy. Look is filled with the DOD’s language and precise, often violent images of those obliterated in the “war on terror” as well as loving images of Sharif’s family. The poem “LAY” shows how Sharif plays with language, both resisting the military definitions of words and asking the reader to appropriate these definitions. The poem begins with “LAY\textsuperscript{xii},” followed by a series of prepositional phrases describing where the action takes place:

\begin{verbatim}
   LAY  down
to sleep then
to rest last night
to waste before
across a stretcher
across a shoulder
over a leg
beneath an arm
in a shroud
in a crib... (Look 11)
\end{verbatim}

At the surface level, the poem begins with the common understanding of the verb but quickly turns to more violent images, indicating that the quiet, intimate moment of sleep
cannot exist in this military context. The DOD term “lay” itself has six definitions, all
dealing with aiming, directing, planning, and dropping either weapons or missions. When
read with these definitions in mind, “LAY” becomes a catalogue of violence in
opposition to the civilian connotation of laying as a gentle action. The poem’s first lines
allude to the Christian prayer “now I lay me down to sleep,” signaling the subject of
violence’s innocence. The series of body parts as well as “to waste before” and “in a
crib” further the idea of victimization of the military targets. The poem’s final line, “in a
hole,” (Look 11) bluntly states the result of these military strikes: death. Through these
images, Sharif directs her western reader’s attention toward those subjected to military
attacks. She shifts the reader’s understanding with the line “holding your breath” (Look
11), connecting the reader and the subject of the poem through the pronoun “you.” Here
Sharif forces intimacy between the object of drone strikes and her reader. By using
language to recognize the other and complicating western understandings of her subjects,
Sharif creates subject visibility for those objectified in the war on terror.

Sharif’s poetry presents the reader with the face of the other, yet she also explores
the personal through her depictions of her uncle, father, and her own immigrant
experience. These strategies complicate the lyric I, as the reader is never quite sure who
is being voiced. Sharif draws upon personal experience and her family to “diagnose”xx
problems without giving the reader a “cure.” Here Charles Altieri’s “The Place of
Rhetoric in American Poetics” is helpful to understand Sharif’s rhetorical moves.
According to Altieri, poetic rhetoric is “the aim of simply making vital or precise or
compelling an actual emotional situation” (130). “Deception Story,” a collage of
experiences presented in the first person, accomplishes this goal with enargia, “vivid,
immediate description” (Altieri 131). Sharif describes an encounter with a security agent in simple, yet compelling language, “After explaining what she will touch, backs of the hands at the breasts and buttocks, the hand goes inside my waistband and my heart goes DORMANT\textsuperscript{xxiv} (\textit{Look} 15). This scene, framed as a bodily violation by the agent, is contrasted with a moment where the speaker becomes the interloper in a classmate’s pool: “My body breaking the chlorinated surface makes it, momentarily, my house my DIVISION\textsuperscript{xxiii} / of driveway gate and alarm codes, my dress-rehearsed DOCTRINE\textsuperscript{xxiii} …” (\textit{Look} 15). In both scenarios, Sharif emphasizes the emotional state of the speaker and how that state connects directly to the distance and othering of the physical body: “…My DISTRIBUTION\textsuperscript{xxiv} / over the globe debated and set to quota. A nation can only handle so many of me” (\textit{Look} 15). The use of immediate description dramatizes these moments, allowing the reader an experience of the other. Sharif’s multiple voices collage the immigrant, US citizen, and Middle Eastern experiences of the wars in the Middle East, compelling her western reader to engage politically.

Sharif’s work carefully situates the reader to view the speakers in her poems as grievable, recognizable subjects. The third section of \textit{Look} focuses on her Amoo, an Iraqi soldier without western “institutional validation,” killed in the Iran-Iraq War. Sharif introduces her western reader to this historic event while using the poetic I to voice the other, interspersing facts about the Iran-Iraq War as well as translated fragments of her uncle’s letters. In one poem she imagines her uncle, “you hand / plucked wild poppies / to soldier friends” and juxtaposes this with her childhood memory, “clearing almost an entire vine of honeysuckles / that sugar / tasting vaguely of grass” (\textit{Look} 78). This small poem, filled with innocent flower imagery, connects her ungrievable uncle to the image
of children picking flowers, allowing the western reader to see his humanity. Through her personal expressions of grief, her uncle is made recognizable. Sharif's lyric voice creates a frame that allows the reader to see the other as grievable rather than a necessary war casualty.

Sharif also creates subject visibility for the subaltern through her series of poems “Reaching Guantanamo.” The series imagines redacted letters Salim Hamdan, detained at Guantanamo for being Osama bin Laden's personal driver, received from his wife while in detention. The poems' lyric form, redaction (also known as erasure or blackout poetry), is described by Rachel Stone as: “a type of poetry created from the substrate material of an existing text. Obscure many of the words, these poems command, and you will find the sentences that have been there all along.” While the political purpose for erasure is to obscure meaning, poetic erasure exposes new meaning by eliminating words within a text. In “Reaching Guantanamo” the invented redacted letters echo, in Sharif's words, “communication interrupted by state and political forces,” drawing the reader's attention to real political efforts to silence the subaltern (“The Near Transitive Properties...”). Poetic erasure echoes state tactics that, “make the reader aware of her/his position as one who will never access a truth that does, by state accounts, exist” and “invoke fear and paranoia via inaccessibility” (Sharif “The Near Transitive Properties”). Sharif repurposes these tactics through her poetic authority, creating fictionalized letters that allow Hamdan's wife, Umm Fatima, to speak and Hamdan himself to become recognizable.

As a poet, Sharif uses aesthetics, the craft and fiction that shapes her lyric, to create a political truth, to create subject visibility in order to create grievable lives. By
echoing state tactics, Sharif encourages the reader to question the ethics of redaction, both hers and the state’s.\textsuperscript{xxv} Creating Umm Fatima’s letters is not without its own set of ethical problems. As an Iranian-American poet, Sharif imagines the Hamdans’ lives without any concrete access to their lives’ truths. While her experience as an Iranian immigrant gives her work more credence to voice those othered by the war on terror than many American poets, in this series of poems Sharif is speaking for the other with little to no personal context.\textsuperscript{xxvi} The creation of a lyric voice requires fiction just as politics requires truth,\textsuperscript{xxvii} yet the poems’ subject visibility is created by speaking for the other, creating, at best, a potentially inaccurate, and, at worst, a morally problematic interpretation of their ungrievable lives.

Since lyric poetry is a collaboration between writer and reader, Sharif’s letters become a co-creation; through the act of reading or speaking the text, the reader and Sharif bring Umm Fatima to life. By filling in the blanks, the reader both creates a grievable life as well as inserts personal assumptions into the text. While redacted poetry relies on a reader’s potentially problematic imagination that the poet cannot control, from the start of the poem Sharif positions her reader to view Umm Fatima’s character in opposition to the western framework of the Muslim woman. Despite the erasure of phrases, a clear persona shines through the text, specifically in the fourth poem in the series:

Dear Salim,

\begin{verbatim}
said I need to
my tongue. It’s getting sharp.
I told him to his own
business, to his own wife. He didn’t
If he wasn’t my
\end{verbatim}
I would never
again. Sometimes, I write you
letters I don’t send. I don’t mean
to cause alarm. I just want the ones
you open to
like a hill of poppies.

Yours,  
(Look 48)

While the erasure tactics attempt to remove Umm Fatima’s agency by literally removing the verbs, “I told him to” his own / business, to his own / wife,” the reader is able to fill action into these lines. Umm Fatima’s voice (the words she spoke) is literally removed from the text, but it is clear she is accustomed to speaking her mind. Her affection for her husband is also apparent, and the phrase “like a hill of poppies” allows the reader to glimpse a loving, intimate moment despite the erasure of the simile’s first half. While reading one also feels the strain of the separation: “It’s getting sharp” and “I don’t mean to cause alarm” show the toll Hamden’s internment has taken on his family. This conjuring of Hamden through apostrophe allows the reader to empathize with his experience as they imagine what it would be like to receive the letter. Ideally, the collaboration between Sharif and her reader effectively humanizes the other, causing the reader to rethink the larger effects of political erasure as well as their assumptions about Muslim women.

While Sharif clearly creates grievable lives through her exilic state, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s interrogation of representing the other remains an important area where Sharif’s poetry potentially fails. The question becomes, as an Iranian-American exile distanced from the conflict and people she is writing about, is her poetry capable of giving voice to those living in Iraq on the front lines of the United States’ war
of imperialism? Sharif herself draws attention to this problem in her poems about her uncle:

...I wrote
*I burn my finger on the broiler*
*And smell trenches, my uncle*

*pissing himself.* “How can she write that? She doesn’t know,” a friend, a daughter of a Vietnam vet, told another friend,

another daughter of a Vietnam vet (*Look* 80).

Here Sharif emphasizes aporia—an irresolvable contradiction—acknowledging that she is not an authority. The act of writing, of voicing the other, requires fiction. Quite literally Sharif cannot know the experiences of her Amoo who died before she was born, just like she cannot voice the Truth of Hamdan and Umm Fatima or her parents. Sharif’s acknowledges that, at best, these poems “parrot the loss” she describes (“The Near Transitive Properties…”). As an immigrant removed from this community, Sharif’s authority is limited to her understanding of Iraq from a distance. While her rhetorical moves in “Reaching Guantanamo” make visible Hamdan and Umm Fatima, her fictional voicing of this woman’s life does not truly allow the subaltern to speak.

While Sharif’s structure brings awareness to and argues against state erasure tactics, her voicing of Umm Fatima may not be ethical.³⁹ Sharif’s voicing uses her privilege to legitimize the suffering of and give visibility to the other. Yet, she still speaks for Umm Fatima, continuing the legacy of intellectuals speaking for the subaltern.

Spivak’s famous phrase: “white men are saving brown women from brown men” (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 93) identifies a relationship between men, and, at its most inclusive, the female academic who similarly uses the “brown woman” as a subject of
discourse. In this construct brown women like Umm Fatima become a voiceless subject. While Sharif’s academic voice is broadcast, Umm Fatima’s authentic voice remains silent. Within this mentality the subaltern woman can never speak, never act. It can be argued that subject visibility is a worthwhile goal, but to truly view the other requires a dialogue that is missing from these poems. Instead, Sharif’s work is a fictitious dialogue, one where Sharif creates a lyric mask to dialogue with the reader. While Sharif may bring new awareness and create grievable subjects, ultimately the voice she creates is as tied up in her own experiences as an immigrant and intellectual exile as it is representative of the other.

THE EXILIC STATE, CONTRAPUNTAL THINKING, & REPRESENTATION

The tension between Sharif’s intention in giving recognition to the other and the realities of the power gap between herself and her subjects is not easily resolved. Her role as an intellectual exile and contrapuntal thinker complicates the ethics of her lyric voice. Edward Said’s work on exile is critical to situate Sharif as a poet within the concept of subject and voice. Sharif’s poetry is particularly suited to creating subject visibility as it creates the experience of contrapuntal thinking for her western reader and gives voice to those made precarious by their lives lived outside the western frame of visibility. Said’s work “Reflections on Exile” (1984) equates the life of an exile to one of voicelessness and “irrecoverable” experience, “like death without death’s ultimate mercy” (174). At the same time, intellectuals, according to Said, must remain in a state of agitation, constantly questioning accepted theories and understandings, willing to listen to the other and refraining from speaking for. Said’s later essay “Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Marginals” (1993) furthers his concept of the exile’s situation, describing
modern exile is a “median state, neither completely at one with the new setting or fully
disencumbered of the old . . .” (114) and the intellectual exile as “a source not of
acclimation and adjustment but rather of volatility and instability” (115). The exile’s
constant state of movement, of unease allows one to become a “contrapuntal thinker,” an
individual capable of holding both the world of your origin (the past) and your current
world (the present) equally in mind. Said’s framework, while idealistically emphasizing
the intellectual exile, still draws attention to the need to question, to live with multiple
realities and ideas. This conception encourages the intellectual to enter the realm of the
political.

If the intellectual exile’s role is to agitate, Sharif both lives the exilic state and
creates this state for her readers:

No matter where I went, I was outside of whatever community I found myself in,
so that even when I arrived in a place where there was a lot of “me,” I was totally
outside again. That probably influenced my artistic impulse—to go back to the
exilic intellectual—to stand outside of and look into, and constantly question and
interrogate the collectives that exist. It’s easy for me because I’ve never felt a part
of any of them in a real way (“The Role of the Poet . . .”).

Here Sharif positions herself as other and sees this unique position as particularly helpful,
if not necessary, for her political poetry. The exilic person unsettles, agitates for change.
Sharif’s ability to think outside of the frame, to evoke for her reader the other, ultimately
positions the reader to question their accepted understandings of the war on terror.

Sharif’s text recalls the contrapuntal state by continuously blurring her speakers’
identities. Her use of the “poetic I,” “a rhetorical figure that solicits participation. . . . The
‘you’ and ‘we’ are not created by agreement about some conclusion but as projected positions for participation” (Altieri 130) creates personas the audience must respond to. While some poems focus on a specific voice, her poetic I in “Drone” (Look 89-93) inhabits multiple perspectives. Sharif moves from “my father” to “it was my job to dig graves” (Look 89) to “an American interrupts” and “she just laid there and took it like a champ” (Look 91). Each lyric moment voices an individual experience, creating subject visibility. For example, the line “from my son’s wedding mattress I know this mound’s his room” (Look 89) asks the reader to inhabit this Iraqi parent’s perspective, imagining a mangled mattress within the rubble of a house. This moment is specific, one that neither Sharif nor her western reader has experienced, yet through the writing and reading all are momentarily linked to the grieving parent.

Sharif’s poetic blurring of voice and the disorientation created by it is a strong dislocating tool for the reader:

    : let’s miss an appointment together
    : let’s miss another flight to repeated strip searches
    : that Haditha bed with magenta queen sheets and wood-shelved headboard and blood splatter up the walls to the ceiling
    : they held each other
    : they slept on opposing ends wishing one would leave
    : my mother doesn’t know who I am anymore
    : I write Mustapha Mohammad Khalaf 15 months old (Look 90-91)

Through multiple pronouns, the reader experiences many speakers’ realities. This dissonance effectively creates an exilic state as the “melodies” run through the reader’s mind. Sharif uses enargia—the detailed description of a bloody bed—to make this
moment alive for the reader. Combined with simple, relatable phrases, “they held each other” and “my mother doesn’t know who I am anymore,” the reader is forced to make connections between the subaltern speaker and themselves. Here Sharif works effectively as an intellectual exile to destabilize and unsettle the western reader.

Said’s contrapuntal thinking indicates while the exile state itself is not ideal, it allows certain individuals an increased mental flexibility: one who sees the larger historical picture, as multiple melodies played together rather than one dominant theme. While Said’s contrapuntal thinking and intellectual exile are foundational exile concepts, his understanding of the exile is not without its problems. Mark Muhammmad Ayyash extends Said’s idea of exile in his essay “Edward Said: Writing in Exile.” Focusing on the idea of being “in” exile, a paradoxical in-between state (107), Ayyash describes the concept of the exile as “walking,” a condition where the exile follows a train of thought without ascribing to that position (109). While this concept connects to Said’s idea of the exile as a contrapuntal thinker (“Reflections” 186), someone capable of maintaining two melodies in the mind, Ayyash focuses on the exile’s “commitment to a variety of lines of thought” (109) by following lines “often in radical conflict with one another” (110), a mental strategy that the exile is largely unaware of. This understanding is significant because recognizing the conflict between ideas is necessary to avoid overly humanistic explanations and simple solutions. While Said’s notion of multiple melodies is romantic, Ayyash draws attention to the dissonance of these ideas.

Tiyambe Zeleza similarly critiques Said’s description of exile as an “ontological and political space of freedom” and “emancipatory experience” (10). Rather than a harmonious experience, exile should be seen as dialectical. Sophia McClennen describes
this dialectical relationship as “tensions revolving around central components of the
exile’s cultural identity: nation, time, language, and space” (2). These cultural identities
collide throughout Sharif’s work as she grapples with what it means to live between
nations and languages and belong fully to neither. Said’s concept of discrete harmonies is
challenged by Sharif’s fragmentation throughout Look:

On YouTube, Blackwater
agents MOP UPbad guys
from a Najafroof
like they’re staving off
zombies. “ Fucking niggers”
one says. …
He cried when he saw
the video. His boys claim
he’s not a racist. Love,
I’ve started to say such
senseless things: “I know
where he is coming from”
and “I’m just doing my job.” (Look 19)

In the second stanza of “FREE MAIL” Sharif problematizes Said’s contrapuntalism
through conflicting narratives: Sharif frames the story in the western knowledge space of
YouTube, sets the action in a holy middle eastern city, then compares the “liquidated”
population to zombies while using a derogatory US term. Finally, Sharif evokes a
beloved, using a connecting apostrophe to link the violence and racism to the everyday
phrases that conclude the passage. These narratives are in four fragmented stanzas, and
Sharif uses enjambment to emphasize their broken quality. The clashing images do not
work themselves into a melodic conclusion. Instead, Sharif emphasizes the “senseless”
quality of war, one where every individual voiced is a dissonant element. While Sharif, as
an intellectual exile, is able to maintain multiple threads in her mind, they are not
contrapuntal but rather a clashing dialectic. For Sharif, the exilic state is jarring, one where an individual must maintain an equilibrium within conflicting realities.

Sharif’s voice powerfully expresses the dialectical exilic state by exposing the multiple realities the exile inhabits. For example, “Desired Appreciation” describes the exilic state as “learned helplessness” (Look 30). She jumps between descriptions of torture: “…teeth of handcuffs closing to fix / The arms overhead”; the president: “…Must muss up / Some kids hair and let him loose / Around the Oval Office”; and conversations with a therapist: “So you feel dangerous?” she said” (Look 30). Sharif’s exile connects with tortured prisoners of war in a “neighboring coffin” as well as the president’s “fistbump a janitor” and the speaker’s “docile, desired state” (Look 30). These identities, rather than harmonizing, as Said suggests, create conflicting emotional states, exposing the daily tensions the exile must navigate. Sharif “walks” the reader through these experiences, describing her pre-30s poetry as “…harmless: / American and diplomatic,” contrasting it with the “danger” and “threat” in her later, exilic work (Look 30). Rather than settle for a clear “solution” or message, the experience itself is foregrounded and fragmented, suggesting an emotional violence inherent in the exilic state. Rather than a voiceless and irrecoverable state, as Said describes, Sharif makes real the exile, the individual within the quota, giving her an identity and dignity.

THE ROLE OF THE POET: THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

Sharif emphasizes the dialectical complexity of the experiences she voices, giving an intimate picture that unsettles rather than simplifies. While this emotional state is contrary to the traditional understanding of the connecting lyric, it is precisely this unsettling that allows Sharif’s western reader to connect to the other she voices. Sharif,
through fragmenting her lyric I, avoids problematic contrapuntal thinking. The poem beginning “How could she say” (Look 66-67) explores the effects of violence on all involved in the war on terror, from the American soldier returned from war:

press a dog tag to your temple,
press a gun to that,

the tag flowering
into your skull, ... (Look 67)

to her father’s treatment as an immigrant:

some badge holding
my father’s pocket contents
up to him and asking

where the cash is from... (Look 66)

to the civilian Iraqi casualties:

In 2003, a man held a fistful
of blood and brains to a PBS camera
and yelled

is this the freedom
they want for us? (Look 67)

Sharif wrestles with these tensions as she questions her own poetic authority throughout the text:

How could she say
the things she does not
know. ... 

According to most
definitions, I have never
been at war.

According to mine,
most of my life
spent there. ... 

I wasn’t there
so I can’t know, can I? (Look 66-67)
Sharif’s empathy towards those she voices, her resistance of clear definitions, and insistence on complicating rather than resolving tensions within her work make her work compelling. Though Altieri and Keller emphasize the lyric’s ability to positively create intimacy and connect, Sharif resists this concept. Instead, the images like “fistful of blood and brains” and the “tag flowering into your skull” highlight the incommensurable nature of her poetry as she uses violence to paradoxically connect the soldier’s suicide to the Iraqi citizen killed by US soldiers. Yet even within her own poetry Sharif’s poetic authority refuses resolutions: “I wasn’t there / so I can’t know, can I?” Rather, violence, the very thing that tears apart, becomes the lyric’s connection. Sharif’s content and form, which deviates from traditional lyric, act as both a generic transformation and a political statement.

The modern warfare Sharif describes often disconnects the soldiers’ actions from their resulting violence. Similarly, the political poet can use the lyric to distance herself from the violence described within her work. Like Adrienne Rich’s “asbestos gloves,” form allows the poet to “handle materials [one] couldn’t pick up bare handed” (“When we Dead…” 22), giving the inexperienced poet freedom to explore the personal and political without using the confessional voice. However, this distancing can be deployed in problematic ways. Andrea Brady’s “Drone Poetics” explores the consequences of using political poetic tools in a utilitarian, abstract fashion. She describes how modern warfare has affected our use of aesthetics in poetry using the drone as a metaphor for the poet. She suggests that contemporary poets wield similar power as a drone operator: “the fantasy of unlimited autonomous creative power in the derided field of poetic operations is consistent with the ideology which underpins drones: the poet, safe from harm, can
perform her prosthetic acts of viewing and intervention, contemplating their consequences and ethics in the abstract, far away from any actual encounter with her objects” (Brady 122). The abstraction of ethics and separation of the writer/speaker, much like the Petrarchan lover’s distance from the object of the poem, creates a problematic voicing of the other. Brady asks us to “confront the possibility that our lyric poems are kill boxes: mobile spaces of predation in which relations of intimate force can be arbitrarily established while ensuring minimal damage to other friendlies; miniaturized states of exception which can be opened and closed at will” (Brady 135). Brady’s depiction of the lyric as a “kill box” warns that political poetry can become nothing more than a philosophical exercise. This critique places poetic responsibility on an author beyond visibility and emotion. Instead, the poet must truly encounter the other. The idea of “ensuring minimal damage to other friendlies” implies a necessary violence on the poet’s part—a tearing away of existing worldviews. Visibility by itself is not enough; the drone’s gaze both dehumanizes and objectifies, taking away the humanity of those it surveils.

Ultimately Brady warns that political lyrics must do more than create visibility, reminding us: “The privileged artist in many ways replicates the perspectives and prosthetic violence which characterize drone operations, and that this relation between the artist and her objects cannot be simply inverted or wished away through acts of imperializing empathy” (123). Sharif’s poem “Drone” mimics Brady’s “kill boxes;” it is filled with moments of startling, violent intimacy, juxtaposing images like: “at a protest a man sells a shirt that reads my dick would pull out of Iraq” with: “my mother tape-records my laugh to mail bubblewrapped back home” (Look 92). These images dislocate the
reader from their worldview, mimicking the dislocation of drones that separate the soldier from the violent effects of conflict, creating a fictitious state of peace within war. The drone kills, yet this object allows the human behind the machine to remain distant, even unaware of the casualties they inflict.

"Drone" interrogates that fiction, itemizing the drone's casualties. The lines "I wrote their epitaphs in chalk" (Look 89) and "I practice the work of worms" (Look 92) emphasize the violent intimacy of war; even from a distance the soldier reaches out to kill. Sharif's final two lines, "we have learned to sing a child calm in a bomb shelter / I am singing to her still" (93) describe the continuous violence drones enact years later in the form of trauma. Through creating a five-page list of casualties, Sharif creates for her reader a visible person, a grievable life to engage her reader. Her lyric form creates intimacy and connection within the frame of the war on terror. Brady's essay asks a broader question about writing and experience: "drones are a historic development which demonstrate the limits of lyric as a technology for imagining and relating to those others whose suppression is part of the general economy in which poetry can be written" (Brady 125). In this sense, the poet must recognize the ways in which her poetry exists within the larger politics of oppression. In a way, the act of writing a person's story is an act of suppression of the poem's subject. Fictional representations may be more transparent in their use of poetic license, but even realistic interpretations, like Sharif's work, cannot perfectly reflect reality. The tension between objectification and voicing of the poem's subject cannot be easily resolved. Rather, a dialectical tension must be maintained between the poem's persona and reality.
PRACTICING THE WORK OF WORMS

In the end, Sharif's work avoids the problematic tendency of wartime politics, to settle for simple solutions to complex issues. Instead of creating melodies like Said's contrapuntal thinker, Sharif recognizes the dissonance within her characters. Her lyric mask evokes complexity and dialectical opposition. While this rhetorical choice does not allow for clear answers within her work, it is precisely this conflict that yields a glimpse of grievable lives. To take the other and make her grievable requires a recognition of her true humanity, not an idealized conception of who she should be. Instead, Sharif presents us with her uncle as a wounded soldier much like the US soldiers: forever altered by his experience with war: "You're posing. You're scared. / A body falls / and you learn to step over" (Look 60). This complexity is clear in her description of Amoo's boots:

how they can kick in
a face—

... —cheekbones fragile
as moth wings beneath the heel.
You tighten your laces

until they hold together
a capable man. (Look 60)

The threads of these boot laces bind together the violent images of war: "you learn to step over / a loosened head" while Amoo grapples with "a body less and less yours— / a body, God knows, / is not what makes you" (Look 60). Again, Sharif's pronoun choice, you, connects the reader to her ungrievable uncle while the images of dead friends ("loosened head"), violent actions ("kick in a face"), and emotional costs ("hold together a capable man") refuse to romanticize or simplify his experience for an expedient moral
lesson. This becomes Sharif’s ultimate lesson: war is violent, dehumanizing, and the costs cannot be justified nor simplified.

One of Sharif’s final lines within “Drone” effectively describes the role of the poet: “I practice the work of worms” (Look 92). Rather than construct, Sharif’s text decomposes western notions of the war on terror and the other. Like the worm, Look uncovers the underbelly of our societal ecosystem, moving through hidden refuse and rot. This exposure is unpleasant; like the violence Sharif depicts, it is easier to ignore the process of decay. Yet exposure also contains hope: fertile soil emerges from debris.

Sharif’s work is regenerative, for rot must be exposed to oxygen in order to be transformed. Ultimately Sharif’s brutal depictions of violence, grief, and loss require us to look, to engage with the other, to recognize all life in its grievable state, to recognize new possibilities, and transform.

---

Footnotes:

1 For the purposes of this paper I will include the complete DOD definitions in the footnotes as reference for the reader, placing the important phrases in the body of the paper. Some of these terms are complex, and multiple definitions can be found depending on which version of the dictionary you use. Sharif used the October 17, 2007 version, and this is the version I refer to as well.

2 Judith Butler’s concept of grievability describes a tactic where individuals are classified and depicted as either “grievable” (an individual worthy of empathy and whose life is considered valuable) or “ungrievable” (a person dehumanized, devalued, and made invisible). In Frames of War she explains the consequences of the US devaluing Iraqi people within the War on Terror, turning innocent people into ungrievable, necessary casualties. Grievability creates recognizable subjects rather than existential threats.

3 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s work on the subaltern is an important theory underlying my understanding of the other and grievability, which I explore in detail with Judith Butler later in this essay. She describes as problematic the “essentialist agenda” embedded in subaltern studies that ultimately classifies the west as ideal, the regional subaltern elite as a “deviation from an ideal,” and subaltern people “a difference from the elite” (Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 80). Class, ethnicity, and gender all play a role in further perceived deviations of subaltern people and intensify the power divide between the west and the subaltern subject. Spivak’s conception of the subaltern is specific, focusing on individuals that lack power and speech in multiple ways, and she explicitly resists categorizing those with economic/educational power as being subaltern. (“Then, the next point; everybody thinks the subaltern is just a classy word for oppressed, for Other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie” (Spivak qtd. in De Kock 145).) In the context of this essay, the Iraqi and Iranian people Sharif voices in her poems are classified as “deviations” and “differences” from the western ideal within the frame of the US war on terror. While some individuals Sharif voices, such as her uncle, do not completely fit Spivak’s definition of subaltern, I find it helpful to use this term in order to think about how the US focuses on “deviations” and “differences” when engaging in political rhetoric. While these individuals may not fit the subaltern category in terms of social status
within their own countries, the US effectively treats them as subaltern. Sharif herself, as an Iranian immigrant, can be classified as a western-educated subaltern elite. Within this paradigm the subaltern-as-subject becomes a logical progression based on the assumption that those that are different from the western “ideal” are evolutionarily less advanced rather than examples of the diverse ways in which cultures function. When one focuses on perceived deviations from the western ideal, a power vacuum is created where the west becomes the moral authority and those in the Middle East become the subaltern “other” in the war on terror. Once middle-eastern people and immigrants are cast as subaltern, these individuals can no longer speak or act for themselves. Instead, a catch-all category, the other, is created, one used rhetorically from the outside to manipulate the US’s war agenda. In this formulation neither the subaltern individual nor the subaltern community has a voice. Thus, the subaltern becomes a subject spoken for and acted upon. To complicate this issue further, attempts at speaking for subaltern communities are done “from the self-diagnosed transparency of the first-world radical intellectual” (Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 80), which disguises imperialist and capitalist motivations. This perceived transparency masks the problematic nature of an outsider, including the subaltern elite, speaking for any people. Sharif’s voicing of Iraqi and Iranian people is potentially problematic within this construct as she is speaking for the subaltern from a perceived authority as an Iranian-American subaltern elite.

iv “look — (*) In mine warfare, a period during which a mine circuit is receptive of an influence” (Department of Defense 318).

v The term “dialectical” is an important theoretical frame for me because it emphasizes the oppositions and tensions between ideas. Unlike Plato’s idea that old ideas must be replaced with new concepts, Hegel emphasized a dialectic where traces of the old are preserved in the new. Dialectical thinking maintains tension within ideas. A dialectical relationship, therefore, encourages reflection and complexity while a more harmonious relationship, like Said’s “contrapuntal thinker,” encourages solutions. While thinking along dialectical lines makes drawing conclusions more difficult, Sharif’s work, specifically her questioning of western constructs and language, encourages the reader to explore these moments of tension rather than search for solutions. Look contains more than one voice as well as more than one Truth.

vi A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory defines lyric in this way: “A lyric is usually fairly short, not often longer than fifty or sixty lines, and often only between a dozen and thirty lines; and it usually expresses the feelings and thoughts of a single speaker (not necessarily the poet herself) in a personal and subjective fashion. The range and variety of lyric verse is immense, and lyric poetry, which is to be found in most literatures, comprises the bulk of all poetry.”

vii Historically, the Petrarchan lyric focused on women as the objects of the male poet’s gaze rather than the poem’s speaker. (Poets like Sappho indicate that the male gaze was not always a component of the lyric voice. However, the male gaze remains an important critique of the western lyric voice.) Later poets, like Sylvia Plath, were negatively deemed emotional and confessional while their male contemporaries escaped this label. Sharif’s use of a lyric that combines the personal and the political is a hybridization of lyric form, one that complicates an accepted understanding of the role of female poets.

viii Despite many adaptations to the lyric genre, Petrarch’s legacy is strong within both the genre and criticism. His tropes continue to affect scholar’s understanding of what lyric is and how poets use the lyric form.

ix While contemporary performance poetry and spoken-word poetry have emphasized the personal within the lyric form, these styles are often deemed less literary. Poets like Jamaal May and Danez Smith are bridging this divide with both critically acclaimed books as well as illustrious careers in performance poetry.

x Rich begins her discussion of the personal and political in poetry explaining: “As a poet, I had learned much about both the value and the constraints of convention: the reassurances of traditional structures and the necessity to break from them in recognition of new experience. I felt more and more urgently the dynamic between poetry as language and poetry as a kind of action, probing, burning, stripping, placing itself in dialogue with others out beyond the individual self” (Arts of the Possible 55). Breaking traditional structures is precisely Sharif’s work throughout Look, and her aim is similar to Rich’s: poetry as action and dialogue.

xi “downgrade—to determine that classified information requires, in the interests of national security, a lower degree of protection against unauthorized disclosure than currently provided, coupled with a changing of the classification designation to reflect such a lower degree” (Department of Defense 170).
xii "draft—1. The conscription of qualified citizens in military service. 2. The depth of water that a vessel requires to float freely; the depth of a vessel from the water line to the keel. See also active duty; Military Service; watercraft" (Department of Defense 170).

xiii "drag—Force of aerodynamic resistance caused by the violent currents behind the shock front" (Department of Defense 170).

xiv "safe house — An innocent-appearing house or premises established by an organization for the purpose of conducting clandestine or covert activity in relative security" (Department of Defense 473).

xv "sheetlines— Those lines defining the geographic limits of the map or chart detail" (Department of Defense 489).

xvi "shell (specify) — (*) A command or request indicating the type of projectile to be used" (Department of Defense 490)

xvii The Bosphorus strait is in Turkey and separates Asian and European Turkey. Sharif was born in Istanbul, which is located on the shore of the Bosphorus.

xviii Keller believes that creating lyric distance politically and emotionally (like the Petrarchan lover’s distance from their beloved) is detrimental because it denies “global connectivity” (77). She suggests that the personal and political must interact in order to create connection within the lyric.

xix "lay— 1. Direct or adjust the aim of a weapon. 2. Setting of a weapon for a given range, a given direction, or both. 3. To drop one or more aerial bombs or aerial mines onto the surface from an aircraft. 4. To spread a smoke screen on the ground from an aircraft. 5. To calculate or project a course. 6. To lay on: a. to execute a bomber strike; b. to set up a mission” (Department of Defense 309).

xx Sharif situates her poetry outside the collective. In many political poets view their work: “There’s this vein of self-affirmation that runs through that generation of radical poets — this need to define and affirm a collective identity that is otherwise despised. … I think of poetry as diagnostic, rather than curative. … I just trust and know that certain lives need to be looked at very closely, and need to be grieved, and need to be considered — and affirmed” (Sharif, “The Role of the Poet…”). Diagnostic poetry opens the readership to those outside of the community described in the poems. While poetry that creates and affirms community is important, diagnostic poetry implies a collective responsibility and gives Sharif’s work a clear political bent.

xxi “dormant— In mine warfare, the state of a mine during which a time delay feature in a mine prevents it from being actuated” (Department of Defense 170).

xxii “division— (*) 1. A tactical unit/formation as follows: a. A major administrative and tactical unit/formation which combines in itself the necessary arms and services required for sustained combat, larger than a regiment/brigade and smaller than a corps. b. A number of naval vessels of similar type grouped together for operational and administrative command, or a tactical unit of a naval aircraft squadron, consisting of two or more sections. c. An air division is an air combat organization normally consisting of two or more wings with appropriate service units. The combat wings of an air division will normally contain similar type units. 2. An organizational part of a headquarters that handles military matters of a particular nature, such as personnel, intelligence, plans, and training, or supply and evacuation. 3. (DOD only) A number of personnel of a ship’s complement grouped together for tactical and administrative control” (Department of Defense 168).

xxiii “doctrine— Fundamental principles by which the military forces or elements thereof guide their actions in support of national objectives. It is authoritative but requires judgment in application. See also multinational doctrine; joint doctrine; multi-Service doctrine” (Department of Defense 169).

xxiv “distribution— 1. The arrangement of troops for any purpose, such as a battle, march, or maneuver. 2. A planned pattern of projectiles about a point. 3. A planned spread of fire to cover a desired frontage or depth. 4. An official delivery of anything, such as orders or supplies. 5. The operational process of synchronizing all elements of the logistic system to deliver the “right things” to the “right place” at the “right time” to support the geographic combatant commander. 6. The process of assigning military personnel to activities, units, or billets (JP 4-0)” (Department of Defense 167).

xxv Rachel Stone in The New Republic reports that erasure poetry has increased in popularity since President Trump’s election. While Look predates this boom in erasure, Stone’s thoughts on erasure echo Sharif’s thoughts on poetic language: “In these [erasure] poems there is a desire to re-examine the institutions and narratives that shape Americans’ lives, from government bureaucracy to new media. The poems’ authors reassert power over language that has typically been used to determine who does and does not belong. And while poets have been reassigning meaning to texts in this way for at least a century, erasure has gained
new energy at a moment when the country is deeply polarized—when official documents may hold radically different consequences and meanings for different people.”

When questioned about this rhetorical move, Sharif described her role as imagining the redaction in order to bring awareness (“Big Ideas...”), much like Butler’s subject visibility. She continued stating that if we had access to the letters, it wouldn’t be her role to write them. She described her writing process: she didn’t write the letter and redact. Rather, she skipped the parts that are cut out. Sharif didn’t want a letter only she could access. Her ultimate goal was to reenact the cruelty, not the position of the DOD (“Big Ideas...”).

Both Adorno and Altieri encourage the blending of these genres to highlight the impracticality of simple solutions.

Here I again borrow from Spivak’s concept of the subaltern. In the accepted western paradigm, Iraqis and Iraqi immigrant populations in the United States are defined by perceived ideological separations, or “deviations,” created by their culture, which is depicted as oppressive, Muslim, and extremist (words that are often used interchangeably despite their obvious differences). Spivak argues that, “for the ‘true’ subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself” (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 80). To be “unrepresentable” means one cannot be spoken of in symbolic forms or expressed in a communal (symbolic) way. Once Iraqi people and immigrants are cast as subaltern, these individuals can no longer speak for themselves.

The term “ethics” itself suggests a problematic either/or binary. While Sharif’s work troubles the concept of voice, ultimately, I believe that she herself is looking for an ethical solution, or, at least, encourages her reader to think in terms of ethics. Perhaps not a conception that emphasizes a clear right/wrong, but one instead that recognizes ethics includes areas of gray.

Said himself uses the poet as an example of an intellectual particularly suited to this state.

Said recognizes that the exile state uniquely positions poets and writers as capable of “lend[ing] dignity to a condition legislated to deny dignity—to deny an identity to people” (“Reflections” 175). His concept of the writer-as-exile describes writers as identity and dignity creators who “cultivate a scrupulous (not indulgent or sulky) subjectivity” (“Reflections” 184), partially through their unique position that forces them to “[insist] in his or her right to refuse to belong” and thus “compelling the world to accept your vision” (“Reflections” 182).

“mopping up — (*) The liquidation of remnants of enemy resistance in an area that has been surrounded or isolated, or through which other units have passed without eliminating all active resistance” (Department of Defense 363).

Najaf is a city in southern Iraq and is a sacred city to the Shi’ite.

“free mail — Correspondence of a personal nature that weighs less than 11 ounces, to include audio and video recording tapes, from a member of the Armed Forces or designated civilian, mailed postage free from a Secretary of Defense approved free mail zone” (Department of Defense 219).
Works Cited


Retrieved from


Harvard University Press, 2014.
