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RELOCATING THE FEMALE BODY: "QUEERING" AS ROUTES FOR AGENCY

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A THESIS

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Abstract

The representation of the female body throughout literature has a complicated history. My thesis attempts to restructure the historical narrative of the female body through a regional narration. The region is a site for collective experience, it allows for different places, spaces, memories, and histories to form as a cohesive unit as it develops a female body that acknowledges the dehumanization, objectification, and otherness it has undergone in each place, memory, and history. However, it is through these historical acknowledgments that allow for an alternative narrative and routes of agency to be developed in the present.

Thus, I argue for a new narrative of the female body, one that intimately connects it to not the only place in which it dwells, but the local, transnational, and global as a means for developing new intimacies and new foundations of willfulness, rewriting its past objectification. The female body no longer remains a platform for dehumanization, sexualization, consumption, and objectification but instead a body that represents shared experiences, unforeseen intimacies, and collective histories of the regions in which it has found its sense of belonging. Looking specifically at Mira Nair’s *Mississippi Masala*, Cormac McCarthy’s *All the Pretty Horses*, and Mohja Kahf’s *A Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, I relocate the female body situating it within a regional border, develop its new identity by establishing its ever present regional embodiment.
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For Papa
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INTRODUCTION:

Uma Narayan, in Dislocating Cultures, argues “for many of us, women in different parts of the world, our relationships to our mothers resemble our relationships to the motherlands of the cultures in which we were raised. Both our mothers and our mother cultures give us all sorts of contradictory messages, encouraging their daughters to be confident, impudent, and self-assertive even as they attempt to instill conformity, decorum, and silence, seemingly oblivious to these contradictions” (8). The site of these “contradictions” is the female body, a physical attribute given a seemingly repressive title: a symbol. It is a confining symbol of domesticity, sexuality, and submission and thus the female body has been reduced to a transaction, a “thing” to be bought, sold, and most importantly consumed, not just by the universal market, but by individuals who claim a female body as theirs, strangers hoping to reap the benefits the body can bestow, dehumanizing the woman who lives within it.

Our “mother culture” has made the female body a symbol, a main attraction, a physical entity to be silenced when it attempts to speak up, to stake its claim in a world that denounces its value. The female body is given two choices: to be “hyper visible” or “invisible.” “Hyper-visible” making the female body a symbol of objectification and “invisible” condemning the body as useless and devoid of its inherent value. If a woman wants to present herself as “hyper visible” she becomes branded as inherently sexual, asking for her body to be consumed through the eyes and bodies of strangers. If a woman attempts to be “invisible” she is then lost of any power she and her body could have attained. Finding a balance between these two options seems rather impossible.
However, breaking the female body away from these symbols requires examining the physical spaces and places in which these bodies are living, where they are present, where they came from, and how they came to be. Narayan posits “visions of one’s nation, one’s national history and community are deeply tied to one’s sense of place, to one’s sense of belonging to a larger community, to one’s sense of heritage and loyalties. Inherited pictures of gender roles and family and social arrangements are often central elements to both one’s sense of self and to one’s sense of one’s social world” (36). Thus, the identity of the female body is inextricably linked to the space and place in which it dwells. The “mother culture” or “nation” in which the female body exists deeply affects its representation, and most importantly “one’s sense of belonging [...] and one’s sense of self.” The female body is forced to confront the history in which it was raised, thus calling for a “rethinking” of the roles in which it is expected to fulfill, denying the choices society has presented to it.

Gayatri Gopinath in *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetics of Queer Diaspora* presents an alternative way to view a physical space/place, pushing against the typical nationalist vision as “the nation as the primary point of reference” develops “formulations of queerness that fail to grasp the texture of regionally inflected gender and sexual formations” (5). As mentioned previously, our “mother culture,” or in other words our nation, dictates the representation of the female body: how it should look, how it should act, where it should and should not be present. The nation claims ownership of the female body, leaving it bounded by its borders, and held hostage by the historical narratives its past has written and a heteronormative national culture. Thus, when the female body is controlled through the nation as its “primary point of reference,” it is
limited in its ability to develop new forms of agency that push back against a heteronormative nation and society, and therefore fails to deconstruct any opportunity for the restructuring of the female body as a symbol, a piece of property, and an item to be consumed. In opposition, Gopinath intimately dissects the regional, specifically “queer regional diasporas” that grant the development of queer intimacy, pleasure, and respite especially when looking at the body (20-21). When narrating the body through “queerness,” and not only “queerness” in reference to nonnormative sexuality, “desires, affiliations, and gender embodiments,” but also the various ways of “seeing and sensing space” made available by the cohesion of the regional and diasporic, the female body develops new routes for agency, ones that defy normative history, sexualization, and gender embodiment, and instead encourage an alternative narrative relying on regional embodiment, thus “queering” the heteronormative national culture (Gopinath 6).

Gopinath argues that “a turn to the region, is, quite often, a turn to the personal and autobiographical,” thus allowing space/place to narrate one’s “sense of self” even when these engagements “attempt to deconstruct an essentialist logic of identity, place and belonging” (26-27). The region allows for an alternative narrative to be written, one that is not static or self-enclosed, but permits agency in places where normative historical and national narratives have denied it. To fully understand place, and further, a regional embodiment, it takes learning how to infuse the past and present together, not as two separate entities but through “queering” both the personal and the region together, in which one can create a narrative of the self that develops a “shared queer visual aesthetic that mobilizes new ways of seeing both regions and archives” and enacts through an “affective register,” an intimate connection between the two. Turning to region for self-
narration allows for collective mutual past narratives of women’s bodies, their experiences, their histories and memories of the spaces, places. It also provides the ability to combine it with the nonnormative present, creating moments of “queer intimacy,” in which the female body has become visible in spaces, places, and embodiments that push away from how the nation expects it to be. Thus, the region develops a “queer” female body, restructuring one’s “sense of self” and a “sense of belonging,” as region creates a more meaningful, more inclusive identity that fortifies alliances between histories, bodies, and places, and experiences free from a nation’s borders. Thus, the female body becomes a site of “intersecting queer regional diaspora” (Gopinath 21).

Upon entering my MA, place, space, and embodiment in literature were deemed especially significant. Three terms that I could define, but failed to fully grasp their importance in my interests: feminist literature and more specifically, the representation of the female body. I failed to comprehend how a physical space, borders of place, and embodiment could cultivate a relationship to the female body, asking myself what these notions had to do with feminism, the female body, and most importantly me. It was not until my second year that these subjects started to form an inseparable bond within my research. I realized that “one’s sense of self” and “one’s sense of belonging” is always linked to the space/place in which they dwell; and how one’s identity, their forming of self, relies heavily on the space in which they grew, where their “social world” exists and existed, and how their past and present in these places must fruitfully grow as one, rather than two separate isolated entities. The relationship between space, place, and embodiment connects a body to its being, it cultivates a greater understanding of how and
why the representation of the female body has come to be. It connects intimate histories between the two, mapping archives of the past and the present together. I realized that my experience at Creighton both in undergraduate and graduate school was an example of the narrative in which I was researching.

When I reflect on the first time I visited the campus, I have a distinct memory. I stood wrapped in my North Face winter coat and paisley scarf, complicity smiling, as my mom took a picture of me in Deglman Circle in front of the Creighton University plaque. This was my official acceptance, the space in which I was standing would now house me for the following six years; of course little did I know about the extra two. I remember feeling settled, content, but not genuinely excited. Of course, that feeling changed as the years continued to pass by, and Creighton University turned from a space in which I lived, to a place that cultivated my identity, my writing; it is where I found my sense of self, not only as a student, but as a young woman, and a writer. It has brought my past into my present, fusing the two together to cultivate a deeper understanding of the places that molded me and how they must coexist together to maintain my “sense of self” and “sense of belonging.” I may have been born in Chicago, but I was also molded at Creighton, and thus I created my own regional embodiment including where I was from, but also where I was now present.

Creighton connected me to my body in ways that I had never anticipated, sharing with me the ways in which a place transforms a body, physically, emotionally, and mentally. My experiences in this program, at this school, set me up for the exact position in which I now stand, but so did the past choices I have made to get here outside of my existence in this campus. I now embody what Creighton has given me through an
intimate relationship with place: values that challenge the normative structures of a
“mother culture” that fails to give a louder, non restricting voice to the female body. But
even after learning my own personal definition of place, I yearned for a deeper
understanding of what place was, how and why it functioned as one of the most
significant driving forces in cultivating an identity, and how something once so foreign to
me now made up the foundation of my research.

Chapter 1 of my thesis “Navigating Intimacy within the American South in Mira
Nair’s Mississippi Masala,” redefines heteronormativity within the American South. By
looking at the relationship between Mina and Demetrius, I argue that their placement
within this region allows them to form a “queer” interracial alliance as means to develop
an alternative narrative that frees them from the constraints of the historical narratives of
their opposing racial and cultural communities. I look to Lisa Lowe’s The Intimacies of
Four Continents, employing her definition of intimacy and how it functions as a tool to
“develop modern liberal subjects and modern spheres of social life,” that demand a
restructuring of colonial hierarchies that are present within Mina and Demetrius’s
Greenwood communities. In my chapter, intimacy operates as catalyst in developing a
new political economy, one that takes previously “othered” bodies—Mina and
Demetrius-- and brings them into an alternative narrative that demonstrates “other” as an
intimate power of social and economic change that acknowledges the differences of
previous colonial hierarchies, but develops alliances in and through them, as
demonstrated through Mina and Demetrius’s interracial alliance.

In Chapter 2, Navigating the “dehumanized” Female Body as “Willful Subject”
in Cormac McCarthy’s All the Pretty Horses, I turn to the regional south as I attempt to
reconstruct the male objectified and dehumanized female body of Alejandra. Located in the overtly patriarchal Mexico, a landscape that traffics in discourses of conquest, subordination of women, and exponential value of physical and manual labor (“a man’s job”), Alejandra is a female body bounded within a “man’s world,” dictated by her father’s ownership and control. Where objectification and dehumanization are terms that typically degrade the female body, I demonstrate how Alejandra’s turns her objectification into her main source of agency as she becomes a willful subject, rather than a willed object. Sara Ahmed’s *Willful Subjects* describes “the will” as “predicating subject- hood— that is, the practice of willfulness, of exercising one’s will, determines one’s status as subject. The subject *wills*, the object is what is *willed*” (27). Where previous critics have situated John Grady as the subject per his demonstration of male objectification unto Alejandra’s body, it is Alejandra who *wills* John Grady, reversing the heteronormative gender roles within McCarthy’s text. Alejandra’s physical body becomes the catalyst for her to “will” John Grady, turning him into the object that is willed.

Jack Halberstam’s *a Queer Time and a Queer Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* defines “queer” as reflecting any nonnormative or non-sanctioned desires. It is through Alejandra’s “queering” of her body, that ultimately allows for the “queering” of the Mexican landscape, as she turns an overtly patriarchal heteronormative Mexican landscape into a landscape dictated and controlled through her bodily actions.
Thus, no male body can exist outside of the landscape which she has created, transforming and “queering” the Mexican landscape from a “womanless milieu” to an ultimate feminine power, pushing against women’s subordination within Mexico.

The final chapter of my thesis, I would argue is the most critical in understanding how region functions in relation to the female body and self identity. In “The ‘Queering’ of Region: Spatial Identity and the Female Body in Mohja Kahf’s The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf” I discuss physical displacement of the female body, and the body’s connection to nation as its “primary point of reference” (Gopinath 4). Relying on Gayatri Gopinath’s Unruly Visions, along with her “queer optic” and “queering” of region, I renarrate the female body within in a regional framework, taking away the exclusive connection to the nation and thus transforming the female body into a platform of unanticipated intimacies of place and space, a site of cultivation of the local, transnational and global, as well as hybrid body of past and present, bringing together a successful cohesion of space, time, and regional embodiment. In doing so, the female body and female identity is able to reconstruct an “alternative narrative” one that acknowledges historical difference, but allows for the possibility of alliance “in and through” those differences, thus developing a “deep understanding of conjoined pasts, presents, futures, and envisions the possibility of affiliation” (Gopinath 29).

When linking all of these subjects together, I reflect on the historical formation of the female body, the way the past has shifted its present representation and vice versa. My thesis aims to restructure and redefine the representation of the female body in ways that are unconventional to the feminist dialogue. I turn to the integration of region specifically, to fortify the connection between “one’s sense of self” and “one’s sense of
belonging” and the female body to demonstrate the agency granted within a heteronormative landscape, ultimately “queering” each hetero space into a place of power. I aim to take away the nation as the body’s primary point of reference, thus disrupting the heteronormative vision of a bordered female identity. In doing so, the female body is no longer a product of the nation, but of the region, solidifying its agency within the local, global, and transnational, rewriting itself through the linked histories and unforeseen intimacies of a regional embodiment.
CHAPTER ONE:

Navigating Intimacy within the American Regional South in Mira Nair’s *Mississippi Masala*

Kum-Kum Bhavnani in “Organic Hybridity or Commodification of Hybridity? Comments on *Mississippi Masala*,” argues that *Mississippi Masala* is a “fictional film that depends on excitement and energy to portray themes of ‘love, home, [and] displacement” (193). The film follows the interracial romance between Mina, a twenty-four year old South Asian Indian immigrant woman, and Demetrius, an African American motel carpet-cleaning businessman. Most of the film takes place in Greenwood, Mississippi and situates Mina and Demetrius’s relationship within the American South. Some critics argue that *Mississippi Masala* “reproduces stereotypical notions about Indians in the United States, as well as black people and families in the South” (Bhavnani 194). However, critics have failed to analyze the importance of region when navigating the physical and racial intimacy between Mina and Demetrius. Vanita Reddy in her article “Afro-Asian Intimacies and The Politics and Aesthetics of Cross-Racial Struggle in Mira Nair’s *Mississippi Masala* defines intimacy as “a technology of imperial statecraft through the management of sex” and also intimacy as “the alliances, affections, and feelings of close familiarity among differently racialized subjects that constitute the ‘inaccessible and unseen’ excesses of such forms of management” (235). Lisa Lowe in her book *The Intimacies of Four Continents* refers to intimacy as a “heuristic” and a means to “observe the historical division of world processes into those that develop modern liberal subjects and modern spheres of social life, and those
processes that are forgotten, cast as failed or irrelevant because they do not produce ‘value’ legible within modern classifications” (18). Relying on both Reddy’s and Lowe’s definitions of “intimacy,” I aim to unearth how the intimacy, both physical, historical, and racial between Mina and Demetrius “queers” their heteronormative relationship and creates a temporary “queer” space within the regional South. Referring Jack Halberstam’s *In A Queer Time Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, I define “queer” as reflecting any nonnormative or non-sanctioned desires. I argue that the American South, specifically, Greenwood, Mississippi, is “queered” due to the interracial romance and alliance between Mina and Demetrius. Through their opposing “colored” bodies, racial backgrounds, physical displacement, and opposing cultures, they unite to form an interracial reliance pressing on the South to conform to nonnormative sexual culture and desire.

**Mina and Demetrius: An Intimate Interracial Alliance Demonstrated Through Region**

An individual usually develops a “sense of home” and “sense of belonging” through the intimate connection they share with the physical place in which they are from. Uma Narayan in *Dislocating Cultures* posits

visions of one’s nation, one’s national history and community are deeply tied to one’s sense of place, to one’s sense of belonging to a larger community, to one’s sense of heritage and loyalties. Inherited pictures of gender roles and family and social arrangements are often central elements to both one’s sense of self and to one’s sense of one’s social world (36).
Thus, in order to develop a new intimacy, one that allows for an intimacy that develops “alliances, affections, and feelings of close familiarity among differently racialized subjects” it is necessary to drive one’s self away from their national culture as their “primary point of reference,” as doing so will create an abundance of opportunities to establish unanticipated intimacies between previously “othered” bodies and regions, the exact case for Mina and Demetrius (Reddy 235). Mina, a “Ugandan Indian,” has only been in Mississippi for three years. Before that she was in England, and before that she was in Africa. She has never been to India, even though she remains “technically” Indian and her parents abide by Indian culture. She refers to herself as “a kind of mixed masala,” a representation of different cultures and races now physically present within the regional South. Demetrius grew up African American in Mississippi. Thus the two come from totally separate backgrounds, emphasizing their socio political and racial contrasts. However, as Lowe contends, intimacy develops “modern liberal subjects” as well as “modern spheres of social life” and Mina and Demetrius’s interracial alliance and romance transforms them into these “modern liberal subjects” while being located within the South. Mina and Demetrius's relationship creates a "modern sphere of social life" as their interracial romance and alliance is one that pushes against the heteronormativity of society in the South. The South, a highly racialized region, would normally regard their interracial relationship as "problematic” as the South polices racial boundaries, but Mina and Demetrius demonstrate a strong racial and political alliance that allows for the blending of heritage, race, and previous historical narratives, “queering” the normative heterosexual relationships present within the South.
Jigna Desai in *Beyond Bollywood: The Cultural Politics of South Asian Diasporic Film* argues that “the film finds resolution through the interracial heterosexual romance configuring a global racial politics of alliance” (72). Desai uses the term “heterosexual romance” to define Mina and Demetrius’s relationship and by the means in which they achieve what she calls a “global racial politics of alliance.” Although by normative standards “heterosexual” refers to a male and female participating in a romantic relationship, as Mina and Demetrius are doing, I believe their interracial alliance is more “queer” than it is “heteronormative” regardless of their gender embodiments. As I mentioned previously, Halberstam refers to “queer” as reflecting any nonnormative or non-sanctioned desires. Further, Gayatri Gopinath in *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetics of Queer Diaspora* defines “queerness” as “nonnormative sexual practices, desires, affiliations, and gender embodiments, but also the alternative ways of seeing and sensing space” (9). Their relationship is “queer” not based on their gender embodiments, but based on their affiliation with another, and the place in which their affiliation takes place, the South. Radharani Ray’s “Interrogating Race in *Mississippi Masala*” argues how the film “illustrates how the social meaning of race is constructed by the interaction between existing beliefs about racial differences and the exigencies of the particular situation” (157). Mina and Demetrius come from two separate, and further, opposing racial and cultural backgrounds, thus creating a cultural collision. Therefore, their opposing communities make their assumptions of Mina and Demetrius based upon the “existing beliefs” and historical narratives they have inherited through cultural lineage, rather than actual physical affiliation with one another. Thus, “a large part of the story pivots around the apparent impossibility of a union between Demetrius and Mina because they are
racially different” (Ray 163). Due to their “racial difference” their affiliation with one another I argue is nonnormative, thus transforming into a “queer” relationship, as their desire for another defies heteronormative boundaries of sexual relationships, both in the South due to their race, as well as their racial backgrounds and cultures, as they desire a body outside their “normative” racial communities. The fact that their relationship takes place in the American South, also to a certain extent “queers” their relationship, as the South makes non-white bodies “hypervisible.” However, their hypervisibility marks them not by means of degradation, but instead by exemplifying their interracial alliance, a shared connection of unanticipated intimacies between two opposing racial bodies. It is ironic as the South creates the physical space for Mina and Demetrius to achieve their interracial reliance, creating an intimacy between them that builds on Lowe’s ideas of “modern liberal subjects” as well as “modern spheres of social life.” In the Southern landscape, they transform into “modern liberal subjects” detesting the historical narratives of the region, contributing to a further development of “modern spheres of social life,” that derail heteronormativity as the interraciality of their relationship is usually prohibited and policed within the Southern region. However, Mina and Demetrius instead encourage “queer” relationships, not only based upon gender embodiment, but affiliation, desire, and racial backgrounds. Through Mina and Demetrius’s “queer” interracial alliance both individuals are able to form an alternative narrative that is free from the constraint of mutually exclusive racial and cultural backgrounds, and instead bring their racial and cultural backgrounds together to form one that includes the local, transnational, and the global. While away on their trip to Biloxi, Mina and Demetrius decide to ride the Ferris wheel when Demetrius says, “The world looks good from up
here. I say we travel together, what do you say?” In unison, Mina and Demetrius begin to
name all the places they wish to travel together including Africa, Colombia, Jamaica, and
India. Their alternative narrative provides them with the opportunity to expand their
regional embodiment, traveling to places that they wish to connect their past together
with their present. In doing so, they break free of exclusivity of their cultural
backgrounds, demonstrating an intimacy together that seeks deeper intimacies in and new
“modern spheres of social lives” within new regions.

Desai continues her argument in stating that Mississippi Masala “detaches itself
from Africa and moves away from Mississippi (and the South) to separate the couple
from their disapproving communities [...] the film closes [...] moving into an unmarked
America” (73). Gopinath defines nostalgia as a confinement of the past that “removes it
from any transactional and material relation to the present; the past becomes an isolatable
and consumable unit of time” (42). In order for Africa to become “detached” from Mina,
she would have to view it as an “isolatable” unit of time, confined to her past and a total
separate entity from her present. However, Mina refers to herself as a “mixed masala,”
signifying that her past is in fact not an isolated unit of time, but instead a current part of
her present. The Mina that represents a “mixed masala” is made up of her connections to
all regions, not one nation in particular. Thus, she remains a “mixed masala,” and a
“mixed” racial and regional body, embodying all of her experiences within Uganda,
England, Mississippi, and the South into her “sense of belonging” and “sense of self.”
She has no sense of nostalgia, thus developing a regional embodiment, that ultimately
contributes to her “queer” relationship with Demetrius. Mina has successfully brought
together the historical narratives of her past into the alternative narrative she is creating
with Demetrius, deepening their mutual affiliation with one another, and created more unanticipated intimacies between two different, previously “othered” bodies. Thus, the move into “unmarked America,” allows the opportunity for Mina and Demetrius to “queer” another region, moving into “unmarked” space that they can “mark” with their interracial alliance and intimacy.

Desai argues that the intimacy between Mina and Demetrius “indicates the reopening of possibilities that have been foreclosed in postcolonial Uganda” (83). This is another representation of Mina bringing the past into her present, the “possibilities” that have been closed in postcolonial Uganda, now become present in the American South. Postcolonial Uganda did not permit Asians to live in Africa. Mina’s father Jay states, “I’ve always been Ugandan first, Indian second. Uganda is my home.” Although Jay claims that he is “Ugandan first, Indian second” the “possibility” for him and Mina to maintain their multicultural identity within Ugandan borders is impossible as Okelo states, “Africa is for Africans. Black Africans,” causing their displacement in Uganda. Uganda represents the mutual exclusivity of race within borders, and although the American South polices racial boundaries, it still provides the spatial opportunity for Mina to maintain her multicultural identity, bringing Uganda to her present life in Greenwood, Mississippi, which is ultimately heightened by her interracial alliance with Demetrius and her participation with his family. When Mina arrives to eat dinner with Demetrius’s family, Demetrius’s fathers asks, “How come they’ve got Indians in Africa?” She responds, “The British brought them there to make the railroads,” he posits back, “like slaves?” Mina agrees. This scene exemplifies an attempt between Mina and Demetrius’s father to establish a historical link between enslavement and indentured
labor, creating a cultural commonality as a means to expand their multicultural and regional identities.

When Mina’s family discovers their relationship, she responds to her mother claiming, “This is America Ma, no one cares.” Although after Mina tells this to her mother, the film demonstrates a host of instances that shows “everyone cares.” The cultural collision of their communities creates physical distance between Demetrius and Mina. However, their persistence in remaining intimate overtakes the cultural collision of their communities, and instead sparks a new economic order—South Asians and blacks working together as a means to gain capital, as witnessed through Mina and Demetrius’s joint cleaning business within the American South. Thus, being in the South, although usually a region that creates hypervisibility to non-white bodies, produces a “queer” relationship based upon Mina’s perception of American culture. Both Mina and Demetrius, refuse to be constrained by their cultural backgrounds., Demetrius confronts Jay stating Jay does not think he is “good enough” for Mina. Jay responds, “No that’s not it. Mina is free to love anyone, [...] You know, once I was like both of you. I thought I could change the world, be different, but the world is not so quick to change [...] I don’t want her [Mina] to go through the same struggle as I did.” Here, Jay only sees the differences between Mina and Demetrius, that of their racial and cultural backgrounds that would ultimately create a “struggle” for Mina, othering her, and increasing her hypervisibility. However, Jay is trying to equate postcolonial Uganda to the American South, an equivalence that provokes Demetrius. Reddy argues “Demetrius claims greater political purchase on the word ‘struggle’ than Jay, because he sees Jay as immune to the
forms of racism that he as a black man faces in the U.S. South, where black populations are still the most visible target of white supremacist ideologies” (242).

Okelo is to Jay what Demetrius is to Mina, a significant other of a different “race” and “skin color.” Jay tells Mina “the color my [his] skin, that’s why we left” in reference to their leaving Uganda. Thus, Jay anticipates the struggle he faced with Okelo, the struggle of being racialized and thus displaced within Uganda due to the “color of his skin” will initiate the same struggle between her and Demetrius in America. However, the American South, although considered a racist region, does not expel Mina or Demetrius’s bodies. Rather the American South creates a landscape that encourages Mina and Demetrius to “stick together” because as Demetrius posits, “Us colored people must stick together.” Thus, the racial boundaries policed by the South actually create a deeper intimacy within Mina and Demetrius’s interracial alliance, as together they unite the cohesion of two separate races and skin colors, pushing back against heteronormativity of the American South and their cultures. Thus, Mina and Demetrius’s interracial alliance is fueled by their rejection of colonialism and acknowledgment of cultural collision to form an alternative narrative free from racial boundaries.

Reddy argues that although the “interracial romance between Mina and Demetrius occupies a great part of Mississippi Masala’s plot, it is the relationship between Jay […] and Okelo [that] […] operates as the narrative frame […] of the film as a whole” (237). Although attention needs to be drawn to the relationship between Jay and Okelo, I argue that the interracial alliance” between Mina and Demetrius is what “operates” as the narrative frame of the film. The interracial formed by Mina and Demetrius’s intimacy, acknowledges the importance of colonial and racial hierarchies at play in the film. This
alliance also draws on organic hybridity. Bhavnani argues that the film engages “with politics by drawing on organic hybridity to hint at how individuals can negotiate different ways of living and of identification to subvert the rigid political realities of their lives” (195). Bhavnani defines “organic hybridity” as the merged and fused identities which create a mixture in which it is difficult to specify the significance of any one individual axis of inequality. Organic hybridity can, therefore, explicitly play with genders, cultures, sexualities, nationalities, and racisms to suggest new prospects for relationships and politics. Thus, any discussion of organic hybridity demands a look at how identity, experience, and culture articulate with one another, and simultaneously, with representation, politics, and power (192).

Mina and Demetrius have successfully demonstrated organic hybridity through their use of region, specifically their “queer” relationship within the American south. Mina and Demetrius through their intimacy have created a “modern liberal subject” that has successfully “merged and fused” their identities together. Their “organic hybridity” navigates the way in which the American South has infused their historical narratives together. Demetrius tells Mina, “Race is passed down like a recipe,” hinting that the passing down of race is a tradition. However, they break this notion through their interracial alliance, demonstrating how the fusing of their “genders, cultures, nationalities, and racisms” form an organic alternative narrative that acknowledges difference, but creates cultural commonalities and shared experience and alliance through difference as well. The “rigid political realities” Mina and Demetrius face dissolve as they move into an “unmarked America” at the end of the film due to their successful
infusion of unanticipated intimacies between their racial and cultural backgrounds. They become more than romantic partners, but also now business partners that allows their mutual labor to map a new life free from social constraint that encourages the pursuit of regional expansion.

*Mississippi Masala* suggests that “the politics of alliance are located in the intimate details and relations of everyday practices” (Stoler 84). Mina and Demetrius’s “politics of alliance” are located within their intimacy and the way in which their “queer” relationship defies racial and cultural heteronormativity within their perspective communities and the American south. Their “politics of alliance” stem from their rebellion of colonial and racial hierarchies. For example, Mina defies her parents by going to Biloxi with Demetrius, and further by continuing to pursue him after their relationship is found out and then prohibited. Demetrius refuses his family’s insistence on his reconciliation with Alicia—his childhood African American girlfriend—and instead chooses to pursue a relationship with Mina, an “Indian” girl “from everywhere.” They refuse to let the color of their skin to be the reason they disengage from their organic hybridity. Thus their “intimacy” allows them to be develop an interracial alliance that functions as a means to gain political and social freedom, creating “modern spheres of social life”—referring to their joint business venture and pursuit of labor in different regions, demonstrating their consensual fusion of race, culture, and labor. Upon returning to Uganda Jay writes to Kinno “there is so little love in the world, and yet so much. Mina was right.” As mentioned previously, Jay believed that “struggle” would create an undying hardship between Mina and Demetrius, that “love” was impossible due to how the American South would perceive their relationship. However, Jay has acknowledged
that the “merging and fusing” of race based on intimacy through Bhavnani’s organic hybridity, allows for a “sense of belonging” that defies social expectations and can exist even when “struggle” is present.

As I have argued for previously, Mina and Demetrius’s only route to develop a “queer” relationship that establishes an alternative narrative is through their intimacy with one other, as it creates a solid foundation in joint racial and cultural pasts, shared histories, and unanticipated intimacies between regions, that creates the greatest power against normative society within their cultures and the south. For example, when their affair is made public, rather than dissolve their interracial alliance, both Mina and Demetrius choose to keep participating in their relationship as the only way to challenge the colonial and racial hierarchies involves their intimacy as an interracial alliance. They are stronger as an intimate alliance than romantic partners because they have the ability to free themselves from their constraint of their communities as they unite to overcome exclusive racial identity and racism. Desai argues “the film asserts the necessity of South Asians claiming racial identity and multicultural solidarity by having Mina choose to be with Demetrius” (84). Mina obtains “multicultural solidarity” through her intimacy with Demetrius, but again she chooses him to develop a “queer” all encompassing regional relationship. The more intimate they become, the greater threat they become to any heteronormative culture. Demetrius serves as an escape route. Desai argues:

Mina’s relationship with Demetrius functions in the film not only as the resolution of historical racial conflict but also as the process of Americanization and racial and cultural identity formation through a subsuming of the transnational migrant woman’s narrative by the narrative of the multicultural romance and American
solidarity. The film forcefully suggests the necessity of alliances between people of color (85).

There is a lot to break down here. First, Mina’s interracial alliance with Demetrius allows her to physically leave South Asian diasporic community. Although she physically departs from the Greenwood community, she is not completely dissolving that part of her identity, she still remains a “mixed masala.” Her reason for leaving is not completely asking for a total separation from her culture, but for the opportunity for her to “grow” outside of what she has already become within her Greenwood community. Mina tells Kinnu, “If I don’t leave now, I’ll never leave” as she departs from her parents. Kinnu tells Jay, “She can’t grow here anymore,” acknowledging that Mina with Demetrius will have the opportunity to expand her regional and cultural embodiment.

Demetrius’s interracial alliance with Mina results in his leaving of the African American community, but again only physically leaving, not separating his past identity from his present identity. By leaving their racial and cultural communities, they are solidifying their opportunity to expand their “queer” relationship into various “queer” spaces outside of the American south as they journey into “unmarked America.” Their interracial alliance serves as a political identity formation. Their intimacy is absolutely necessary to break free of their previous political identities, as in doing so, they became “modern liberal subjects” by acknowledging their past historical narratives to which they will always belong, while also restructuring those narratives as a means to further develop their organic hybridity, creating a greater access to equality through their racial affiliation.
Reddy argues “romance is not a narrative end in itself; most often, it draws out how state racisms and antistate political struggle […] are bound up in feelings of loyalty and betrayal between men (239). Reddy agrees that romance cannot function as the sole narrative, but rather it is a representation of racism and betrayal. For example, Jay warns Mina about the dangers of interracial love when he states, “That’s why we left, not because of Idi Amin or anything like that. Believe me. I am speaking from experience. People stick to their own kind, Mina. We are forced to accept that. I’m only trying to spare you the pain.” He wants to warn Mina about the potential heartbreak that she will face in dating an African American--Demetrius. However, Mina can disregard heartbreak, because what she has with Demetrius functions as an alternative narrative, that does not remain static or self-enclosed but instead relies on the conjoined intimacies between Mina and Demetrius that allow for a new “sense of belonging” and “sense of home,” based upon their rebuttal to heteronormative society. When Jay says “people stick to their own kind,” Mina’s intimacy with Demetrius exemplifies how their interracial alliance causes Mina to want to expand her regional identity outside of the Greenwood community, and “grow” as a means to cultivate a greater “sense of belonging” within the American South. Again, demonstrating their organic hybridity their merging and fusion of opposing cultural and racial identities. Demetrius and Mina sparked desire in one another to “queer” their cultures, and the space in which they were dwelling as a means to create new routes of agency for her body and for Demetrius’s. In “queering” cultures I refer to how Mina and Demetrius have created a “queer optic” through their interracial alliance, that develops agency as a means to create “alternative ways of seeing and sensing space” (Gopinath 21). Thus, the American South had previously been a region
that dictated the mutual exclusivity of their race and culture. However, their interracial alliance allowed them to create an “alternative” view of the American South as a landscape that develops their intimacy, as witnessed on their trip to Biloxi.

Reddy argues “the language of racial struggle in Nair’s film is routinely routed through the discourse of love” (253). Racial struggle is present through Mina and Demetrius’s interracial alliance, but combining their struggles together rather than create “love” creates an intimacy between their shared racial othering. Ann Laura Stoler argues “in talking about the politics of intimacy, I am not talking ‘primarily about sex’ but instead, posits that intimacy, of course, does have some reference to sexuality, but more importantly is about “the making of the private and the managing of the intimate in the making of the imperial rule” (895). Therefore, “the politics of intimacy offer [...] an opportunity to recognize that the distinctions between the public and the private [...] were the concerns of those who ruled and categories fundamental to racialized imperial states” (894). Stoler’s standpoint on intimacy, plays a large role in deciphering the interracial alliance between Mina and Demetrius. Mina and Demetrius’s “intimacy” is sexual, but at the same time, it serves a larger role; it creates a “distinction” from past heteronormative narratives that challenges “those who ruled,” calling to question the power of imperial and colonial conquest, which is what Mina and Demetrius are doing through their “queer” interracial alliance. Viewers must think of Mina and Demetrius’s “intimacy” the same way Stoler would—their intimacy, which results in “queer” interracial alliance operates as a “political technology” that allows for the remapping and rethinking of “boundaries of our analytic and historical maps” (Stoler 864). Mina and Demetrius’s intimacy is a political and social tool that enables them to create a new type of “social
Ultimately, their intimacy, although consummated, transforms into a political and social discourse as a means to redefine colonialism and racial structure within their communities, breaking down heteronormative structures of each region they have been present in and will be present in. Mina and Demetrius are challenging these colonial and racial hierarchies, and therefore “rethink the boundaries of our analytic and historical maps” that have fueled the “diasporic investments in capitalist hegemony [...] consolidated through the reproduction of hetero-endogamy” (Reddy 239). After they engage in intercourse, Mina has a dream that functions as a flashback, which features Idi Amin saying, “Africans are poor. The Asians are rich. The Asians are sabotaging the economy. They have refused to let their daughters marry [black] Africans.” This flashback frames their consummation and it “identifies the way that British colonial laws prohibiting economic partnerships between blacks and Asians effectively discouraged interracial marriage as well, since exogamy threatens to throw into crisis racial stratification of capital” (Reddy 249). Mina and Demetrius’s interracial alliance is to some extent an economic partnership, as at the end of the film they decide to open a business together. However, Mina’s flashback also signifies how the power relations have not changed from Uganda to the American South—for example, the power her South Asian community has over black labor in Greenwood. Thus, Mina’s dream represents the fear of the South Asian community losing their provisional control over social and economic order within Greenwood—and it is Mina and Demetrius’s alliance that is that catalyst for this change. Thus, it is necessary for Mina and Demetrius to continue their relationship as a way to push against the heteronormativity of the economic and social order of the American South and their communities within
Greenwood. Thus, Mina and Demetrius’s alliance, allows for the attending to “aesthetics” that denaturalize heteronormative manners of romantic love and attachment, and further intimacy and region. In doing so, this alliance brings forth the importance of “intimacy” as a “political framing of cross racial solidarities” (Reddy 239). This again demonstrates how Mina and Demetrius’s interracial relationship is more than just a romantic engagement and sexual intimacy. In creating an intimacy through “political framings of cross-racial solidarities” they now have the power to reframe capitalist hegemony in their communities. For example, viewers are able to witness this “investment” by the way Demetrius’s carpet cleaning business begins to fail after his affair with Mina has been discovered. The South Asian group functions as the Greenwood Indians and they are the ones that Demetrius holds responsible for “ruining” his business. Ultimately, this reveals how Asian capital “triangulates” African American and white capital among Greenwood’s racial economies and populations (Reddy 241). The Greenwood Indians exert their capitalist power over Demetrius and his business, which also leads to a white male banker denying Demetrius a loan for his business. However, Mina and Demetrius’s “queer” interracial alliance challenges those previous notions of hierarchies and capital. Their alliance has allowed them to create a new business, one which equivocates South Asians and African Americans. As Urmila Seshagiri argues “interracial sex between Mina and Demetrius threatens a social and economic order in which Asians maintain provisional control over the economy and thus over black labor” (Reddy 239). Their sexual intimacy threatens this social and economic order because Mina and Demetrius elope and Mina calls her mother to tell her of her and Demetrius’s future plans--they plan to “work together” by opening up a carpet cleaning
business, contributing to their alternative that will ultimately open opportunities for expansion of regional embodiment. This serves as a potential site for “shared labor and capital” and therefore, posits back to the issue of Jay’s “fertile Uganda” in that the “sharing of labor and capital” has yet to be accepted (Reddy 242). In “working together” Mina and Demetrius have defied the refusal of the “shared labor and capital” that Jay argued for, and have made it present within a region that “others” racialized bodies, demonstrating how their “queer” interracial alliance provides new routes of agency. Their “intimacy” has reached a whole new level, mapping “modern spheres of social life” that did not previously exist, creating more nonnormative opportunities. Mina and Demetrius have brought racial and cultural solidarity to the American south as well as their South Asian and African American communities.

The Objectification of Mina’s Body: A Break in Agency

Although Mina and Demetrius’s interracial alliance creates a large source of agency within the American South, I must draw attention to the way in which the film objectifies her female body through the ways she is framed by the camera. The first scene is when Demetrius and Mina are talking on the phone, before they embark on their trip to Biloxi. Viewers witness Mina lying on her bed while she is on the phone with Demetrius. She has on a shirt that explicitly shows the skin of her abdomen, revealing her belly button, as well as most of her stomach. Mina is smiling, not knowing she is being watched as the camera frames her body, capturing a bird’s eye view, making the camera superior. Mina has her hand in her hair twirling it around her fingers in a flirtatious, sexualized manner. Although the film grants Mina agency through her “queer” interracial alliance with Demetrius, the way in which Nair captures her, still aligns with female objectification.
When Demetrius states, “I wish you were here with me,” the camera cuts to Mina’s bare leg, as she stretches it out against her sheets. She responds, “I was thinking the same…wanting to be with you” in a clear sexual tone. Here, one can witness how Mina is laying potential groundwork to engage in sexual intimacy with Demetrius. The way in which she touches her hand to her leg, mirrors the actions she wants Demetrius to follow. Mina has a clear reaction to Demetrius’s voice as she does not make any physical movement until his verbal engagement, telling her he wants to be with her. The more Demetrius speaks, the less material covers Mina’s body. Demetrius talks to Mina using terms of endearment and sexuality, he calls her “baby.” As soon as this occurs, Mina almost loses total coverage of her bed sheet.

The description of Mina’s body is problematic as it objectifies her body, working against her agency she creates through her interracial alliance with Demetrius. The color of Mina’s skin is highlighted against her white sheets; it draws attention her darkness, and highlights the “otherness” of her skin and racial background. This view confines Mina to her racialized body. Therefore, Mina becomes a hypervisible female body within a space—her bedroom—that is normally disclosed from the public sphere, breaking her hypervisibility in this scene ultimately mirrors the hypervisibility of “colored” women throughout the American South, especially colored, laboring women. This depiction of Mina largely contributes to notions of white patriarchal supremacy present within the American South, as her body transforms into a sexualized symbol, a piece of property—specifically, a piece of property within a motel in the South—and an item of consumption. Nair fails to capture Mina’s body as a site for agency and instead denotes it
to a sexualized object—in doing so, she declares Mina’s intimacy with Demetrius as strictly sexual, participating in the racial boundaries present within the American South.

I believe the relationship between Mina and Demetrius is a “queer” interracial alliance,” that relies heavily on the importance of associating one’s “sense of belonging” and “sense of self” to a region. Coming from opposing backgrounds of race and culture, Mina and Demetrius successfully navigate a way to “queer” heteronormative culture within their perspective communities, while also being present within the overtly racist American south. Doing so demonstrates the ability to create an alternative narrative based on the cohesion of the local, transnational, and global experiences of bodies, bodies that were previously cast out and othered. Together, Mina and Demetrius transform into “modern liberal subjects” through the “queering” of their interracial alliance, creating a space within the American South that generates organic hybridity: the fusion and merging of multicultural identities and cultures. Their ending into “unmarked America” rather than signifying displacement, signifies the opportunity for transgression into a future that continues to gather unanticipated intimacies between them. My argument allows for the analysis of intimacies between regions, and how intimacy functions dually to create a stronger alternative narrative for previously abject, othered, and racialized bodies. It also allows for the tracing of past colonialism into the present in order to better understand how colonial modernity still remains an issue in today’s society.
CHAPTER TWO:

Navigating the “dehumanized” Female Body as “Willful Subject” in Cormac McCarthy’s *All the Pretty Horses*

Cormac McCarthy’s *All the Pretty Horses*, like many McCarthy novels, details the journey of a young, white male protagonist on his quest to selfhood and acquisition of white masculinity. Jennifer Reimer in her article “All the Pretty Mexican Girls: Whiteness and Racial Desire in Cormac McCarthy’s *All the Pretty Horses* and *Cities of the Plain*” advocates for McCarthy’s ability to “represent an in-between space where western history and the Western genre can be self-consciously invoked and revised” where *All the Pretty Horses* transforms John Grady Cole, as well as McCarthy, into “an example of a progressive white masculinity that is also culturally ‘fluent’ south of the border” (424). However, she still highlights McCarthy’s “problematic” representation of Mexicans within his text, particularly Mexican women, that ultimately “implicates his work in a larger and longer history of commodification and sexualization of women’s bodies along the border” (424). The absence of women throughout *All the Pretty Horses* has not gone unnoticed, placing McCarthy’s text within a patriarchal framework reliant upon the objectification of the female body. Scholars Megan Riley McGilchrist and Molly McBride underscore “how land and the female body both function as territories that must be violently conquered by McCarthy’s heroes,” locating the female body as an item of consumption, confined to a strictly physical “thing” to be consumed and purchased, reifying McCarthy’s stereotype (Reimer 425). Susan Kollins in “Genre and the Geographies of Violence: Cormac McCarthy and the Contemporary Western,” claims
that McCarthy is inherently well suited to the genre of the Western due to the near exclusive “lack of fully developed female characters” (569). In “Boys Will Be Boys and Girls Will Be Gone: The Circuit of Male Desire in Cormac McCarthy’s Border Trilogy,” Nell Sullivan draws a similar conclusion, arguing for the ways in which McCarthy responds to women’s liberation and expanding independence within the patriarchal landscape through the “systematic expulsion of women [...] confirming that the Western [...] remains what Jane Tompkins calls a ‘womanless milieu’” (229). Thus, the “womanless milieu” argued for becomes the present and dominant landscape within McCarthy’s *All the Pretty Horses* in which John Grady inhabits a new space to relinquish his white masculinity at the cost of the consumption of Alejandra’s female body.

However, Reimer, Collins, and Sullivan all fail to consider an alternative narrative for Alejandra’s female body, specifically how her body functions and remains present within the overtly patriarchal Mexico in which John Grady attempts to inhabit. Where past critics have viewed Alejandra’s dehumanization and objectification as her downfall, and cycle into the text’s total expulsion of the female body, it is these very *degradations* that allow Alejandra the most agency within the novel. Both Alejandra’s “dehumanization” and “objectification” by male bodies enable her return to nature, thus fortifying her female presence within the patriarchal framework of the novel. Although I agree with how the previous critics I have mentioned argue for Alejandra’s dehumanization and objectification, it is important to argue for the additional element at play that allows for Alejandra’s dehumanization/objectification to be a key factor in the process that develops and draws attention to her willfulness. Thus, Alejandra remains ever present within the “man’s world” as her female body becomes an extension of the Mexican landscape in
which she resides; therefore John Grady can never exist outside of her presence: Alejandra remains present even when her physical body is not. Applying Sara Ahmed’s *Willful Subjects* I will discuss the reversal of Alejandra’s female objectification, arguing that Alejandra’s bodily objectification and “dehumanization” is what inextricably connects her to the Mexican landscape, creating her as the “willful subject,” and John Grady as the “willed object” ultimately leading to John Grady’s permanent displacement even upon his return to the United States.

**Navigating Alejandra’s “Willfulness” & Female Body in the Mexican Landscape**

Sara Ahmed describes “the will” as “predicating subject-hood--that is, the practice of willfulness, of exercising one’s will, determines one’s status as subject. The subject *wills*, the object is what is *willed*” (27). Where previous critics have situated John Grady as the subject per his demonstration of male objectification unto Alejandra’s body, it is Alejandra who *wills* John Grady, reversing the heteronormative gender roles within McCarthy’s text. Alejandra’s physical body becomes the catalyst for her to “will” John Grady, turning him into the object that is willed. Ahmed argues “the will acquires meaning and force as that which can eliminate desire from human intention” and thus “wishing, desiring, and willing thus are all activities that face a future in a certain way in or even as the aim to bring something about” (32). Desire then, must exist outside of the force of willing, an action that John Grady fails to uphold, never being able to make exclusive his physical desire for Alejandra from his willing her to want him (Ahmed 37). Rawlins says to John Grady, “She thinks you got eyes for the daughter,” in which he replies “I do have eyes for the daughter” (McCarthy 137). Before their official
introduction, John Grady’s “eyes” are intrinsically drawn to Alejandra’s physical body, inhibiting him from separating his “desire” from his “will,” as Alejandra remains the “the” as in “the thing” he desires, rather than the “she” in which he wills. It is important to note that John Grady’s power only lies in his physical power, he is a male body within a “man’s world,” thus allowing that power to only exist within his physical dominance, for example, the way he trains horses. Although Alejandra is a woman in a “man’s world” and as others have argued a piece of property owned by her father soon to be sold off as a wife, she demonstrates her intentional power in pursuit of “willing” John Grady as her partner. In contrast, John Grady’s will is only exercised through his “desire,” and him failing to separate his “desire” from his “intention” to marry Alejandra, confines him to the object that is willed.

Alejandra exercises her will outside of her desire, commanding bodily power over John Grady, as most explicitly demonstrated when they engage in sexual intercourse. When Alejandra arrives at the lake John Grady does not demand her to get in. “She paused midway to look back [...] do not speak to her. Do not call. When she reached him he held out his hand and she took it [...] she put her other arm about his shoulder and looked towards the moon in the west do not speak to her do not call and then she turned her face up to him” (141). Ahmed argues “a willing subject leans toward what is being willed. To get behind something is to orientate the body that way” (35). Where this scene would normally depict the objectification and consumption of Alejandra’s body, it is her position as subject, and thus her “willingness” to participate in this engagement that permits her agency. John Grady makes no attempt to “will” her into the water, he remains complicit, isolate, only participating based upon her following actions. Alejandra’s body
remains the “willing subject” as she physically orients herself towards “what is being willed,” but only on the premise of her acceptance, her willing participation. Alejandra’s entrance into the water, the way in which she “put[s] her arm about his shoulder” and “turned her face up to him” confine John Grady as the object that is willed, as her physical actions toward his body are the only actions that allow for his participation in sexual intercourse. Alejandra provokes John Grady’s desire, serving as a “specific mode of intentionality” that exemplifies John Grady’s lack of strong will, and situating herself as the dominant body within the physical landscape (Ahmed 35).

Reimer discusses how “the repetition of ‘black’ emphasizes Alejandra’s exotic beauty--her otherness--” while also connecting to her the wet stallion she rides (426). There is similar emphasis on her “blue” eyes and “pale” neck. Reimer views these emphases on Alejandra’s physical body as her entering into a “voiceless” narrative through an “objectifying male gaze” (427). However, the emphases subscribed throughout the text mirror John Grady’s descriptions of the landscape. Thus, Alejandra’s hypervisibility projects unto the landscape, connecting her “otherness” as the very subject that makes her ever present within the patriarchal Mexican framework of All the Pretty Horses, structuring her agency and constant ability to “will” herself into the Mexican landscape, and thus provoking John Grady to be “willed” by her, even when she is not physically present. When John Grady sees Alejandra at the edge of the water, the way he describes the landscape embodies Alejandra’s physical body. “The water was black and warm […] the water so dark and so silky and he watched across the still black surface” (McCarthy 141). Rather than remain voiceless, Alejandra gains “willed” visibility as the main agent of her voice, disrupting the normative objectification of the female body.
Alejandra’s “black hair” remains present within the “black,” “dark,” and “silky” water and “black surface”, synonyms all dually functioning to demonstrate Alejandra’s physical projection unto the landscape, unconsciously unbeknownst to John Grady. With Alejandra being both physically present in her body, and also present within the description of the landscape, she heightens John Grady’s desire for her, positioning him as the willed object, her subjecting him to her unescapable bordered landscape. Ahmed argues “the willful subject might be striking in her appearance not only because she disagrees with what has been willed by others, but because she disagrees with what has disappeared from view” (17). Alejandra’s body is a testament to Ahmed’s claim, her “striking” appearance appears as an acknowledgment that she “disagrees” with what has been previously willed as an overtly patriarchal landscape, thus she transforms the “womanless milieu” of McCarthy’s text into that of a feminine landscape, emasculating John Grady by triggering his desire. “Me quieres? She said. Yes, he said, He said her name. God yes, he said,” securing her hold on him (McCarthy 141). Alejandra demands that John Grady ask her for her thus, he is forced to express his desire for her verbally as a means of granting Alejandra total control of their relationship. Thus, John Grady must always ask for want he wants as Alejandra will decide whether or not to grant or withhold. This creates an ultimate pattern of control for Alejandra, permitting her more agency as their narrative progresses.

Alejandra, the clear “willing” subject, although granted agency through her acquisition of a “strong will,” a will that John Grady can never fully embody, still is confronted with the challenge in overcoming the inherent dehumanization accorded to her throughout the text. Reimer argues that “Cole’s relationships with Alejandra and
Magdalena reify stereotypes about the availability and hypersexualization of Mexican women on the US-Mexico border in service of constructing a dominant, if ambivalent, white masculinity” (423). However, Reimer’s identification of Alejandra’s “hypersexualization,” can be renamed and restructured to demonstrate the power of her “hypervisibility” as earlier mentioned. Alejandra’s “hypervisibility” functions as a tool of knowledge that allows her to permeate the patriarchal landscape of Mexico, the land in which John Grady seeks to reify his white masculinity. Alejandra is the subject that denies John Grady’s acquisition of masculinity, not only due to her looming presence within the overtly patriarchal framework he attempted to escape to (turning it feminine), but also denying him the total consumption of her body, by rejecting his proposal, which will be discussed in more detail later. Reimer continues her critique of McCarthy positing how McCarthy’s West “is still a man’s world where women are fickle, absent, or dead. The violence, sexual, and otherwise perpetrated bodies of brown women in the Border Trilogy reminds us how much McCarthy’s white masculinities rely on such abject bodies in order to fashion their own ambivalent agency” (424). However, Alejandra’s body is not “abject” but rather “queer.” Jack Halberstam in his chapter “Queer Temporality and Postmodern Geographies” argues how the term “queer” refers to “nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time” (5). Alejandra exercises this definition, as the way in which she uses her body contributes to the “queering” of her sexual identity, specifically in reference to how she “queers” the normative patriarchal landscape of Mexico into a “nonnormative” feminine landscape. Halberstam’s definition of “queer” thus reflects any nonnormative or non-sanctioned desires. Thus the “queering” of Alejandra’s sexual identity is exemplified
through her dual presence of her physical body and also the presence of her body within the Mexican landscape and therefore, the “hypersexualization” Reimer and previous critics have argued for become irrelevant as the Mexican landscape becomes an “embodiment” of Alejandra’s female body, “queering” it as a route to her agency.

Her black hair twisted and blew about her shoulders and the lightning fell silently through the black clouds behind her and she rode all seeming unaware down through the low hills while the first spits of rain blew on the wind and onto the upper pasturelands and past the pale and reedy lakes riding erect and stately until the rain caught her up and shrouded her figure away in that wild summer landscape: real horse, real rider, real land and sky and yet a dream withal (McCarthy 131-32).

Earlier, I had discussed the ways in which Alejandra’s “black hair,” “pale neck,” and “blue eyes” have all been underscored as the “things” that make her “hypersexualized” and therefore, an object of the male gaze. In this passage, Alejandra’s connection to the landscape is heightened even further, contributing to her alternative “queered” narrative, that diminishes the “man’s world” in which she is present. John Grady once again describes the landscape mirroring Alejandra’s physical body. Her “black hair” transforms into the “black clouds” encompassing the landscape, “twisting and blowing” matching the patterns of the wind present within the storm in which she rides. The “pale and reedy lakes” are reminiscent of her “pale” skin, and her “figure” thus becomes “shrouded,” as it canopies itself, becoming the epitome of the “wild summer landscape” present not just within this particular scene, but throughout the entirety of the novel. Rather than becoming “hypersexual,” she becomes “hypervisible,” in a way that
“queers” the normative patriarchal Mexican landscape. The “womanless milieu” becomes irrelevant, as Alejandra remains the “willful subject,” allowing her body to be dually present. Ahmed posits “the landscape of will might appear differently, might appear queerly, if we notice how it is littered with waifs and strays” (8). Alejandra uses her position as a “waif” and “stray” by demonstrating how the neglected woman figure, the “stray” and “absent” female body in a patriarchal framework can “queer” a space/place by projecting itself unto the landscape through its objectification, again referring back to the way in which Alejandra “disagrees with what has been willed by others,” but also “because she disagrees with what has disappeared from view” (Ahmed 17). Alejandra successfully locates her body within the physical landscape, at the cost of the objectification of her female body. However, the objectification of her body, the “hypervisibility,” is necessary to provoke the desire of John Grady, thus diminishing the surfacing of his will.

Coming out of the barn with his bare heels under the horse’s barrel and the horse lathered and dripping and half crazed and pounding up the ciénaga road riding with just a rope hackamore and the sweat of the horse and the smell of the mare on him and the veins pulsing under the wet hide and him leaning low along the horse’s neck talking to him softly and obscenely. It was in this condition that all unexpectedly one evening he came upon her returning on the black Arabian down the ciénaga road (McCarthy 129).

This passage clearly signifies explicit sexual undertones, as “the prized stallion’s robust libido mirrors Cole’s lust for Alejandra” (Reimer 432). The stallion’s actions represent Cole’s desire, “dripping and half crazed and pounding,” “the veins pulsing under the wet
hide,” placing John Grady as an inhuman object within Alejandra’s landscape as she was “returning on the black Arabian down the ciénaga road,” willing him to have a physical reaction to her presence. When Alejandra commands him to dismount the stallion, John Grady’s physical reaction is heightened as “the insides of his trouserlegs were hot and wet” (McCarthy 130). Reimer posits that John Grady is “unable to make a place for Alejandra outside of the lusty world,” and her claim is not wrong (Reimer 432). John Grady’s will is an embodiment of his wishing, his desire to claim Alejandra as his own, but failing to separate these two entities from actually willing Alejandra to be his, he remains the complicit object within her landscape, a landscape that she transformed through the recognition of her own objectification to have John Grady act on his desire, rather than his will. John Grady’s “desire” is not only a product of Alejandra’s female body, but also alludes to his desire to adhere to the cowboy narrative in which he failed to successfully fulfill within American borders. Alejandra, turning what John Grady expected as the overtly patriarchal Mexico into that of a feminine landscape, furthers John Grady’s displacement, as he enters a landscape that denies his masculinity through Alejandra’s ability to will.

Gail Morrison in her article “All the Pretty Horses: John Grady Cole’s Expulsion from Paradise,” argues “like the native mares, Alejandra is described as being small and slight [...] ultimately, she is as wild and passionate as the native mares, a creature of the lake and lagoons, of the night and darkness, dark-haired and dark-horsed” (181). Reimer argues that Morrison “exoticizes Alejandra as a racial other—’a creature’ whose darkness affiliates her with animals and landscape, thus dehumanizing her” (429). The “dehumanization” Reimer argues for, is not dehumanization at all, but Alejandra’s
recognition that she needs to transform her body to become an extension of the landscape, as the physical landscape cannot be dehumanized, but rather engulf her physical presence through the way in which John Grady perceives it (landscape). The earlier passages that I argue for, highlighting Alejandra’s “darkness” do not mark her as “racial other,” or “abject,” but again a “queer” body, one that looks past the normative views of sexual identity and embodiment. It is through this “queering” of her body unto the landscape that her will becomes the strongest, disallowing John Grady to “tame” her like one of his mares. She transforms herself from being “small and slight” into the “looming” and ever present Mexican landscape in which John Grady dwells.

Anne McClintock argues in *Imperial Leather* (1995), “sexuality as a trope for other power relations was certainly an abiding aspect of imperial power” (14). Reimer comments on this positing:

> Often this trope appears as metaphors that link women’s bodies to land/territory and nation (i.e., the idea of a ‘mother country’ or ‘virgin territory’). The equation of land or territory with the female body has long had roots in the gendering of the nation as female (the site where citizens are reproduced). Within these cycles of representations, geographic and ideological spaces, such as the nation-state are feminized and women’s bodies take on the symbolic role of land, territory, and nation, becoming sites through which colonial power can exert itself--what McClintock calls ‘the erotics of imperial conquest’ (McClintock 24) (Reimer 429).

The “erotics of imperial conquest” are not only the interpretation for Alejandra’s restructuring of the Mexican landscape. Although she “feminizes” the landscape, turning
the nation into a “feminized” body, colonial power still becomes displaced upon its entering. John Grady ultimately represents the “colonial power” as he is the white male body crossing the border to fulfill his identity, to command the cowboy narrative taken from in the United States. Alejandra’s “sexuality,” yes although a projection of Mexican “land and territory” still refuses the colonial exertion of power, most specifically for the total refusal of John Grady’s proposal. To fulfill his cowboy narrative, and reify his white masculinity, John Grady is conforming to a heteronormative narrative, one in which hopes to claim a woman, a female body as his. Unable to locate that body within the borders of the United States, his journey to Mexico is anticipated to bring him an “exotic,” “dark,” woman, who he can bring back across the border, “othering” her body, “abjecting” her, and turning her into a symbol of his property. Reimer argues “Alejandra is nothing more than an item in a list of material possessions, that Cole might have designs upon,” but Alejandra remains far from a “material possession” and farther from an “imperial conquest.” Reimer, along with previous critics, have neglected to knowledge the ways in which Alejandra refuses to be “tamed” or “possessed” by John Grady and the “lust” he attempts to project unto her. When John Grady proposes to Alejandra, it is the strongest exercising of her “will”: she denies imperial conquest, she denies consumption, and she denies a heteronormative future, causing John Grady’s total displacement within her landscape, as the key factor in denying his white masculinity. “He told her that he could make a living and that they could go to live in his country and make their life there and no harm would come to them” (McCarthy 252). Although a tempting offer, Uma Narayan in Dislocating Cultures posits
visions of one’s nation, one’s national history and community are deeply tied to one’s sense of place, to one’s sense of belonging to a larger community, to one’s sense of heritage and loyalties. Inherited pictures of gender roles and family and social arrangements are often central elements to both one’s sense of self and to one’s sense of one’s social world (36).

Alejandra’s “sense of self” and her “sense of belonging to a larger community” remain inherently within Mexican borders, especially as demonstrated through the projection and “queering” of her body onto the Mexican landscape. Her nationalism is deeply rooted within her identity, as is her “heritage and loyalties.” Her future remains within the Mexican landscape she has created for herself, and her allegiance to her nation and her heritage overpowers her allegiance and want for John Grady. Accepting his proposal and crossing borders into “his country,” although he promises “no harm,” still would turn Alejandra into a submissive female body, displacing her and her “sense of self,” as she turns into an item of consumption, of claimed/named property. Before Alejandra’s refusal, John Grady referred to America as “his country,” but later during a conversation with Rawlins after crossing back into the United States, Rawlins states, “This is still good country,” in which John Grady responds, “Yeah. I know it is. But it ain’t my country” (McCarthy 299). What John Grady once referred to has “his country,” now remains a space of homelessness and total physical displacement, and a landscape completely barren of Alejandra. Unlike Alejandra, John Grady’s “sense of self” and “sense of belonging” linked to his nation was contingent upon Alejandra’s acceptance of his proposal, thus after her refusal, John Grady now turns into what he would have made
Alejandra within the United States, foreign, abject, and othered, thus he still remains the “willed object,” and Alejandra the ever standing “willful subject.”

Ahmed argues “a strong will thus settles, thus attends by stopping, by being held in place or held in one place [...] We might even describe the strong will as a straight mind: you are able to keep your thoughts on a straight line by not being distracted by what comes near” (83). Alejandra is the epitome of this argument, as she “settles,” is quite literally, “held in one place,” as she refuses to leave Mexico to marry John Grady and cross borders into the United States. Her thoughts are kept “on a straight line” and never “distracted by what comes near,” thus never distracted, never fully tempted to commit to John Grady. She refuses to turn towards a future that would will her into becoming an object, a piece of property, demonstrating her ability to “settle,” to “stop” engaging with him. “‘I cannot do what you ask, she said. ‘I love you. But I cannot’” (McCarthy 254). Ahmed posits “the effort to acquire a will to disobey is the effort to not only say no but to say no publicly, to say it loudly, or to perform it through one’s own bodily action or inaction” (141). Alejandra is often given little to no verbal agency throughout the text, as Reimer posits she remains “voiceless,” but her strength to verbally deny him, and to declare it publicly, exemplifies her will, and most importantly the way in which she fortuitously separates her will from her desire and from what she wishes. Although his proposal seems almost chivalric, it is his complete undoing. His desire dictates his coherence both physically and emotionally, leaving him once again willed by Alejandra.

John Grady attempts to follow a moral, chivalric code, one that aligns with the cowboy narrative that he seeks so desperately. This however, remains impossible as he
cannot separate his “desire” from his “will.” John Grady gets overtaken with his obsession with Alejandra, she consumes him completely, making herself ever present within the landscape, and also with her body. The more that she exercises this will, the more it heightens John Grady’s desire, and takes over his ability for sacrifice.

In order to will, the mind must withdraw from the immediacy of desire, which, without reflecting and without reflexivity, stretches out its hands to get hold of the desired object; for the will is not concerned with objects but with project, for instance the future availability of an object that it may or may not desire in the present. The will transforms the desire into an intention (Ahmed 36).

This is exactly why John Grady cannot will Alejandra to marry him, because he cannot withdraw from his “immediacy of desire,” he fails to reflect on how their marriage would ultimately, make Alejandra the “racialized other,” and “hypervisible,” but “hypervisible” in a way that degrades her, consumes her. In several instances, readers witness John Grady “stretch out” towards Alejandra, to have her in his grasp, not as an “object” but as a “project” of his desire, hoping to “transform” his desire onto her, which of course fails, as she is the one subjecting him to desire her.

Alejandra’s “Willful Disobedience”

Reimer argues “Alejandra must return to her father’s home as used goods, a ‘fallen woman’ whose reputation has been publicly damaged [...] it is likely she will become like her iconic aunt, Duena Alfonsa, who was also crossed in love and remains an unmarried spinster, stuck on her brother’s hacienda until she dies” (433). A woman’s virtue, in Mexican culture, is linked with her virginity, thus when romantically engaging with John
Grady, many critics equivocate Alejandra’s loss of value with her loss of virginity, turning to the “used goods” and “fallen woman” symbol Reimer argues for. However, Alejandra’s value is not complacent with her virginity, as her virginity represents her willful disobedience. Ahmed posits “disobedience is the ‘trait of being unwilling to obey. A willfulness archive might be full of accounts of how some bodies come to acquire this trait” (437). Not only does Alejandra position herself as the willful subject when exerting her will and power onto John Grady, but she also demonstrates her willfulness towards heteronormative Mexican culture and values, that allows her to start an “archive” of willful disobedience as demonstrated through the actions of her physical body. “To be unwilling to obey what is commanded by the sovereign is to be heard as willful” (Ahmed 137). The “sovereign” in this instance has various subjects: Mexican culture, Duena Alfonsa, and Don Hector. Alejandra remains unwilling to listen to her aunt, refusing to stop seeing John Grady, and also refusing to abide by the laws of women’s virtue valued in Mexico. Duena Alfonsa expresses her concern for Alejandra to John Grady

You see that I cannot help but be sympathetic to Alejandra. Even at her worst. But I won’t have her unhappy. I won’t have her spoken ill of. Or gossiped about. I know what that is. She thinks that she can toss her head and dismiss everything. In an ideal world the gossip of the idle would be of no consequence. But I have seen the consequences in the real world and they can be very grave indeed. They can be consequences of a gravity not excluding bloodshed. Not excluding death. I saw this in my own family. What Alejandra dismisses as a matter of mere appearance or outmoded custom (McCarthy 144).
Duena Alfonsa is expressing the “consequences” Alejandra would endure, if she were to consummate and continue her relationship with John Grady. The price to be paid is not outside of “bloodshed” and would cause “ill” naming of Alejandra, but still Alejandra refuses to participate in Duena Alfonsa’s and Mexico’s “outmoded custom” as mentioned previously, and partakes in sexual intercourse with John Grady. Duena Alfonsa argues that in Mexico “a woman’s reputation is all she has. There is no forgiveness. For women. A man may lose his honor and regain it again. But a woman cannot. She cannot” (McCarthy 145). Alejandra’s honor, in her opinion, is not dependent on her virginity, as the more she engages with John Grady, the more he succumbs to her willfulness. Ahmed posits “to be unwilling to obey the will of the sovereign is to accept the charge of willfulness. An acceptance can be a ruin. The history of disobedience is a history of those who are willing to be ruined by standing against what is instituted as right by law” (Ahmed 137). Alejandra accepts “the charge of willfulness” even if that “acceptance can be a ruin,” which is exactly what Duena Alfonsa fears, that Alejandra will be “publicly” ruined, and shamed. However, Alejandra once again demonstrates the “queerness” of her body, by disregarding what is expected of her, and refuses to abide by the heteronormative opinions of her aunt, father, and Mexican culture. She takes a stand as to what is “instituted” by them, strengthening her as the “willful subject” throughout the novel. Although Duena Alfonsa believes John Grady can once again reinstate his “honor,” I posit his “honor” is displaced, aligned with his physical body. His “honor” is contingent upon his ability to fulfill his cowboy narrative, a feat that he never gains. His “sense of self” and “sense of belonging” are connected to neither America or Mexico, leaving him as a nomadic subject within borderlands, and disinhibiting any “honor” he
could receive. His “desire” not only for Alejandra but for her country overtakes his actual will, but also overtakes his ability to claim his white masculinity as his “desire” and “wishing” for that named honor, are too desired to be an action he can will. John Grady in opposition to Alejandra

As Reimer previously argued for, Alejandra remains at risk of turning into her aunt, the “spinster” who resides on her brother’s hacienda. What Reimer fails to apprehend is what Alejandra’s refusal of John Grady’s proposal does to her agency: it renews it. Although Alejandra has “lost” her virtue, not in her opinion, but to Mexican society, she still keeps her name, never submitting herself to formal submission of a male subject. In doing so, the hacienda will remain hers, free of male ownership, and giving her name a transactional value outside of her virginity. If Alejandra were to become a “spinster” like her Duena Alfonsa, it would only be due to her “willful disobedience,” her ultimate refusal to conform to the heteronormative structures of Mexico.

The last sentence of the novel, I find peculiar as it reads, “Passed and paled into the darkening land, the world to come” (McCarthy 301). After some time away from Alejandra, this last scene still reflects her presence within the landscape. The “darkening” land is reminiscent of her “dark” “black” hair, and “paled” signifies her pale neck and skin. Although it ends with “the world to come,” it further signifies a world, not just Mexico, that is a projection of Alejandra’s physical body, a world that cannot exist outside of the landscape that Alejandra has willed John Grady to envision and to perceive. My argument has attempted to situate Alejandra’s female body within a “queer” framework, one that disrupts the heteronormative structures of the overtly patriarchal Mexico. Alejandra’s physical body becomes a projection onto the Mexican landscape,
transforming the “man’s world” in which John Grady hoped to reify his white masculinity, into an all encompassing feminine “world,” one that does not permit male dominance, but rather causes total male displacement. Alejandra’s “hypervisibility” is a tool of knowledge, a tool of agency, used to invoke John Grady’s desire, inscribing her physicality’s into his mental mapping, willing him to see her even when she remains invisible within his sight. Her ability to demonstrate herself as the willful subject, diminished the ways in which she was objectified and dehumanized, and rather situated her as a body of power, claiming her name and keeping it as her own, while also transforming into the “willful disobedient subject.” Alejandra’s “sense of self” and “sense of belonging” is undoubtedly connected to her nation, even though she disagrees with the heteronormative structures of some of its “outmoded customs.” However, she successfully demonstrates the separation of her “desire” from her “will,” and in doing so positions herself as an undying female “willful subject.”
Chapter Three:

The “Queering” of Region: Spatial Identity and the Female Body in Mohja Kahf’s The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf

Mohja Kahf’s The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf begins with, “‘Liar,” she says to the highway sign that claims ‘The People of Indiana Welcome You,’” situating Kahf’s novel within a specific regional border, claiming falsehood against the “welcome” policy so explicitly projected by the secularism of the United States. Kahf details the narrative of Khadra, a young immigrant Muslim girl attempting to locate herself within the United States, more specifically Simmonsville, Indiana, while attempting to adhere to the laws of her religion (1). So physically far dislocated from the birthplace of her religion (Saudi Arabia), Khadra finds herself unable to fully immerse herself into the “practicing” Muslim lifestyle, due to her ever present, almost unwilling participation within the American landscape. Kahf thus presents her readers with an intricate bildungsroman as Khadra is in full pursuit of finding her “sense of self” while balancing her “sense of belonging” within the United States and her Muslim background. Alireza Anushiravani and Abbasali Borhan in their article “Resistance and Uncanny Moments of In-Betweenness in Mohja Kahf’s The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf,” argue “Khadra’s self-realization occurs in three stages: nativist reproduction of the past, transitional self-criticism, and hybrid fashioning” positing that her constructive identity leads to a fulfilled female bildungsroman by the end of the novel, as she is able to claim America as her “home” (10). However, both Anushiravani and Borhan fail to analyze how Khadra embodies each region through her “self-realization,” and more importantly her “hybrid-fashioning.” She is only able to achieve this “hybrid-fashioning” due to her ability to “queer” her body as based upon region. This notion of “queering,” comes from Gayatri
Gopinath in Unruly Visions: The Aesthetics of Queer Diaspora in which she employs a “shared queer visual aesthetic” that allows for “new ways of seeing both regions and archives, and that puts into play, through an affective register, an intimate relation between the two” (3). Gopinath seeks to transform the heteronormativity of diaspora that claim the nation as the “primary point of reference” as well as “standard formulations of queerness that fail to grasp the texture of regionally inflicted gender and sexual formations” (3). Barbara J. Hampton in “Free to be Muslim-Americans: Community, Gender, and Identity in Once a Promised Land, The Taqwacores, and The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf,” argues for the ways in which Kahf explores “new narrative patterns that see ‘unveiling as a particular expression of Muslim-Americanness rather than foreignness’” (254). Hampton presents an intriguing argument as Kahf does successfully depict Khadra’s narrative of “unveiling” through the use of her hijab creating a balance of her Muslim-Americanness but like Anushiravani and Borhan, Hampton disregards the functionality of the “queering” of region as the cause of Khadra’s “unveiling” narrative, thus failing to fully recognize Khadra’s regional embodiment.

Uma Narayan in Dislocating Cultures posits visions of one’s nation, one’s national history and community are deeply tied to one’s sense of place, to one’s sense of belonging to a larger community, to one’s sense of heritage and loyalties. Inherited pictures of gender roles and family and social arrangements are often central elements to both one’s sense of self and to one’s sense of one’s social world (36). Khadra’s journey to find both her “sense of self” and “sense of belonging” is intrinsically connected to her place of birth—Syria—and her religion’s place of birth—Saudi Arabia.
Thus, Khadra’s spatial identity is one that aligns the nation (Syria/Saudi Arabia) as her “primary point of reference. Thus Khadra’s journey to her “unveiling” and “hybrid-fashioning” can only be done through Gopinath’s “queering” of regions, displacing the nation as the “primary point of reference” and instead combining both the past and the present to form an alternative narrative that is formed through the cohesion of the “local, the national, and the transnational” (6). Therefore, I argue that Khadra can only achieve an effective *bildungsroman* through the “queering” of region, and the removal of the nation as her “primary point of reference,” which allows her social transformation into a polyvocal Muslim, and a self-identified Muslim American woman, versus a Muslim woman within American confinement. Every experience Khadra encounters contributes to her ability to “queer” region. It is through her denial and isolation of her past, and the way in which her expectations of her past/Syria/Saudi Arabia/allow her to move away from nationalist vision to a regional, accepting both Syria, Saudi Arabia, and America as both her past and her present, creating a regional identity, that’s not “static and self-enclosed” but all encompassing of the intimacies and similarities each place shares and creates through its cohesion with one another.

**Navigating American Confinement: Relocating “Home”**

“There is definite smell to the air in Indiana. It’s not pollution; not a bad odor, really-- nor a good one; just there” (Kahf 4). From the beginning of the novel, Khadra situates herself within a specific regional frame, in this instance Indiana, in which she parallels herself to the odor. Her presence within this landscape is not polluting, neither bad nor good, but is simply there. In this opening scene Khadra is returning to “horrible little Simmonsville” after some length of time, still failing to properly name this place as
her home, but instead referring to it as “back where [she] came from” (Kahf 8). Thus, Khadra’s displacement is intrinsically connecting her identity to that of spatial identity, and demonstrates the struggle Khadra has in navigating, and further, naming a place as her “home.” Khadra makes it evident, that to her, America and what she refers to as “back east” (Syria/Saudi Arabia) remain mutually exclusive, as she fails to find a source of cohesion between the local and the transnational. She fails to look past difference as she categorizes each place by their lack of similarities, and relies strictly on her limited and inherited memories to narrate what the transnational/ “back east” means to her within the American landscape. A flashback evokes Khadra asking Eyad, her brother, “Where’s Syria?,’” as she recalls memories of “words and tastes” that outline her Syria, “a little boomerang shaped scar on her right knee that had been made on a broken tile in Syria [...] a vague memory of being on a mountain. Dry sunny days that had a certain smell, [...] and when she bit into a tart plum or dark cherry, her mouth felt like Syria” (Kahf 15). Eyad responds gravely, “Syria’s far, far away” (Kahf 15). Thus, Syria remains Syria, narrated by collective memories of the past, what had been, and America is named as the place where “no one looked like them and they looked like no one” (Kahf 15).

In Unruly Visions Gopinath discusses the way in which nostalgia is linked to “the personal consequences of historicizing sensory experience which is conceived as an [...] emotional journey” (6). Nostalgia then “confines the past and removes it from any transactional and material relation to the present” and therefore becomes “isolatable.” Khadra is undergoing this type of nostalgia, separating the past (“back east”) and the present (America) as two separate entities, and in doing so removes the possibility for any type of “social transformation” of her Syrian past to become present within her
American landscape. Because of this, Khadra is unable to “queer” both regions together, as she fails to see the intimacies between each place and is denied the ability to follow Gopinath’s strategic model of engaging: “a model that does not see past difference, but opens the possibility of forging alliances in and through it” (Gopinath 29).

In the narrow back hallway was a map captioned ‘The Muslim World.’ The countries that were mostly Muslim were dark green. Light green meant they had a lot of Muslims, yellow-green and yellow meant they had some, and the pink and dark pink countries had next to none. The U.S.S.R., Khadra was surprised to see, was light green. China was yellow. The U.S. was only pink. Muslims didn’t count for much here (Kahf 27).

The United States “was only pink,” visually signifying to Khadra the lack of nationalist dominance, and to her understanding the mere insignificance of Muslims’ within America, “othering” not only her “sense of belonging” but the “larger [national] community” in which she identified with. Here, Khadra’s body thus becomes a marker of her own physical displacement, her body, like her religion, “didn’t count for much” within the borders of America, its power lies within the nationalist framework of Syria/Saudi Arabia. Khadra’s “affective register,” the way in which she internalizes her displacement, still adheres to the “normative ways of seeing and knowing,” denying her the ability to disrupt and “apprehend” her body, desires, and affiliations “rendered lost or unthinkable within normative history” (Gopinath 6). Although Khadra recognizes Indiana as the space in which she dwells, she remains unsuccessful in connecting it to the place in which she was born, to the place that also birthed her religion, serving as the ultimate connection to her nationalist vision. Without the co-existence of the past and present
together, Khadra’s sense of nostalgia supports the nation as the primary point of reference, failing to create an alternative narrative driven by the “queering” of regions. She remains unable to separate herself from a national identity and fails to “deconstruct” the “essentialist logic[s]” of her religion being connected to a physical space, thus bounding her identity between the borders of Syria and Saudi Arabia, failing to cultivate the intimacies between America and “back east.”

Although Khadra has yet to “queer” the regions together, these moments that highlight her unease, her discomfort and confinement within America, and mutual exclusivity of the United States and “back east,” remain crucial in why she is able to “queer” the regions as the novel progresses. Each experience she creates within American borders allows her to contribute to a personal archive, one that details her experiences in Indiana. This archive, this collective memory of her past is then brought to her present during her trips “back east” that allow her to confront expectation with reality. The connection with her religion, and most importantly with herself is not based on a nationalist vision, but how her experiences have shaped her ability to understand each space. She thought of America as “foreign,” but as she journeys back east to Saudi Arabia, she sees that she felt more foreign, more dislocated than she did within her American landscape. Khadra struggles to find a “sense of belonging” and her “sense of self” within Indiana, and more generally American confinement. Thus, as she continues to grow older so does her sense of nostalgia, isolating her past as a unit of time that could never exist within the present. When Khadra becomes “of age” she gets to partake in a ritual, one that connects her to “back east.”
The sensation of being hijabed was a thrill. Khadra had acquired vestments of a higher order. Hijab was a crown on her head. She went forth lightly and went forth heavily into the world, carrying the weight of a new grace. Even though it went off and on at the door several times a day, hung on a hook marking the threshold between inner and outer worlds, hijab soon grew to feel as natural to her as a second skin, without which if she ventured into the outside world she felt naked (Kahf 123).

Khadra views her hijab as a “crown on her head,” a total signifier of her Muslimness, it was a “new grace” that largely contributed to her “sense of self” and her “sense of belonging,” as it served as a physical marker of her difference, of her connection to a “larger community” (“back east”) that was physically displaced from her. In this veiling, Khadra’s hijab links her to a nationalist vision, and does not allow her to “see beyond the limited vista of conventional knowledge production, as well as dominant articulations of both nation and diaspora, that depend on heteronormative framings of family and community” (Gopinath 20). This experience of Khadra’s hijab is important as the viewing and perception her hijab transforms as the novel progresses to contribute to her ability to “queer” the regions together. In this scene, Khadra’s hijab represents her “otherness,” but an “otherness” and “hypervisibility” she welcomes as a way to distinguish her from the “American” woman. Her hijab, is a dedication to her religion, and her nation(s) (Syria/Saudi Arabia), a “higher order” that ultimately distances her from the “queer aesthetic” Gopinath argues for, rather than provoking the disruption of the “meteronormative queer and nationalist vision” of her “sense of self” she contributes to her national identity. Khadra’s hijab is a “second skin” that is a symbol of the nation,
more than her actual “sense of self,” although in this moment, she believes the nation is linked to her sense of self (Gopinath 17). If she were to go out in public she would feel “naked” as her “sense of belonging” and “sense of self” would be physically stripped from her, leaving her exposed, and no longer “hypervisible,” but more aligned with the American woman, an exposed, American female body.

However, this experience, serves as another experience for Khadra to archive, to be able to look back on to create an intimate experience with how she will eventually apprehend what her hijab means to her, that ultimately allows her to create an affective register, and unanticipated intimacies between who she thought she was, who she was, and who she is, and who she will become.

“Haj! Their parents announced it. They were going this year. ‘Mecca-- be there or be square,’ [...] Khadra and Eyad were so astounded by the news, they forgot to roll their eyes” (Kahf 119). The trip to Haj serves as Khadra’s return to what she considers her homeland, Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of her religion, and thus the origin of her identity—her “sense of self” and “sense of belonging.”

The phrase ‘leaving home’ came into her head. But Indianapolis is not my home she thought indignantly. Catchphrases from Islamic revival flashed in her head—how a true Muslim feels at home wherever the call to prayer is sung, how a true Muslim feels no attachment to one nation or tribe over another. I don’t even care if I never see the Fallen Timbers Complex again, Khadra thought (Kahf 120).

Here, Khadra reflects on the American landscape as she denies it being her “home,” the ways in which that land, those people, down there, could never develop her “sense of belonging” in Indiana. As witnessed throughout the novel, Khadra aims to be a devout
practicing Muslim, and believes to do so means degrading the American space in which she resides as it holds no significance towards her identity or her Muslimness. However, as articulated above, the Islamic Revival posits “how a true Muslim feels at home wherever the call to prayer is sung” and should feel “no attachment to one nation or one tribe over another” (120). Thus, if the “call to prayer” was sung in the Fallen Timbers Complex, that is where she should feel at “home.” Instead, Khadra projects a type of hypocrisy as she refuses to follow these guidelines, minimizing the opportunity for America and the Fallen Timbers to be a place of meaning, a place of belonging as she “[didn’t] even care if [she] saw the Fallen Timbers Complex again now that she was returning “back east.” Khadra’s “nostalgia” continues to isolate her past “back east” as a separate entity from her present within America. In doing so, Khadra only sees difference between “back east” and America, rather than acknowledging and then forging alliances through those differences, which would create an alternative narrative for Khadra free of the nation as her primary point of reference of selfhood and belonging (Gopinath 5).

Instead of narrating her identity through region, one that could dually include “back east” and America as a collective whole, Khadra claims her patriotism towards nations “back east,” where she rejects the opportunity to learn “unanticipated intimacies” present within her two separate geographies. Khadra thus fails to recognize the “overlapping histories of racialization and diasporic dislocation” that are present within her grasp.

Also important to mention is the objectification Khadra projects onto a woman she sees on the plane; an “American woman, a blonde who had those tanned, speckled arms that American women get when they age because of the careless way they expose their bodies in youth, slipped on a long sleeved white blouse. That’s right cover yourself
up [...] we’re the majority now” (Kahf 120). This reflects Khadra’s connection to her hijab, how it allows her to transgress away from being identified as an “American woman,” as the woman on the plane was the epitome of what Khadra inherently opposed about American culture the “carelessness] and “exposing] of their bodies. However, Khadra eventually mirrors this woman, learning that a “marked” body can present more intimate connections than appear on the surface.

Kahf presents not only readers, but Khadra with a female body that represents the “queering” of regions, an unexpected body who successfully navigates herself as a Muslim American woman, acknowledging both her past and present together to form an alternative narrative. In opposition to Khadra is her mother, who as they are leaving says, “Our community is the best ever [...] those sisters are my best friends in the world” (120). Here, Kahf successfully demonstrates the contrasting perspectives of Khadra and her mother, as Ebtehaj has claimed Indiana and the people she has met as contributors to her faith, falling in line with Gopinath’s “queer optic aesthetic,” she has fortunately “queered” both her past and present regions, living within a landscape that encompasses the alternative ways of experiencing (seeing and sensing) “space, scale, and temporality made available by this collision of the regional and the diasporic” (Gopinath 20). Ebtehaj, unlike Khadra demonstrates the “queering” of regions, in which she has developed a narrative of the self that cultivates a “shared queer visual aesthetic that mobilizes new ways of seeing both regions and archives” and enacts through an “affective register,” an intimate connection between the two. The intimacies established form an alternative narrative founded on a regional frame versus the national, which is “not static and self-enclosed, but rather is produced by the collision of the local, the national, and the
transnational” and understanding how these “queer visual aesthetics” function in regard to the “alternative narrative” underscore the intimacies in connecting the personal to the regional.

The last scene I engage with that greatly contributes to Khadra’s archive in solidifying the connection of her past to her future is her actual experience at Haj on Mecca. “They landed. At last, Khadra thought, someplace where we really belong. It’s the land of the Prophet. The land of all Muslims” (Kahf 121). Their arrival to Saudi Arabia solidifies Khadra’s attachment to the “one nation” and “one tribe,” as it is “someplace where [she] really belongs.” Although Khadra expects this trip to be her return to “home”, the Islamic world in which she believes to know and nation based identity soon begin to shatter, as she once again becomes “hypervisible,” although this time, unwillingly, within a place in which she anticipated complete “oneness” and normativity, a place of total belonging. One of the first mornings on Khadra’s trip she attempts to attend the mosque for the call to prayer, only to return with “a tearstreaked face” escorted by two police officers, in which her own Uncle refuses to know her when asked, “Is this one of your womenfolk?” (Kahf 132). Khadra ultimately stands bewildered, when her father tells her “women are not allowed to pray in the mosque here [Saudi Arabia]” (Kahf 132). She refuses to accept this, failing to recognize that “women don’t go to the mosque. They don’t in most Muslim countries” to which she reflects “it couldn’t be right. Being a Muslim meant going to the mosque [...] women have always gone to the mosque. It’s a part of Islam” (Kahf 133). Khadra’s father responds, “You’re used to America, binti, [...] in most of the Muslim world, it hasn’t been custom for hundreds of years” (133). His response triggers Khadra, pushing her towards her first step
in “queering” regions. It is the first time Khadra realizes that living in America has given her a greater opportunity, a greater sense of equality than “back east,” which is ironic as she refused to call America “home.” Khadra is learning that being “back east” limits her ability to exercise her Muslimness to the full aesthetic in which she wishes to follow, and America has given her that ability without constraint as she is now witnessing during Haj.

As her trip progresses, the more displaced Khadra begins to feel, only heightening her “hypervisibility” and calling to question her nation based identity. When hanging out with her cousin and her friends Khadra repeatedly argues, “No. I’m not really American. I’m an Arab, like you” (Kahf 137). Khadra envisioned her experience as one that would underscore her Muslimness and denounce her Americanness, but in reality she is only identified by her American roots, and thus is deemed to have/support American values. “What is it--what is the big deal--we’re not doing anything you have to worry about [...] we’ve got our clothes on--and you grew up in America--don’t tell me you never do stuff like this in America” (Kahf 139). Here, Khadra is reduced to her “American” body, expected to adhere to stereotypical American values--greed, lust, etc.

Within her American landscape, Khadra used her body’s willing “hypervisibility” as a site of power, one to proclaim and signify her contrasting differences that denounced America and strengthened her Muslim background. However, her body has now become the ultimate site of betrayal, “hypervisibility,” and rejection as she failed to assimilate into “the” Muslim country. “And even though she was in a Muslim country at this moment, and not just any Muslim country but the Muslim country, where Islam started, she had never felt so far from home” (Kahf 139). Gopinath calls attention to the bordered knowledge framing the heteronormative community, claiming that the reliance on
normative archives and aesthetics limits one’s ability to enable various regional, local, and transnational intimacies. Khadra is a product of this reliance, relying on a "heteronormative community,” but more specifically her allegiance to the nation, that limited her ability to form relationships between the regional, local, and transnational. However, her trip to Saudi Arabia was the catalyst needed to drive her towards Gopinath’s “queer aesthetics” as it underscored the limited road for her self identity. Without this journey back East, Khadra would have never been given the opportunity to provoke the disruption of a “meteronormative queer and nationalist vision” and it is through this disorienting lens that “surfaces the connections between seemingly disparate geographic locations, temporalities, and sites of power” (Gopinath 21). It is only now, in her return back to Indiana, that she is realizing the “intimacies between different racial formations and various historical moments [...] intimacies typically obscured within dominant forms of knowledge production,” but still not to their full capacity (Gopinath 21).

Khadra’s “historical” formations of her identity were based on her where she thought she belonged—“back east”—in Syria, the place she was born. Thus, the nostalgia she developed in being so far physically displaced from a place that she believed embodied her truest sense of self allowed Syria, and also Saudi Arabia, to be the nation(s) she used as her “primary point of reference.” Undoubtedly, her trip shifted her understanding of this “historical” formation, as she became “hypervisible” and almost powerless within the nation she assumed would give her the most agency and sense of belonging. Now, Khadra is granted the ability to establish an alternative narrative founded on a regional frame versus the national, just like her mother, which is “not static
and self-enclosed, but rather is produced by the collision of the local, the national, and the transnational” and understanding how these “queer visual aesthetics” function in regard to the “alternative narrative” underscore the intimacies in connecting the personal to the regional (Gopinath 6).

“Queering” Regions: Combining Archives & Nostalgia to the Present

“Khadra was glad to be going home. ‘Home’—she said, without thinking. She pressed her nose against the airplane window. The lights of Indianapolis spread out on the dark earth beneath the jet. The sweet relief of her own clean bed awaited her there—and only there, of all the earth” (Kahf 135). Upon her return from Haj, Khadra begins to reconstruct her “sense of self” and “sense of belonging,” and thus her alternative narrative begins to transgress and she welcomes Indiana as “home.” Gopinath’s definition of “queerness” serves as a process of dually dwelling within “off-center spaces” and “staying lost,” which allow for the “stumbling” upon new worlds of possibility” (21). Khadra expected her trip to Saudi Arabia to be one filled with meeting her expectations, to welcome her as one of their own, to finally clench her “sense of belonging” she had been reaching for. However, her experiences, as mentioned earlier, disrupted her expectations, freeing her from her nationalist vision, she felt “lost” in the place where she was supposed to feel the most welcomed, the most cherished. Indiana now shifts from an “off-center space” to one of homecoming. She now has been given the ability to “stumble” into “new worlds of possibility” within American borders, something she had previously resisted. The nostalgia she once felt begins to evaporate, remapping the places she felt intimate with, and shifting her “sense of belonging” completely.
Shortly following her return, “Khadra put on a white scarf with tiny flowers like a village meadow in spring, and a pale blue blouse and soft floral skirt” her previous black scarves and navy jilbab “moved to the back of her closet,” signaling a small push towards her “queering” of regions, as the radical Islam she had followed, now held no place in her “alternative narrative,” and now she chose to embark on a journey that linked her more to the American landscape in which she now considered “home.”

A pivotal, and honestly necessary experience for Khadra in her journey to “queer” regions, is her marriage and divorce to Juma, as well as her abortion of their child. Khadra finds herself more displaced than ever, not only with the American landscape in which she dwells, but she feels total disconnect to her faith. She asked herself, “Where do you go when the first part of your life is coming to an end, and you don’t know what is yet unborn inside you? Where do you when you’re in a free fall, unmoored, safety net gone, and nothing nothing to anchor you?” (Kahf 216). The life in which Khadra had been subscribing to, the one built upon a “sense of self” and “sense of belonging” to a nationalist vision, no longer served as her “anchor.” She has yet to realize, that this “anchor” was a necessity, again an object needed to contribute to her archival register, an experience needed to fuse together her past and her present, for her to embody a collective, regional embodiment. A small poem opens the next chapter declaring, “You have no homeland,” now situating Khadra as completely placeless, detached from any type of “home,” or “larger community.” Now, “It was time for a retreat. She would betake herself unto an eastern place. Back where she came from: Syria. Land where her fathers died” (Kahf 218). Khadra’s displacement is compelling her to return to “where she came from” in the hopes of finding answers as to where, and how, her life should
progress from her rock bottom. The “land where her fathers died” allows Khadra to excavate the past, something Gopinath argues for in order to “apprehend the historical formations that have been cast into shadow by conventional historiography” (28).

Although Khadra does not have full recognition of this, her “retreat” back to Syria is the catalyst for her alternative narrative, her “queering” of regions as she begins to break down the past and embody it in her present.

For Khadra, Syria, up until this point, had been an isolated unit of the past, only negotiated by inherited memories and perceptions, but now it transforms to a visual template of her reality. Her visit with Teta, her aunt, demands her to challenge her “sense of self” and “sense of belonging,” pushing her past what she believes to know as her self-identified truth, to her actual truth. “You are allowed to know the truth about yourself. Besides, you have an ego, te’brini--of course! You have to have one to live! Who can live without a self? [...] to think of yourself as floating high above the normal level of humanity, selfless, and pure--why that is what gets you in the biggest danger” (Kahf 220). Khadra’s “ego” has been connected to her faith, and thus connected to the nationalist vision. Now that her “anchor” has been released, so has her “sense of self” and she is pushed to find a new “ego” one that allows her to “live” a new alternative narrative. Khadra’s ego, before her divorce, before her abortion, even after she returned to America from Haj, pushed her “above the normal level of humanity, selfless and pure,” as witnessed most inherently when on the plane to Haj calling out the “American woman” who was exposed, and “tanned,” showing off her body, as she turned out to be Muslim, just like Khadra. Previously, Khadra positioned herself as superior, her hijab as her “crown,” placing her within a “higher order,” all stemming from the nation as her
primary point of reference and allowing the nation to narrate her “sense of self” and “sense of belonging.” With all that now diminished, a “new” Khadra, a new “ego,” is being born into a regional landscape.

Gopinath argues “queerness names a state of being out of place, of disorientation in the landscape of heteronormativity, in temporal terms queerness has the potential to suspend the linear temporal rhythms of hetero- and homonormative life courses” (18). Khadra escaped to Syria to excavate her past, the past of her religion, and the past of her origin. In doing so, she expected to return to a “landscape of heteronormativity” one that would provide her with answers as to who she was, and who she was supposed to be in this next phase of her life. She expected to reconnect herself to her faith, to her nationalist vision to locate once again her “sense of self” and “sense of belonging.” However, her expectations have not delivered as she anticipated. When visiting Damascus, Khadra stumbles upon a poet, one that asks her what she considers provocative questions, “You still think of God as some Big Parent in the Sky don’t you?” leaving Khadra “surprised at how he seemed to be able to speak right into her mind’s conversation” (Kahf 245).

Khadra is still having trouble navigating her religion, this connection to Muslimness and its Syrian roots, to her “sense of self,” how her religion and Syria act cohesively as the “Big Parent in the Sky,” responding to the poet “without that (religion), I’m lost” (Kahf 245). Khadra did not expect to be confronted, to be questioned as to who she was when entering Syria, but it is allowing her to “stumble” into “new worlds of possibility” that have been previously cast into shadow by the “conventional historiography” Khadra remembers of Syria. Gopinath argues that the region partly functions as “‘the place where you’re from’” and is also “where one’s queerness is both formed and nurtured but also
disciplined and repudiated” (11). Khadra’s “queerness” comes from her origin in Syria, but the way she comes to know Syria as she experiences it now, versus how she had expected it to be and remembered it be, disciplines her, challenging her to “nurture” a new “sense of self.”

When attending the Jobar with Teta and Hayat, they come across the rabbi, who “spoke with the deepest Damascene accent” she had ever heard (Kahf 249). Khadra had stereotyped the rabbi, marking him as Jewish, and marking her as Muslim. Thus, hearing him speak brought back a memory in which a Marion County librarian gushed at Khadra “you can speak the English language! And your accent is so American” (Kahf 249). This comparison, brings Khadra shame, shame for creating an exclusivity between her and the rabbi, and sparks her total transformation, the step to “queer” her regions together.

But this was different, wasn’t it? It’s just that—all this time, she’d thought of them as Them, these people over There, not all the same of course, she knew that, but, still not part of Us. Never. And even when she grew out of that primitive notion of “There’s-us-and-then-there’s-them,” she grew by accepting, albeit reluctantly, the claims of some of her professors that certain things crosscut religion. Dr. Mattingly used to argue, for example, that class interests could unite working-class Arabs in Israel with working-class Jews (Kahf 249).

Khadra finally understands the difference between “us” and “them,” aligning with Gopinath’s critical model of engaging with difference: “a model that does not see past difference, but opens the possibility of forging alliances in and through it” that develops a “deep understanding of conjoined pasts, presents, futures, and envisions the possibility of affiliation” (29). Khadra rightfully recognizes difference, but rather than using difference
as a mode of rejection, she now sees it as an “alliance,” a way to connect with
“unanticipated intimacies” that stretch far beyond the nationalist vision, connecting her
deeply to a regional embodiment. Difference allows for cohesion, for a deeper
apprehension of one’s “sense of self” and “one sense of belonging.” Thus, “this whole
other life opened up in her mind” one that takes every experience of her past archive,
how she perceived herself, her nation, her religion, into a deeper understanding of
collision and intimacy, how regional geographies all contribute to her “sense of self.”

This new “queering” is also reflected in the wearing of Khadra’s hijab. Khadra’s
hijab, as talked about previously, portrayed more of a politicized garment, one that made
her “hypervisible,” as a means to distinguish her from an “American” woman. Now,
Khadra stood at ease,

Khadra paused […] the scarf was slipping off. She shrugged. The chiffon fell
across her shoulders. She remembered when she’d taken her last swim in the
Fallen Timbers pool as a girl. She closed her eyes and let the sun shine through
the thin skin of her eyelids, warm her body to the very core of her. She opened her
eyes, and she knew deep in the place of yaqin that this was all right, a blessing on
her shoulders. Alhamdu, alhamdulilah. The sunlight on her head was a gift from
God. Gratitude filled her […] Here was an exposure, her soul an unmarked sheet
shadowing into distinct shapes under the fluids. Fresh film. Her self, developing
(Kahf 252).

Khadra now becomes “expose[d]” but she welcomes it, as “gratitude filled” her. She
recognizes her hijab no longer as a political marker, but a choice, a choice that reflects
her disbandment from the nationalist vision, to a regional embodiment. Khadra used to
think of her hijab as a “regime of power” that “dictated” her body and landscape in ways that determined her “regimes of vision” that command what we see, how we see, and how we are seen (Gopinath 7). Now she has control of her own “queer optic” that “bring into focus and into the realm of the present, the energy of those nonnormative desires, practices, bodies, and affiliations all concealed within dominant historical narratives” (Gopinath 17). Her “self” is being redeveloped, restructured, as she learns to understand “how veiling and unveiling are part of the same process, the same cycle, how both are necessary; how both light and dark are connected moments in the development of the soul in its darkroom” (Kahf 252).

Khadra’s “veiling” and “unveiling” is thus a metaphor for her ability to “queer” regions together. In order to “queer” Syria and America, she had to be a part of the nationalist vision, she had to be “othered” within the American landscape, it was the “dark” of her development, that was crucial for her to then shift to the “light.” Khadra needed to feel nostalgia, needed to isolate Syria as a “dark” time in her past, to inherit memories and perceptions so she could once again return to make her own, to be able to recognize difference between America and Syria, between “queered” self, and nationalist self, as a means to move forward, to take the experiences of her archive, and put them into an “affective register” of her present and her future. Gopinath argues that “a turn to the region, is, quite often, a turn to the personal and autobiographical,” thus allowing space/place to narrate one’s “sense of self” even when these engagements “attempt to deconstruct an essentialist logic of identity, place and belonging” (26-27). Without Khadra’s nostalgia, without her “veiling,” she would never know what “essentialist logics” to deconstruct, she would have not had an identity, place, or belonging, to
restructure and “queer,” as to be “unveiled” you must be “veiled” first. Khadra needed the “historical formations” of her past to be able to reflect how these formations left “imprints” on her body and on her desires, without this she could have never “queered” her regions together.

Had Khadra’s past--her birth in Syria, her growing up in Simmonsville, her “veiling,” her trip to Haj, her marriage/divorce, her abortion, her trip to Syria-- never occurred, she would not be able to be “unveiled” to be “queered” to narrate herself based on region because the past and present are necessary to deconstruct the heteronormative vision she was living in. Her past experiences mark her in a way that brings intimacy and belonging to her present, allowing her to dually dwell within America and “back east,” to feel connected through inherent differences, and apprehension of these differences, creating “alliances” between “here” and “there,” “us” and “them.” When leaving Syria and heading back to the United States Khadra “pulled the tangerine scarf out of her handbag” and “draped the depatta so it hung loosely from the crown of her head. Not tightly, [...] loosely, so it moved and slipped about her face and touched her cheek, like the hand of a lover [...] she wanted her heart to remember, in the dappled ruffle and rustle of veiling and unveiling” (Kahf 255). Her hijab no longer heightens her “hypervisibility,” or “otherness,” but represents the “veiling” and “unveiling” of her “self,” and its intimate connection to region, how each place, Syria, and America, “veiled” and “unveiled” her, “queering” them as one region together.

She loved the country of her origin, and found that something in the soil there, in the air, in the layout of streets and the architecture of buildings, answered a basic need in her, and corresponded to the deep structure of her taxonomy. She would
go back again in a flash if only Syria wasn’t so clenched and a path out wasn’t so open to her. But she knew at last that it was in the American crucible where her character had been forged, for good or ill. No matter that she had been brought there through no act of her own will. It was too late, it was done, no going back now, no phoning home. She was on her shariah to America. Toto, we’re not in Damascus anymore, Khadra whispered, as the wheels hit the ground. Homeland America, bismillah (Kahf 256).

Every one of Khadra’s experiences “queered” her, allowing for her to be disoriented within America, Syria, and Saudi Arabia, which allowed her to disconnect herself from her national embodiment that drove her “sense of self” and “sense of belonging” and instead turn toward a regional embodiment, that she learned by forging together her past and present experiences within each place she felt a connection to. In doing so, she was able to both “veil” and “unveil” a new identity, a fulfilled bildungsroman that shares histories sharing histories of “conjoined pasts, presents, and futures” that insists upon the cohesion of the local, transnational, and global affiliations. Khadra’s body is no longer “hypervisible” or “othered” but an intimate body meant to display the conjoining of region and identity to narrate a “sense of self.”


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