



## Introduction

In our second issue we announce Seelai Karzai's involvement in *Desert Nights, Rising Stars*. We recap our latest event, *Reimagining Queer Futures*, as well as [The Samovar Network's Afghan Americans in the Arts](#) event, which featured AAWWA members Gazelle Samizay and Sahar Muradi. We end our recaps with Sahar Muradi's involvement in the *Ragas Live 2020* festival. We begin our new feature, *Portraits*, which will introduce our members to our readership. Finally, we round out this issue by outlining how you can get involved in our work!

## Upcoming Member Events



Date: February 18–20, 2021

## Desert Nights, Rising Stars

In Feb. 2021, AAAWA member Seelai Karzai will be participating as a Fellow at the “Desert Nights, Rising Stars” Virtual Writers Conference hosted by the Piper Center at Arizona State University. Seelai will be hosting “The Witness of Poetry.” This is an hour-long generative workshop that introduces participants to the poetics and poetry of witness, where participants will broadly address themes of displacement, war trauma, gender and sexual identities, and conclude with a generative exercise and writing prompt.

## Event Recaps & Review

### Reimagining Queer Futures: Afghans and Art in the Diaspora



**Event Review** On October 30, 2020, we hosted our *Reimagining Queer Futures: Afghans, Art, and the Diaspora* virtual event to over 100 participants from across the US. The event featured scholars, artists, and activists, Ahmad Qais Munhazim, Wazina Zondon, and Bobuq Sayed. The event was moderated by Wazmah Osman and Seelai Karzai, with an introduction by Helena Zeweri.

Topics of discussion centered around the political and creative potential of identifying as queer, including: resisting the narratives of “acceptable forms of queerness” in America and the Afghan community, and what it means to render queer lives more visible. Participants discussed the importance of addressing cultural expectations around sexuality while also recognizing how their cultural and religious traditions offer them the tools for self-empowerment, a narrative often ignored in representations of gender and sexuality among Muslim and Afghan Americans.

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## Afghan Americans in the Arts

**Event Review** Recently, AAWA members Gazelle Samizay and Sahar Muradi joined The Samovar Network (TSN) for a conversation on what it means to be an “Afghan American” artist. The panelists spoke with TSN co-hosts Ghizal Adina and Weiss Hamid about what these identities mean to each artist. Gazelle and Sahar also discussed how they have navigated both the western “art world” and the Afghan community. They spoke to how their identities have informed both

their practice and shaped their overall worldview. You can watch the full episode on [Facebook](#) or listen via [TSN's website](#).



## Ragas Live: Ask Hafiz



**Event Review** Sahar Muradi's collaborative storytelling/music/dance performance "Ask Hafiz" was showcased alongside the many legends of music at the Ragas Live Festival on November 22, 2020. The show was a retelling of Sahar and her family's forced migration from Soviet-occupied Afghanistan to Queens, NY. Their journey is told through the age-old practice of consulting the Divan-e-Hafiz, the collected works of the 14th century Persian poet Hafiz, for guidance and answers about the future. The answers were revealed through the auguring ghazals of Hafiz, the gestural language of Bharatanatyam choreographed and performed by Malini Srinivasan, and a lush musical soundscape created by Haleh Liza, Trina Basu, Rich Stein, and Chris Hoffman.

The performance from Ragas Live is not yet available, however, you can [check out Sahar's performance of this piece](#) from last year. The show starts at 24:50, and prior to that is Ask Hafiz collaborator Haleh Liza performing her own poetry and Farsi-to-English translations of Rumi.

## Member Portraits

Welcome to our new series "Member Portraits"! In each series, we spotlight AAAWA members, their inspirations, and exciting new initiatives they are a part of. In this issue we will be talking to longtime AAAWA members and supporters, Helena Zeweri and Seelai Karzai.



**Helena Zeweri** is a founding member of AAAWA and has been involved in cultural and research initiatives with the Afghan diaspora in New York since 2008. She is currently an Assistant Professor of Global Studies at the University of Virginia. Helena received her PhD in Cultural Anthropology from Rice University. Her work is published in the *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, *Anthropology News*, and *Feminist Formations* and she has taught courses on global humanitarianism,

refugees, and human rights. Helena completed MAs in Anthropology from The New School for Social Research and in Near Eastern Studies from New York University, as well as a BA in Middle Eastern and Asian Languages and Cultures from Columbia University.

### **What brought you to AAAWA and how does your work outside of AAAWA connect to it?**

**Helena:** I first became involved with AAAWA in 2011—I was writing a paper on Afghan American diasporic writing, and I had come across a wonderful anthology called *One Story, Thirty Stories*, of Afghan American literature co-edited by Sahar Muradi and Zohra Saed, two founding members and accomplished writers and poets. At the time, AAAWA was a very small collective of people who got together to talk about issues around representation in the Afghan diaspora. At the time, finding a group of likeminded people who shared my worldview and were okay with talking about their complicated relationships to identity, culture, and the immigrant experience was a revelation. I had been yearning for such a space. As an anthropologist and a professor of Global Studies, I am always inspired by our work and this collective—it's a space where we talk about what it means to identify with our ancestral homeland in a way that is authentic to our individual experiences. My experience in this group allows me to continue to figure out how different first and second generation immigrant communities are building meaningful relationships with each other to affect society for the better.

### **What motivates you?**

**Helena:** Feeling like there is a purpose to my work – that there is an audience, that someone is listening. I've found that sometimes we have to work a little harder to find those audiences and figure out who they are. But for me, I need to know that I'm doing something that goes beyond myself and my own echo chamber.

### **What does being Afghan American mean to you?**

**Helena:** To me, being Afghan American can't be summed up in a universal set of experiences. For me, it's a combination of my family members' memories of life in Afghanistan, their experiences trying to find a place for themselves in this country, and a place for those memories of the homeland to matter. I think that's the case for a lot of immigrant communities—the struggle to make your past and your worldview matter in this new place. Part of being Afghan American has also meant being seen in a particular way by American culture,

discourse, and media because of the US's long-term involvement in Afghanistan.

### **How does your identity inform your approach to building community in the diaspora?**

**Helena:** I think my own difficulties finding a safe space of likeminded people with whom to share my worldview (which includes figuring out how to be a part of social change and transformation in the US), inspires me to create those kinds of spaces for others. I have also seen the dangers of trying to play into the idea that Afghans exist as a monolithic group, and that our focus should be on trying to build community based on these monolithic ideas. I'd like to find ways to harness our cultural values toward advocating alongside other marginalized groups and communities, since our histories and futures are so deeply interconnected.

### **What has 2020 taught you?**

**Helena:** That life can change overnight. I got a bit of a glimpse into my family's worldview—one in which everyday life is always tinged by the threat of crisis, of everything falling apart. This worldview is understandably borne out of their own experience of sudden displacement back in the 80s from their homeland. In 2020, with the pandemic and the Trump administration's volatile and violent political agenda, the fragility of 'everyday life' was made very explicit.



**Seelai Karzai** is a poet, community organizer, and chocolate enthusiast who hails from Flushing, Queens, New York City. Her writing centers the experiences of marginalized and displaced communities. She is currently an MFA student at the University of Oregon. Seelai received a master's degree in women, gender and sexuality studies, and religion from Harvard University, and a B.A. in English Literature and Classics from Hunter College in New York City. Her

writing has appeared in *Newtown Literary Journal* and elsewhere.

### **What brought you to AAAWA and how does your work outside of AAAWA connect to it?**

**Seelai:** Back in 2015, I submitted some of my poems to AAAWA's multimedia gathering "Distant Attachments: Unsettling Contemporary Afghan Diasporic Art" at City Lore in New York. From the moment I stepped into that space, I felt like I had found a new purpose. I had searched for an artistic community that studied politics and literature with a critical lens for a long time. My personal commitment to unraveling the complexities of my existence aligned with AAAWA's mission and, from that year onward, I felt really connected with these kind and generous artists, writers, and scholars from the Afghan diaspora. Becoming a part of AAAWA feels like I've found my artistic home. I always walk

away from our conversations more aware, and hopeful that the social change we seek is possible within our lifetime.

### **What motivates you?**

*Seelai:* That, despite the staggering losses we have endured in 2020 (and before this year), as well as the harms in our world today, we survive. I am motivated by the hope that my work speaks to this survival. I am also motivated by the joy and discovery inherent to the process of reading.

### **What does being Afghan American mean to you?**

*Seelai:* I appreciate that there is no hyphen between the two terms. The absence of this hyphen indicates that I am many things and that my sense of being cannot be put into any neat category. The absence of the hyphen also indicates that my Afghanness is on equal footing to the part of my identity that was raised in the United States and so it is not a mere afterthought. At the same time, I can't think of the term without also thinking about the power imbalances enacted by the word 'American': I am an Afghan in exile, living with the privileges of American citizenship on colonized land.

### **How does your identity inform your approach to building community in the diaspora?**

*Seelai:* As an Afghan woman living in the United States, I am acutely aware of how abysmally the U.S. empire views Afghans and Afghanistan, as well as other oppressed groups domestically and around the world. I am also aware of how these abysmal views and theories have become internalized among members of the diaspora. Therefore, I am interested in building a literary community (and literary futures) within the Afghan diaspora that is accountable to itself and which does its best not to replicate the harms of colonialism and self-orientalism within our work.

### **What has 2020 taught you?**

*Seelai:* What a great question to reflect on at the end of such a challenging year. 2020 has brought me the lessons of patience, sitting with grief, and believing in myself as an artist. I've learned that it takes time to create work of lasting value and resonance, and that I shouldn't try to rush the process. I've learned that I can't ignore grief and that I have to let my body acknowledge the pain I feel when I read the news. Finally I've learned that I need to believe in myself as an artist because the world needs artistic visionaries to imagine different futures.

## **Joining AAWA**

### **Membership Tiers**

[View](#)



### **Hive Member**

**Hive Member** For those with ancestral ties to Afghanistan who are interested in a platform to dialogue and exchange with a hive of like-minded folks that identify with the vision and mission of AAAWA, we recommend becoming a member of the AAAWA Hive, which is hosted on Slack. In the Hive you can exchange resources (including relevant events, readings, news, etc), share calls for opportunities, and connect with others for potential artistic, activist, and creative collaborations.

*If you are interested in joining, please fill out [this brief form](#), which will be reviewed by our group administrators. We will then send you a link to join the Slack Group.*



### **Momentum Member**

**Momentum Member** Supporters have an opportunity to actively learn about the work of AAAWA and contribute important skills by assisting with project preparation and publicity on an as-needed basis and as their schedule allows. Supporters are welcome from all communities and backgrounds. Possible tasks include website maintenance, developing social media posts, and graphic design for publicity efforts. Supporters are also welcome to help with the production of events as needed, including helping to coordinate art exhibits, panel discussions, and performances. Other tasks may include: conducting research on potential grants, assisting with grant proposal writing and/or editing, compiling a monthly newsletter, and administering technical assistance with digital events. Supporters contribute a few hours a week. *If you are interested in becoming a Supporter, please fill out [this form](#) to get started and a member of our group will be in touch with you shortly.*



### **Catalyst Member**

**Catalyst Member** AAAWA's presence and contributions in the world rely on the dedication of our Catalyst members. Being a Catalyst means that you share in the content creation, decision-making, and organizing efforts of our internal and public projects and you are committed to collectively shaping and furthering AAAWA's vision. Responsibilities include generating, organizing, and facilitating chai chats; developing and executing public programming; applying for grants; regularly attending and helping facilitate planning meetings; and seeking potential partnerships and collaborations. Catalyst members are expected to generally contribute 3-5 hours of work per week and can take part in one or multiple ongoing projects.

*For those that are new to AAAWA, we recommend that you first become a Supporter for a period of 3-6 months and then transition to becoming a Catalyst. If you are interested in becoming a Catalyst member, please fill contact us we will be in touch with you shortly.*

# Happy Holidays from AAAWA

We would like to end this issue by wishing you all a festive holiday season and a happy New Year. We hope you are well, physically, mentally, and emotionally. This year was undoubtedly difficult for many people, but we are hopeful that the new year will bring with it a revived sense of optimism and unity. We will continue our efforts to bring strong programming from the Afghan American community and look forward to engaging with you in person or online in 2021.

## Afghan American Artists and Writers Association

CA, United States

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