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Sara Rahbar and the Art of Loving Otherwise

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SARA RAHBAR AND THE ART OF LOVING OTHERWISE

by

Michael Lahti

A Thesis Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
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ABSTRACT

SARA RAHBAR AND THE ART OF LOVING OTHERWISE

by

Michael Lahti

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2021
Under the Supervision of Professor K.L.H. Wells

Born in Iran and currently working in New York City, Sara Rahbar is a contemporary multimedia artist who gained some acclaim with her *Flag* series (2006-present), which was inspired by her experiences in the aftermath of 9/11. Many of these works merge Persian fabrics onto the American flag thus expressing her lived history and political views. To shed light on the political nature of Rahbar's works writ large, I examine a textile from her *War* series (2009-2013), titled *I Want to Shelter You* (2013). Against a flat canvas bag, Rahbar attaches large-caliber bullet casings into a heart-shape to point out that war is never about love. Tied to how war proponents used voices of people from the Middle East to promote the War on Terror, it is a commentary on how human rights were used to justify violence. I examine Faith Ringgold's flag painting, *Flag for the Moon* (1969), to show how flag imagery has been used previously to protest both war and prejudice. I also connect this painting to the postcolonial phenomenon of the native informant to track a stream of thought that travels from Frantz Fanon through the Black Power movement and continues in postcolonial feminist critiques of the War on Terror. Beyond claiming Rahbar as an American artist, this reading of Rahbar's work is an intervention in the art world's unwitting complicity in using Iranian diasporic artists to further Western supremacy.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vi
PART ONE	4
<i>I Want to Shelter You</i>	4
<i>M60</i>	7
<i>Iranian Flag</i>	7
<i>History between the United States and Iran</i>	8
<i>Rahbar Biography</i>	12
<i>Islamophobia</i>	13
<i>Hybrid Identity</i>	15
PART TWO	17
<i>Faith Ringgold</i>	17
<i>Flag for the Moon</i>	19
<i>Positive Visibility</i>	24
<i>Conclusion</i>	26
PART THREE	29
<i>Historical Context & Postcolonial Feminism</i>	29
<i>Native Testimonials</i>	30
<i>Human Rights Appropriated—Shirin Neshat</i>	34
<i>Blending Theory and Praxis</i>	37
<i>Nationalism, Islamophobia, and Love</i>	39
<i>Disingenuous Love</i>	41
<i>Pure Love</i>	42
FIGURES	46
WORKS CITED	60

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Sara Rahbar, Flag #1, 2006. Mixed media.	46
Figure 2. Sara Rahbar, Land of the Free (Flag #55), 2017. Mixed media, 64 x 40 in.....	47
Figure 3. Detail from Land of the Free (Flag #55).	48
Figure 4. Sara Rahbar, I Want to Shelter You, 2013. Mixed media, 29 x 18 in. Private Collection.	49
Figure 5. The national flag of the Islamic Republic of Iran.....	50
Figure 6. Sara Rahbar, You Burned My House Down Then Offered Me Shelter from the Rain, 2009. Mixed media installation.....	51
Figure 7. Sara Rahbar, #8, from Love Arrived and How Red, 2008. Photograph, 60 x 40 in.	52
Figure 8. Faith Ringgold, Flag for the Moon: Die Nigger, 1969. Oil on canvas, 36 x 50 in. Artist's collection.....	53
Figure 9. Faith Ringgold, The Flag is Bleeding, 1967. Oil on canvas, 72 x 96 in.	54
Figure 10. Jasper Johns, Flag, 1954-5, Encaustic on canvas. 42 ¼ x 60 5/8 in. Museum of Modern Art, New York.....	55
Figure 11. Marc Morrel, The United States Flag in a Yellow Noose, 1966. Multi-media. Present whereabouts unknown.	56
Figure 12. Faith Ringgold, Die, 1967. Oil on canvas, 72 x 144 in. Museum of Modern Art.....	57
Figure 13. Shirin Neshat, Speechless, from the series Women of Allah, 1996.....	58
Figure 14. Sara Rahbar, Barriers of Separation and Distance, 2008. Mixed media, 79 x 47 in. ..	59

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Introduction

Born in Iran and currently working in New York City, Sara Rahbar is a contemporary multimedia artist who gained some acclaim with her *Flag* series, which was inspired by her experiences in the aftermath of 9/11. This series of textiles, which numbers in the fifties, started in 2006 and continues today. In the first of these works, she attaches various Persian objects onto the American flag (figure 1). Later flags are free of Persian reference and leave the red and white stripes almost completely occluded with military paraphernalia (figure 2). While her first flags were certainly political, they were also about her conflict of being an exilic Iranian woman in America. Her later work attempts to reject all identity categories.

Rahbar's work is frequently discussed as primarily autobiographical and personal and thus a product of her own identity and unique history.¹ I argue instead for a broader interpretation of Rahbar's work that takes the larger politics of the conflict between the US and Iran into account. Since pro-war members of the Bush administration used human rights to justify the War on Terror, Rahbar, qua anti-war activist, is prevented from commenting on Iran critically after 9/11 from a human rights perspective. Contrasting with scholarship that subsumes Rahbar within contemporary Middle Eastern art, I situate the artist in a specifically American art historical tradition of political art. I will compare and contrast Rahbar's work to Faith Ringgold's flag paintings and the intellectual milieu fueling the Black Power movement of the 1960s to understand how both artists are reacting and responding to issues related to the phenomenon of the "native informant." The "native informant" is a term that comes from anthropology and ethnography and has since come to be used as an epithet in postcolonial literature. It refers to a

¹ Although Rahbar rejects identity categories, I am choosing to use talk of identity while believing it is merely a social construct.

person from an oppressed group who works for the interests of an oppressor. In the context of the Black Power movement, the analogous terms include the “sell-out” and “Uncle Tom.”

Rahbar’s art well exemplifies the false divide between the personal and political. Her earlier work attempts to come to terms with her complicated identity as an Iranian exile, her parents’ divorce, and her father’s subsequent return to Iran.² Yet her art is also politically charged. This reflects even her earliest memories, which were engendered by a country burgeoning on revolution, when chants of *death to America* were commonplace.³ Thorsten Albertz speaks of Rahbar’s career thus,

Even though in her *Flag* series she was simply trying to come to terms with her personal history, the mood of the times led her audience to think of her as a politically motivated artist. Ironically, now that she has achieved closure on her past, her new work is transforming her into exactly the kind of figure her audience thought she was all along: an admonitory conscience of our times.⁴

Although Albertz may well be speaking to Rahbar’s explicitly stated intentions, I argue that her work has always been political, even when it is about her personal experiences. Making a clear divide between the personal and political is especially erroneous considering Rahbar’s personal history—experiencing revolution in her earliest years, and moving to the country that she believes to be the cause of that revolution. Since *the personal is political* was originally a feminist argument that supported the role of first-hand experience, Rahbar’s work shares this

² Thorsten Albertz, “A Faded Utopia: Sara Rahbar Reflects on Her Childhood Exile from Iran and Its Influence on Her Work,” *ArtAsiaPacific*, November 1, 2010, 72–73.

³ Dallas Contemporary, *Chit Chat with Artist Sara Rahbar*, 2018.

⁴ Albertz, “A Faded Utopia: Sara Rahbar Reflects on Her Childhood Exile from Iran and Its Influence on Her Work,” 72–73.

similarity. However, it is important to note that it would be a mistake to view her art from a Western feminist perspective.

Most of the writing on Rahbar is promotional in nature—not scholarly. However, she is often discussed in monographs on Iranian and Middle Eastern contemporary art. This thesis offers a very specific reading of only a few works by Rahbar. Her personal history is imbued in all her work, but she has gone on to work on themes that grapple with a deeper level of conceptual abstraction. For instance, instead of being about nationalism in a specific historical context, some of her newer work deals with the self and other per se. In other words, this thesis does not intend to be a comprehensive and final statement on Rahbar’s career. It also does not pretend to take a view from nowhere. I am an American and contend that Rahbar should be positioned along with other American artists. However, I hope that other scholars would argue otherwise. For instance, I hope Iranian scholars argue that Rahbar should be positioned with Iranian and Iranian diasporic artists. Practical circumstances make this necessary, healthy, and inclusive.

In the introductory section, I provide an overview of Rahbar’s life and art and contextualize this with the Iranian-American condition writ large. After an analysis of Rahbar’s 2013 piece, *I Want to Shelter You* (figure 4), I conclude with an examination of hybrid identity. The second section situates Rahbar’s work within an American art historical tradition through a comparison with Faith Ringgold’s paintings from the late 1960s. I utilize feminist theory and postcolonial feminist literature in the third section to argue that Rahbar’s work is about properly loving others. To that end, I examine three interrelated concepts: alterity, affect, and epistemology. I conclude by stating that Rahbar’s politically charged anti-war message also

challenges how human rights have been appropriated in the US for militaristic and Western chauvinistic purposes.

PART ONE

I Want to Shelter You

Ostensibly having little to do with her personal history, Rahbar's group of mixed media textile works, titled *War* (2009-2013), marks a shift in her *Flag* series.⁵ Not only is this collection of work about the futility of war, it is about what she believes to be the cause of war: nationalism.⁶ *I Want to Shelter You* is one of three textile pieces in the *War* series that utilizes a heart shaped motif. Here large caliber bullet casings are sewn to a kaki green canvas bag. Beneath the bag is a block of wood allowing the work to be hung flat on a wall. As in her flag pieces, the works in this series take three-dimensional objects and place them on other three-dimensional objects yet are hung and meant to be read like two-dimensional paintings. Above the heart-shaped arrangement of bullets are the stenciled words "TRANSPORT BAG."

The canvas bag is a WWII US Army heavy duck canvas bailey transport bag with rope handles. The "duck" refers to the bag's tightly woven duck canvas. A bailey bridge is a prefabricated bridge used by the allied forces in World War II. Its relatively small components were able to be transported by trucks and assembled without the aid of heavy machinery. With Western Europe's extensive river systems, replacing bridges the Germans destroyed while retreating was necessary for the allies to advance their military vehicles towards Germany. Rope

⁵ The subject matter is not about a dual ethnic/national identity per se.

⁶ Sara Rahbar, *2014 BBC Interview*, Youtube Video, 2014.

handles allowed for transporting the materials that held the components of the bridge together such as pins and rods.

The tan canvas bag measures 29 inches high and 18 inches across. Stenciled in all caps and centrally aligned several inches from the top is “TRANSPORT BAG.” Tiny holes reveal where stitching once held the belt that allowed the bag to be closed tightly. Remnants of the belt’s metal components are seen with small areas of rust. Small tears and folds on the near the bottom of the bag are imprints of the ropes which served as handles.

Despite the bag’s original purpose, I believe that in Rahbar’s work the bag loses its WWII context and just becomes a sign of war, an effect the bullet casings more easily achieve. However, beyond denoting war, the rough and worn qualities also conjure thoughts and feelings of a lived history. It is important to understand Rahbar’s art from an aesthetic level, and not solely based on its materiality and historical context.⁷ Rahbar spent six years following 9/11 traveling back and forth between Iran and America. Much of this time was spent collecting objects in both countries.⁸ She says, “As for where I find my materials, well just about anywhere that I can, and I mean ANYWHERE. I go to the most bizarre places to find things... from bazaars in Tehran, to flea markets in Pennsylvania, from Vietnam vets to little old ladies on the street.”⁹ Although these objects were not picked at random, she does not know why she picks them. She says,

⁷ Catherine Grenier, “When History Encounters Aesthetics,” in *I Have No Faith for the Devil to Take* (New York: ArtAsiaPacific, 2011), 20–21.

⁸ Elaine W. Ng, “Interview with Sara Rahbar,” in *No Faith Left for the Devil to Take* (New York: ArtAsiaPacific, 2011), 72–73.

⁹ Julia, “An Interview with Artist Sara Rahbar,” Free People Blog, November 21, 2011, <https://blog.freepeople.com/2011/11/interview-artist-sara-rahbar/>.

I'm very aware that there is no rhyme or reason to my work and that a lot of it is coming from my subconscious and that it is very instinctual, lacking any sort of logic. I go to these places and there are a billion and one things to choose from, with things hanging from the ceiling, on the floor, piled up on top of each other. . . And I look and go through a thousand random objects and I pick five things. So, I know this stuff is coming from somewhere. It's coming from my subconscious, from past memories—a lot of things that I've blocked out that I'm seeing now for the first time through the work.¹⁰

Rahbar picks the materials she uses by instinct. She does not pick objects because they reference specific wars or military units. They are selected from a feeling that the materials speak to her. They conjure some kind of memory. Also, the worn quality is imbued with a sense of humanity. She says, "I don't like new, shiny, slippery things. They make me very uncomfortable."¹¹

In this way, the fact that the transport bag has a specific history tied to WWII is not important to understanding the piece. While a bailey bridge may be interesting, it does not make a significant contribution to the meaning of the art. So, instead of reading "transport bag" as a contrivance for carrying bridge parts, it is more appropriate to read these words as a signifier of violence. It is the United States government who transports state sponsored violence across the globe. Its rough aesthetic suggests that this device may have been actually used in this service. It is imbued with humanity thus, but the implications of violence also refer to inhumanity.

¹⁰ Ng, "Interview with Sara Rahbar," 72–73.

¹¹ "Artist of the Week: Sara Rahbar," abudhabiart, 2020, <https://www.abudhabiart.ae/en/artist.of.the.week/sara.rahbar..aspx>.

M60

Below the stenciled words are layers of large caliber bullet casings arranged in the shape of a heart. These bullets are from the US military's M60, a machine gun developed in the 1940s and used extensively in Vietnam. The M60 can be used in various ways; it can be mounted to the side of helicopters, tanks, or trucks. It can also be carried, but its size makes it necessary for a three-person team: a gunner, an assistant, and an ammunition bearer. The particular size of the casings is especially frightening. Again, however, the specific reference is difficult with Rahbar's work. It is unlikely she is referencing Vietnam in particular. It is more likely that she is using the bullet casings to show the horrors of war and violence.

Not only does Rahbar use the links to attach the bullet casings together, she also uses the links to attach the bullets to the canvas bag. We can see this with the exposed Philips-head screws. As mentioned, the M60 is belt fed. The bullets form a belt by attaching individual metal links to each bullet. As the gun fires, each link spits out the right side of the gun. In this piece, the links are darker than the bullet casings. The darker links form a sort of Y shape that recalls the shape of a tulip, which has tremendously important symbolic meaning to Iranian national identity demonstrated in the national flag.

Iranian Flag

Since 1910, the Iranian flag has been divided into three equal horizontal bands: green on top, white in the middle, and red on the bottom. Within the original tricolor, a gold lion in front of a sun is placed in the center. After the 1979 revolution, several features were altered to reflect that the nation had become an Islamic republic. In Kufic script forming a meandering pattern along the top of the red band and bottom of the green band is the takbir, which is the Islamic/Arabic

phrase meaning: God is greater than everything. Replacing the gold lion is the centrally placed national emblem of Iran.

The emblem is a complex symbol combining various elements of utmost importance to Islam. At once, the emblem forms the word “Allah” and the phrase “There is no God except Allah.” Also, the emblem is formed by four crescents and a line, which also creates the shape of a tulip. The tulip stands for Iranian patriotism and self-sacrifice, but has a rich history tracing back to ancient Persia.

Similar to Western notions of the heart, in Persian culture from antiquity to the present, the tulip has had connotations of love. Later, it has come to represent Iranian martyrs, especially after the battle of Karbala in the seventh century.¹² Furthermore, according to legend, watered by the tears of mourners, the blood of the martyrs grows into tulips. After the 1979 revolution, tulips were commonly seen in revolutionary posters and other state propaganda.¹³ By combining the tulip with the heart, *I Want to Shelter You* displays both a hybrid identity and the universal phenomenon of love.

History between the United States and Iran

Americans tend to know little about histories that present America in a negative light. With even a cursory understanding of the relationship between the US and Iran, however, it becomes difficult to see America simply as a defender of democracy and human rights. To understand

¹² Since I am not an Islamic scholar, I do not believe it would be appropriate for me to be explaining the significance of this very important event.

¹³ Talinn Grigor, *Contemporary Iranian Art: From the Streets to the Studio* (London: Reaktion Books LTD, 2014), 190–91.

Rahbar's work, the American viewer is forced to confront the uglier side of their own national history. However, by doing so, perhaps this would make future dealings between the two nations more hopeful. Although both sides are flawed, and both have legitimate grievances with each other, it is preposterous to think either is evil. I trace this troubled history to the exploitative practices exercised by the British that the US inherited soon after the second world war.

Unlike other nations in the Middle East, Iran's national identity has persisted for thousands of years. However, it was not until 1906 that Iran became the first country in the Middle East to ratify a constitution and form a parliament. Although oil was known to exist in Iran since ancient times, in 1908 oil was discovered by the British who saw this as an opportunity to further exploit Iran's natural resources. In an effort to control Iran politically and economically, they formed the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) in 1914.

With a petroleum prospecting contract between the British agent, William Knox D'Arcy, and the Shah of Iran, Muzaffar al-Din, Britain was able to gain control of Iranian oil for several decades. In exchange for this, the Shah would receive 16% of the profits, 20,000 pounds and 20,000 pounds worth of shares in D'Arcy's company, and the Iranian people would receive the same amount of the profits. Although Iranians were employed as laborers, they were prevented from the best jobs, which were given to British workers. This created a clear hierarchy based on nationality and the lack of training also prevented Iranians from taking control of their own natural resources for the next decades.¹⁴

By the 1930s, oil was discovered elsewhere in the Middle East. Realizing that the British were abusing the Iranian people through the AIOC, Reza Shah asked the League of Nations to

¹⁴ Stephen Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2008), 47–61.

intervene. This led to contract renewals that would last another sixty years. The Shah was able to greatly benefit from this arrangement, but the Iranian people saw a small fraction of the profits they were promised.

Partly because Iran declared neutrality in WWII, the UK and USSR invaded Iran in 1941, thereby dividing Iran in two. They jointly held de facto rule over the divided country. Reza Shah was forced to abdicate the throne. A new shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the son of the exiled Shah, was sworn in because the British thought this Shah was weaker, and hence easier to control.

The pro-democratic politician, Mohammad Mosaddegh, was elected Prime Minister in 1951. This weakened the power of Mohammad Reza Shah. Led by the popular Mossadegh, parliament voted to nationalize the oil supplies. The British used embargos and sanctions to prevent Iran from producing and exporting their own oil. By the fall of 1951, the British oil workers were evacuated from the country. Even after Churchill's petitions, Truman refused to fully side with the Brits because he disapproved of their exploitative behavior over the less powerful nation.

After Eisenhower became president in 1953, Cold War politics of the era shifted foreign policy. Whereas Truman's approach was hands off, Eisenhower was willing to be ruthless to further US interests. Influential members of the Eisenhower administration such as Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, and Director of the CIA Allen Dulles, were fervently anti-communist. Eisenhower also believed covert operations were a more cost-effective method to carry out foreign policy. However, it is not clear to what extent the communist threat influenced Eisenhower's policy on Iran: Mossadegh was not a communist.

Out of the basement of the United States embassy in Tehran, the CIA staged a covert coup d'état of the popularly elected leader in 1953. This operation was codenamed Operation Ajax, and it was led by Kermit Roosevelt, the great grandson of Theodore Roosevelt. By bribing various people of influence to speak out against Mossadegh, he was able to create widespread instability. Other people were hired to start riots in the name of Mossadegh, which were used to inspire a popular backlash. Mossadegh was captured at his home and forced into exile. Mohammad Reza Shah returned from exile in Europe and became the dictator of Iran until 1979.¹⁵

After the coup, although the British regained some control, the US became more influential in the region. Moreover, the US reaped greater financial gains in the following decades. Not only did they benefit from increased oil revenues, the Shah spent a great portion of Iran's oil income on military technology from the US.¹⁶ Despite increased spending in infrastructure and education, the Shah's reign was increasingly more autocratic.

The Western-friendly Shah was overthrown in 1979 by a popular uprising. Ayatollah Khamenei gained power and declared Iran an Islamic republic. Iranians fearing further US meddling stormed the US embassy and Tehran and took diplomats hostage. Iraq invaded Iran during this time of instability, and the US supported both sides of the conflict. Iranians were demonized throughout the 1980s in the media and elsewhere.

¹⁵ Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror*.

¹⁶ Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 58.

Rahbar Biography

Rahbar was born in Iran three years prior to the overthrow of the US-backed Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. After the Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein, attempted to exploit the ensuing power vacuum with the invasion of Iran, Rahbar's parents chose to take the family and flee in 1982; Sara was only five years old. Because her visas were destroyed in November 1979 when militants stormed the US Embassy (resulting in the Iranian Hostage Crisis), and hence precluding a legal escape, her parents hired smugglers to escort the family to Turkey.¹⁷ Subsequently abandoned by the smugglers, and carrying Sara's baby brother in a gym bag, the Rahbars travelled to the Turkish border by foot.¹⁸ After the seven-day trek to Turkey, the family then went to Dubai, and eventually found sanctuary in New York City.¹⁹

In reflection, Rahbar sees incongruity in the escape from Iran to America because she sees America as the cause of the problems in Iran.²⁰ This personal conflict is expressed in a 2009 installation of American flags shaped into a tent appropriately titled *You Burned My House Down Then Offered Me Shelter from the Rain* (Figure 6). Although the family found refuge in the US, they were then burdened by prejudices and the insistent feelings of displacement that many Iranian-Americans face.²¹ However, demonstrating pride in being Iranian in America, the

¹⁷ Albertz, "A Faded Utopia: Sara Rahbar Reflects on Her Childhood Exile from Iran and Its Influence on Her Work."

¹⁸ Dallas Contemporary, *Chit Chat with Artist Sara Rahbar*; Albertz, "A Faded Utopia: Sara Rahbar Reflects on Her Childhood Exile from Iran and Its Influence on Her Work."

¹⁹ Berlin Art Link, *Studio Visit with Sara Rahbar*, Youtube Video, 2017.

²⁰ Dallas Contemporary, *Chit Chat with Artist Sara Rahbar*.

²¹ Hamid Dabashi, *Iran: A People Interrupted* (New York: The New Press, 2007), 4–5.

family opened an Iranian restaurant.²² This did not prevent young Rahbar from struggling to cope with the new culture in which she now existed. She says,

When I arrived here, I did not know the language and had a great deal of difficulty fitting in. School was a complete nightmare for me. And it was in the very beginning of my time in America when I had my first run in with the American flag. I have a very distinct memory of that encounter. At a very young age, I was asked to stand and salute the American flag in school and when I refused, I was told that either I salute or I have to leave school. This memory stayed with me. I will never forget it.²³

Rahbar grew up at a time of extreme hostilities between her homeland and place of refuge. The political merging with the personal began with her earliest years. This continued throughout her adolescence with experiences of American prejudice and into her early adulthood following 9/11.

Islamophobia

American fear and anger reached a zenith after 9/11 when Americans prioritized safety over civil rights and civility. The target of this negativity was people from the Middle East and anyone considered a Muslim. Rahbar, who is not religious, speaks of her experience, “When 9/11 occurred, I remember my fear of speaking Farsi in the streets. We received threats if we did not put the American flag up by our home. There were conversations about ‘whose side are you on?’

²² Albertz, “A Faded Utopia: Sara Rahbar Reflects on Her Childhood Exile from Iran and Its Influence on Her Work.”

²³ Ana Finel Honigman, “Sara Rahbar in Conversation with Ana Finel Honigman,” *Saatchi Online Daily Magazine*, November 24, 2008, 6.

and ‘are you with them or us?’ Iranians were threatened and terrorized at airports and so on.”²⁴ The family also received death threats and suffered vandalism.²⁵ These experiences were not unique to Rahbar. In *Backlash 9/11*, Anny Bakalian and Mehdi Bozorgmehr write, “The post 9/11 backlash was overwhelming and relentless. Immediately after the attacks, individuals who appeared Middle Eastern or had Arabic- or Islamic-sounding names became the scapegoats of Americans’ anger and vengeance.”²⁶ The failure to protect persecuted minorities led many to further mistrust the US government.²⁷

In a photographic series from 2008 titled *Love Arrived and How Red*, Rahbar captures herself and another person wearing balaclavas. In the eighth photograph of the series (Figure 7), Rahbar is wearing a white wedding dress and facing to her right. As her face is obscured by a ski mask, an American flag is worn like a veil no longer covering her face. This image addresses the ridiculous idea that people from the Middle East are terrorists. It also reflects how Iranian-Americans felt persecuted in their adopted homeland.

Many Americans responded to 9/11 by displaying the American flag.²⁸ The most common explanation given for this was to support the victims and their families. However, “support for the government” and “to show national unity against the enemy” were also frequent explanations.²⁹ The flag not only symbolized a nation in mourning, it served to conjure feelings of patriotism. *Love Arrived and How Red* asks if this is possible without also Othering those

²⁴ Finel Honigman, 6.

²⁵ Paul Sloman, *Contemporary Art in the Middle East*, Artworld (London: Black Dog, 2009), 108.

²⁶ Anny P. Bakalian, *Backlash 9/11: Middle Eastern and Muslim Americans Respond* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 190.

²⁷ Bakalian, 173.

²⁸ Bakalian, 190.

²⁹ Bakalian, 24.

perceived to be the enemy. A person from the dominant culture may be resistant to believe their patriotism is anything less than innocent. Rahbar's art challenges this and shows the darker side of patriotism—one that is exclusive and has dehumanizing potential.

Yet, the American flag is also protected as an object of protest, and there is a long tradition in the US, especially connected to fights for civil rights, of treating protest as a patriotic duty. Similarly, the situation in Iran contains its own contradictions. According to the eminent Iranian studies scholar from Columbia University, Hamid Dabashi, Iranian identity is hard to pin down, but the national character of Iran is one of protest stemming from Zoroastrianism and the Shi'a sect of Islam.³⁰ This is also evidenced in Iranian modernism, which Dabashi claims is essentially about resistance to power. So, who gets to be considered truly American and/or Iranian? Is it the government apologist or the person who exemplifies the character of the nation? Do these questions have meaningful answers? Are what pose as metaphysical questions really questions of power?

Hybrid Identity

Within a poststructuralist worldview, identity is seen as more of a social construct than an intrinsic feature a person possesses. This might be more readily apparent for people from Iran. According to Dabashi,

Iranians are Zoroastrians, Jewish, Catholic, Armenian, Muslim, Sunni, Shi'i, and Bahai, and there are also many blessed atheists among them. Iranians are Arabs, Azaris, Baluchis, Kurds, Persians, Turkmans, and (illegal) immigrants to countries all over the

³⁰ Hamid Dabashi, *Shi'ism: A Religion of Protest* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011).

globe. Iranians are socialist, nationalist, Islamist, nativist, internationalist, liberal, radical, and conservative, and a few of their topnotch intellectuals have even joined the Oriental regiment of the U.S. neocons—Iranians cannot be cornered—they run away from all their stereotypes as a rabbit flees a fox.³¹

This is also true for Rahbar in particular who now currently refuses to identify with any category. As an animal rights activist, she even refuses to identify as a human being, as this would create a divide between her and her beloved dog Sophie.

Homi Bhabha's idea of the Third Space becomes relevant to Rahbar's work in this regard. The Third Space refers to the interaction of two cultures thus demonstrating that culture is not a matter of essence. Our familiar notions and stereotypes are disrupted and show us that cultures are not homogenous. It therefore also disrupts the idea that one culture can be better than another. Rahbar's work is a patchwork by expressing two identities at the same time.³² By doing so, it shows that identities are merely socially constructed ideas.

There is a rich history of American artists engaging with the stars and stripes. I will situate Rahbar's work within that tradition. Although my primary concern is not with Rahbar's flags, *I Want to Shelter You* contends with similar issues. Therefore, an examination of the abstract nature of flag imagery as a means to prevent appropriation will proceed my final analysis. Not only have those traditionally deemed outsiders lay claim to the power of the American flag, but they have also prevented that imagery from being used to further their outside status through the abstraction of the flag. I argue that this strategy is used in one of Faith Ringgold's flag paintings during the height of the Black Power movement.

³¹ Dabashi, *Iran: A People Interrupted*, 19.

³² Grenier, "When History Encounters Aesthetics," 20–21.

PART TWO

Faith Ringgold

Faith Ringgold is an African-American artist who has been working since the 1940s. Although she began her career as a figurative painter, she is best known for her textiles of the 1970s and is traditionally associated with the feminist movement of that era even though her work spans many decades. One of her often-discussed oil paintings of the American flag was made in the late 1960s and is titled *Flag for the Moon: Die Nigger* (figure 8). In this oil on canvas, Ringgold experiments with subtle variations of dark colors symbolizing the diverse tones of African American skin.

One reason *Flag for the Moon* departs from traditional modes of representation to embrace the non-figural is because, considering the abundance of stereotypical representations of black people at the time, any figural representation could be considered a caricature. This avoidance of figural representation gives space needed to mold a positive black self-image, an image recovering from the damage of hundreds of years of slavery and colonialism. Ringgold employs text hidden within the stars and stripes with the words *die* and *nigger*. While the n-word is loaded with ethical, semantic, and referential complexity, I argue that its inclusion participates in the debate over the “native-informant” (or its domestic cognate) thus making it an image pertinent to compare to Rahbar’s art. In this way, I connect Ringgold and Rahbar’s work to postcolonial thought within an American context. Examining a stream of thought that travels from Frantz Fanon through Malcolm X, I also suggest that these ideas percolate in the writing of Jamil Al-Amin and the music of the Last Poets, which are likely sources for Ringgold.

Born in 1930, Ringgold was raised and educated in New York City. Before her engagement with art that was distinctively African-American, she was attracted to the European art of the Old Masters. Her art of the early 1960s emulated a French Impressionist style which made her work difficult to sell since she was a black woman. At least once it was rejected because she is not French. Changing direction, her Super Realism style began in 1963, which she explained in this way, “The idea was to make a statement in my art about the Civil Rights Movement and what was happening to black people in America at that time, and to make it super-real.”³³ This was part of a counterhegemonic trend in the mid-sixties which favored art that was explicitly black. This led to a modest proliferation of opportunities for Ringgold and other black artists willing to portray African-American subject matter.

Ringgold began to incorporate flag imagery in her work in 1967 with *The Flag is Bleeding* (Figure 9). This painting depicts a white woman positioned between a black man and a white man visible through the translucency of the American flag. While the white man wears a business suit, the black man holds a knife. The blood on the figures leaves the viewer wondering who is the victim and who is the perpetrator. According to Albert Boime, “All are trapped behind the flag’s stripes that serve as prison bars, but it is the black who is shown to suffer most in the reality of red-white-and-blue America. It is also he who stabs the flag of oppression and takes the initiative against it. The red bands drip blood from their edges, attesting to a literal interpretation of the flag field as a weapon of racism.”³⁴ Ringgold’s work became increasingly more political

³³ Faith Ringgold, *We Flew over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005), 144.

³⁴ Albert Boime, “Waving the Red Flag and Reconstituting Old Glory,” *Smithsonian Studies in American Art* 4, no. 2 (1990): 19.

throughout the 1960s, serving as a precursor to her involvement with feminism. At this point, her political engagement was primarily aligned with the more radical faction of black activism.

Flag for the Moon

Flag for the Moon is immediately recognizable as the American flag, but the significance of its alterations may not be noticeable at first. The top left contains a blue rectangle filled with fifty stars. The stars are larger than in official American flags, therefore cluttering the space more than we have become accustomed to. The thirteen alternating red and white stripes that we expect to run horizontally within the rest of the flag are also altered. There would be more than thirteen stripes if countable, but they fail to cut fully across the canvas as one would expect. Another difference is the absence of white in this canvas.³⁵ The stars and broken stripes instead take variegated shades of grey.

By varying the shades of blue in the rectangle and the grey of the stars, Ringgold forms the word *die* in all-capitalized sans-serif letters. Within the space traditionally occupied by red and white stripes, Ringgold creates the n-word, again with sans serif letters. However, this time she elongates the letters and places them sideways. Where one might at first think that the stripes are merely broken, the viewer is confronted with a racial epithet. The title of the piece also

³⁵ Patrick Hill, "The Castration of Memphis Cooly: Race, Gender, and Nationalist Iconography in the Flag Art of Faith Ringgold," in *Dancing at the Louvre: Faith Ringgold's French Collection and Other Story Quilts* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998), 30.

alludes to a contemporaneous event: it was created during the summer of 1969, when Americans planted their flag on a newly occupied moon.³⁶

An analysis of this work would be incomplete without mentioning Jasper Johns's flag series of the previous decade. Not only are his works extremely important to art history, Ringgold herself was well-aware of his flags and acknowledges them as a source for her own work. She says,

I was partially inspired by Jasper Johns's flag series for two reasons—I liked the regularity of the position of the forty-eight stars as opposed to the uneven position of the fifty stars, and I also felt that Johns's flag presented a beautiful, but incomplete, idea. To complete it I wanted to show some of the hell that had broken out in the States, and what better place to do that than in the stars and stripes?³⁷

Her flags take the American flag motif and some of the conceptual meaning of Johns's work.

However, by placing the n-word onto the flag, Ringgold gives the flag a very different political significance.

Johns's American flag series of the 1950s (Figure 10) placed this ubiquitous symbol in a high art context thereby challenging viewers to see the symbol in a new light. These flag paintings challenged conventional understandings of the meaning of the flag itself—nationalistic pride, freedom, and support for the military—and presented it instead as a banal commodity. By re-presenting the national flag, Johns laid claim to it.³⁸ He deflated the secular mystique of Old

³⁶ Ringgold, *We Flew over the Bridge*, 164.

³⁷ Ringgold, 158.

³⁸ Boime, "Waving the Red Flag and Reconstituting Old Glory," 16.

Glory and presented it as an appropriation of popular imagery. It thus became a personalized commodity for Johns to show and sell on the art market. Like any other form of art, it could be seen apart from its traditional meanings and viewed for its formal qualities.³⁹ Moreover, it could also be interpreted by critics for its political gestures.

As other artists further utilized the American flag motif in the 1960s, the political message became more overt, and hence less subject to the interpretation of the viewer. The 60s were a time of political upheaval with the Civil Rights Movement and an unpopular war. In this environment, the flag lost its perceived wholesomeness and was no longer an innocent marker of group identity expressing shared values. Some Americans used the flag as a symbol of American dominance; others saw it as a sign of exclusion. It had become abundantly clear which groups lay claim to the flag's meaning and which groups were fighting for inclusion. Both those excluded and those who rejected the hegemonic values associated with the flag sought to destabilize those very meanings. This was expressed not only in art but in protests which staged the burning of the flag.⁴⁰

The artist and ex-marine, Marc Morrel, created *The United States Flag in a Yellow Noose*, in 1966 (Figure 11). Morrel shaped the flag into a sack vaguely resembling a human body. While the blue rectangle and white stars represent a person's body, a rope tied with a hangman's knot is wrapped around the suggestion of a neck. Anti-war songs were played while this mixed-media sculpture was exhibited.⁴¹ This piece is not simply about war and US imperialism; the noose carries racist connotations in an American context. Morrel's piece

³⁹ Boime, 16.

⁴⁰ Boime, 4–16.

⁴¹ Boime, 10.

reminds us that the flag can also represent exclusion at home. Not all Americans feel that the flag represents them. To some, it represents exclusivity—the American dream that is only accessible to the more privileged. To others, hegemonic power does not convince them to believe in the promise of historical inclusivity.

The postcolonial writer and activist Fanon influenced the Black intellectual milieu of the 1960s. Trained in psychoanalysis, he worked for liberation movements in Africa before writing about the devastating psychological effects of colonialism on the colonized. In *Black Skin, White Masks* (first published in 1952), he develops a theory suggesting that colonization leads black people to see themselves as inferior. Additionally, the only path towards their own liberation is thought to be through the identification with their oppressors (i.e. white people).⁴² Accordingly, black people who think thus are inclined to work for the interests of their oppressors, thereby furthering the oppression of their ‘own group’s’ interests.⁴³

In 1963, Malcolm X delivered his “Message to the Grass Roots” speech in which he made a distinction between the field slave and the house slave.⁴⁴ Undoubtedly influenced by Fanon, he suggested that the house slave, who worked in the house of the master, not only identified with the master, but felt that the master’s life was more important than their own. The

⁴² Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008).

⁴³ I do not intend this to be an essentialist claim. In other words, I do not believe one’s group status is determined by genotypic or phenotypic properties.

⁴⁴ Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, version First Grove Weidenfeld Evergreen edition., ed. George Breitman, First Grove Weidenfeld Evergreen edition. (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990).

point is that he believed that black people who worked within the rules and values of society are analogous to the house negro.

Contrarily, Malcolm X says the field negro hated the master. He wanted contemporary black people to become aware of their oppression, and to feel accordingly. Since working within a racist system is to propagate a racist system, he was encouraging all black people to unite to confront their common enemy: white people. Like Fanon, Malcolm X also advocated for revolution even if it required violence.

It is likely that Ringgold's *Flag for the Moon* was derived from two sources: the song "Die Nigga!!!" by the rap group The Last Poets, and Jamil Al-Amin's book *Die Nigger Die*, published in 1969.⁴⁵ In The Last Poets song, the lead rapper discusses the myriad ways that African-Americans have been dying for the last four hundred years. However, the message goes beyond racism. After the crescendo of the group aggressively chanting "die nigga," the lead rapper finishes with "... so black people can take over." The song is a call for black power—for black people to resist. Accordingly, the oppressed should not go to die in Vietnam; they should fight the system at home. Thus, it places the onus on African-Americans to resist oppression. It challenges black people to work outside of a system that oppresses them.⁴⁶

Author of *Die Nigger Die*, Jamil Al-Amin was a notable Black Power leader who tended towards the more violent side of the movement.⁴⁷ After a speech he gave in Maryland in 1967, a riot broke out. This was the event that inspired Ringgold's earlier oil painting titled *Die* (Figure

⁴⁵ Boime, "Waving the Red Flag and Reconstituting Old Glory," 18–19.

⁴⁶ The Last Poets, *The Last Poets*, Compact Disc (Fuel 2000 Records, 1970).

⁴⁷ Jamil Al-Amin, *Die, Nigger, Die! By H. Rap Brown* (New York: Dial Press, 1969).

14). Modeled after Picasso's *Guernica*, Ringgold's large mural contains weapon-wielding black and white people in a tangled mess of bloody violence. Ringgold's work reflects the more radical side of the Black Power movement in this way. Although not advocating directly for violence, the movement had a deontological leaning that rejected compromise and slow progress. The idea was that they would fight back if necessary. No longer was there a willingness to work within the system. No longer would principles be sacrificed to make bargains. Moreover, the black people who continued to do so, were seen as part of the problem. This holds true for even Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., whom some considered to be an Uncle Tom, including Malcolm X.

Positive Visibility

Prior to the 1960s, positive representations of African-Americans were relatively rare. Although there were notable artists working in black figuration, their work was overshadowed by other artistic styles more on trend within the art establishment. Beyond the absence of positive representation, there was little representation at all in mainstream culture. On the heels of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, first published in 1952 as an exploration of the social invisibility of black people, the 1960s saw a conscious effort to bring a change to this condition.⁴⁸ This opened opportunities for African-American artists depicting black people.

Flag for the Moon was also made before Betye Saar and others who grappled with ugly stereotypes. The problem for a marginalized community that has been kept invisible is creating art that is not seen as stereotypical and offensive. Limited representations create limited

⁴⁸ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1996).

exemplars, and those exemplars become prototypical.⁴⁹ Those then become stereotypes, and since African-Americans are seen in inferior social, political, and economic conditions, the stereotype becomes a sign of inferiority. Prior to dealing with the stereotypical nature of the marginalized, just about any figurative work could be seen as offensive and caricature-like.

By working with abstraction, Ringgold was able to represent the African-American experience visible in a high cultural context without providing grist for the racist grill. Hill says of *Flag for the Moon*, “In casting the American flag through the prism of her black light palette toward the end of rendering a novel black visibility, Ringgold both mocks and plays with those binarisms intrinsic to Western racial hierarchies, which define blackness as the negative antithesis of whiteness.”⁵⁰

Ringgold was not fully engaged with women’s issues yet despite her concern for justice.⁵¹ As she explained, “Trying to get a black man a place in the white art establishment left me no time to consider women’s rights. I had thought that my rights came with that of the black man’s. But I was mistaken.”⁵² As the legal expert, Kimberlie Crenshaw, points out, without acknowledging overlapping systems of oppression, women of color will continue to face the same obstacles despite attempts to rectify those conditions.⁵³ Also, socially, women of color will remain doubly invisible.

⁴⁹ Hal Foster et al., *Art Since 1900: 1945 to the Present*, Third Edition (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2016), 741.

⁵⁰ Hill, “The Castration of Memphis Cooly,” 32.

⁵¹ Hill, 34.

⁵² Hill, 34.

⁵³ Kimberle Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 13, no. 1241 (1991): 1241–99.

While the concern for visibility of specifically black women was not explicitly articulated until later, African-American self-image was victimized by hundreds of years of oppression. The black is beautiful movement is also thus connected to the early postcolonial thought of Fanon, and Ringgold's *Flag for the Moon* is also tied to the fight for black self-esteem. Although fully abstract, the rejection of white paint, and the subtle variations of tone reflect the diversity of African-American skin. Speaking of her earlier figurative work, she says,

Come the summer of 1969, I found myself longing to paint. In 1967 I had begun to explore the idea of a new palette, a way of expressing on canvas the new 'black is beautiful' sense of ourselves... In Western art, however, white and light influence the entire palette, thereby creating a predominance of white, pastel colors, and light-and-shade, or chiaroscuro."⁵⁴

Monochromatic variation was one strategy Ringgold used to celebrate not only black pride, but black physical beauty.

Conclusion

Ringgold's *Flag for the Moon* critiques the implicit racism in excess American nationalism. Her flag-paintings attempt to wrestle away hegemonic control of the stars and stripes as a fetish symbol of patriotism and re-present the flag as a symbol of society's ills. According to Ringgold, "I use the flag to force attention to the struggle. That's the symbol that makes you know it's

⁵⁴ Ringgold, *We Flew over the Bridge*.

America. So when I say the flag is bleeding. I mean the country is bleeding.”⁵⁵ Although it becomes a subversive sign per se, the re-appropriation of that sign in the name of African-Americans is also a subversive act thus paralleling Rahbar’s work decades later.

Furthermore, because Ringgold is an African-American woman, the sampling of the American flag, the ultimate symbol of American patriotism, is especially subversive since it asserts the rights of citizenship to African-Americans. Ringgold says, “The flag belongs to us. It belongs to every individual who sees America as home. And if you don’t claim it you lose it. When we sit back and allow only people who have on hoods to use it, then it becomes that, it becomes theirs. ... We must continue to use the flag.”⁵⁶ It is in this spirit that we can understand Stokely Carmichael’s cover art of his book, *Black Power*, which places that title atop the image of the American flag.⁵⁷

Ringgold audaciously stitched African-American culture to the American flag. Placing her work in a high art context allowed this transformation. Both her critique of American hegemony and her concern with purging the psychological harms that come from historical oppression place her in dialogue with other thinkers engaged with the postcolonial thought of Fanon. Of course, these debates continue to this day. However, postcolonial feminism has been evolving along with structural inequities in order to address them. This is the scholarship that fills in the gap between Ringgold and Rahbar—between the turbulent 60s and the decades following 9/11.

⁵⁵ Hill, “The Castration of Memphis Cooly,” 29.

⁵⁶ Hill, 29.

⁵⁷ Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967).

The use of the flag to push back against prejudice thus places Rahbar's work in dialogue with Ringgold's earlier work. Although Ringgold's later work retained a critical edge, the domestic connotations of the medium led to a softer reception. Although the textiles may have seemed more personal, they were anything but just that. As Rahbar's less domestic seeming textiles, Ringgold's work always challenges. Although there are some obvious parallels between the two artists, the meaning and historical context of their work are very different. For instance, whereas Ringgold challenges fellow African-Americans working with the status quo, Rahbar challenges the idea of using a piteous love of others to support war. Despite this contrast, they are both engaged in discourse around the native informant. Moreover, both achieve this through abstraction and hidden symbolism.

The workings of racism and xenophobia are perplexing. Just how did any black figuration become potentially racist? How did the Uncle Tom trope become a mechanism to oppress black people? It should be a reminder of the ridiculous ideal progressive abolitionists had of enslaved Americans. A similar flip occurred with discussions of black psychology by putting the onus on black people for their own liberation, in essence blaming the oppressed for their own oppressed state. Why do African-Americans have to fight for their equal rights to citizenry? None of these phenomena stand scrutiny. When we understand the illogic of racism and xenophobia, it becomes easier to understand how Iranian-Americans were demonized before and after 9/11. It also becomes easier to understand how something like human rights could be used to support war and how a human rights activist could be degraded by those across the political spectrum.

PART THREE

Historical Context & Postcolonial Feminism

In the early 1980s, feminists began to develop an ethical system which has come to be called Care Ethics. In response to psychological studies on moral development, Carol Gilligan shed light on the gender bias of traditional ethical systems.⁵⁸ She believed that girls and women navigated ethical situations intuitively utilizing empathy and compassion.⁵⁹ This is opposed to other ethical theories which prioritize reason, and are generally skeptical of intuition. Products of Enlightenment rationalism, most traditional ethical theories sought universal validity.

Soon after this, feminists became interested in the advancement of all women in the name of love and care. This coincided with a new interest in how race was necessary in any analysis of gender. Intersectionality was a product of collective Black Feminist thought that asserted that black women faced overlapping systems of oppression. In this milieu, women's rights as human rights were advanced globally by Western women. However, this cause was not deployed on an equal playing field. "Non-western" feminist voices were rarely taken seriously. Also, universal human rights presuppose a universal validity, but women from around the world did not agree on what these rights should be. For instance, not all women want the practice of female genital cutting eradicated. Paralleling the state of black women in America, third world feminists had to

⁵⁸ Traditional ethical systems would include Virtue Ethics, Utilitarianism, and Deontology (i.e. Kantianism).

⁵⁹ Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

fight on two fronts: they had to challenge patriarchy, but also had to fight accusations that they were selling out their own cultures to the West.⁶⁰

Postcolonial feminism is born out of criticizing Western feminism. While the critiques are diverse, one common feature is the focus on the lack of respect that Western feminists seem to have had of other people, cultures, and religions. In this way, like the Black Power movement, respect is an important feature of postcolonial feminism, and hence shares this important feature with deontological ethics. Striking a balance between love and respect is mandatory in this light. Since empathy, compassion, and love are central to Rahbar's art, I suggest that she takes respect to be key to loving other people properly. It is a respect that allows for a genuine equality between people—a respect that does not contribute to more separation and division. Love, as a progressive value, has been historically problematic because of a lack of respect. Relatedly, the questions of who gets the right to speak for others and how that information is used are key. This is the connection to the native informant, uncle Tom, sell-out, Orientalist, or whatever else that speaker is called.

Native Testimonials

After 9/11, proponents of war appropriated and exploited 'feminist' goals to justify the War on Terror. These people constructed 'radical fundamentalist Islam' as an existential threat that needed to be combatted with democratic ideals and institutions. Appropriating feminism, one strategy was the attempted empowerment of women by spreading universal human rights as women's rights. Further, some proponents of war believed that through women's education and

⁶⁰ Uma Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third World Feminism* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

achievements in economics and politics, women would inevitably adopt feminist agendas. Since many people believe feminism is inherently contradictory to fundamentalism, they also believed women's empowerment would decrease fundamentalism.⁶¹

Promoted by conservatives, but also supported by liberals and progressives, autobiographies of Muslim women and their suffering due to Islamic practice were deployed as a rallying call to war. The most discussed of these works is *Reading Lolita in Tehran* by Azar Nafisi and everything Ayaan Hirsi Ali has ever written.⁶² According to Saba Mahmood,

These autobiographical works are . . . distinct from earlier colonial accounts in which it fell to Europeans to reveal the suffering of indigenous women oppressed by the primitive practices of colonized cultures. Here it is the 'indigenous woman' herself who provides the ethnographic grist for this bloodied imagination, lending a voice of authenticity to the old narrative that a liberal ear, raised on a critique of colonial literature, can more easily hear and digest.⁶³

The attractiveness of these 'native testimonials' lies in their ability to elicit sympathy, while disguising an anti-Islamic agenda. The insider-status of the authors made their work more authentic seeming.

Lila Abu-Lughod discussed the issue further in *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*⁶⁴ Abu-Lughod argues that the mobilization of women's suffering at the hands of Islam obfuscated the

⁶¹ Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

⁶² Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*, First edition. (New York: Random House, 2003).

⁶³ Saba Mahmood, "Feminism, Democracy, and Empire: Islam and the War on Terror," in *Women's Studies on the Edge* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 84.

⁶⁴ Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*

real causes of problems. She claims that focusing on religion prevents the “serious explorations of the roots and nature of human suffering in that part of the world.”⁶⁵ She quotes Laura Bush’s speech supporting the War on Terror in which she claims the newfound freedoms of women in Afghanistan as successes of American intervention. The implication of this attitude is that Muslim women need saving by white men from not only Muslim men, but from Islam itself.

By focusing on the most fantastic stories of abuse of women in the Middle East, Western feminists were able to mobilize around the idea of universal human rights. Although seemingly innocuous in intention, Abu-Lughod claims a chauvinistic attitude helped motivate this mobilization. She says, “I do not think it would be as easy to mobilize so many of these American and European women if it were not a case of Muslim men oppressing Muslim women—women of cover, for whom they can feel sorry and in relation to whom they can feel smugly superior.”⁶⁶ Beyond this problematic attitude are the limits of knowledge and the lack of understanding those limits.

In a more contemporary intellectual atmosphere, especially after critiques of Orientalism thanks largely to Edward Said’s important study, it is much harder to accept an outsider’s perspective on a particular culture, especially when it is critical.⁶⁷ This might be even more true when the criticism is coming from a conservative perspective. An insider’s (or native) perspective seems more trustworthy. Educated folks from the Middle East found themselves with abundant opportunities to share their expertise after 9/11 as linguists, academics, cable news pundits, scholars working for think tanks, etc. The abundance of opportunities is not a problem in

⁶⁵ Abu-Lughod, 31.

⁶⁶ Abu-Lughod, 41.

⁶⁷ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978).

itself, for Dabashi, it becomes a problem when this ‘native informant’ works for the furtherance of global capitalism, and the continued exploitation of formerly colonized peoples.⁶⁸ It is also a problem when people cash in on feminist sympathies to support war.

The ubiquitous image of suffering Muslim women throughout the media helped contribute to the idea that all Muslims are the same.⁶⁹ Namely, there is a Muslim world that lacks meaningful diversity. This false overgeneralization has egregious consequences. Overgeneralizing prevents not only understanding of people’s unique experiences and hardships, but also their causes. Abu-Lughod offers a solution, “Intimate familiarity with individuals anywhere makes it hard to be satisfied with sweeping generalizations about cultures, religions, or regions, or to accept the idea that problems have simple causes or solutions.”⁷⁰ Instead of attempting to save Muslim women, which problematically presupposes saving from Islam and saving to Western values, Abu-Lughod suggests that we forgo military interventions and calls for human rights by learning about other cultures and adopting an egalitarian language. We can also learn from those in other cultures and respect local systems of morality.⁷¹ Additionally, getting to know others on an individual basis prevents these problems because one major cause of these problems is ignorance. And relatedly, the reaction following 9/11 and the desire to save Muslim women was more about fear than love. The common thread between all this is how affect and epistemology are intertwined in regard to others. I argue that this is central to Rahbar’s *I Want to*

⁶⁸ Hamid Dabashi, *Brown Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 2011).

⁶⁹ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” *Feminist Review* 30 (1988): 61–88.

⁷⁰ Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, 17.

⁷¹ Abu-Lughod, 46–47.

Shelter You. To that end, an analysis of how these ideas fit into the Western-dominated art world is in order.

Human Rights Appropriated—Shirin Neshat

Belonging to a previous generation, Shirin Neshat is a great Iranian-American multimedia artist who has firmly established her place in the art world. Although working in diverse media, she is most well-known for her photography and videography. Despite being both Iranian-American women, Rahbar and Neshat's work shares little in common. My goal is not to compare their work itself but to examine how their work has fit or not fit into an art world that prizes its progressive values.

Neshat is an Iranian-born artist who moved to the US in 1975 where she earned her BA and MFA from the University of California Berkeley. After spending a near decade-long hiatus from artmaking, she traveled back to Iran in 1990. She was shocked at the cultural changes that had occurred during her time in the US. This experience provided her with the subject matter that would fuel the rest of her career: images of veiled women perceived to lack both individuality and power. She says,

In Islam a woman's body has been historically a type of battleground for various kinds of rhetoric and political ideology. Much about a culture and its identity can be gleaned from the status and circumstances of its women, such as the roles they play in the society, the rights they enjoy or don't, and the dress codes to which they adhere. Also, a Muslim woman projects more intensely the paradoxical realities that I am trying to identify. Each image is constructed to magnify contradiction. The traditionally feminine traits such as

beauty and innocence on one hand and cruelty, violence, and hatred on the other coexist within the complex structure of Islam itself.⁷²

Her work is an exploration of how women have been affected by the resurgence of Islamic tradition after the Revolution in Iran. This work, however, is not simply a statement of fact, it comes from a human rights perspective and is compatible with a Western-centric progressive ideology.

Neshat's most notable works come from her *Women of Allah* series (1993-97), which is a collection of photographs that feature veiled women with poetry written on their skin. These images destabilize some Western stereotypes of Muslim women and confirm others. According to Scott MacDonald, "[Neshat's] photographs are both intimate and confrontational. They reflect the repressed status of women in Iran and their power, as women and as Muslims."⁷³ One black and white photograph from the series is *Speechless* (figure 13), Neshat captures the face of a young woman covered in Farsi calligraphy. Under the woman's right ear, emerging from the dark of her chador is the barrel of a handgun pointed directly at the viewer. This piece is about women's religious devotion and submission in a patriarchal society. Neshat says, "There is a great deal of self-sacrifice, defiance, sweetness, pensiveness, resignation, flirtation, anger, ennui—simultaneously make for a tapestry of enduring human emotion and fracture the absurd uniformity projected onto Muslim women by the colonial gaze."⁷⁴ Although Neshat challenges the false idea that all Muslim women are the same, her work is capable of being appropriated and used to further Western hegemony.

⁷² Shadi Sheybani, "Women of Allah: A Conversation with Shirin Neshat," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 38, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 204–16.

⁷³ Scott MacDonald, "Between Two Worlds: An Interview with Shirin Neshat," *Feminist Studies* 30, no. 3 (2004): 621, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20458988>.

⁷⁴ Sheybani, "Women of Allah."

By displaying women as victims of Islamic culture, her work could be appropriated to support the notion of Western supremacy and promote war. Although much of Neshat's work was created before the War on Terror, it had become more popular after 9/11—as did the aforementioned tales of Muslim women's suffering. It is unlikely this happened in the art world to promote the lack of human rights in the Middle East to intentionally justify war. Nevertheless, after the appropriation of human rights under the Bush administration to justify the War on Terror—in the name of compassionate conservatism—advocating for global human rights gets much more complicated. This is the predicament for Rahbar. Her work would be more easily digestible by an American audience if she were critical of Iran, especially from a human rights perspective that focused on women. However, as primarily an anti-war activist, speaking of human rights from an Iranian-American perspective has become difficult if not impossible post 9/11.

Rahbar's work is not a critique of other Iranian diasporic artists creating art that promotes human rights. *I Want to Shelter You*, makes a necessary intervention after the Bush administration hijacked human rights as a call to war--something artists like Neshat would not be able to foresee. This is where human rights and Western chauvinism reached a critical mass, and talk of human rights can no longer be taken at face value. Furthermore, Rahbar's art does not critique human rights per se. It challenges those using human rights for ulterior motives.

Blending Theory and Praxis

Rahbar is a self-described emotional and angry person.⁷⁵ She says, “My work is very personal and, because it’s a direct reflection of my life and because I’m a very emotional person, it all comes out in my work. The work moves with my emotions, up and down like a roller coaster.”⁷⁶ Not only does her work reflect this aspect of her personality, creating is the one and only thing she believes keeps her sane.⁷⁷ Her creative process is one of healing, an act of Aristotelian catharsis purging away negative emotions— ἔλεος and φόβος.⁷⁸ Rahbar speaks of her work, “I am confessing my deepest and darkest secrets, thoughts, memories; and specifically through ‘Confessions’, I am saying things that I cannot say out loud. It’s all pouring out without any constraints or restrictions. It’s my own private catharsis.”⁷⁹ It is thus highly personal, but it is not only that. Part of her pain comes from being sensitive to her surroundings and being attuned to the suffering of others.⁸⁰ She attempts to transform this pain into art—into something beautiful.⁸¹ She is showing the ugliness of the world, but she is doing so with the remote hope that things will get better.

Although Rahbar is a brilliant person, her creative practice is not intellectual. She says, “My process is very instinctual. I collect objects and materials and piece them together in a way that makes sense to me, and I don’t always know why I make certain pieces. I just go with my gut and I don’t question my instincts.”⁸² Being sensitive to her environment is difficult for her,

⁷⁵ Berlin Art Link, *Studio Visit with Sara Rahbar*.

⁷⁶ Ng, “Interview with Sara Rahbar,” 68.

⁷⁷ Berlin Art Link, *Studio Visit with Sara Rahbar*.

⁷⁸ Aristotle, *Aristotle Poetics* (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2012); “Confessions and Catharsis: An Interview with Sara Rahbar,” n.d., 9.

⁷⁹ Sara Rahbar, *Restless Violence* (Dubai: Carbon 12, 2012), 8.

⁸⁰ Dallas Contemporary, *Chit Chat with Artist Sara Rahbar*.

⁸¹ Dallas Contemporary; Julia, “An Interview with Artist Sara Rahbar.”

⁸² “Confessions and Catharsis: An Interview with Sara Rahbar.”

but she redirects this into her art. Rahbar is always feeling surrounded by war, violence, and extreme nationalism, which she describes as “everything ugly in humanity.”⁸³ She says, “Coming from that background, I’m not intentionally thinking . . . I want to talk about nationalism [or] I want to talk about war, it’s ingrained in my fiber. I don’t even think about it like when I go somewhere and I see an army helmet, I’m just drawn to it.”⁸⁴ Her art is about excavating emotions and releasing them.

Although purging emotion and alleviating her subconscious are central to her process, it is not her intention for her audience to also experience catharsis; the intended catharsis is her own. Also, her work is not made to be sold to xenophobes; she creates her work for institutions and specific collectors.⁸⁵ In this way, her art is more about the irrational fear tied up to excess nationalism than its solution, i.e., catharsis. Although she is not attempting to purge the fear in viewers, I argue that her work proffers love as the solution to global conflict. Since love has also been a source of conflict in the first place, I will need to pinpoint what kind of love could achieve this to make sense of Rahbar’s positive message about love. To this end, I will further examine some feminist theorizing pertinent to the history at hand to find a “pure love” that avoids the deontological problems that has plagued love in the past.

⁸³ Dallas Contemporary, *Chit Chat with Artist Sara Rahbar*.

⁸⁴ Dallas Contemporary.

⁸⁵ Sara Rahbar, video conference with author, September 29, 2020.

Nationalism, Islamophobia, and Love

In *The New Religious Intolerance* (2012), Martha Nussbaum discusses Islamophobia and lays out a simple theoretical model of how it is based on fear.⁸⁶ For Nussbaum, fear is an emotion that we need to survive, but it also has downsides. She says,

The removal of fear would produce social disaster: obtuseness about real dangers to life and limb, failures to protect both self and other. But at the same time, fear can produce unreliable and unpredictable conduct, and it can be exploited by politicians eager to whip up aggression against unpopular groups.⁸⁷

Nussbaum claims that fear usually starts from an actual problem, but that source is frequently displaced onto an easier target. Additionally, fear amplifies when the new target is mysterious in some way. In other words, ignorance perpetuates fear.

Nussbaum envisages fear to be a primitive emotion that we share with other animals, including animals lacking the ability to think of cause and effect. Our emotions evolved to prepare us for natural threats like lions, tigers, and bears, but humans today face complex and abstract threats: economic, social, political, etc. Also, the perceived threat and the actual threat are not always the same, namely, intentionality and reality are not coextensive. She says, “As society gets more complex, occasions for potential dissonance between appearance and reality multiply.”⁸⁸ In this way, we can displace fear not only onto people we are unfamiliar with, but onto people who are not actual threats.

⁸⁶ Martha C. Nussbaum, *The New Religious Intolerance: Overcoming the Politics of Fear in an Anxious Age* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012).

⁸⁷ Nussbaum, 20.

⁸⁸ Nussbaum, 27.

Fear also causes the experiencer to focus narrowly on oneself and one's immediate concerns, for example: the people whom one loves. Nussbaum says, "Fear is a form of heightened attentiveness—but of a self-focused, indeed solipsistic kind. It reduces to a kind of vivid awareness of one's body, and perhaps, at best, of a narrow circle of people and things closely connected to the body."⁸⁹ This narrow self-focus can cause a host of epistemological and ethical concerns. Not only does ignorance perpetuate fear, fear thus perpetuates ignorance. Here we have a negative feedback loop.

Not only does fear shut down our ability to feel love and compassion for the people not in our immediate community, it is also a cause of hatred. Nussbaum says, "Fear is a 'dimming preoccupation': an intense focus on the self that casts others into darkness. However valuable and indeed essential it is in a genuinely dangerous world, it is itself one of life's great dangers."⁹⁰ Even for those who do not take their fear and ignorance to that extreme, fear prevents a genuine curiosity about other people.

The negative feedback loop can indeed be a source of problems, but perhaps it is neither inevitable nor inescapable. Feminist epistemologist, Alison Jaggar, works on the role of affect as a positive force in the acquisition of knowledge.⁹¹ She argues that emotions are epistemologically indispensable. She says, "The hegemony that our society exercises over people's emotional constitution is not total."⁹² People can have unsanctioned emotional responses, which allow people to call attention to the problems of the status quo. Moreover,

⁸⁹ Nussbaum, 28–29.

⁹⁰ Nussbaum, 58.

⁹¹ Alison Jaggar, "Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology," *Inquiry* 32, no. 2 (1989): 169.

⁹² Jaggar, 166.

subordinated groups thus have privileged epistemic access to injustice. They are more likely to feel unsanctioned emotions, so they are more likely to understand the injustices of the world.

Jaggar also claims that emotions and values are essentially linked—each presuppose the other. Given this, coupled with the fact that emotions can be recalibrated, loving those outside of one's own community is another way to break away from the negative feedback loop. Valuing others will lead to emotions that express concern for others. Therefore, one can focus on others even in fear responses. By thinking of others, one is in a good position to learn about them. Thus, one who loves others broadens their own epistemic access. Loving expansively in this way can break the cycle of fear and ignorance.

Disingenuous Love

Similar to the appeal to feminist sympathies previously discussed, even colonialism was partly 'justified' on the basis of love. According to Dawn Rae Davis,

The civilizing, Christianizing mission of colonization, drawing on the ethical-epistemological schemes of the Enlightenment, asserted a benevolent function, and Christian ideologies of love formed a supportive partnership with knowledge procedures imposed upon the colonized. Administrative practices, cartography, road-building, extraction of natural resources, agriculture, anthropology, botany, and geology—along with systems of education, language, cultural assimilation, and religious conversion—represents epistemological projects' demands by colonialism. Within these projects, love is the basis for a benevolent rhetoric of the West dutifully marching alongside the

imperialist project and justifying its systems of information gathering and domination—the ideological foundation for moral and economic salvation.⁹³

Hence, there is an eschatological love (saving the colonized from going to hell), the saving from barbarity (the civilizing), and even the salvation stemming from Kantian ethics (being a proper moral agent and therefore free). The horrors of colonialism ridicule this line of thought.

A further problem with love according to Fanon is that lovelessness is where the possibility for change and revolution resides.⁹⁴ Additionally, a normative ethics demanding that oppressed people love their oppressor is bizarre—a *reductio ad absurdum* by itself. Davis proposes a normative epistemology of humility and love. In this way, we are meant to build a knowledge base patiently. Thus, we ought to be slow and apprehensive to generalize about groups of people. We should think of them with diverse different identities, and also with idiosyncrasies that might fail to be expressible in propositional form.⁹⁵ This solution emphasizes the role of respect in love. It prescribes that we treat others with the deference demanded of those in an equitable relationship.

Pure Love

Barriers of Separation and Distance (figure 14) is one of Rahbar's more prototypical flags done early in her career. Various Persian textiles cover the stripes of the flag, while leaving the fifty

⁹³ Dawn Rae Davis, "(Love Is) The Ability of Not Knowing: Feminist Experience of the Impossible in Ethical Singularity," *Hypatia* 17, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 147.

⁹⁴ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*.

⁹⁵ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006); Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006).

stars exposed. Among the references to Persian culture are flagellation whips, suzanis, horse-riding equipment, and calligraphy. Other than the obvious hybridity of this piece, its title intimates its broader meaning. Reflecting again her intuitive process, she believes laying bare one's emotions is the way to break down human division. She says, "I think that when we are honest, nakedly honest, and sharing our basic human emotions and feelings; ideas and emotions become borderless... When we share and are honest and vulnerable, when we are just being human, there is a borderless relatedness."⁹⁶

For Rahbar, the division between the personal and political dissolves even when it comes to love. As expressed, from the justifications of colonialism to the problematic global practices of Western feminism, love has had a troubled history. The twenty-first century appropriation of love, via human rights, casts a gloomy shadow over the prospect of love as a feasible approach in a diverse and interconnected world. During an interview I conducted in the Fall of 2020, Rahbar expressed her skepticism even of romantic love due to its inherent exclusivity.⁹⁷ However, just because love has failed as a strategy in the past does not necessarily mean that it is the wrong approach. The common point of failure is that it has yet to be carried out on an equal playing field. Love coupled with an egalitarian respect has the potential to break down the barriers of separation and distance between people.

One could also read the bullets shaping the heart in *I Want to Shelter You* to mean an excessive love of one's own country at the expense of others. Inasmuch as the tulip refers to martyrs, this could also be a criticism for sacrificing for an excess love of one's own group. This sense of love is just another barrier of separation and distance—a narrow sort of love that creates

⁹⁶ Rahbar, *Restless Violence*, 10.

⁹⁷ Sara Rahbar, video conference with author, September 29, 2020.

fear and ignorance. While the tulip in *I Want to Shelter You* and the n-word in Ringgold's *Flag for the Moon* refer very differently, they bear certain similarities. Both are messages for the non-dominant groups. The disguised signs, at least symbolically, is only for those in the non-dominant culture to read, which prevents it from being used by the dominant culture. However, whereas Ringgold's message is for Black people to not act as native informants, Rahbar's message shows that the excess love of one's own group is not unique to America. Because the tulip is likely illegible to a Western audience, the message cannot be appropriated.

With the stark incongruity in its heart and bullets, *I Want to Shelter You* reminds us that war is not about love—at least not a genuine and expansive love. Given the historical context, and how love was mobilized to support the War on Terror, this piece is also a statement about illicitly speaking for others and using the voices of others to further one's own interest. The conflict between the US and Iran has not subsided since 9/11 and the ensuing wars. While writing this thesis, the US assassinated the Iranian general, Qasem Soleimani, in January of 2020. While waiting for Iranian blowback, I noticed an influx of Iranian-American artists' human-rights-focused works were shared on social media. Although it is good to see quality art, the timing was utterly backwards. If the art world also prizes the progressive value of world peace, perhaps they should think about the ramifications of what and when they are sharing.

Rahbar's art does not flatter. It does not provide progressives a source of pride at the expense of conservatives. It challenges everyone to be better human beings and to love and respect expansively. From the overly patriotic to those harboring irrational fears, Rahbar's art would provide a cathartic opportunity if viewed with an open mind. However, it also challenges the progressive-minded to live up to their own values. It is not enough to provide space for

diverse voices, those voices must be heard as purely as possible. This is especially true for artists such as Rahbar, whose art is inseparable from the highest-of-stakes politics.

Figures



Figure 1. Sara Rahbar, Flag #1, 2006. Mixed media.



Figure 2. Sara Rahbar, *Land of the Free* (Flag #55), 2017. Mixed media, 64 x 40 in.



Figure 3. Detail from *Land of the Free* (Flag #55).

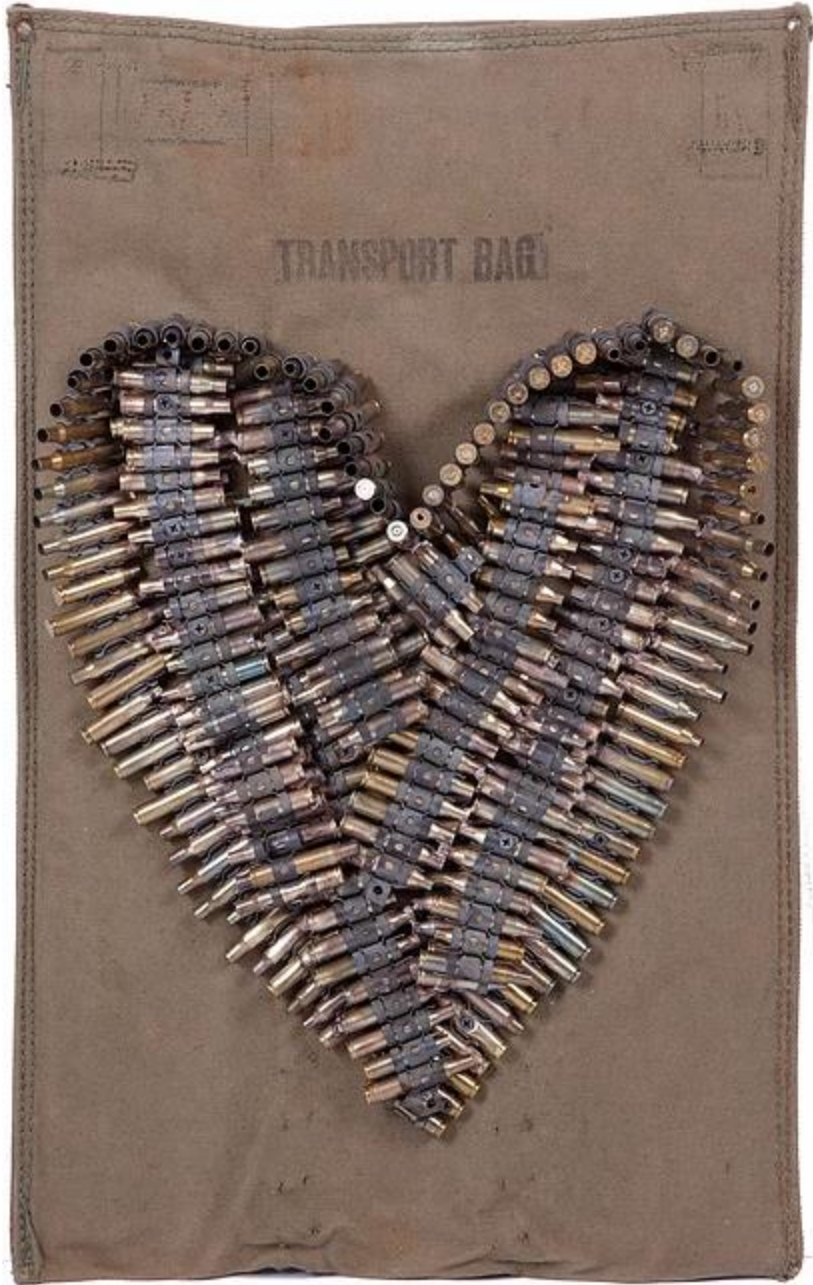


Figure 4. Sara Rahbar, *I Want to Shelter You*, 2013. Mixed media, 29 x 18 in. Private Collection.

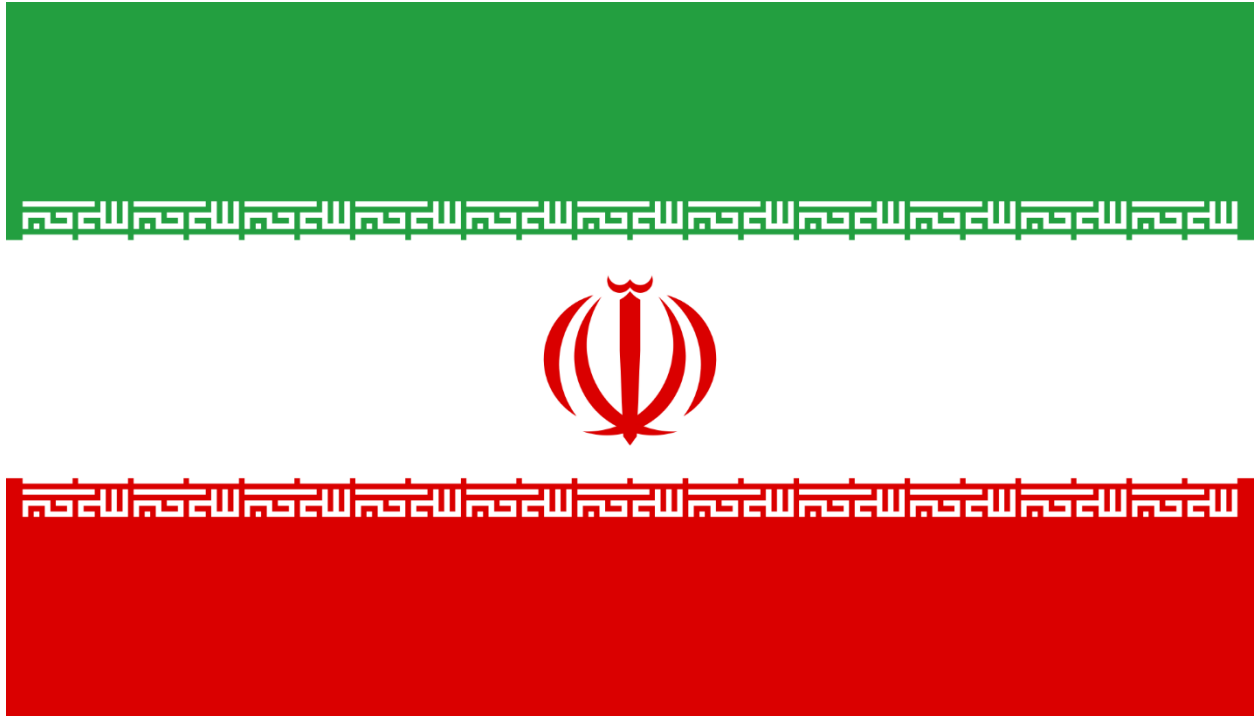


Figure 5. The national flag of the Islamic Republic of Iran.



Figure 6. Sara Rahbar, *You Burned My House Down Then Offered Me Shelter from the Rain*, 2009. Mixed media installation.



Figure 7. Sara Rahbar, #8, from *Love Arrived and How Red*, 2008. Photograph, 60 x 40 in.

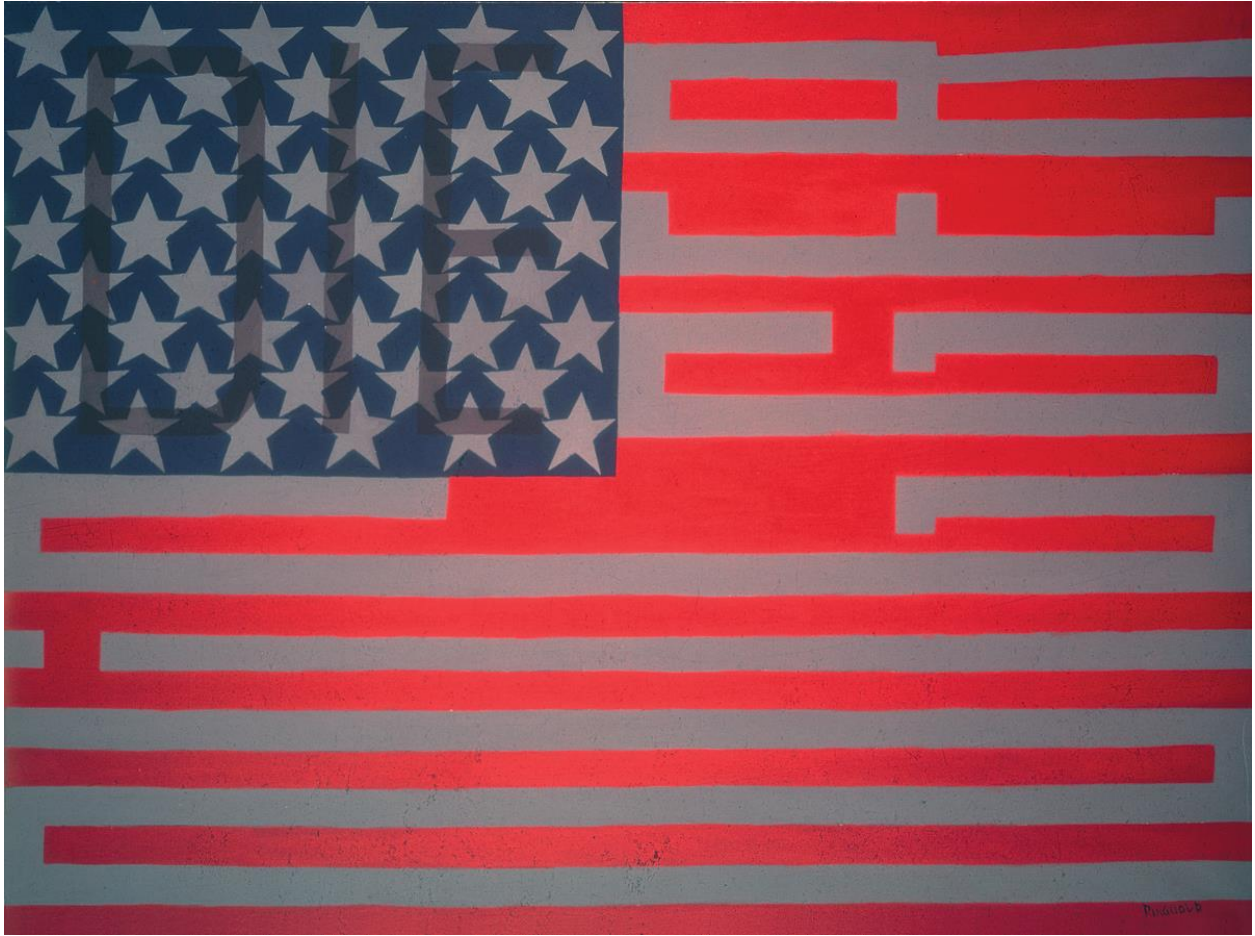


Figure 8. Faith Ringgold, *Flag for the Moon: Die Nigger*, 1969. Oil on canvas, 36 x 50 in. Artist's collection.



Figure 9. Faith Ringgold, *The Flag is Bleeding*, 1967. Oil on canvas, 72 x 96 in.



Figure 10. Jasper Johns, *Flag*, 1954-5, Encaustic on canvas. 42 ¼ x 60 5/8 in. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

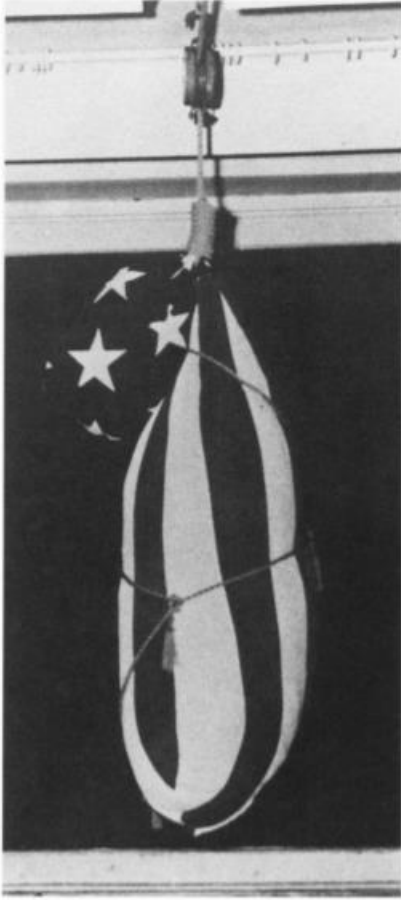


Figure 11. Marc Morrel, *The United States Flag in a Yellow Noose*, 1966. Multi-media. Present whereabouts unknown.



Figure 12. Faith Ringgold, *Die*, 1967. Oil on canvas, 72 x 144 in. Museum of Modern Art.

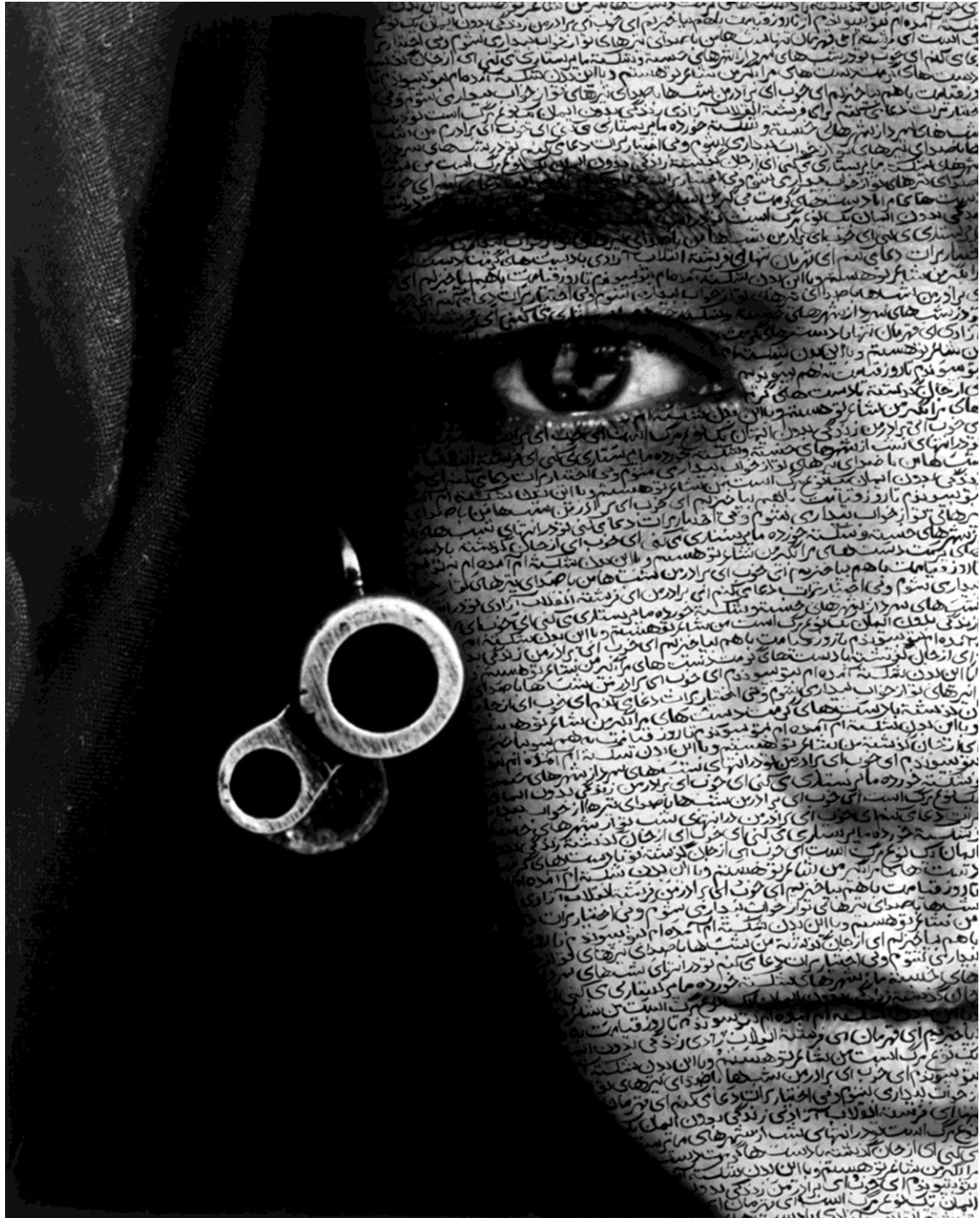


Figure 13. Shirin Neshat, *Speechless*, from the series *Women of Allah*, 1996.



Figure 14. Sara Rahbar, *Barriers of Separation and Distance*, 2008. Mixed media, 79 x 47 in.

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