“Handmade by You”: The Poetics and Politics of Long-Distance Correspondence in Agha Shahid Ali

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1. Introduction: "The Dacca Gauzes" and the Work of Broken Hands

To describe some of the central concerns in Agha Shahid Ali's poetry, the Kashmiri-American poet's own vocabulary does the job well: he is someone who follows "the 'route of evanescence' to draw a nostalgist's map of 'separation's geography' and 'desolation's desert'" ("Introduction" 5). Born in 1949 into a secular Muslim household where Urdu, Kashmiri and English were the languages spoken, Ali spent his childhood between New Delhi, Srinagar, and Indiana. For most of his adult life, he lived and taught in the US, and English was his primary artistic medium. The losses expressed in his poetry are not only those of a voluntary exile, however, for they speak profoundly to colonial exploitation, the partition of India in 1947, and the subsequent displacement, wars, ethnic conflicts, and state violence that agonized Kashmir, especially since the upsurge of insurgency in the late 1980s. The recent 2019–2021 lockdown stands witness to the continued tension in the Jammu and Kashmir region.[1] Upasana Dutta, pointing out the governmental suppression that prevented people from grieving in public, describes Ali as mourning "a community in the process of fracturing, and also the violence that continues to fracture it" (8). With these histories of separation in the background, Ali's poetry is often noted for its formal hybridity, its wide range of allusions, and its crossings of spatial, temporal and cultural borders that render normative frames of moving and relating "out of focus," to borrow Gayatri Gopinath's characterization of Ali's queerness.

There is something about Ali that scholars frequently acknowledge but hardly ever bring to a serious formal analysis: namely, his interest in instances of long-distance communication, especially failed ones. In his poems, readers are likely to find lost letters, blocked telephone calls, and boarded-up post offices. To focus on letters and postcards in particular, the trope of

[1] Ali's early passing in 2001 means that he was not there to witness the 2019-2021 communication blackout imposed by the Indian government, though his poetry resonates powerfully with it.

correspondence in Ali's poetry shows him wrestling with what Aamir Mufti identifies as "one of the central and most familiar problems in Urdu poetics": "the meanings of this word [*hijr* (separation)] and those of its paired opposite, *wisal* (union)" (611). As the mail was frequently disrupted in the shared historical experience of Kashmiri people, Ali's use of correspondence can be seen as an act of translation that updates inherited themes. However, since the pathos of a union sought by poetry is also present—and poems have often and in many traditions been imagined as letters sent out to the world, or to specific persons—in this thesis I want to delve more deeply into Ali's juxtaposition of poetry writing with letter writing in order to track his reflections on his own tasks as a poet who rebuilds lost connections. To do so, I take "Stationery," "Postcard from Kashmir" and "Country Without a Post Office" as examples and will call them correspondence poems. However, this is not about poems passing themselves as epistles that arrive somewhere to link poets and audiences together. Rather, the collaborative and material process of correspondence as imagined by Ali gives us an ideal of poetry as embodying the work of many others (signified especially through references to hands) and of such work as indispensable to creating a shared world when social relations are threatened by capitalism, violence, and postcolonial displacement (which "amputate"[2] hands). In a way then, the problem Ali faces is one of writing poems that may fail to communicate. Communication breakdown, as we'll see, can have very high stakes and delineates a "route of evanescence" in "separation's geography."

This thesis is partly motivated by my interest in the role of relationality in theories of poetry. There are clearly vital differences between poetry and the day-to-day language of communication, and one need not subscribe to the view popularly represented by John Stuart Mill's "eloquence is heard, poetry is overheard" in order to think so. Yet the tendency in the

[2] The idea of amputation comes from Ali's poem "The Dacca Gauzes" which I discuss later in this section.

study and teaching of poetry to treat poems as utterances of fictive speakers, accessible to all readers posing precisely as "overhearers" to what comes to be construed as interior speech, can seriously sideline a poem's relational impulses or intentions and limit our sense of its address structure.[3] In her recent monograph *Before Modernism: Inventing the American Lyric*, Virginia Jackson indeed demonstrates that how we imagine poetry's address has not only formal but also historical significance. Jackson turns to the 19th-century to focus on "the deep design of the racialized social antagonism foundational to America" (6) as being also the deep design of the poetics that brought about "the publicly private lyric speaker" (49). Changes in social relations contributed, Jackson points out, to what she calls the lyricization of poetry, the historical process whereby "miscellaneous forms of address gradually and unevenly merged into one big genre of address associated with the genre of the person" (3–4). With genre taken to mean specifically "a mode of recognition instantiated in discourse"[4] (6–7), lyricization mirrors processes of racialization that were producing imaginaries of recognizable persons abstracted from historical persons. Thus (as I understand it) the lyric speaker addresses all and yet no one because of the difficulty of a collective identity that is in fact "contingent on racialized definition" or otherwise "utopian" (48). It is also this abstract address that fuels a desire for private access[5] and encourages the imposition of a readerly attitude of lyric overhearing. Within the dialectics that led to the American lyric today, 19th century Black poets pushed back by turning this speaker into "an abstract figure of representational alienation," which was subsequently appropriated, however, by White poetics into "the radically abstracted solitary subject" (49, 42).

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[3] For more on address, see scholars such as William Waters.

[4] Jackson borrows this definition from Lisa Gitelman.

[5] As Jackson likes to quote from Herbert Tucker's "Dramatic Monologue and the Overhearing of Lyric," there is a certain "thirst for the intersubjective confirmation of the self" (*Before Modernism* 39).

Jackson's intervention in the narrative of modern poetics is worth recounting at some length because she models a way of mining social meanings from readerly postures assumed in response to a poem's imagined address ("overhearing").[6] It is outside the scope of this thesis to historicize address structures found in Ali's work, but since "Stationery," "Postcard from Kashmir," and "Country Without a Post Office" all explore Ali's relationship with particular correspondents, I want to see these poems as helping us imagine postures that we can then apply to poetry within a politically charged postcolonial context. The poems I have chosen are not remarkable *as epistles* (only one is clearly addressed to "you"), but they suggest nonetheless a kind of interactivity grounded in the physical space of letters/postcards that evokes hands crafting, writing, and delivering. The work of another's hand as a safeguard against silence and erasure is indeed a useful motif that I track in all three sections that follow. Meanwhile, this interactivity orients us to adopt postures toward poetry itself as a form of making. What losses are expressed by "the publicly private lyric speaker" in light of the interdependent relationality of correspondence? The particular talk of "postures," however, I borrow not from Jackson but from Elizabeth Fowler's idea that "[art] invites us, by means of real and virtual sensory experience, into emotional or intellectual states and attitudes that combine into sequences" (597).[7] That poems thus make meaning through "aesthetic programs of bodily experience" (Fowler 597) is a good way to describe what is happening as Ali takes the readers of his poetry also through acts of sending and receiving associated with correspondence.

Jackson's intervention also specifically articulates an idea of the lyric that helps me frame the devices that Ali uses to problematize poetic communication under alienating postcolonial

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[6] Or: "...we make ourselves into a choral *we* performing a readerly karaoke that solves the problems of collective identity that Plato's poem so eloquently poses." (*Before Modernism* 32)

[7] "Poems, the primary object of my study here, associate the feelings and the postures or attitudes (as they say in dance or sculpture) embodied in these sequences with particular intellectual ideas and propositions: texts configure the relations among sense, thought, posture, and feeling." (Fowler 597)

conditions. Jackson has demonstrated that the solitary modern lyric is a genre implicated in problems of recognition and abstraction; what is recognizable is abstracted from the racialized and likely misrecognized lyric subject.[8] Interestingly, Jackson also refers several times to Theodore Adorno's "On Lyric Poetry and Society," an essay that tells a familiar though problematic[9] sincerity-to-alienation story of how "*before modernism*, lyric poetry was the expression of our inner subjectivity, but after x happened, lyric came to be and will ever after remain at odds with itself" (*Before Modernism* 50). Though there are differences in the social relations Jackson and Adorno address, their shared sense of the lyric subject's self-alienation resonates with Ali's struggle to speak for Kashmir, a land troped by him and others as "a paradise lost" (Chambers 176). If the solitary lyric is counterintuitively an unexpressive space, what happens to the memories and experiences conveyed by a self-ironic poet who poses as a lyric speaker? Do they become messages that lack the means of communication?

This question of poetic experience is another coordinate that organizes the analysis in this thesis. As Jackson and Yopie Prins suggest in *The Lyric Theory Reader* as part of their introduction to phenomenological approaches to "poetry as experience, experience as poetry" (381), "the familiar threat to experience and to the senses" (389) preoccupy thinkers who both value poetry as vital or even constitutive of human subjectivity and fear that it is becoming impossible due under modern conditions. Looking at the fractures, endangered communication, and widespread losses in Ali's poems about Kashmir, I argue, gives new social content to this post-Heideggerian "sense that poetic worlding is only possible on the margins of impossible worlds" (*Reader* 385).

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[8] "[...] then the problem for Wheatley's couplet is that the discourse that makes it recognizable as a genre also makes the person who wrote it unrecognizable" (*Before Modernism* 7).
[9] Jackson does not find it necessarily true that the history of poetics is heading toward progress and synthesis, a Hegelian view that is kind of implied in Adorno.

...

To preface the intersubjective modes of making in the correspondence poems, the second half of this introduction reads Ali's "The Dacca Gauzes" as a poem that foregrounds language as embodying others' touch and exemplifies the pathos of missing hands. Under exploitative British economic policies, the forced deindustrialization of India left textile workers heavily impacted by colonial violence. In "The Dacca Gauzes," Ali makes the lost muslins of Dhaka a site of mourning:

> Those transparent Dacca gauzes
> known as woven air, running
> water, evening dew:
>
> a dead art now, dead over
> a hundred years. "No one
> now knows," my grandmother says,
> [...]
>
> In history we learned: the hands
> of weavers were amputated,
> the looms of Bengal silenced,
>
> and the cotton shipped raw
> by the British to England.
> History of little use to her,
> [...]
>
> in autumn, should one wake up
> at dawn to pray, can one
> feel that same texture again.
>
> One morning, she says, the air
> was dew-starched: she pulled
> it absently through her ring.
>
> (*The Veiled Suite,* stanzas 1–2, 7–8, 10–11)

Punctuated with words such as "known," "knows," "proved," and "learned," the poem can be read as an effort to recover an experience despite Ali's grandmother's claim, in one of Ali's drafts, that "[no] one can imagine [...] what it was to wear, just to touch, that cloth" (1983

version). The poem seems to attempt this recovery by trying on the language of those with first-hand experience. Besides "history," Ali chooses Oscar Wilde and his grandmother as his sources. As Robert Stilling's research points out, the first stanza's "woven air, running/ water, evening dew" is taken out of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* where Wilde himself has borrowed these names first given "in the East" to the fabrics (Wilde 118) and later circulated transnationally as marketing labels; Wilde recycles them into aestheticized phrases for his novel.[10] Somewhat jealously, the two available versions of Ali's drafts open with "Dorian Gray wore those gauzes from Dacca,/ known as woven air, running water, evening/ dew [...]" and "Not only Dorian Gray but many aristocrats of Europe/ wore [...]" (Stilling 55). The suppression of this reference in the published text, though, suggests Ali taking up Wilde's words more intimately as his own. Ali performs a complex act of identification, it seems, with one of the European aristocrats whose complicit first-hand involvement in capitalist colonial trade ironically gives their sensuous but exoticized writing the potential for connection. Stilling has also made a case that Ali may have seen a less imperialistic and more sympathetic Wilde in the latter's decadent aesthetics.

With the grandmother, who "wore/ it once, an heirloom sari," and whose fingers seem to have retained memories of the lost muslins, Ali's drafts interestingly also show signs of deliberation over the distance between her words and his poem. The ending in particular is shown to be the grandmother relating (in quotation marks) how she was only able to feel the fabric again upon "touching Kashmir's dew-starched dawns," whereas the published text chooses to paraphrases the grandmother, even momentarily shifting the pronoun to "one" in the

[10] Ali originally titled the poem "Reading *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in Kashmir" (1983 draft). The sentence from Wilde's novel reads "the Dacca gauzes, that from their transparency are known in the East as 'woven air,' and 'running water,' and 'evening dew.' (Wilde 118)" *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is also the source of the poem's epigraph, which shows Dorian trying to "accumulate" Dacca gauzes (*Veiled* 42).

second-to-last stanza. The published text thus ends with an ambiguous moment that seems to show the unconscious movement of her hands simultaneous to her story-telling: “she pulled/ it absently through her ring.” As with Wilde, Ali seems to have decided to draw nearer, not only repeating his grandmother’s words but also evoking the sureness of her embodied knowledge. Of course, the poet’s identification with his grandmother is not straightforward either. The closing image disperses the “heirloom sari”—already dispersed once as “handkerchiefs,” as the poet tells us—into “woven air,” an inhabited space of inheritance and customs. However, it remains unclear whether this makes the fabric accessible to an expat poet identified with book-learning (“In history we learned,” line 19).

The beautiful final image of the grandmother’s hands re-emphasizes touch as a form of knowledge that can pass into a poetic language—an idea that seems to motivate the probing, sampling, and wondering approach Ali adopts in “The Dacca Gauzes.” However, the image also reminds us of the weavers’ hands’ absence. That Wilde and the grandmother made art for Ali to experience does not make up for the more fundamental loss of those “amputated” hands whose “silenced” (line 21) production caused the original art to disappear or indeed die. In a way, the interwoven sense of distance and entanglement the poem expresses about Wilde and the grandmother accompany the question of witness in a manner characteristic of Ali. Like the weavers’ hands, their hands are in danger of alienation under divided and objectifying social conditions, conditions that are always important concerns for Ali. Losing touch, in this sense, threatens the irretrievable erasure of the legendary textile from even the witness of language. Without others’ handiwork, “The Dacca Gauzes” could not have been made. All this may be more or less a riff on hands on my part, but as a guiding image, hands that make art to preserve an experience, a memory, or a witness account is useful for understanding the importance of

intersubjectivity in the correspondence poems. We can indeed take "The Dacca Gauzes" as a reminder that while it is an experience that is in danger of being lost for good, the deeper cause for mourning is the people who cannot be there to build a world together.

It is worth noting, additionally, that the motif of broken hands does recur in Ali's oeuvre in significant ways. "Homage to Faiz Ahmed Faiz" commends Faiz, a renowned Urdu poet who was an important influence on Ali, for always standing witness despite being "away from Pakistan, from/ the laws of home which said: the hands/ of thieves will be surgically/ amputated" (*Veiled* 56); the same poem also claims that Faiz has allowed Ali's hands "to turn to stone,/ as must happen to a translator's hands" (*Veiled* 58). For another, stranger instance of amputation, Ali's ghazal "For Time" ends with "Who amputates clock-hands to make you, Shahid,/ await the god not there with all the time for time?" (*Veiled* 367). It is also remarkable how amputation becomes itself a metaphor for separation. In "Muharram in Srinagar, 1992," a loose kind of sestina that conjures a surrealist vision of death traveling first-class, the breaking or disappearing of "our" hands is repeated conspicuously, and these hands serve as a synecdoche for people who may not return, or who may return holding "guns, or a bouquet" (*Veiled* 234). For more examples, in "In Marble," after "A hand broke" from a god made of plaster, Ali "took it in mine" (*Veiled* 355), and he writes of God in "A Secular Comedy" that "All of His hands lie broken" (*Veiled* 286). The laborers' hands "but for [which] this story would be empty" in "Rooms are Never Finished" are not broken; instead, they build the various rooms through which the poem moves. However, even there a sense of disembodiment attends these hands called "quick," "small," and "invisible" apart from the bodies they belong to (*Veiled* 279–281). These references to hands in the context of creation, desolation, and separation will hopefully warrant my attention

to acts of co-construction in all three correspondence poems this thesis explores, including in "Postcard from Kashmir," where it is their absence that is notable.

Ali's broader literary projects also provide useful contexts. Calling the poet an architect of nostalgia, Shadab Zeest Hashmi identifies a desire for an "expansive memory" (183) in Ali. Detecting a "disappointment or a sense of loneliness, call it poetic anxiety if you will, about the esoteric breadth he is attracted toward and capable of" (184), Hashmi honors Ali's translations and ghazals for "[laying] the groundwork for a literary lexicon that encodes and communicates his native cultural memory in contemporary American literature" (185). In 1991, Ali undertook to publish *The Rebel's Silhouette: Selected Poems of Faiz Ahmed Faiz*, a volume he translated and assembled with Faiz's endorsement. As for ghazals, Ali is credited for the English form which he taught and formalized into American poetics.[11] Addressing in particular postcolonial debates over style that tend to treat aestheticism in general as unmodern or even reactionary, Robert Stilling has argued that it is partly by bringing out the ghazal's histories that Ali translates back into memory a traditional genre that had come to be distrusted as courtly decadence. As Stilling puts it, Ali "mourns, and thereby salvages, the cultural products of a Mughal court forced into decline by British rule" (59). Stilling also points to Ali's efforts, for instance, to "recreate the wide range of desires present in Urdu poetry through his own richly ornate poems" (73). To add to Stilling though, the poet's "political commitment to represent Kashmir in crisis" (Dutta 1) likely also means that the communicative openings in Ali's poetry will paradoxically serve the purpose of bearing witness to ineffable loss.

Transmitting, remembering and witnessing, these are all key concerns in Ali's poetry. If projects of cultural translation helped Ali, as Hashmi suggests, to combat "loneliness," the correspondence poems literalize the worry of things lost in transit. By emphasizing the

[11] This is mentioned across several articles on Ali. See, for example, Christopher Merrill.

co-constructed dimension of letters and postcards, we see how lost messages can signify the erasure of memory and injustice, the evanescence of people and objects, as well as the problems that separations and displacements raise for a poet. By studying the relational, "worlding" possibilities of poetry as imagined in "Stationery," "Postcard from Kashmir," and "Country Without a Post Office," my thesis shows the intimacy of personal correspondence to be a potential site for understanding Ali's political consciousness.

2. Making Paper: "Stationery" and Intersubjectivity in Poems

A starting point for thinking about hands that collaborate to build a shared world through artistic creation is a short poem about correspondence called "Stationery." Though only 8 lines in length, "Stationery," which Ali's friend and fellow poet Christopher Merrill calls a "signal poem in [Ali's] body of work—a plea for convergence, if you will" (Merrill 95), provides a kind of *ars poetica* about intersubjectivity in what I'll call poetic making:

> The moon did not become the sun.
> It just fell on the desert
> in great sheets, reams
> of silver handmade by you.
> The night is your cottage industry now.
> The day is your brisk emporium.
> The world is full of paper.
>
> Write to me. (*Veiled* 71)

Without stationery no letters can be written, nor perhaps poems. Making paper is in a sense the subject of "Stationery" and we can take "great sheets" to anticipate the "paper" or stationery in the penultimate line. The poem seems to help us imagine a generous gift made out of moonlight, which is turned by means of a poet's alchemy into the very object he sends into his reader's hands. Underscoring the thematics of separation and union, the expansiveness of Ali's sociable gesture is complemented by the poem's metaphorical dexterity and its succession of declaratives

that culminate in a fondly impervious invitation. The poem looks out upon a whole landscape transformed into a medium of convergence.[12] As moonlight is inexhaustible and free, at least at night, the poem trusts that communicating long-distance will not frustrate its desire for connection. Interestingly however, this act of paper-making is attributed to "you" and not to the moon or to Ali's imaginative transformation, even though the latter might seem a poet's prerogative. What is the meaning of "handmade by you"? Answering this question takes us far in seeing the different ways others may have a "hand" in the success of a poet's efforts—especially when these are efforts at recovery.

To begin with, the compact shape and second-person address of a postcard that "Stationery" possesses is not a mere resemblance. Christopher Merill, with whom Ali often discussed his work, recalls receiving "Stationery" as a postcard message from Ali while working for a literary journal. Merrill tried but did not succeed in publishing the poem, but he included it in full in a review of Ali's collection *The Half-Inch Himalayas*, thus introducing it to print. Knowing that "Stationery" had a private, material embodiment in the mail prior to its life in anthologies shows us one of the ways in which hands become significant: this fact about the poem's genesis highlights the text's orientation toward interacting with readers. In lines 4–6, for example, the stress on production and the repetition of "you" in "handmade by you," "your," and "your brisk emporium" pin the poem's attention on the recipient and what they might do as an agent with the postcard in their hands.

However, though Ali calls on the reader's hand to "Write to me," "Stationery" is perhaps less coercive than Keats's famous poem "This Living Hand," which in a tense final gesture of "I hold it toward you" (Keats, line 8) compels the reader to accept the hand as "living" to avoid

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[12] Ali delights in transformations that confound scale and substance. See, for example, this moment in "From Another Desert": "Tonight the air is many envelopes again/ tell her to open them all at once" (*Veiled* 150).

being haunted by a dead one. More gently, Ali extends a fragment of the moon as a letter of invitation. Nonetheless, what Keats requests so that "in my veins red life might stream again" (line 6) seems not entirely different from what Ali asks for, since Keats reminds us of the animation that a living reader is supposed to supply. In the case of correspondence, a piece of writing may similarly show resistance toward being read purely passively. Theorist and poet Susan Stewart has written that while art is for beholding, it retains a "thinglike aspect" insofar as "face-to-face forms, regardless of media, bring forward a desire to touch" (162, 161). According to Stewart, this desire is elicited by the artist's touch already embodied in the artwork.[13] Art's need for reciprocity, along with the imagined changes in the audience's posture that Stewart describes, finds a chance of being actually realized in correspondence. A message is the product of an inscribing hand's labor, and it tries to stir its recipient, urging them to reply. Whether we consider "Stationery" as a poem or in light of its original status as a message, "handmade by you" foregrounds a space of making shared by active participants.

However, the recipient's completion or animation of a message does not yet capture the sense of intersubjective dependency in "Stationery" in its fullness. If "Stationery" evokes a circuit of sentience on the page—linked up by the way touch "shifts between activity and passivity, subjective agency and objective matter" (Stewart 168)—"handmade by you" also suggests a deeper sense of communion, experienced as the presence of an other that accompanies the poet as he writes. To appreciate such union, it is worthwhile turning first to a poem that may shed some light on "Stationery's" imagery and tropes—Faiz Ahmed Faiz's popular poem "Memory." Faiz's "Memory" is not included in *The Rebel's Silhouette: Selected Poems of Faiz Ahmed Faiz* that Ali translated and published, but a somewhat liberally translated version of it

[13] "[...] the stored activity of the maker is simultaneous to an implicit and reciprocal capacity for animation in the receiver" (Stewart 150).

(also titled "Memory") can be found embedded as the fifth piece in Ali's own poetic sequence "From Amherst to Kashmir." I will discuss the poem based on Aamir Mufti's more literal translation before moving on to Ali's.

Faiz's "Memory" is a meditation on the blending of self and other—presence and absence—in memory.[14] Similar to "Stationery," while Faiz's poem enlists the desert to express the solitude of being separated from the beloved, it also suggests a sense of not being fully alone:

> So lovingly, O my love, has placed
> your memory its hand this moment on my heart.
> It seems, though this distance is young,
> The day of separation is ended, the night of union has arrived.
>
> (Mufti 609, lines 9–12)

The memory of the beloved lays a "hand" on the poet's "heart," or more precisely as Aamir Mufti points out about the original Urdu wording, on the heart's "cheek," caressing it as though it were a human face. Who can tell, as readers, if the touch we feel in perusing these lines is that of the hand or the heart/face? What baffles the stability of individual identity even more, however, is the way "the beloved is at the same time distant, and hence other, and intimately present to the self as itself" (Mufti 610). Faiz seems to perceive such a strong presence of his addressee that it materializes as touch and transforms his perceptions of the desert (as seen here but also in parts of the poem not quoted above). Yet at the same time, this presence speaks all the more powerfully to the poet's need and incompleteness. The subject that emerges seems thoroughly relational.

Mufti in particular notes the suffering of such a subject and finds it expressive of the tensions in Indian modernity,[15] for, overall, "the social truth embodied in Faiz's lyric poetry is

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[14] We can compare memory's effect to that of letter-writing, since writing is also a form of recollection: "It's a theme that runs throughout epistolary writing: you're absent, but also present, because I'm writing to you" (Brooks-Motl).

[15] "[...] the degradation of human life in colonial and postcolonial modernity - exploitation - and the withholding of a collective selfhood at peace with itself - what I am calling partition - find common expression in the suffering of the lyric subject" (Mufti 605).

that the emergence of the (modern) self is also its self-division" (604).[16] I want to note in passing that Mufti's assessment of Faiz is useful both because it helps contextualize the troubled intersubjectivity in "Memory" and because the idea of the lyric that Faiz introduces into the picture is important for my thesis. Faiz is "widely credited with having resuscitated [the ghazal] form after a half century of neglect and disdain" (Mufti 608). Partly to explain the social and political appeal of Faiz's highly personal poems of separation and love, Mufti applies the lyric as an analytic to Faiz's oeuvre. The move is justified by Mufti as the "translation" of Faiz's use of traditional forms (the ghazal being exemplary) from "a literary history that is specific to Urdu into a critical space" where the supposedly decadent and out-of-touch genres in Urdu literary production come to embody an experience of alienation that expresses "the crisis of Indian national culture" (608). As discussed, the suffering lyric subject, in its isolatedness, reflects all the more clearly its entanglement with its Other within a divided social totality. Mufti thus works in alignment with Adorno, whose "On Lyric Poetry and Society" Mufti cites as part of his theoretical framework, that modern lyrics, seen as poetry reduced to "the pure subjectivity of the 'I,'" are in fact the best vessels for "the precipitation of the social" (604).

In what ways do we see "Stationery" engaging with a self that is similarly relational (one that is perhaps vexingly so)? If we turn to Ali's translation of "Memory," a notable place it diverges from Mufti's is Ali's treatment of day and night in lines 11–12. While Mufti renders line 11 as "It seems, though this distance is young," Ali develops the moment's more intimate implications that evoke —in a hybridizing move perhaps—something like a lover's aubade:

> Memory's placed its hand so on Time's face, touched it
> so caressingly that although it's still our
> parting's morning, it's as if night's come, bringing
> you to my bare arms. (*Veiled* 263, lines 9–12)

[16] Mufti explains that the self is divided in that it is not fully alienated; it is "desiring reconciliation and wholeness and yet cognizant that its own distance from itself is the very source of its movement and life" (610).

In Ali's version, it is the face of "Time" that is being caressed as a bribe to make night come sooner. Ali's enjambment casts a spell over the lines that lead up to the arrival of "you" at the horizon of the final line (plausibly likening the disarticulated lover to the moon). The assonant echoes of "placed" and "face," "caressingly," "parting," "morning," and "bringing" linger richly; even if the speaker's arms are "bare," the suggestion is erotic. There also seems to be a heightened emphasis on the deictic—on the presence actualized even as the poet speaks—which causes the meaning of the first "so" (line 9) to flow into that of the second (line 10).

In the no less haunted desert of "Stationery," it is a similar hope to extend nighttime intimacy that Ali expresses. Relationality therefore finds a striking expression as the poet imagines doing so with the help of his correspondent, declaring that "[the] moon did not become the sun," since "you" are there to weave it into paper. As in "Memory," the other's presence in the self transforms the subject's world, reasserting the union lost to "the day of separation" by salvaging something from the night. The metaphorical language Ali uses ("It just fell on the desert/ in great sheets") resonates with the hallucinatory immediacy of Faiz's "Memory," although in "Stationery" the enchanted poet seems less self-divided in his isolation, encouraged by the addressee's felt presence to expect the possibility of an actual reply. For instance, the "great sheets" that are "handmade by you" present a double image that evokes the moonlit landscape as well as the artifacts found in plenty in the "brisk emporium" of daytime, allowing the recovered moon to travel outward in the latter form to reunite, paradoxically, with its source.

However, there are limits to the analogy between "Memory" and "Stationery" indeed because of the way salvaging the moon takes on a different meaning in the latter poem. The moon does not deliver the beloved into a lover's bare arms; instead, it becomes the thing in need of being delivered, an experience to be given aesthetic form. After all, the metaphor of the moon

is a vivid part of the experience Ali's poem provides; moreover, with their flashy pictures and messages of “wish you are here” and “thinking of you,” postcards are the very incarnation of the desire to mail a fragment of one’s world to another. Is the assurance of intersubjectivity therefore not that “the night of union” lives on, but rather that its beauty will remain communicable? Since, as Brian Glavey suggests about poetry in the context of queer relationality, “art and experience must be communicated so as not to be lost” (998)? If Ali’s version of “Memory” helps us see a desire to prolong the night, the matter is immensely complicated by the introduction of paper in contrast to Faiz, who mainly employs nature to describe the effects of the absent beloved (“In the desert of solitude, under the dust of distance,/ the flowers of your presence bloom,” lines 3–4, Mufti’s translation). Reinventing the relational self’s dynamics, the stationery that is “handmade by you” brings interdependency, making, and communicating to the problem of preservation. Poetry’s ability to capture and convey something of the lost is important to Ali, as I mentioned earlier; in an interview, he describes his sensibility as informed by “this overriding sense of the evanescent, the vanishing” and continues to say that “And I suppose that’s what inspires me to write” (“Introduction” 5). In this light, as a poem that attends to the entanglement of another’s work with the poet’s own, “Stationery” can very well be read as another meditation on both the role of and the implications for the other in the poetic preservation of an evanescent experience.[17]

That the poem imagines the moon to be the medium “paper” (and only the message by implication) is perhaps what in particular gives “handmade by you” its fullest force. By manufacturing stationery out of the moon, “you” ensure the communication of the moon as image. A felicitous metaphor, the figure of this empowering paper-maker raises fundamental

[17] I’m reminded of an often quoted couplet at the end of Ali’s ghazal “In Arabic”: “They ask me to tell them what Shahid means - / Listen: It means ‘The Belovéd’ in Persian, ‘witness’ in Arabic.”

questions. Does the very act of poetic making allow an image to take flight and be preserved, i.e. give it a communicable or intelligible form? And does poetic making itself depend on there being someone to share with, or on the internalized hands of others that guide our hands?[18] Does communicative breakdown in turn cause those other hands to vanish? "Stationery" suggests at least that there are vital interdependencies among recognition, poetic creation and self-and-other relations; the self-dividedness that Mufti identifies in "Memory" is recomposed into a question of giving experience form or meaning. In the same chapter where she discusses touch,[19] Susan Stewart presents poetic making as a humanizing or worlding process that springs up between people rather than from individual inspiration. The other precedes the self, even though it is by poetic making that the former comes within reach and into a space of contact:

> The cliche of the blind poet is one we must take seriously—for the poet beholds the other and at the same time creates the conditions for beholding, seeing without needing to see. The poet is summoned by another and in turn summons another into presence. The reader or hearer of the poem recalls these forms of summoning when she attributes intention to the poem as a made form. (Stewart 146)

Stewart participates in a phenomenological tradition that prizes an idea of the lyric as constitutive of human experience; for her, "the lyric brings forward [...a] place of language as the foundation of intersubjectivity and intersubjectivity as the foundation for the recognition of persons" (47). Besides the classical allusion to the blind poet, one of Stewart's images for "the recognition of persons" is drawn from Genesis, where "the voice of the wind becomes [...] a voice in the wind" (10). "Stationery" yields a different myth, but Ali seems concerned precisely

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[18] And would this give rise to an anxiety that raw materials (moonlight) might run out, that the destruction of a shared world will deprive one of the paper by which to keep in touch? To quote Brian Glavey again, "[the] beautiful thing about paintings and statues, in other words, is the way they can be woven into social relationships" (1009).
[19] "Facing, Touch, and Vertigo" from *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*

with the many "forms of summoning" in the act of creation and with the ways in which creation furthers relationships, making experiences intelligible and communication possible. In other words, the paper that "you" make is an indispensable medium of world-making.

What happens when there is no contact zone or zone of recognition "handmade by you" is intimated already in "The Dacca Gauzes." There are also less happy desert landscapes. Deeptesh Sen observes that the recurring imagery of the desert in Ali's "nostalgist's map" usually "functions as the black hole of history, gobbling up memory and nostalgia," a scene rehearsed, for example, in a poem called "I Dream I Return to Tucson in the Monsoons" (Sen 152). In this poem, the moon momentarily "turned the desert to water" as Ali, standing "alone," mourns for "[the ocean] that was a dried floor" and "a world without footprints" (*Veiled* 117). This futile moonlight that drenches the solitude of Ali's dream of Tucson provides an interesting contrast to the kind of mirage generated in "Stationery" and "Memory," underscoring the self-and-other entanglement's importance. Sen's characterization of Ali's poetic project as countering death and forgetting through the "de-territorialization of physical boundaries" and the "re-territorialization of desire" (158) orients us once again to the nexus of art, intersubjectivity and recovery against the desert that features so prominently in Ali's imagination.[20]

…

"Stationery" is one of the many poems selected for The Poetry Society of America's "Poetry in Motion" program, which "places poetry in the transit systems of cities throughout the country exposing it to millions of viewers every day."[21] "Stationery" in particular is shown on a poster in New York City's Transit Grand Central 42 St Station—it has traveled a long way from

[20] Ali set many of his poems in the desert landscapes of the American Southwest. He once said that "I think one very good thing that happened to me by moving to Arizona was that I suddenly found a landscape that could somehow bear my concerns and my themes of exile, loss, nostalgia" (Sen, 155).
[21] "Poetry in Motion." The Poetry Society of America. https://poetrysociety.org/poetry-in-motion

the original postcard sent to Christopher Merill. Yet, the public nature of this display and a mass audience of anonymous transients may strike a jarring note against the intimacy of Ali's desert poem. Those thinking of Ali's familiarity with US popular culture and his interest in commercial jingles shown for example in *A Walk Through the Yellow Pages* might even hear "Write to me" as an advertisement tagline on the walls of a New York City transit station.

This anxiety that "Stationery's" display potentially provokes throws into relief, for our purposes, the public nature of all poetic texts seen from a certain angle. In presenting the poem as part of "Poetry in Motion," The Poetry Society of America likely projects certain ideals such as the mobility of poems and their ability to address a broad public. In *Poetry's Touch*, William Waters has gone to some lengths to consider how poems decide whom they belong to: some have the effect of what feels like "the discovery [...] that the world intends you" (*Poetry's Touch* 67), but many also perform a withdrawal that refuses to hail the reader as an individual. For one example of the latter situation, Waters writes of William Carlos Williams's "This is Just to Say" that "theft and gift are of one root" (23); gifted with the poem as an apology, Williams's wife is asked however "to surrender the position of sole and intimate target and so also the attending reciprocal claims that would govern the genre 'domestic note'" (21).

Understandably then, this problem of public circulation is particularly troublesome for poems that evoke personal reciprocity or are in fact written for private correspondence. According to Virginia Jackson in *Dickinson's Misery*, the prolific letter-writer Emily Dickinson considered "the conditions of intimate address [...] explicitly opposed to the conditions imagined as 'poetic'" (135).[22] Jackson is interested in the fact that, though they have come to be considered quintessential lyrics written by a private "poetess," Dickinson's posthumously published poems

[22] Dickinson often appears in Ali's poems as one of his many intertextual references, though I can't say if Ali had Dickinson's letter-poems in mind when he was composing his poems about correspondence.

once had historical addressees. This fact chafes against contemporary reading practices that grant overhearers access to the lyric subject, attributing the lyric's ability for broad address indeed to the non-social or apolitical privacy Dickinson represents, i.e. "a self-address so absolute that every self can identify with it" (128). Yet such practices can misrecognize the address of poets like Dickinson, who was worried that her letter-poems would not reach their particular destinations. For Jackson, if only critics can see past their notion of the lyric, they will recognize that Dickinson's poetics reflects this worry.

One of these strategies Jackson discusses is relevant to my discussion of "Stationery": Dickinson's evasion of poetry's "problem of keeping 'You' in the Real, outside its own apostrophe's reach" (153). To avoid abstracting her addressee, Dickinson turns to focus on the material circumstance of correspondence and specifically, paper. Though this "White Sustenance"[23] can sometimes appear tenuous as a means of connection, its material specificity works as a source of exclusive intimacy so that a poem's "you" and "I" are "sustained by that page" (158) across time and space. In this spirit, Dickinson once half-complained to Susan Gilbert that there was not enough room on the page for all that she wanted to say: "Wont you tell the man who makes sheets of paper, that I hav'nt the *slightest respect* for him!" (Jackson 135). Originally sent as a postcard to Christopher Merrill, "Stationery" is also highly aware of its own "material of address" (Jackson 158). However, juxtaposed with Dickinson's letter to Susan Gilbert, "Stationery" seems to more readily anticipate its displacement from both Merrill and its paper medium. Thanks to "you"—"the man who makes sheets of paper"—Ali promises an endless supply of stationery, inexhaustible like moonlight and vast like the desert.

[23] A phrase from Dickinson's poem "I cannot live with You -" (*Dickinson's Misery* 146).

After so much discussion of interdependency and of hands and materiality, this immaterial mobility at the expense of specific senders and recipients might come as a surprise.[24] However, perhaps it serves to reorient us to a more capacious understanding of shared making that brings the social meanings of the concept closer to the surface. In a poem called "In Search of Evanescence," Ali seems to question the usefulness of having exact addresses when the system of connection itself is destroyed. He writes to himself that "You didn't throw away,/ addresses from which,/ streets,/ departed" and later concludes the poem with an ambivalent stance toward writing: "there's nothing in this world but hope: I have/ everyone's address. Everyone will write:/ And there's everything in this world but hope" (*Veiled* 135). In light of this hopeless hope, "Stationery's" willingness to disseminate itself strongly evokes the widespread losses in Ali's world and the consequent desire for rebuilding foundational spaces of communication; without these spaces, there cannot be landscapes of desire, only deserts of silence. The hand that is invited may not personally reach Ali in reply, but the act of writing is nevertheless desired.

The phrase "handmade by you" indeed allows for an extension of "you" beyond the interpersonal to a kind of intersubjectivity that takes cultural production as its basis. We can imagine, for example, that the poet's vision of the moon is inspired by poems he himself has read and received. There are, moreover, references to handcrafts: alongside the nighttime "cottage industry" and the daytime "emporium," "handmade by you" possibly evokes Indian cultural institutions that support craftspersons from diverse backgrounds through emporium stores that

[24] Jason Schneiderman has a short gloss on "Stationery" which Schneiderman calls "one of Shahid's most impressive and accomplished poems" and to which he attributes "the paradox of a wholeness through breaking" (137). Schneiderman points to the title as a homophone suggesting "the stillness required to receive a letter" (137) and notes how "[the] sense of stillness and motion…pervades the poem" (138). Perhaps the tension and yearning between the stationary recipient/writer and the traveling postcard resonate with the way public address resembles a message left to stand still (on a desert or a poster), offering itself to all and anyone passing by, while a version of it nevertheless travels and disseminates through these strangers' memories.

showcase and sell an array of handloom and handicraft products.[25] Taken to celebrate the transformative craftsmanship of many "yous" that shape landscapes into culture, the process whereby the moon becomes artifacts and its generosity turned into the emporium's brisk welcome secures a space of contact and acknowledgment even though this space is highly mediated. When positioned among artisans, the poet who speaks to all perhaps need not be faulted for displacing intimate experience with something that might look like exchange and consumption.

Connection is both the condition and aim of poetic making, both a summoning and a sphere of recognition. This is certainly true on the cultural level of "handmade by you," as we know that people have read Ali's poem (and specifically its last line "Write to me") as a broad call to write for Kashmir and sustain a conversation. These readers take up Ali's invitation, which is itself a loving response, because Ali empowers them to do so by articulating experiences that serve as new grounds for creativity and community building. Ather Zia, poet and author of *Resisting Disappearance: Military Occupation and Women's Activism in Kashmir*, is one of those who expressed Ali's influence. Zia names Ali "the balladeer of Kashmir's political tragedy" whose example is followed by many from the younger generations. For her personally, "Stationery" is a verse that "became a personal invocation, ensuring poetry stayed a constant companion while I began the scholarly journey of anthropology" (25).

3. Making Lyric: "Postcard from Kashmir" and the Space of Misrecognition

Communication is not without failures. In the two poems analyzed in this and the next section, disruptions to the mail signify anxieties about representation. In "Postcard from

[25] Today the Government of Jammu and Kashmir runs a number of arts emporiums, but smaller shops may call themselves emporiums as well.

Kashmir," the poet becomes captivated not by the postcard he receives but by the photo on its back. In "Country Without a Post Office," letters have stopped coming from home, prompting the poet to embark on an imaginary quest. In both cases, I suggest that Ali is troubled by things that disappear not only from his reach in the face of violence past and present, but also from his poetry. Similar to what I did with "Stationery," I want to show how the handiwork of others plays a key role in imagining—if in a metapoetic way—whether a poem can become a shared world to inhabit and experience together.

"Postcard from Kashmir" is a poem about the representation of home. Upon a first reading, it raises the problem of untruth by dramatizing an expat poet's attachment to an idealization:

> Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox,
> my home a neat four by six inches.
>
> I always loved neatness. Now I hold
> the half-inch Himalayas in my hand.
>
> This is home. And this the closest
> I'll ever be to home. When I return,
> the colors won't be so brilliant,
> the Jhelum's waters so clean,
> so ultramarine. My love
> so overexposed.
>
> And my memory will be a little
> out of focus, in it
> a giant negative, black
> and white, still undeveloped. (*Veiled* 29)

Here, after discovering that "Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox, my home a neat four by six inches," the poet experiences an encroachment of the logics of temporality and presence that we normally think of as structuring a person's sense of belonging. Looking at the picture on the postcard, he realizes that "This is home," an expression made startling by the apprehension of estrangement that this "home" causes: "This is home. And this the closest/ I'll ever be to home." This is perhaps a poem that many would not hesitate to call "lyrical": it is spoken to no one,

focused on a moment of first-person consciousness, and even exactly 14 lines long. In contrast to "Stationery," the postcard gives occasion to the poem but does not turn it into a message. Indeed, "Postcard from Kashmir" seems to push aside questions of making and conveying. Instead, it zooms in on the poet's interiority. The landscape that Ali recognizes as home is in a way an externalization of his desire, which is too idealizing to find its image of homeland realized in anything except perhaps a postcard photo. The poem casts doubt on poetic representation therefore more as a matter of distortion than articulation or communicability: driven ironically by yearning,[26] poets with "overexposed" perceptions and a memory that is "out of focus" might produce their own oversimplified postcard photos. Idealization is often an important topic in postcolonial contexts where displacement and destruction give rise to nostalgia. To summarize the matter in the words of Jahan Ramazani: "the postcolonial poem, like a postcard, risks miniaturizing, idealizing and ultimately displacing the remembered native landscape" ("Contemporary" 603).

In this section, however, I argue that we gain a more complex understanding of "Postcard's" conundrum—one that brings in the hands of others—if we think of the "lyrical" as a more complex matter and treat it less as *merely* a style and more as a poetic posture or attitude that is in a curious way imagined to be a cause of misrepresentation. Interestingly, though structured to favor lyric overhearing in its finished form, "Postcard from Kashmir" did not always exist in its current introspectiveness. According to the drafts,[27] Ali had at first imagined a message directed to "you," i.e. himself. The first typed version is entirely bracketed in quotation marks except for two final, silent lines from the poet: "In my mind, a giant black and white negative/ gathers dust, lies undeveloped." This arrangement seems to express a stronger sense of

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[26] This love is quickly becoming tinged with the touristic enthusiasm and commercial allure of postcards too.

[27] Available online through Hamilton College's The Beloved Witness Project.

self-censor: the poet's self, divided into two, calls on itself to return home to authenticity. What is especially striking, though, is the extent to which the published text seems a verbatim internalization of the drafts' second-person address. The first typed draft, to use it as an example again, opens with "Kashmir shrinks into *your* mailbox,/ *your* home a neat four by six inches" (my italics). Though my reconstruction is necessarily artificial, in what follows I suggest that, especially because of this inversion, the shift from the earlier interactivity in the drafts to the poem's final, self-absorbed stance can be read as a process that grapples with alienation, misrecognition, and confession.

That revisions can be a site to see poets wrestling with the past can be seen through a particularly useful study by Vidyan Ravinthiran of the four published versions of Sri Lankan poet Alfreda De Silva's "Grass Fields in Sunlight" (a poem in which De Silva revisits a place from her childhood).[28] Ravinthiran makes a case for reserving a place for the aesthetic in postcolonial criticism by showing De Silva's acts of "self-sabotage" as well as "self-recovery" through a "compulsion to edit." De Silva's fourth and final version, he argues, re-asserts the hope for "time travel" by its return to an earlier, superseded version. In doing so, the poem stylistically affirms the past's accessibility by re-embracing—in Ravinthiran's words—"the very fast, the ambiguous or imperfectly curated, the slippery yet immensely compelling" simile of the remembered sun[29] as "a fisherman netting/ In green water" (De Silva). For Ravinthiran, this image (and De Silva's earlier declaration of "I remember") "jettisons the uncertainty that made the [third] version prosaic." This third version in question relocates this sun, originally described by De Silva as "shocking" in its strange radiance, into the present where the sun "shocks [her] with its candour"

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[28] Vidyan Ravinthiran presented this paper during the University of Virginia's "Poetry, Place, Displacement" symposium in the spring of 2022. A YouTube recording is available online and I have listed it as the source of my quotations.

[29] Or perhaps De Silva in the act of remembering; as Ravinthiran suggests, there is some ambiguity in context.

(De Silva). Ravinthiran suspects, however, that in evoking the sun's candor, De Silva is not herself being quite honest and evades a felt but hard-to-justify experience. Her return to the past's presence in the fourth version therefore seems a sign of her resistance to the psychological displacement of such experiences.

Ravinthiran tracks the variations of De Silva's poem across its published forms. However, I think Ali's drafts are similar in their suggestiveness. They too reveal a hesitation toward the remembered home through shifts that we might call stylistic or aesthetic, and they too are entangled in questions of memory and presence, candor and self-deception, recognition and misrecognition. In the drafts, we can see that initially the poem's posture toward home is in fact mediated through the collaborative character of correspondence. Judging from an archived sheet of note paper, it is true, however, that "Postcard" owes its incipience to Ali's interest in the photo that comes with a postcard, though arguably even then there are more relational dynamics than there exist in the finished text. On this piece of paper, we find written in red ink "This(?)/ Giant photographer,/ he shrinks my home and sends ~~me all~~/ [illegible]." A second attempt[30] goes: "I send you ~~your home~~ (a shrunk) Kashmir/ ~~shrunk~~ by a giant (of a) photographer." Who might the giant photographer be? Who is the "I" in the second attempt? Who, moreover, is the speaker who dictates (narrates, predicts) in a third version that goes: "~~First~~, Kashmir ~~will~~ shrinks/ into your mailbox [...] ~~Well~~/ ~~t~~(T)ake it out. Hold the two-inch/ Himalayas ~~in your hand~~"?[31]

By the first typed draft, Ali has settled on the postcard message as his format and, more importantly, begun adapting the poem to the conventions of correspondence. A clearer image of the sender emerges: a "we" from "home" who "always talk of you," "miss you," and are

[30] I'm making guesses about chronology based on where the different versions are scribbled on Ali's note paper.
[31] A fourth beginning reads "Kashmir shrinks into/ the ~~a~~ mailbox; ~~and~~ I take it out." This is arguably the version closest to the published text, but since it advances immediately to the "giant negative" that later makes up the poem's ending, it does not take away from the generative value of the second-person address for Ali's conception of "Postcard from Kashmir."

"waiting for your return." The first typed draft also shows signs of mimicking a postcard's crowded surface (through a rectangular shape and copious use of enjambment) as well as the routine communication of family matters ("Things here are as usual" & "We're waiting/ for your return and for the almond blossoms"). This playfulness becomes attenuated only when the fourth and fifth drafts begin releasing some lines from quotation marks. By the time the poem was published, all traces of the interlocutor had been taken out, including the acts of wishing and informing mentioned above: the poem is now personally expressive, memory-haunted, and stripped of social matters. It would not do Ali justice, however, to suggest that he has merely purified away the trappings of ventriloquism in getting rid of the interactive dynamics that come with the postcard, for the drafts have given sophisticated considerations to the significance of co-construction for Ali's relationship to home. As in "Stationery," there is a sense that more than one pair of hands are needed to communicate.

Specifically, Ali plays with the fact that the picture on a postcard can change meaning depending on what is inscribed on the other side. In other words, just having stationery may not be enough after all; the hands of another are needed to shape it into a space of contact. Amanda Golden's archival work helpfully illustrates this mediated kind of touch. Apparently, Ali was alert to the two-sidedness of postcards and specifically to the intimacy this two-sidedness affords. Golden points to one of Ali's postcards for Anthony Hecht, posted in Salt Lake City in 1999 but written earlier in Kashmir. The picture on the postcard (captioned "Kashmir—Garden of the Himalaya") is referenced in Ali's message: "I am writing from Kashmir. My home is a five-minute walk from the banks of the Jhelum" (Ali qtd. in Golden 41–42). In terms of "handiwork" embodied in artifacts, Ali's message serves as an ekphrastic guide that orients Hecht to look at a generic image through a personal lens (indeed Ali asks Heckt to imagine what

was a "five-minute walk" away from the picture frame). The message can also be seen as a kind of proxy in Ali's stead, since Ali is not calling for a visit but expressing the hope that in autumn he'd have a chance to meet Hecht in person. While the postcard briefly invites Hecht into Ali's landscape, it also evokes something of Ali's presence.

In the drafts of "Postcard from Kashmir," Ali makes full use of the postcard message's ability to make meaning through such a guiding touch. The message in the first draft, for example, produces a tantalizing oscillation of proximity by commenting that "Be sure *this* is home, at least from *that* /distance, *this* the *closest* you'll ever/ get. Even when you return, you/ won't be so *close*" (my italics). The sender hovers near in the message, referring to "this" image on its back. Because of the way correspondence links temporalities, they are also faraway at home, writing on the back of "this" image of "things here" and contrasting these things with the recipient's view of the image "from that distance." Despite the question of psychological distance raised by the repetition of "closest/close" (since the second "close" suddenly makes "this" seem something more dangerous than an invitingly approximate piece of the expat's homeland), the sender's voice ensures the existence of an authentic "here" while also being "here" with the poet to help him recognize the nostalgic, "overexposed" image as both a reproach and perhaps an enticement. The contrast in the published version is therefore poignant, when, left alone with the image, the poet admits that "This is home. And this the closest/ I'll ever be to home."[32] Here, the poet's "this" indicates the image starkly, caught by its closeness without the hand (or handwriting) of a correspondent to point a way out.

What took place for this change in the meaning of "This is home" to happen? It is as though in adopting an inward stance, the poet has alienated himself from the space of shared

[32] Judging from the drafts and from what I can make out from the handwritten notes, "This is home" never became the poet's own words, as it were, until the published version.

making that is his only anchor for representing home. This turn is too figurative to amount to a description of Ali's revision process, but it is tempting to connect the sense of isolation thus highlighted in the published version of "Postcard" with the idea of the lyric, especially as "Postcard" presents itself eventually as a rather stereotypically lyrical poem. As suggested in previous sections, the idea of the lyric subject often possesses a more than aesthetic significance for scholars such as Jackson and Mufti, both of whom cite Adorno's thesis that "the lyric work is always a subjective expression of a social antagonism" (*Reader* 244). And although there are differences in their thinking, Jackson, Mufti, and Adorno all seem interested in particular in the lyric subject's isolated interiority as both characteristic of the modern lyric and, importantly, the site for discovering social meanings. What can we gain, then, if we think of Ali's revisions as making a shift in aesthetic posture where the lyric as an idea has particular implications for Ali's struggle with representing home?

Perhaps a further helpful idea is that, in its imagined detachment from society—and from definite forms of address or genres—the lyric resonates with modern subjects that are self-divided and incapable of any wholeness in so-called personal expression.[33] Additionally, considering that historically, as Jackson and Prins point out in *The Lyric Theory Reader*, some poets have taken the lyric "as an idealized genre for emptied-out experience in late modernity" (572), we might think of the lyric subject's self-alienation as also alienation from the world. Indeed, in the related German philosophical traditions (with which Mufti is in conversation), one key question is "[that] of subjectivity and the immediacy of subjective experience within a larger version of the collective" (*Reader* 571). In this light, if we read "Postcard" as worrying over representation in the absence of others' "hands," the isolated negativity of the lyric as a space provides an especially fitting frame for the poem.

[33] As I touched on in the introduction's discussion of Jackson and in the previous section's discussion of Mufti.

We see what this “emptied-out experience” looks like in the case of “Postcard,” for example, when we turn again to “This is home” and track it across the drafts. The drafts tell us more than the fact that the published version’s moment of realization owes its expression to a postcard’s play of deictics; what is remarkable is the mechanism underlying this shift that almost appears to be a mishearing. If the photo draws out a nostalgia that occupies all of the poet’s attention inside “Postcard,” a similar pull about “This is home” seems to attract Ali to the phrase during his revisions. Ali first begins to repeat it in the second typed draft and further emphasizes this reiteration through lineation in the third, fourth and fifth:

> “This is home. Be sure from that distance
> This is home. And this the closest
> you’ll ever be to home. [...]” (third/fourth/fifth version)

Could it be that the final lyric emerges because, as it were, Ali has misheard his correspondent’s voice and turned “This is home” into his own confession? This willingness to indulge in what seems a misrecognition resonates with the easiness with which a reader of the published text might also commit misrecognition:

> the colors won't be so brilliant,
> the Jhelum's waters so clean,
> so ultramarine. My love
> so overexposed. (published version, lines 7–10)

Here, the lines slide all too easily into the magnetism of “brilliant,” “clean,” and “ultramarine” until the “will be” of line 11 (“And my memory will be a little”) arrives only as a belated reminder of the prior “won’t be” of line 7. If the published version’s “This is home” is in fact what Ali saw (or mis-saw) in the original postcard message, this reading encourages us to think that the poet slips in these lines as well, since interestingly, in all the drafts, Ali’s correspondent originally emphasizes negatives such as “never.” For instance:

> the colours won’t be so brilliant
> the Jhelum’s water never so clean,

> so ultramarine. Your love
> never so overexposed." [...] (fifth version)

With the published text's use of ellipses, the drafts' insistent tone relents and even grows in warmth. Note, especially, the change from "Your love/ never so overexposed" (fifth version) into "My love/ so overexposed" (published version). The transition away from the drafts' repetition of negatives appears almost as a rehearsal of the temporary fading away of the single "won't be" in the published text.

The change to a more lyrical stance is therefore one that tends toward negativity, since, as a projection of Ali's desire (just like the postcard photo), the published text can only offer a false form of experience. The poet's absorption is in a sense self-alienating and rife with bad faith: he beholds an image he knows to be "overexposed" and yet nonetheless calls it "home." The published text's "will be" is another moment that reflects the spell cast on the poet that makes him almost consciously misrecognize what he sees. The oddness of the lines "And/ my memory will be a little/ out of focus," which comes from the projection of "memory" into a future tense, [34] will perhaps appear more understandable in light of the poet's self-contradictory attitude. The poet denounces his memory as out of focus—along with false love and colors—but the syntax and grammar in fact defer genuine acknowledgment into a hypothetical future.

"Overexposure" is a plausible metaphor for gazing at the "lyric" in a poem for too long, and Ali's misrecognition of words addressed to him as his own ("This is home," "so clean/ so ultramarine" and so on) may be the very lyric posture that is key to understanding the social meanings precipitated in the finished poem. In her theorizing of lyric reading, Virginia Jackson historicizes the popularization of "the publicly private lyric speaker" (*Before Modernism* 49)

[34] Ali added "will be" to the fourth version's "my memory a little out of focus" so that in the fifth version, the line about memory aligns more closely with the sender's earlier assertion that "When you return/ the colours won't be so brilliant." Before the fifth version, the talk of memory does not present a problem since it more or less straightforwardly evokes a present response to what is said (rather than a continuation of it).

within 19th century processes of racialization. Specifically, Jackson argues that this figure was made to embody the social tension that "made 'subjective expression' the precise 'locus of impossible speech,' resulting in a poetry of personal expression that nevertheless centers on "the fiction of 'the speaker' as an imaginary person who says what the reader of lyric poetry wants to hear" (9). As the speaker's counterpart, the lyric overhearer is all the more eager to quench a "thirst for intersubjective confirmation of the self" (39). This desire for an intimate personal address then leads to the performance of a "readerly karaoke" designed to help readers imagine a collective identity that is, however, falsely universalizing at the expense of Black poets (32). In engaging with this poetics (which Jackson traces to one of its key origins), Ali enters as both a speaker and an overhearer into the drama of lyric reading. In repeating fragments of the words of an imagined other, the poet becomes enchanted by his own projections and misses contact with the correspondent's message. The lyric subject that emerges, however, is unable to speak for the home, just as the postcard can only reflect back the poet's "overexposed love."

Put another way, what little truth there is in the bright postcard lies in its reflection of the expat's intense feelings. Going back to the question of "candour" that Ravinthiran raises regarding De Silva's hesitation about the past, Ali's revisions seem to incline him toward a greater degree of candor as they put the poem eventually into a confessional mode. Yet like De Silva's candor, Ali's is dubious because the space of the published version's "This is home" is also an "overexposed" space[35]—confession crowds out the touch of others and evades the work of shared making, becoming engrossed instead in experiences that negate themselves. What

[35] "In these two poems as in *Country* more generally, we find an echo of Shahid's own characterization of Faiz Ahmed Faiz, one of the subcontinent's most celebrated poets of the Urdu language: 'In Faiz's poetry, suffering is seldom, perhaps never, private (in the sense the suffering of confessional poets is). Though deeply personal, it is almost never isolated from a sense of history and injustice'" (Dutta 10). In an interview, Ali also gives his own opinion on confessional poetics: "But I don't think some people read [my work] and say, 'This is a poem in which we are getting Shahid's personal neuroses or something.'" He notes however that he has great admiration for poets such as John Berryman and Slyvia Plath.

counts as a truer sign of candor, though, might be Ali's adoption of the lyric posture as a response to loss. Especially since the lyric enjoys the privilege of representing all poetry,[36] this posture ultimately expresses the general challenge that poetry faces if it wants to represent the remembered homeland and save it, even, from distortion and neglect. The social meaning of Ali's intense self-absorption in an unreal or hyperreal photo image lies not only in nostalgia, but also in a kind of worldlessness that results from longer histories of exploitation, violence, and conflicts.

Indeed, in an echo of the concern with co-construction as cultural production in "Stationery," the negativity generated around the postcard photo is haunted by a bleaker consciousness of irreparable harm beyond any one poet's remedy. This level of reflection is introduced in the last lines of "Postcard" that deal with "memory." In the drafts, Ali made conspicuous changes to this part of the poem. The versions are as follows:

> In my mind, a giant black and white negative
> gathers dust, lies undeveloped. (first version)
>
> In the dark room of my memory,
> overexposed in greys, there's
> a giant negative, black
> and white, undeveloped. (second version)
>
> In the dark room of my memory,
> out of focus,
> a giant negative, black and white,
> lies undeveloped. (third version)
>
> My memory a little out of focus,
> in it, a giant negative, black and white
> still undeveloped. (fourth version)
>
> my memory will be a little
> out of focus, in it
> a giant negative, black
> and white, still undeveloped. (fifth version)

[36] See Jackson, for example.

Ali’s decision to enjamb the final stanza from a tercet (fourth version) into a quatrain (fifth version) evokes a black-and-white photo negative but also black and white blanks or blots. These negative spaces stare out of Ali’s personal lyric and open it to history. It is tempting to read “will be” as also a denial of the hope of renewal through return—the photograph will always come out “out of focus” because the inadequacy of representation has deeper roots in the destruction of cultural memory. As I summarized in the introduction, Ali’s work often addresses the suppression of Kashmiri crafts and the need to recover and translate Urdu poetics. Interestingly, Rajeev S. Patke finds the difficulty of recovery still in need of emphasis, likening the dynamic between Ali’s poems and translations to “the relation between the photographic image and its negative, where the translation is the positive to the negativity of his poems in English” (268). Patke’s idea of a negative poetry lends itself well to thinking about “Postcard from Kashmir.” The “Postcard” as lyric presents itself as a medium that cannot be made to register what still lacks the language of expression, fittingly because on a cultural as well as personal level, the hands of others are missing from its self-consciously or perhaps helplessly adopted “lyrical” form.

4. Conclusion: “Country Without a Post Office” and What Representation Demands

We have come far enough in exploring Ali’s poetics to see, hopefully, that the pathos of communicative breakdown can tap deeply into the loss of memory and intersubjectivity, and raise important questions about where poetry positions itself vis-à-vis our relatedness and responsibility toward others. “Country Without a Post Office,” the poem with which I hope to conclude this thesis, gives us a direct expression of the “hands” required for the process of communication and of their vital importance. In the preceding sections, “Stationery” gave me a

chance to sketch out what it looks like to imagine mutual dependency in poetic making; it appears that in artistic creation, Ali's correspondent creates the "paper" that extends to him a space of contact and recognition wherein the "moon" becomes transmittable. On the other hand, "Postcard from Kashmir" and its drafts stage a drama about the narrow conception of poetry as lyric and play out how a poem withdrawn from the touch of home (or adequate cultural resources) can end up creating a negative space for Ali to enter spellbound into misrecognition. These two poems heighten the charge of poetry's relational attitude by threatening to make intimacy or home unintelligible and lost to experience. However, it is in "Country Without a Post Office," which Ali wrote in a later period of intensified political investment in the face of escalating violence, that we find his role as a poet confronted by losses on the scale of life or death. If "The Dacca Gauzes" helps us imagine a desire to stand witness to lost people and things as what underlies the project of exploring others' words, "Country" returns us to this problem of recovery—only this time Ali's agony over the posture of his poetry comes further into the foreground.

In "Country Without a Post Office," Ali embarks upon a surrealistic journey. In the aftermath of a fire that destroyed a Muslim shrine and the surrounding Kashmiri town,[37] the "I" of the poem "[returns] in rain/ to find him, to learn why he never wrote" (*Veiled* 203). What the seeker finds are streets left empty by the repressed Muslim minority and by Hindu populations in exile from militia violence; he is also accosted by defunct post offices where letters to "doomed addresses" ("Country") pile up undelivered. The search for lost letters in a sense guides the poem, which is itself a quest about representation—on personal as well as national scales, poetry and correspondence become linked by a shared risk of disconnection.

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[37] Ali appears to have been in the US when the event took place.

We can begin by noting that the poem depicts death and displacement through the materiality of media by evoking dead letters, whose physicality weighs heavily on the mind. "Country" owes much of its moving quality to the intensity of its symbolic transformations, which is arguably one of the signature tropes of poetry (or what is seen as lyric poetry). These displays of imagination's power are not limited to the poet's return to the desolated scene where he wonders to himself "Fire runs in waves. Should I cross that river?" however, since the poem also conjures up a "shrine of words" where, according to the voice that summons the poet, "You'll find your letters to me. And mine/ to you." There is a special affective weight to the desire of recovering letters that can perhaps be best explained through John Durham Peters's observation that "the pathos of dead letters is not that minds fail to share the meaning of signs but that mortal beings miss getting in touch" (168). This "erotic" challenge shows that letters are just like bodies "prone to become lost in transit" because, once dead, they reveal a terrible mortality in exposing "the materiality of communication" (Peters 168, 169, 169). The mute remains of messages, moreover, are a poignant reminder of private meaning's dependence on reaching the right recipient. "Country" therefore draws on the feelings of those waiting for letters as signals from loved ones: bodies have a precarity that is felt all too strongly in the materiality of letters.

Separation is also expressed through an imagined viscerality of correspondence. It is here that we see how communication embodies the work of other hands, and how poetry struggles to pass on its testimony since those hands are "inside the fire." In the second section (the poem has four), Ali picks up on a wisp of the voice he is searching for:

> "We're inside the fire, looking for the dark,"
> one card lying on the street says, "I want
> to be he who pours blood. To soak your hands.
> Or I'll leave mine in the cold till the rain

> is ink, and my fingers, at the edge of pain,
> are seals all night to cancel the stamps."
> The mad guide! The lost speak like this. They haunt
> a country when it is ash. Phantom heart [...]

As with most voices in the poem, it is unclear if an aural event happened here at all.[38] The urgent and ghostly "card lying on the street" undermines lyric imagination's claim to accessing or conjuring presences; the scene of correspondence becomes instead an exchange of blood, demanding a corporal participation. A similar image also appears in another poem in the same collection. "The Floating Post Office" asks if "blood shaken into letters" is the "new password," but it casts what is revealed in a light that is far from comforting, calling blood "cruel primitive script that would erode/ our saffron link to the past" (*Veiled* 207). Jahan Ramazani observes of "Country" that "the ambiguity and instability of Ali's address—now to himself, now to an imagined Kashmiri interlocutor—[...] embodies the postcolonial expatriate's fragile sense of poetic identity" (137). Beside Ali's self-reproach implied in this assessment, perhaps we can also wonder if indeed the voice's longing to "be he who pours blood" is a vicarious expression of Ali's own desire to stand witness. It is a powerful image of representation as correspondence: to have blood-soaked hands, a connection more horrific than sociable. Yet even blood has vanished. With its disjunctive "or" at the end, the stanza seems to imagine blood decomposing into rain mixed with ash, painting a correspondent's fingers—the extremities "at the edge of pain"—so that personal pain, itself bloodless and erased, may join collective suffering and accomplish the canceling of stamps.

Canceling the stamp is in fact another way Ali signifies correspondence's requisite bodily involvements. It recurs in the poem as a conspicuous motif, linking "Country" to other poems

[38] The voice of "the mad guide" comes from "one card lying on the street"; the speaker also "[sees]" rather than hears the voice of "the keeper of the minaret"; the keeper's own voice refers to itself as a thing - its speech begins with "The entire map of the lost will be candled" and ends with "Come before I'm killed, my voice canceled"; and when the poet arrives in the "archive," he finds, heartbreakingly, "the remains/ of his voice, that map of longings with no limit."

such as “The Dacca Gauzes,” “Stationery,” and “Rooms Are Never Finished” where artifacts bear traces of the artisan’s labor. The lack of postmarks signifies a “country without a post office,”[39] but Ali’s attention is concentrated especially on the human body; his surreal emotional landscape makes it specifically “fingerprints” and “hands” that “cancel blank stamps.” For the circulation of letters and the testimony of poetry, hands are needed to write, deliver and receive, but it is poignantly clear in the poem that hands are absent or merely the product of a poet’s imagination.

How would Ali respond as a poet? How can he reimagine his posture toward a poem when there are no hands to make it work or give it stationery “handmade by you”? At the very beginning of the third section, we hear a second voice from “him” call out to Ali:

> “The entire map of the lost will be candled.
> I’m keeper of the minaret since the muezzin died.
> Come soon, I’m alive. There’s almost a paisley
> against the light, sometimes white, then black.
> The glutinous wash is wet on its back
> as it blossoms into autumn’s final country—
> Buy it, I issue it only once, at night.
> Come before I’m killed, my voice canceled.”

Presented with the Kashmiri symbol of the paisley, transformed at once into country, stamp, transportation ticket and possibly also photo negative and burnt paper, Ali is called upon to find the map that contains living traces of “my voice.” This development as the poem transitions from the second to the third section of “Country” suggests a complex negotiation with what it takes for the poet to give his own hands to the act of correspondence. Faced with the mediated voices of artifacts that evoke a ghostly absence rather than the immediacy that lyric imagination is supposed to conjure, at the conclusion of the second section Ali decides that he can only

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[39] On a related note, the way Ali turns paisleys into money, stamps and paper all in one makes the mail a symbol of Kashmir’s fate more generally. Ali told during a reading at Hamilton College that the mail wouldn’t be delivered for months during crackdowns from India. This situation is also the background for the poem “Dear Shahid,” which in fact uses some of the excised materials from the drafts of “Postcard from Kashmir.”

continue his quest by self-evacuation: “Only silence can now trace my letters/ to him. Or in a dead office the dark panes.” This negative vision does not entail the silencing of the poem, however.[40] In the third section, Ali urges his heart that “this is your pain. Feel it. You must feel it” and makes a new movement to cross into an imaginary “archive” where “I read them, letters of lovers, the mad ones,/ and mine to him from whom no answers came.” There, repeating the sequence of actions performed by the minaret keeper earlier in the poem, he lights lamps, climbs steps, and reads messages. True to the resolve that “I must force silence to be a mirror/ to see his voice for directions,”[41] Ali glimpses a silenced voice in a mirror of silence that directs him unto a new path, raising the question, however, whether silence becomes his mirror too, or indeed whether his lyrical voice is the very silence that paradoxically becomes the only voice capable of expressiveness.

This is a bold reorientation of the poet’s bodily gestures as well as the posture he assumes through his poem. Instead of pursuing a quest “to find him”—or all of those who are missing—Ali mirrors the lost by inhabiting a Dead Letter Office, reading even his own letters “to him.”[42] As Ali reveals in a characteristically self-canceling manner, this move to recover lost letters is at the expense of his ability to communicate and be recognized. From within what the poem calls an “archive,” which does not afterall exist in fact, the poet is unable to be heard: his “lament/ is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent,” like “Calls to prayer/ to deaf worlds,” or rain going out “to addresses, across the oceans.” The negativity here echoes that of “Postcard from Kashmir,” where poetry similarly becomes evacuated under the weight of missed connection. In “Country,” Ali does not wander away from others’ messages and even manages to

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[40] It might be interesting to note, however, that an earlier version of the poem, titled “Kashmir Without a Post Office” and published in *Graham House Review*, ends at section 2. The last two sections seem later additions.
[41] Second and third lines of the last stanza of section two.
[42] Ali mentions Bartleby in his ghazal “Forever”: “With a brief note he quit the Dead Letter Office—/ O World, they’ve lost Bartleby’s missive forever” (*Veiled* 369). Here, characteristically for Ali, Bartleby’s is lost together with his letter.

read them, but his bodily mirroring of the lost nonetheless betrays a concern about communicating loss. As a variation of material co-constructedness of correspondence in "Stationery," the poem's depiction of proffered hands and blood ultimately underlines a sense of helplessness in the absence of Kashmir's displaced or perished people. To give his hands and write for the lost, what Ali eventually performs as a poet seems to be a different sacrifice of corporeality: the suffering, abstracted, voiceless, and misrecognized lyric subject once again becomes a deposit for social meanings—a figure reflective of broader divisions and separations.

Ali's formalism has the effect of a palindromic pendulum swinging with fatalistic regularity.[43] The containment of the lines and stanzas offers a compact intensity of feeling while dispersing various elements into imaginative displacements. In the final section, where the former "he" is now the poet himself—and perhaps "he" always has been the poet—the elements recompose themselves into the scene of poetic making, and the letters decompose back into the "bodies/in prisons":

> It's raining as I write this. I have no prayer.
> It's just a shout, held in, It's Us! It's Us!
> whose letters are cries that break like bodies
> in prisons. Now each night in the minaret
> I guide myself up the steps. Mad silhouette,
> I throw paisleys to clouds. The lost are like this:
> They bribe the air for dawn, this their dark purpose.
> But there's no sun here. There is no sun here.

To communicate on behalf of the lost requires a concrete space of touch, but there is only emptiness. Yet calling himself "mad" like he has called the voices before, Ali nevertheless desires contact, asking the lost to "be pitiless you whom I could not save—/ Send your cries to me." Elsewhere in other poems, Ali seems to wonder whether immateriality can be redeemed.

[43] The stanzas of "Country Without a Post Office" all follow an "ABCDDCBA" rhyme scheme.

One is reminded again of the moonlight-paper in "Stationery." There are also these lines from "From Another Desert":

> Tonight the air is many envelopes
> again. Tell her to open them at once
> and find hurried notes about my longing
> for wings. Tell her to speak, when that hour comes,
> simply of the sky. Friend, speak of the sky
> when that hour comes. Speak, simply, of the air.

The question is whether with enough collective work, the air itself—like the moonlight and desert in "Stationery"—can be transformed into that long-for space of witness. Ali's reception by poets who followed his call suggests a positive answer. Moreover, we can also consider Gayatri Gopinath's argument that Ali's poetic idiom constitutes an alternative archiving practice in the spirit of José Esteban Muñoz for whom "queer sociality, acts, and desires leave traces that cannot be codified within standard metrics of evidence, or contained within traditional archives" (Gopinath 118). The ephemerality of queer life resonates with the central challenge in "Country" to bear witness to violence without the reassurance of others' "hands," considering especially that Gopinath emphasizes the way Ali's mapping of queer loss resurfaces other grids of dominance given "the imbrication of various forms of erasure and dispossession" (117). In light of the potential that Muñoz sees in alternative practices of knowing and recording, perhaps this connection strikes a hopeful note.

The stanza from "Country" quoted just now also makes a reference to Emily Dickinson's poem "If I could bribe them by a Rose." In her poem, Dickinson offers to bribe "them" with all of the roses "From Amherst to Cashmere"—without stop—and to sing both in "summer" and in "Winter"—"if they would linger for a bird." Her mysterious aim, which she hints at only at the end, seems to be obtaining a "Yes" from "them" even at the cost of being driven "from the hall"

as a “Beggar” (“If I could”). Dutta notes in the case of “Some Visions from World Cashmere”[44] —another poem by Ali that references Dickinson—that “[the] hallucinatory force of Dickinson’s emotions, somewhat buried in her own verse, implodes into Shahid’s fractured remembering” (10). In “Country,” acting like the lost who “bribe the air for dawn” by throwing “paisleys to clouds,” Ali no doubt captures the edge of Dickinson’s persistent supplication as he merges her imagery with his own desire for a response of “Yes.” Yet the actual political tragedy into which Ali channels Dickinson creates an added bleakness—from the poet’s position inside the silent, imaginary shrine, “There is no sun here.”[45] Even the parallel intertextuality of this reference to bribing, following Dutta’s observation about Ali's use of Dickinson, ironically multiplies ruptures that Ali knows he “cannot invent a language to repair” (Dutta 11). The cost of representation takes one’s outpouring of song and blood that may not, however, be enough to compensate for very real absences of others. But like Dickinson, Ali is willing to embark on the impossible journey of gathering all the roses “From Amherst to Cashmere,” working as much as he can in a space of negative poetics to nevertheless achieve a form of making.

…

Through “Stationery,” “Postcard from Kashmir,” and “Country Without a Post Office,” this thesis explored the poetic implications of the self-and-other relationships imagined in these three poems between Ali and his correspondents. First, the transmission of the moon in “Stationery” illustrates intersubjectivity at work in poetic creation; “Postcard from Kashmir” juxtaposes correspondence with an idea of the interiorized lyric to evoke anxieties of miscommunication; finally, the state of postal breakdown in “Country Without a Post Office”

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[44] It might be worth noting that “Some Visions” uses the first stanza of Dickinson’s “If I could bribe them by a Rose” as its epigraph.

[45] From “Some Visions of the World Cashmere”: “And I’m holding her hand in that sun which is shining on all the summers of my childhood, shining on a teardrop in which windows are opening, amplifying her voice, and she is telling me, *God is merciful, God is compassionate*” (*Veiled* 189).

creates despair over representation in the context of a poet's attempt to write about a tragedy. Unlike the common notion of poetry as "a self-address so absolute that every self can identify with it" (*Dickinson's Misery* 128)—to quote Jackson's description of Dickinson's reception again—the value Ali places on others' hands reminds scholars of lyric theory to expand their sense of the postures that poets assume. A reminder, that is, to attend to the ways in which the social is what allows a poem to take flight. Moreover, informed by Kashmiri histories of displacement and cultural erasure and figured through the pathos of correspondence, Ali's nostalgic poetics constitute a particularly rich meditation on the possibility of experience in relation to poetic making. The bare silence of Ali's desert landscapes is perhaps what charges the need for co-construction with social and political significance, especially as it also underlines the missing "hands" themselves.

Indeed, Ali makes a strong indictment against the forms of exploitation, erasure, and violence that historically afflict Kashmir. His relational poetics complicate the conversation around nostalgia in postcolonial poetry since they show that the inaccessibility of home is not due simply to distance or the quirks of memory; instead, it is necessary to examine the underlying conditions—to remember the weavers' "amputated hands," which may have been an apocryphal myth[46] but which is nonetheless suggestive and thought-provoking. For Ali, it also becomes important to imagine correspondence in new ways and beyond a purely personal and reciprocal kind of intersubjectivity, since the worldmaking capacities of poetry can help rebuild a public zone of contact too.

[46] See Stilling.

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