

ARCHIVE

Nicollet Mall Public Art

Nicollet Lanterns

Regina Flanagan Interview with Poet Sagirah Shahid on July 23, 2017 and Email Edits and Additions Received from Shahid on August 3, 2017

Regina Flanagan: *I understand that you are a third-generation Black Muslim. Does your Muslim faith influence your writing?*

Sagirah Shahid: My faith absolutely influences my writing. In a broader sense, Islam has historically influenced a variety of arts all over the world; from calligraphy to music, you'll find ways in which communities and cultures are in discourse with Islam creatively or at least drawing from. My favorite semi-local example of that is with Dante Alighieri's "Divine Comedy"—specifically *Inferno*, the work borrows heavily from a popular Islamic narration called "Isra Wal Miraj" where the Prophet Mohammed takes a miraculous journey from Mecca to Jerusalem, then visits heaven and hell and all the various levels of each in a single night. The narration serves as a foundational component in the Islamic understanding of afterlife with its vivid details. This narration, along with a plethora of other very rich and detailed stories and oral traditions were instrumental in my upbringing as a child.

I grew up studying and memorizing the Qur'an. By its nature, Qur'anic Arabic is poetic. Its verses are arranged in a way that is complimentary to recitation. In fact, its memorization and recitation is an art form (there are Qur'an recitation competitions all over the world). Going back to calligraphy, when you look at how Qur'an is presented on the page, there is an attention to detail that is aesthetically appealing too. In many ways Islam and Qur'an were my first experiences with art, especially with literary arts; Qur'an trained my ear to pay attention sound and was my introduction to poetry. I should clarify that I did not learn to speak or understand the Arabic language—the emphasis was on memorization of the Arabic verses, meaning always came in English translation. And Islam and Quran weren't my only influences.

The combination of being Black and Muslim – I also grew up immersed in Black culture and Black Muslim culture. I grew with a mother who made an effort to find children's books and music that was either super-Black or Muslim or both (or sometimes she would just make up her own songs and stories). One year, my mom would be vacuuming to Whitney Houston, the next we'd be listening to a "Native Deen" tape (a Muslim rap group). Black culture is also in discourse with Islam and has shaped Muslim identities all over the U.S. and beyond, a lot of people don't realize that. In the book *Muslim Cool, Race, Religion and Hip-Hop in the United States*, Su'ad Abdul Khabeer unpacks this way more eloquently than I ever could.

RF: *Did you grow up in Minnesota?*

SS: Yes, my whole life except for two years; from 1998 to 2001 my family lived in Hamtramck, Michigan. Hamtramck is a tiny town basically surrounded by Detroit, and it's super diverse Bangladesh. Polish. Bosnian. Yemeni. Black. Various cultures and communities all living together in this tiny town within this giant city. Essentially my family moved there for religion – my family changed from Hanafi to the Maliki School of Fiqh or Islamic law (like switching from Catholic to Baptist). My mom wanted my brother and I to learn Qur'an and be involved with the Muslim community there. It's important to note that this was during the tail-end of the 1990's.

The Twin Cities' Muslim communities were just starting to grow in the 1990s, especially regarding visibility, thanks in part to the arrival of the Somali community. In Minnesota, Muslim

communities were relatively small prior to the arrival of East African Muslims. In Michigan, various Muslim communities had been established for generations; it was a place where if you're Muslim you could be the norm. Your faith, your spiritual practice – was the norm in a way it wasn't in Minnesota yet. My parents didn't want us to feel like outsiders when we were growing up, and wanted an environment where we could thrive fully, including spiritually. But now, I'd say local Muslim communities have grown significantly in Minnesota and are on the rise.

RF: *There's a strong thread of the ethic of the Qur'an in your work. You employ that ethical awareness in whatever you do; paying attention to issues of fairness and social justice and employing language as a way to highlight those issues. Your personal creative life and work-life appear interwoven. You are an editor for the Saint Paul Almanac, a democratic publishing experiment that gathers community stories, and recently served on the Northern Spark steering committee for the 2017 Green Line event. Were your parents involved in social and cultural issues the way that you are? Did you inherit this focus from them?*

SS: I don't know if anyone can inherit anything like that but I will say those core values and the things I witnessed growing up influence me. Part of being Black and Muslim means you are aware of what's going on politically; how Blackness was birthed into this nation – our actual bodies are politicized because we don't settle for violations against our bodies. My grandparents' decision to convert to Islam was in some ways a reaction to the racism and discrimination Black folks were encountering during the civil rights era.

And, in terms of examples I've witnessed, my mother has a kind heart and is very devout in her implementation of Islamic traditions and concepts surrounding communal responsibility. Growing up, we moved around a lot – almost every other year, and we didn't have a lot in terms of money, and that was fine – but even under those circumstances, my mother always invited people in. People she had met who were hungry or struggling in some way and have them live with us for a time. We always had people in our house. My mom was and still is committed to supporting women, children and families who are struggling. Throughout her life, she had done a lot with youth; building opportunities for them and advocating for them with non-profits, her job, or in her home.

RF: *Do you have brothers and sisters?*

SS: Yes but the way I define siblings is probably a little different than other people. I am one of nine, but my Mother only had two kids. I have seven half-siblings that I didn't grow up with but, because of my mother's nature to invite people to stay with us I did grow up with several foster-siblings, cousins, and other children from families who lived with us for a time. Depending on the year, sometimes it was just me and my brother, sometimes it was me, my brother and like six other kids.

I'm working on a series of poems entitled "Bean Pie" inspired by my Mother and Black Muslim culture and community. Many of the poems examine mother-daughter relationships.

Bean (Pie)

Soaked in water,
dried beans have the potential for holiness.

When I was a girl
I watched my mother fall in love with god
as if god were a dying language.

Every morning before dawn
she would find transliterations
of prayers in wet beans
and whisper them into
the batter of a devoted pie.

The pie only knew how to pronounce
the sounds of god. As it baked,

I knew it was enough for me
to purify my nostrils in this fashion,
splash the pearly gateways of my mind
with the smokiness of a pie's promise.

To appreciate a beautiful moment
you have to know its absence,
taste the quality of life
burning down your throat
long after it's gone

and this does not mean
you get to summon it back
no,

beauty doesn't work that way. And like any daughter
I reflect on how
I have a hard time recalling
the way the base of my throat is supposed to catch
the brimming sounds of this particular Quranic
verse—but miraculously

I have managed to memorize
the scent of every home I prayed in.

SS: Bean Pie is made with white navy beans; it's yummy (imagine sweet potato pie only with beans). Black Muslims invented it. At the re-emergence of Black Muslims during the 1940-70's, Black Muslims emphasized an entrepreneurial spirit, self-sufficiency, taking care of your body, and building community; selling bean pies was one way to accomplish that. The pies are more popular on the East Coast, Chicago or Detroit---places where there's larger African-American populations. The pies are rich in protein and a celebratory staple of our cuisine.

RF: *How did you learn to write? And why do you choose to write?*

SS: I didn't realize I was a writer until I was in college – and even there I was a mess. Now looking back, it makes sense why I gravitated toward writing. My culture, my household and faith basically trained me to be addicted to critical and creative thinking. I was always writing or reading something as a kid. I was homeschooled for three years after I turned 11, and during that time I had a lot of freedom to immerse myself in storytelling and dense religious concepts. The combination of these things, tangled with teen angst laid the foundation for what I believe led me toward writing.

While I had a lot of practice being an independently critical thinker, thanks in part to my communities' positioning in relation to the "American Dream", and though I also had natural creative inclination thanks in part to the beauty of the Qur'an, when I got to college, writing was something I struggled with. I majored in English and realized my reference point wasn't from a Eurocentric point of view and as a result I struggled and resisted. That resistance made me a better writer and also made me appreciate the generosity of writing professors and mentors who nurtured and supported me throughout that process – they taught me the formal vocabulary to hone my craft.

That said, I'm still very much a student of writing and I seize every possible opportunity in my community to continue what I hope is a lifelong pursuit to live, learn and grow as a human being. I don't have an MFA, I have Minneapolis. I'm especially grateful to the robust local arts communities here – groups or organizations like the Loft Literary Center, Mizna, the Saint Paul Almanac, Pangea, Intermedia Arts, Black Table Arts (to name a few). I'm grateful to the many writers, especially writers of color who have taken me under their wings and continue to create space for writers like me to grow and learn in community.

I hope to one day be in a position to do the same and give back or pay forward what my many teachers, mentors, and writing group members have given me. I hope to give to other emerging or aspiring writers what my original writing teacher and storytelling mentor, my mother, has given to me too. All that is to say, I didn't choose writing, I got lucky enough to be surrounded by incredible human beings with stories that weren't necessarily the focal point of our country. I write to affirm myself and to call attention to these stories. I stumbled into writing because it was my first line of defense, the first way I gained true agency in the world. The whole process, the act of creating, the act of receiving stories – feels sacred. I'm grateful for the opportunity to improve my own ability to do both.

Peace be upon you

Assalamu alaikum wa rahmatullah
 body be a peephole into where I live how I live
 surveillance is only an answer to questions
 you wanted to find people you refuse to see
 my skin is this nation's consciousness
 reminding on some level
 we never wanted to be here
 fattening up blood soaked pocketbooks
 but what's the plight of a slave if not to make due
 dua for the unborn and bulletless
 what's the difference between a bird's nest and potted roots yanked free
 in this nice climate
 I can't wait for you to notice
 my life is fear and muffled survivals

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RF: *I'd like to talk about some of the references in this poem for Nicollet Lanterns.*

SS: Peace be upon you. Assalamu alaikum wa rahmatullah is one of three options for a Muslim greeting. Translated it means: Peace be upon you, and God's mercy upon you. Whenever someone greets you, you are obliged to reciprocate, or do better.

RF: *Lines in the poem are messages for people who understand it the way you do, and there are messages for people like me who are curious and open to learning more about your faith and world-view.*

SS: I'm interested in what's going on with Black and Muslim people right now. The peace greeting affirms us. But I was also trying to find entry points to capture the violence of the times we're living in, and how disruptive it is, how it makes us feel out of place.

Being a Black person, we have roots in this country but also we don't. Like a bird's nest this is our home, but it is also very temporary and was constructed out of necessity, for survival – also bird nests look a lot like the way roots look in the ground; in that image, I wanted to be subversive or point to the disconnect that is the Black American identity. I'm speaking to the Black community at large, or people who can relate to that. We're displaced people; because we come from slavery, we will never be at home here. This is indigenous land. But we have nowhere to go – so we make our homes out of these uprooted things.

RF: *I'm reading Ta-nehisi Coates's Between the World and Me. People say that book is so important, but after reading only thirty pages – yes, I can see why. In direct but subtle writing, he gets at the ever-present level of fear that he feels as a Black person, for his family, especially his son, that is based upon the fact of displacement, and not having those roots; of feeling free-floating. I understood that kind of fear – of the potential for things to be taken away at any moment – for the first time.*

SS: Yes, totally. That's part of our collective cognitive dissonance to some degree as Black people. On the one hand, we're Americans, but on the other hand what has the Americas done for Black people – even our names – we've created these names for ourselves – and who are we? It's all predicated on the original trauma inflicted upon us when we were forced to come here.

RF: *Scandinavian surnames. Irish surnames.*

SS: Yes, you know that's part of the reason why I have the last name that I do. The first thing many Black Muslims did was relieve themselves from their "slave names" – famously adopting "X" until they choose their own names – the X representing the unknown because the names ascribed to our communities were a direct result of slavery. We were robbed of many things including our very names – our ancestors didn't come to the Americas with those surnames, so true freedom and true self-love came symbolically, through choosing a name that wasn't associated with American slavery. That's a trend that's not unique to Black Muslims, it's across African American culture.

Even the name "African-American" – what does that mean? It refers to two distinct continents. First, we were called Negroes, Colored, and Black, then African American which is still a relatively new name and in my opinion a peculiar one to describe us. Our ancestors were diverse peoples who had rich cultures, languages, traditions and religions and they were all forced to be together because of this central trauma. It makes me wonder who are we as a people when the glue that has brought us together, that continues to bring us together is this trauma. The beauty of us is that even under the worst possible circumstances, the spirit of us remains and sprinkles clues of who we are – so much so that our culture is immolated all over the world. I'm not sure the Americas could ever truly be "home" for Black peoples; we are all living on indigenous land, and always will be. We're not rooted here; but we are rooted here. The two realities are in perpetual contradiction.

RF: *We exist, and we need to make our roots no matter where we are, and the desire to make connections is intrinsic.*

SS: Exactly. That's why I made an effort to center our existence in these poems. In one of my poems, I give a shout out to Masjid An'Nur (Masjid of Light) which is a Muslim place of worship in North Minneapolis. It is a historically Black Muslim masjid and it's very inclusive, the Masjid the effort to make people of all backgrounds comfortable and it shows. It has a growing congregation and it's likely the only Masjid to have an American Sign Language interpreter for the deaf who regularly translates Friday prayer services.

I requested that the *Nicollet Lanterns* with my texts be located near the 7th Street intersection of Nicollet Mall where the buses stop who carry people to the Masjid and into the Northside. I also wanted to pay homage to people who use the bus to get around as a primary means of transportation. Recently, some larger buses have been added to accommodate the number of people going north; but before that, people were sardined into the buses in a very oppressive way, and to be honest this still happens sometimes. At any rate, I wanted to give my fellow busers a shout out and again, I felt strongly about making one of the poems a tribute to the Northside. It was my first home and no matter where life takes me, Northside will always be the home of my heart. All three of my lantern poems seek to center Black people.

We shouldn't have to say

thirteenth amendment couldn't protect us
 from the war on drugs
 after our leaders were jailed or shot
 our country pressed its fingers up against our spine
 but you should know we still want a new flag:
 Brave Like Martin
 Bronze Lit Movement
 Beautiful Like Malcolm
 Blessed Lone Mamas giving us life
 we want this new flag on bended knee and repenting
 the old one lost all credit
 the first time
 it racked up the debts of genocide and when we get it
 may the streets be soaked in rosewater may the streets be cloaked in the sage
 we have lit

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