

Missing

Youth, Citizenship, and Empire after 9/11

men without countries:
canaries in mines

لا يوجد إسان
غير قانوني

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Cultural Citizenship

My research explores the ways in which young South Asian immigrants make sense of citizenship, particularly cultural citizenship or everyday understandings of belonging and exclusion, a charged trope in the War on Terror. After 9/11, but also at earlier moments in U.S. history, cultural definitions of citizenship and dominant understandings of who is truly American mediate the rights afforded to citizens and immigrants and cultural constructs of “terrorists” (now “jihadists”), “borders,” and “security.” Young Muslim men, such as Amin, became inextricably associated with the specter of radical Islam and with an explicit, or sometimes implicit, suspicion exacerbated by anti-Arab racism and conflations of “Muslims” and “Arabs.” As I will discuss at greater length in [chapter 2](#), cultural citizenship is a critical issue for immigrants and nonwhite Americans because it highlights the ways in which the trope of national belonging, so powerful in modernity, is not just based on political, social, and economic dimensions of citizenship but is also defined in the social realm of belonging.⁷ These questions are especially pertinent to youth, who are viewed as the next generation of citizens and whose future cultural and political role in the nation is a concern for both the Right and the Left (France 1998). The issue of cultural citizenship is a critical one, as it goes to the heart of issues of equality and exclusion, rights and justice, and extends beyond official definitions of citizenship.

At the same time, cultural belonging is still intertwined with legal distinctions between citizens and noncitizens and issues of

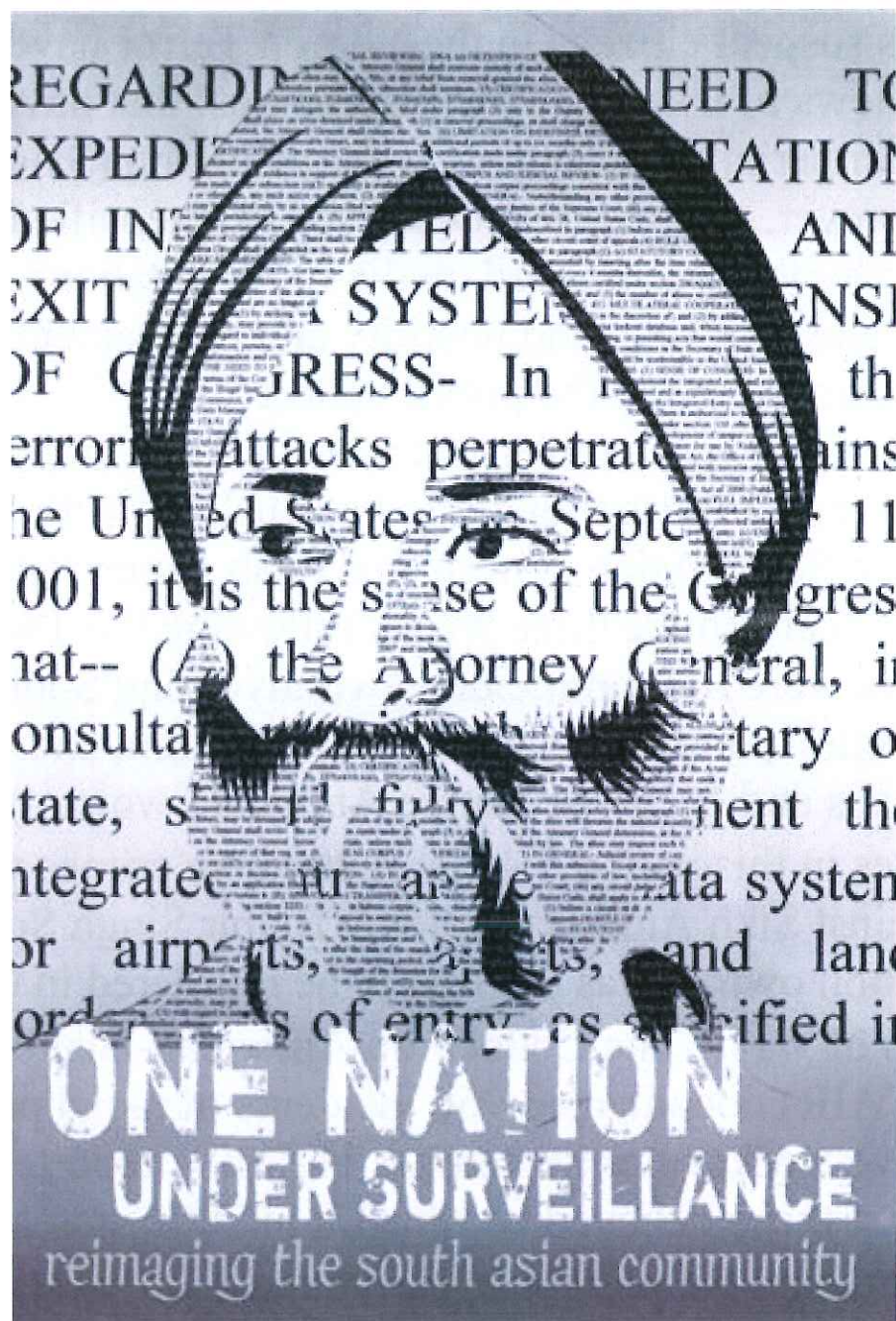
immigrant rights and worker rights in the neoliberal economy. My research demonstrates how issues of exclusion and inclusion play out in the sphere of labor for young immigrant workers, linking economic citizenship to consumption, subcultural affiliation, and (trans)national belonging for South Asian Muslim youth, questions that have been underexplored in existing work on Muslim American youth, in particular. Sara was one of several youth in this book who engaged with national (Indian) identity by consuming South Asian films and television shows, in the little time she had between school and her part-time job. Like other South Asian immigrant students, she also expressed a dissenting critique of the U.S. war in Afghanistan, challenging the use of the veil as an alibi for the War on Terror.

South Asian immigrant youth spoke of their relationship to the nation-state in various ways, as I will discuss in the chapters that follow: through transnational ties embedded in global labor and family networks (flexible citizenship), multicultural and political affiliations, popular culture, local and urban cultures (multicultural and polycultural citizenship), and dissent or critique of state policies (dissenting citizenship). These forms of cultural citizenship are overlapping and simultaneously expressed, and they highlight the interconnections between transnational migration, the neoliberal economy, multicultural management of “difference,” and political subversion and complicity.

The book explores how the War on Terror operates on the terrain of cultural citizenship, and is infused with cultural constructions of “terrorist threats” and “alien civilizations” that justify so-called racial profiling polices that targeted populations based on U.S. foreign policy concerns, as I will explain in [chapter 5](#). The cultural reimagining and political persecution of Muslims

and Arabs as suspect citizens in the War on Terror have roots in Orientalist views of Islam and the Middle East that have long been tied to imperial engagements with the region (Said 1981 [1978]). However, this suspicion emerged in intensified form after 9/11 through hyper-Orientalized media representations, state surveillance and profiling, and hostility and harassment of Arab and Muslim Americans in the public sphere.

After 9/11, there was a violent backlash in the United States against Muslims, or those thought to be Muslims, with 700 hate crimes against South Asian Americans, Arab Americans, and Muslim Americans in the three weeks following the Twin Towers attacks. There were four homicides (two involving South Asian American victims, one Sikh and the other Muslim, and others targeting Arabs and even one Native American woman), reported as hate crimes in this period.⁸ At least 200 hate crimes were reported against Sikh Americans alone; Balbir Singh Sodhi, a Sikh gas station owner, was the first to be murdered in connection to the events of 9/11.⁹ The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) documented 960 incidents of racial profiling just in the five weeks after September 11, 2001; reported hate crimes against those believed be Muslim in 2001 increased by 1,600 percent from the previous year, in the F B I's estimate.¹⁰ In addition to the official statistics for reported incidents of profiling, harassment, or assault—which are a conservative estimate since many more instances went unreported—there was also a much broader range of formal and informal practices of ongoing exclusion, profiling, and surveillance of South Asian, Arab, and Muslim Americans in the mainstream media and public sphere, as I will discuss later.



Filer for art exhibit at Asian Resource Gallery, Oakland, California, 2006. Graphic by Kasi Chakravartula; design by Joy Gloria Liu.

Under the guise of the War on Terror, there were mass detentions and deportations of Muslim and Arab Americans,

mainly immigrant men rounded up on public suspicion or for immigration violations. They had a chilling effect on Muslim and Arab American communities, as did the “Special Registration” program requiring Muslim immigrant men to register with the government and submit to questioning. The state’s program of surveillance, detentions, and deportations of South Asian, Arab, and Muslim Americans has largely receded from the mainstream media’s attention (except in a few sensationalized cases), but it continues to target these communities, particularly through ongoing FBI monitoring and surveillance, the use of Muslim and Arab informants, and interviews targeting Muslim males and mosque communities (e.g., Maira 2007).¹¹ The War on Terror is also, in part, a battle about the meaning of cultural citizenship: it uses a cultural discourse to emphasize values about clashing civilizations that presumably explain the “radicalization” of Muslim youth alienated from “Western” values and notions of liberal (and supposedly secular) democracy. The imperial state is constituted in these political as well as cultural processes of contestation, representation, classification, surveillance, and everyday disciplinary practices that shape cultural citizenship.

Exploring expressions of cultural citizenship by youth who are from communities targeted with suspicion after 9/11 allows us to understand some of the paradoxes of national belonging, exclusion, alienation, and political expression for a generation of immigrants that is coming of age at this particular moment, and it also sheds light on larger cultural and political debates about citizenship and dissent in the United States. These discussions of the political views of Muslim youth are shaped by deeper national anxieties, not just about “radical Islam” but also about the national consensus, the positioning of white middle-class

America, and the role of U.S. empire. This anxiety is most evident in the fear and loathing evoked by reports of alleged terrorist plots by young Muslim Americans, such as the sensationalized case of Hamid Hayat, a Pakistani American from Lodi, California (Dubal and Maira 2005; Maira 2007), which generate panic about a “fifth column.” But it also surfaces in the horror, confusion, and moral reprobation provoked by stories of young, white, middle-class and upper-middle-class Americans who convert to Islam and join the “other side” in the War on Terror. The so-called American Taliban, John Walker Lindh (Best 2003), and the al-Qaeda spokesperson, Adam Gadani, are viewed as betraying the nation not just because of their treacherous assistance to “the enemy” but also due to their apparent rejection of the cultural values underlying “Western” liberal democratic citizenship.