



Introduction

Welcome to the summer issue of our newsletter! In this issue, we highlight our response to the CBS sitcom *United States of Al*, provide updates on our member projects, including the Afghan Literary Futures Project, and the UVA Global Mentors Program. In addition, we recap our member driven initiatives, including Bi-Lingering, Encounters, and a presentation on the multiple lives of Sharbat Gula, National Geographic's infamous 1985 cover. Finally, we cap this issue off with a brief interview with Arash Azizzada, a member of the Afghan Diaspora for Equality and Progress.

The Fog of the Forever War



AAAWA members Seelai Karzai, Wazhmah Osman, and Helena Zeweri, recently published an op-ed responding to the CBS sitcom "United States of Al." [The essay](#), which was published by the Middle East Research and Information Project, identifies issues surrounding the stereotypes of Afghans in North American media,

and the political agendas these narratives reflect.

Updates

Afghan Literary Futures Project

Rooted in an anti-racist decolonial politics, the [Afghan Literary Futures Project](#) is

designed to cultivate a unique literary space for Afghan Americans to study, create, and workshop Afghan diasporic writing in community over the course of five sessions from March to July 2021. Each participant will have the opportunity to grow in a group of 14 other emerging writers in a long-term creative community and meet with potential editors and mentors. While the workshops will be conducted primarily in English, we will encourage multilingual expression.

For our inaugural cohort, we will be hosting a series of free monthly generative writing workshops in the spring and summer of this year! These workshops will be taught by teaching artists from the Afghan diaspora. Although the application window is now closed, please stay tuned for opportunities to join future workshops.

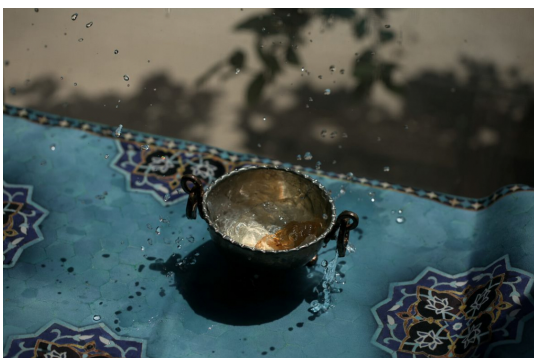
UVA Global Mentors Program

This past spring, AAWA members Gazelle Samizay and Seelai Karzai participated as Global Mentors as part of the [University of Virginia's Global Mentors Program](#). The program is designed to give students a window into global conversations, from migration to social justice to human rights through the lens of artists, activists, and creators from around the world. Gazelle and Seelai worked with students in fellow AAWA member Helena Zeweri's course, "Migrant Women's Political Activism: Global Perspectives." They reflected on their own creative and activist work as first generation immigrants and mentored students on their own projects about migration and activism.

Gazelle Samizay: "This was a really interesting collaboration because Helena's research on migrant women's activism was carefully funneled into a potent syllabus for undergraduate students from varied backgrounds. This was then augmented by my and Seelai's experience as an artist and writer and educators. It was great to challenge students to move beyond their academic research into creative expression. Based on the feedback, students really enjoyed the multidisciplinary approach and found the artistic presentations helpful in understanding migrant women's activism in new ways."

Events Recap & Review

Bi-Lingering



Event Review [Bi-Lingering](#) invites bilingual people (of any and all proficiencies) to **share their stories** of expressing themselves in more than one language by writing a letter to "Dear Bi-Lingering". As a thank you, participants will be mailed a [limited edition art](#) card created by the artists with love. From the submitted letters,

artists Labkhand Olfatmanesh and Gazelle Samizay will create visual art that captures and celebrates the experience of being a Bi-Lingerer. To participate,

fill out this [sign-up form](#) to receive a "Dear Bi-Lingering" Letter Kit by mail. Sign up before letter kits run out!

Encounters



Event Review "Encounters" featured fourteen women from the South Asian Diaspora working as artist pairs to illuminate shared bonds and

histories and envision an equitable future in which women thrive. In their collaborations, the artists drew on many South Asian traditions of craft such as bandhani dyeing techniques, mehndi, weaving, embroidery, as well as mediums of video, painting, sculpture, installation, photography, and choreography.

- An artist talk with the artist pairs can be found [here](#).
 - This link includes the above artist talk, as well as other related recorded programs on the left of the page. At the bottom of the page one can see [the virtual exhibit](#).
 - Here is [a photo](#) of the installation Labkhand Olfatmanesh and Gazelle Samizay did in the exhibit.
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Society for Photographic Education Talk



Event Review In 1985, National Geographic published an image of a young girl on its cover. With piercing green eyes and a loosely wrapped burgundy veil, the "Afghan girl," as she came to be known, riveted magazine readers. Since its publication, the legacies of this image have been profound. On June 8, 2021, Gazelle Samizay and Helena Zeweri presented on "[The Multiple Lives of the Afghan Girl](#)," for the Society for Photographic Education Conference. This presentation used Steve McCurry's famous photograph as a jumping-off point for looking at how photographs of Afghans have been mobilized to tell

racialized narratives toward militarized humanitarian projects.

Community Spotlight

Arash Azzada is a photographer, videographer, and community organizer. He recently started a



newsletter called [What's Up Afghanistan](#), which centers news, commentary, and art from Afghanistan and the diaspora. With a background in media and communications, Arash's visual and written work focuses on documenting the stories of marginalized communities across the United States. In the past decade-plus, he has shot music videos and short films as well as photographed protest movements from Occupy Wall Street to Black Lives Matter. As someone deeply committed to social justice and building communities, Arash co-founded the [Afghan Diaspora for Equality and Progress \(ADEP\)](#) in 2016 and is an active organizer in the Afghan American diaspora, with a

current focus on ending the coalition war in Afghanistan that has lasted for the past 20 years.

Helena: How did you first get involved in advocating for the Afghan American community? Anything else you'd like to share about your positionality within the diaspora?

Arash: My starting point for all this was spending 5 years in the Iranian American community. I owe my core group of Iranian American friends who I met through the Iranian Alliances Across Borders (IAAB) a lot of credit. They gave me community and taught me a lot. The bridge to my work in the Afghan diaspora came through the Afghan American Conference (AAC) and I am grateful to the wonderful organizers there for facilitating all the worthwhile friendships and connections that have allowed me to do community work within the Afghan American community. I think I spent a lot of my early years searching for things that didn't exist within our community: institutions, leadership, mentoring, funding. I realized it didn't exist. We had to build it or it would never happen. Building things that benefit folks within our community is both a lot of fun and painstakingly frustrating. I'm merely one of many, many organizers who are dedicated to doing worthwhile work that grows our community in a more engaged and progressive direction.

Helena: How did you get involved with ADEP?

Arash: Simply put, organizations and collectives within the Afghan American community didn't exist and if they did, they were very informal. A beautiful thing about community building is that you run into like-minded leftists and progressives who deeply care about bettering our material conditions, rooted in abolitionist and anti-imperial thought. This, by the way, was true before I even realized what those two words meant or before they became mainstream. Within ADEP, the goal has always been to find ways to elevate those in our community that never got the spotlight previously. More frequently these have been folks from marginalized Afghan identities, queer or Hazara, for example. Traditionally, too many organizations have these hierarchical structures that allow for certain leaders to stand out and speak out, for better or for worse.

Personally, I've always believed everyone has leadership qualities and that's the approach I've taken. Everyone is a leader: in their home, in their social circle, in their neighborhood, in their workplace, on Zoom. It's mostly about giving everyone the know-how and the tools to be able to be one. That's at the core of our work.

Helena: What are some campaigns, projects, or initiatives are you most proud of that ADEP has accomplished?

Arash: First, the electoral work that we've done includes highlighting to our community what is at stake during elections, translating materials into Dari and Pashto, making that accessible to folks in our community by informing and educating. Secondly, our Qatra video-series that focused on environmental racism and race because it discusses how those things impact Afghan Americans and how we can be complicit in systems. Lastly, our work highlighting the need for Afghan women to be at the negotiating table in a future political settlement in Afghanistan.

Helena: What was your goal in setting up your newsletter, "What's up Afghanistan?" What do you hope to achieve through it?

Arash: It's been frustrating to be part of a media machine, as a journalist myself, to be totally ignored while the country I reside in and pay taxes in spent two full decades occupying my native Afghanistan and another two decades fighting a proxy war. When the withdrawal happened, it was just so obvious. The media spoke to dozens of American veterans of the war and they neglected to speak to us. It was hard getting our thoughts out there in the public. Part of that is our reliance on a complicit media that further propagates false narratives about Afghanistan: that it's inherently violent and corrupt, for example. My newsletter simply aims to talk to Afghans from across the world about Afghanistan and to center their different perspectives and voices. It's the same approach I've taken in organizing: okay, so nobody else is willing to do this? I'll do it with the help of the wonderful people who give me their time, insight, and wisdom. We are more than capable.



Helena: What are your thoughts on the relationship between the diaspora and the homeland in the wake of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan?

Arash: Understanding Afghanistan can be very complex and confusing. To be quite frank, however, too many folks in our diaspora have been complicit in furthering and enabling harmful conduct by the United States and other coalition troops in Afghanistan. We can acknowledge, for example, that the withdrawal will have a dire impact on many, including women and ethnic minorities such as Hazaras. We can also acknowledge that the United States doesn't give a damn about the well-being of everyday Afghans and has caused a tremendous amount of harm and furthered conflict there. Hopefully, we can move past the propagandist nonsense we've been swallowing for twenty years now. Afghans in the diaspora have an obligation to advocate for everyday Afghans and to stop making excuses for selfish, wealthy elites in Kabul. That duty doesn't simply disappear because we live in relative safety in the West.

Helena: In your view, how can we build solidarities with other marginalized communities in the US and globally?

Arash: I hope folks realize that the struggle Afghans go through, both here and abroad, is impacted and part of the same machinery that affects people of color and marginalized communities across the world. Whether it's anti-tax protests in Colombia, the fight for Black lives in the US or calling out apartheid by the Israeli regime, it's all part of the same fight. It's workers, the disabled, Black folks, Indigenous folks, queer folks. We are in this together and none of us are free if one of us is chained.

It's also important to remember that solidarity isn't transactional. They don't teach solidarity in business school for a reason. Afghans should stand up against injustice anywhere and for marginalized people everywhere, regardless of the outcome. Solidarity, hope, and joy are the most powerful tools we have in our arsenal. The Taliban, apartheid states, and white supremacists have fear and violence. We have a vision: a just, equitable, liberated, and beautiful tomorrow. Once you believe in that vision wholeheartedly, you are immediately connected to billions across the rest of the world. That's incredibly powerful.

Afghan American Artists and Writers Association

CA, United States

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