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MAKING HOME IN OKLAHOMA: AFGHAN MATERIAL CULTURE AND THE
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Para Zach, Sam, Ben y la chiquita en camino.

Abstract

This work explores how the Afghan community in Oklahoma City creates home and belonging after displacement. Drawing on Sandra Dudley's (2010) work on how displaced communities seek to make spaces "feel right" through sensory and aesthetic practices, I examine how Afghan families materially and sensorially reconstitute home after the sudden rupture of the 2021 Kabul airlift. Through ethnographic examination of domestic spaces, clothing practices, foodways, and digital materiality, I show how the sensory dimensions of material culture, the textures of carpets, the sounds and smells of pressure cookers, the visual aesthetics of dress, and the sonic world of TikTok videos become the primary terrain through which displaced communities negotiate belonging on their own terms. Every day, sensory and material practices reveal creative agency where families exercise control over how home should look, smell, sound, and feel. This research contributes to broader anthropological conversations on displacement and material culture by attending to a community whose experience of sudden, total rupture, followed by rapid resettlement, differs from gradual migration or protracted displacement in camps, revealing how the specific temporality of displacement shapes the sensory and material negotiations through which home is remade.

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Introduction



**Figure 1: Sgt. Samuel Ruiz, U.S. Marine Corps, Afghanistan Evacuation, August 21, 2021.
Defense Visual Information Distribution Service.**

The displacement of thousands of Afghan families began with the Kabul airlift in August 2021. Families left the places they called home to load into American military planes. This often took place in a hurry, quietly navigating of Kabuli streets to make it to the correct airport gate. Families left behind steep, stony mountains peppered with greenery, villages connected by dirt roads, and valleys whose names will be kept in Afghanistan like secrets vaulted in a chest, physically left behind, but sparking memories full of longing and nostalgia. Articles, documentaries, and social media posts documenting the Kabul airlift shed light on the violence that permeated those days; entire families standing outside the airport gates for days without food

or water, babies being passed into the arms of marines over barbed wire, a suicide bomb exploding as Taliban soldiers surrounded the perimeter, choking the life out of the American presence in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, military planes flew out of Kabul, landing in places like Qatar or Germany, sometimes Italy or Albania —routes that emanated from Afghan airspace, carrying people out the way breath leaves a body.

Landing in America, families were deposited in ad hoc military reception camps where the bureaucratic apparatus of U.S. refugee resettlement decided the future homes of thousands of people. Families were informed of their future resettlement cities, and soon after, they boarded a flight to be met at their destination by a representative from the local resettlement agency. For families arriving in Oklahoma City, reception at the airport was followed by a stay in a hotel until more permanent housing was found. Instead of looming mountains and the smell of *boulani* (thin fried pastry with savory fillings), families found themselves surrounded by the perfectly paved streets around the hotel. Families had no kitchens, no gardens to tend—just thoughts about home, and the people left behind, *qaum* (solidarity/kinship group). The drabness of standard hotel comforters and the rough green carpet of a double-queen bed hotel room served as material reminders that the soft, thick carpets from home were in the past.

The agency assigned each family a caseworker who assisted with setting the family up in housing, usually an apartment that was furnished by resettlement agency volunteers based on federal requirements. This bureaucracy decided what home should look like, how home should feel. Couches and chairs lined the walls. Most apartments chosen for families were open concept, with no division between common spaces like kitchen and the living room. The hardness of vinyl wood floors was another reminder that the warmth of home was thousands of miles away. The sensory disjunction between what home should feel like, look like, and smell like for Afghans,

and how home was set up by volunteers, prompted families to engage in a process of creative transformation. They bought carpets, dismantled furniture, hung up Afghan flags, and refitted kitchens with different utensils. Everyone in the Afghan community began to infuse their homes with specific cultural aesthetics. Afghan pressure cookers began to populate kitchens all over the Oklahoma City community. The cooker's size and curvy shape strike an imposing figure compared with the other pots and pans more familiar to American kitchens. Cupboards were stocked with rice, oil, and spices. As women began cooking daily meals, the smells of Afghan food traveled through the air in apartment complexes, out the windows, and into the alleys where the aromas of other Afghan kitchens also defied the boundaries of their apartment's four walls and congregated together, making a feast, a cloud, a sensory banquet that enveloped this new place.

After some time, families began buying cars and taking trips to Afghan stores in Dallas, where they could find tea thermoses, nut serving dishes, and culturally appropriate dresses: *watan* (homeland) pieced together with fragments. The home they curated, then, was a place suffused with an aesthetic of Afghanness, palpable in the material and the sensory, soaking the senses so they remember, feel at home, and belong. But this was not the end. Making home is a process always in flux, never static. Through the four years I have known the families in this project, I have noticed changes, new rugs, and new objects—an undercurrent of constant tensions and negotiation of what home means for Afghans here in the United States. After the rupture from *watan*, the process of (re)constituting home has involved making home between two worlds. How much of each world permeates a home is a daily negotiation.

These negotiations, tensions, and creative cultural expressions are at the heart of my project, which explores how Afghan families in Oklahoma City (re)constitute home and

belonging after displacement. An ethnographic account of this process reveals what James Clifford describes for diasporic communities as a “lived tension,” where culture becomes a site that mediates the experiences of separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering/desiring another place (311). I ask how material and visual culture become the medium through which Afghan families negotiate the tension present in everyday life. By analyzing quotidian dress, objects, spaces, and digital realms, I examine how families, by asserting their own cultural aesthetics, are also affirming Afghanness and the tension between discomfort in America and longing for Afghanistan. How are daily acts of agency, resilience, and creativity rooted in longing for kinship, qaum, and nation, watan, and how can we account ethnographically for the ways these moments and actions shape what home and belonging look like in Oklahoma?

These questions foreground what the resettlement experience in the United States looks like in a political order that explicitly invokes notions of “appropriate assimilation” for refugees without defining what that means or how it is to be measured, thereby situating culture as fixed, either compatible or incompatible with American culture. These political discourses have direct, tangible consequences for refugee and immigrant communities across the country and obscure the everyday lives of communities who are grappling with the effects of displacement, migration, and resettlement. This research pushes against politically motivated narratives of assimilation and instead demonstrates how the Afghan community asserts belonging on its own terms—through objects, spaces, and traditions that create connection, autonomy, and comfort.

Afghanistan: Historical Background

It is difficult to synthesize the history of a country whose political and ethnic dynamics have been so deeply shaped by the ebbs and flows of power imposed both from inside and

outside the country. Afghanistan's history is complex and marred by wars that have shaped the ethnic and religious makeup of its people. The involvement of the British Empire in the late 1700s and early 1800s marked a turning point for the country. Not only did British forces engage in efforts to expand and assert their colonial presence through three Anglo-Afghan wars in the 1800s, but British colonial authorities also installed various local Pashtun tribal rulers in an effort to control the country's internal and external affairs, as Afghanistan's territory was seen as an extension of neighboring colonial regions (Noelle 1997, 15). In an effort to block Russian access to the northern regions of what would become Afghanistan, Britain demarcated Afghanistan's permanent borders in the 1890s. These new borders disregarded Indigenous tribal and ethnic boundaries: specifically, the drawing of the Durand line, which essentially divided Afghanistan and Pakistan as modern nation-states, and also split what Pashtuns saw as their traditional tribal land (Omrani 2009, 184). This history indelibly shapes how Afghans, including the community in Oklahoma, understand watan as a contested space, where the outsider was situated as a threatening figure.

Despite Afghanistan declaring independence from British rule in 1919, internal conflict and further foreign involvement in the country continued. In 1979, a Soviet invasion propelled a civil war where international players poured funds into different factions, and widespread violence led to a mass exodus of displaced persons into neighboring countries, devastating local communities both in rural and urban parts of Afghanistan. After the end of the nine-year-long Soviet invasion in 1989, internal conflict continued to ravage much of the country. Out of this milieu of warlords, who were externally funded armed actors participating in the civil war, the Taliban emerged as the new rulers of Afghanistan, controlling ninety percent of the country by 1998 (Lee 2010, 28).

In 2001, as the Taliban ruled Afghanistan with its forceful implementation of Islamic law, Al Qaeda launched the attacks of September 11th on American soil, while its leader enjoyed respite in Afghanistan. These events led to the invasion of Afghanistan by the United States, with American occupation lasting nearly twenty years and ending on August 30th, 2021. As American forces withdrew, the Taliban, who had negotiated with President Donald Trump, quickly recaptured all of Afghanistan, marking the beginning of an Afghanistan ruled again by the Taliban and its theocratic form of government. In August 2021, the United States airlifted over one hundred thousand people from Kabul to be resettled in the United States. The scenes at the Kabul airport during the airlift, like the photograph that opened this chapter, bore witness to a people and a country devastated yet again by displacement and the abrupt and chaotic end to American colonial presence in Afghanistan. The totality of loss for the Afghan families airlifted out was unprecedented, despite decades of war and displacement.

The interlocutors for this project arrived in the United States aboard U.S. military planes that lined the tarmac during the Kabul airlift. The men in these families worked for the United States as part of the CIA zero units and Khost Protection Force and, therefore, were prioritized to get their families onto the planes in Kabul during the U.S. withdrawal in August 2021. As they hastily loaded into the planes, families perhaps carried a change of clothes or a backpack with a few belongings. For the most part, they had to leave everything they owned behind. Coming from different regions of Afghanistan, my interlocutors included both Persian and Pashto speakers who were resettled in Oklahoma City after their arrival in the United States. Unlike the traditional resettlement process that takes place through a cooperation between the United States government and international organizations, the Kabul airlift helped families rapidly escape what they thought were going to be heavy reprisals by Taliban forces. The suddenness and desperation

of this displacement wrought a stark rupture from family and home. Decades of displacement have created multiple Afghan diasporas globally, but 2021 was different. Earlier, refugees had time to plan, to bring things, to settle in established communities. The 2021 airlift families had none of that.

Positionality and Methods

My position in the community and with interlocutors was shaped by a series of factors that uniquely positioned me to conduct this research. When Afghans began arriving in Oklahoma in 2021, I knew my Persian language skills would be useful, and I contacted a local non-profit to volunteer and assist with whatever was needed at the time. I learned Persian during my time in the military as a linguist for the U.S. Army. I never deployed to Afghanistan and did not work in anything related to Afghanistan. My experience with Afghanistan was limited to a four-month course on the Persian dialect spoken in Afghanistan and a year-long research project I did on Afghanistan when I was in tenth grade. In the fall of 2021, these two things, military service and language skills, shaped my access to the community in unique ways. Speaking Persian allowed me to connect with the community by understanding their needs without a translator. This made families feel safe and seen. Once people knew I had been a soldier, another layer of trust and credibility began to take shape, especially with the men who had worked with the U.S. military, some for over a decade. I was seen as trustworthy and competent because of shared military experience.

Volunteering in the fall of 2021 eventually turned into a full-time position with a local non-profit. My job was to support the community in whatever they needed. I drove folks to the halal mart from the hotel where the community was staying while they awaited permanent housing. I served as an unofficial translator sometimes for caseworkers, sometimes for hotel

workers. Eventually, my work turned towards women's health. Access to obstetric care was difficult to obtain, but through a connection I made at a local clinic, I began to take pregnant women to their prenatal appointments, taking care of scheduling, often interpreting, and following them through birth and post-partum. I became a women's health advocate. In this role, my language skills became key as I could be a cultural and linguistic bridge between the doctors and their Afghan patients. This experience cemented my reputation with the women as a trustworthy person who would help without ulterior motives or judgment. After one year of going to births, spending hundreds of hours in hospitals, homes, and supporting the community in whatever needs there were in the moment, I had to step away. Although I was no longer referred to as *khareji*, or foreigner, the community began to situate me in a position of power that made me uncomfortable. I was being asked to make medical decisions, to navigate situations where I felt the autonomy of community members was not being centered, and honestly, I was tired. Being a mom to two young boys and helping the community took a personal toll.

I kept in touch with community members, even some who became interlocutors for this project. Over the next two years, I visited as a friend, shared meals, and helped with the occasional ride to the doctor or the pharmacy. Sometimes I'd get a call to do a quick translation, but overall, my involvement in the community changed. When I started a master's program in Anthropology, I knew I wanted to work with the community and conduct ethnographic fieldwork to shed light on their experience living in Oklahoma. Given my background, I knew my access was partly already negotiated in the community, but it would need to be recontextualized within my research.

I was hesitant to ask my friends to participate in this project as interlocutors because of my understanding of how trust and belonging worked in this community. I did not want them to

feel as though they had to participate, and I approached community members who had understood that I no longer had access to the resources I did when I worked for a local non-profit. I hoped this would help me in framing my presence not only as a friend, but also as a researcher.

Asking for consent was a strange yet positive experience as a novice ethnographer. Interlocutors were surprised to hear me ask for something and, equally, that I offered compensation. I had to explain the project multiple times and assure interlocutors that I wanted to focus on material culture, not on what they felt were sensationalized issues covered by the media regarding cultural topics in Afghanistan. I often had to reiterate that I was not a psychologist and that my goal was to talk about dresses, furniture, and their experiences here in America. Five women in their mid to late 30s agreed to participate, with some diving into stories and showing me objects once I had finished explaining my project and reading the oral consent script.

Once I began to visit interlocutors, a new reality came to the fore, and I had to navigate my presence as someone who wanted to ask questions about material culture, not just spend time together. I had to reevaluate my knowledge of what Charles Briggs (1984) calls “native metacommunicative repertoires” (40) —the culturally specific norms by which a community organizes talk about itself, including what can be asked directly, or how different topics are approached. I had to reformulate how I would approach my interactions with interlocutors as a researcher. Asking direct questions was not working well. I thought about an instance from a year before, when I was visiting a family for Eid. A group of women was complaining about a girl’s rudeness. I asked the women why this girl was so rude, and they explained to me that she asked too many questions and that asking too many questions was impolite in their culture.

Reflecting on this moment from previous years helped me realize that perhaps my questions were threatening and casting suspicion on interlocutors. Thinking about Briggs's work on how setting and indexicality shape interactions between interlocutors and the fieldworker, I decided to, put simply, go with the flow. Over the course of several months in 2025, I spent many hours with interlocutors in their homes, drinking tea and chatting. Allowing for topics to come up organically through a comfortable and intimate setting, like having tea, permitted me to set aside my own "metacommunicative strategies" and fully embrace those of my interlocutors.

Every woman I worked with is a unique person, and therefore, all interactions were unique in their own way. But leaning into each individual's rhythm of conversation proved to work much better than relying on my own communicative repertoire. For example, Mozhgan loved talking about her things, offered to cook together, and would set her thermos on the table with some dishes for me to take pictures. Conversely, Baran would panic if I asked questions about specific objects, often changing her answer multiple times. Both interactions required me to decenter myself and choose presence over questioning.

For three and a half months, I visited women in their homes, usually for lunch and tea. I engaged in participant observation and informal conversation. I also conducted semi-formal conversational interviews with two Afghan men. These lasted about one hour and took place in their homes. I did not record or transcribe their interviews as I felt it was important for them to feel comfortable, and I wanted to respect their wishes. Two women allowed me to accompany them as they engaged in skilled activities of making material culture. With Mozhgan, we made a type of fried Afghan cookie together, and Nazo let me observe as she sewed two types of dresses. I received three grants that provided funds to take interlocutors shopping for fabric and to compensate interlocutors for their time.

During these visits, interlocutors and I would have tea and engage in conversations. I was able to take photographs of everyday objects in interlocutors' homes, making sure to avoid faces, especially those of women who did not feel comfortable being in pictures. I paid specific attention to the sensory qualities of the home, food, clothing, and digital images on TikTok and WhatsApp. Following Sophie Woodward's (2020) suggestion to use ethnography to "attune yourself to the role that senses play in people's lives," I allowed myself to look, listen, smell, and touch objects such as fabric or foods such as bread to be a part of the practices I was observing. This allowed for a space where I oriented myself to being "open to the unexpected" (Woodward 2020, 122) by letting my observations become mediums contextualize the materiality of home and belonging and what that looked like for each person. Essentially, I put into practice what Sarah Pink (2015) conceptualizes as *emplacement* or *entanglement* in a specific ethnographic place. This *emplacement* attends to "the sensoriality and materiality of people's ways of being in the world" (47).

To understand the perspective of volunteers and resettlement staff who were influential in the early days of "(re)making home," I interviewed nine upper-middle-class, college-educated American individuals who became involved with the community after they arrived in 2021 and in the lives of the Afghan families they volunteered to help, and one resettlement agency caseworker. Our semi-formal conversational interviews lasted about two hours. My connections with volunteers stem from the time that I was working in the community as a women's health advocate in 2021. Oftentimes, I would need to connect with volunteers about families for a myriad of reasons, and so these connections were established years before. When I reached out in the summer of 2025 to recruit volunteers for interviews, most were enthusiastic and willing to share their experiences of working with Afghan families. Although they were happy to

contribute to my academic work, they were also eager to connect, reminisce, share observations, and discuss something that continues to deeply touch their lives.

Pseudonyms and Interlocutors

As part of the IRB confidentiality stipulations for this research, I developed pseudonyms for all interlocutors who participated in this project. One important part of ensuring confidentiality was making sure that individuals' participation remained secret within the community. I have taken measures to ensure that nothing in this thesis can point to anything that might make their identity knowable by other members of the community. I've done this by redacting, for example, references to cities of origin. I have also used pseudonyms for the volunteers and for the one case worker I was able to include.

For the five Afghan women who are the interlocutors I spent time with, I created pseudonyms in their native language because for them, keeping shyness around their names is important. They are: Baran, Bibi Marwa, Bibi Naghma, Mozghan, and Nazo. I gave the pseudonym Jan Gul to one of the Afghan men whom I interviewed. I refer to Bibi Naghma's husband as Sheer Khan briefly as well. These names index years of relationships. They are interlocutors whose lives I have been part of, and who have allowed me into theirs. I do not refer to each interlocutor's region of origin throughout this ethnography for confidentiality purposes. Given the historical context of ethnic tensions between the different ethnicities present in Afghanistan, I decided not to focus on this out of respect for interlocutors' privacy and the precarity of their situation after displacement and resettlement.

Diaspora and Material Culture

This project sits at the intersections of three bodies of literature: diaspora studies and material culture, home and belonging, and Afghan studies. While diaspora scholars have

productively theorized identity through discourse and cultural production, and material culture scholars have illuminated how objects and spaces constitute social worlds, less attention has been paid to how suddenly displaced communities, those who experienced total rupture rather than gradual migration, negotiate belonging through everyday material practices in the context of rapid resettlement. This project contributes to and extends these conversations by attending to the Afghan community in Oklahoma City through the lens of material culture, foregrounding the sensory, tactile, and aesthetic dimensions of making home after abrupt displacement. I begin with diaspora studies and material culture, where anthropological conversations around diaspora identity information, displacement, and material culture provide a theoretical foundation for this project.

Anthropological conversations around diaspora involve movement between the transnational, the global, the local, and the diasporic. These conversations explore how this movement impacts identity formation and representations of the self within temporalities of displacement that so deeply affect the diasporic experience (Daswani 2013). James Clifford (1994) asks in his essay *Diasporas*, “how do diaspora discourses represent experiences of displacement, and of constructing homes away from home?” (302). Clifford argues that reductionist lenses that situate the study of diaspora experiences solely within paradigms such as “the epiphenomena of the nation-state and global capitalism” run the risk of obscuring nascent insights around “emergent postcolonialisms,” transnational identity formations, and collective experiences of communities around the world (302). In his treatise on cultural identity and diaspora, Stuart Hall (1990) critically presents the notion that cultural identity “is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’” (259). Hall describes diasporic cultural identity as a multi-layered concept where power, the colonial experience, and the Other, as seen through the

Western gaze, create a dynamic paradigm of diasporic identity that is not fixed, yet is contextualized within history and culture. For Hall, cultural identity in diaspora is produced rather than fixed, generating new subjectivities (269).

Discourses like Clifford's and Hall's situate diasporic identity within large-scale aspects of cultural identity production and correctly seek to free the exploration of the diasporic experience from bounded discourses of identity. Drawing on critical perspectives such as Clifford's, Girish Daswani (2013) then situates diasporic discourses of identity outside of the "trans" versus "nation" dichotomy, instead arguing that diasporic identity is about past and future imaginings, the creation of home across several sites of interaction, and how diaspora communities are represented (37). For Daswani, the emergent and dynamic nature of the diasporic conversation allows for a multiplicity of perspectives that broaden anthropological viewpoints on the diasporic experience. Yet while diaspora scholars have productively theorized identity through discourse and cultural production (Camino & Krufeld 2005; Moghissi 2006; Gupta & Ferguson 1992), fewer have attended to the material dimensions of sudden, total displacement, the objects, spaces, and sensory practices through which belonging is negotiated in the aftermath of abrupt rupture and rapid displacement.

This project deepens anthropological diasporic discourses and perspectives by attending to the experience of the Afghan community in Oklahoma City (OKC) through the lens of material culture. Scholars have explored how the material realm constitutes social worlds, reinforces culture (Bourdieu 1977), and comprises objects with "social lives" (Appadurai 1986). Daniel Miller (1998) argues that looking at the breadth of human material experience affords insights into cultural processes that make up the texture of everyday cultural life (6). For Miller, the study of material culture contextualizes objects within cultural practices and identity

formations, tethering objects to a social process instead of seeing objects as “free floating symbols” (9). More importantly, Miller contends that the study of material culture, in domains such as home décor or media, attends to how value systems transform over time (10).

Basu and Coleman (2008) extend the study of material culture to its intersection with migration, arguing that materialities constitute mobility and that migrants’ material worlds are thus shaped by “the particular nature of their distinct journeys” (317). Lauser et al. (2022) examine the intersection of forced migration and material culture by “thinking migration consistently through things,” allowing the “centrality of temporality, spatiality, and emotion” to emerge and permeate their analysis (3).

Sandra Dudley’s (2010) seminal work on Karenni refugees sits at the intersection of the material, the sensory, and forced migration. Dudley’s work, which has deeply inspired my own exploration of Afghan material worlds in OKC, expands on “the intrinsically cultural experience of forced migration through a focus on objects, places, sensory perception and conceptions of time and place” (2). For Dudley, the Karenni experience shows that members of the Karenni community are not passive victims but active agents “busily engaged in daily life and in making sense and the best of the world as it is” (1). Dudley employs the notion of “feeling right” in describing the processes through which interlocutors in her work seek to make home through aesthetic, visual, and sensorial culture. Via material “forms and processes” and embodied experiences, people can culturally infuse the spaces they live in (121). The Karenni community in Dudley’s work shows how “feeling right” stems from the sensory and affective dimensions of a relationship to place and how this leads to a feeling of “being at home” (140). Yet scholars like Dudley, who attend to forced migration and material culture, focus primarily on protracted

displacement in refugee camps rather than sudden, total rupture followed by rapid resettlement in vastly different contexts.

Dudley's notion of "feeling right" resonates with a longer thread in anthropology that treats cultural aesthetics as embodied. Steven Feld (1988), in his work with the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea, argues that cultural aesthetics are best understood as an embodied, felt sense of form. For Feld, aesthetics is not a set of rules that can be analyzed from the outside. It emerges from participation, from being inside a cultural world long enough to recognize when something feels right. This idea echoes an earlier claim from Franz Boas (1927), who argued that the emotional attachment people develop to customary forms is what allows aesthetic practices to persist across time in a specific culture (149). The Afghan women I worked with carried this aesthetic sense with them through displacement. They could tell when a meal tasted like home, or when a space was set up correctly, even if they did not pause to explain why. In Oklahoma, they kept recognizing and reproducing this felt sense in new material conditions.

In a conceptual nod to Dudley's work, in my own project, I want to call attention to the tactile, sensory, and aesthetic dimensions of making home, of fostering a sense of belonging through everyday practices and things. Following Sophie Woodward's (2020) assertion that things "are not separate to cultural or social relations but are an integrated part of them" and that things "are key players within which people's lives and worlds are mutually created" (17), I argue that material culture is an intrinsic part of how the Afghan community in OKC has (re)constituted home and fostered belonging after a painful and sudden rupture from Afghanistan, through the interplay of various material domains such as domestic spaces, clothing, food and mobile phones.

Home and Belonging

Scholars of material culture have engaged with domestic spaces through ethnographic studies that shed light on how the material is an intrinsic part of how people construct life-worlds. Sara Pink's analysis of home spaces, *Home Truths* (2004), delves into the minutiae of how people create home atmospheres through sensory practices rooted in "biography and identity," where gender is produced and where everyday practices mediate "true" selves through material and sensory engagements in the domestic space. In *Home Possessions* (2001), Daniel Miller questions normative assumptions about the meaning of home and what is viewed as natural, instead focusing on emergent ethnographic insights of transformation and social relationships, from long-term fieldwork in people's homes. Both scholars converge on and establish the idea that home is actively made through everyday material practices that construct meaning in people's lives.

Migration fundamentally complicates the notion of home and home-making. Paolo Boccagni's (2017) pivotal work on how communities make home after migration, *Migration and the Search for Home*, parses the conceptual issues involved in defining exactly what home means. From his theoretical purview, Boccagni situates the definition of home as "a special kind of relationship with place" (4). Home is not static; it is "purposively negotiated and reproduced"; it is a "social experience" characterized by the basic attributes of security (only insider access), familiarity (emotionally and cognitively), and control (autonomy in the use of the space) (7). For Boccagni, the use of home as a conceptual category "provides a lens on migrants' everyday lives and for the social process of *homing* and *place-making*" (9). In sum, home is flexible; it is a "relational, processual and context specific social experience" (Boccagni 2017,13). This definition provides an overarching framework for exploring the intersection of the physical, material, and phenomenological when thinking about what home means to a community. Home

can be constituted in a place, or places, as in a house. Yet, examining how a person transforms a place through the material, the visual, and the sensory has the capacity to profoundly contextualize a particular experience of how a person engages not just in place-making, but also in “feeling right.” I approach home through embodied and aesthetic everyday cultural practices rather than symbolic meaning alone.

Sara Ahmed (1999) complicates the idea of home by exploring the way migration and leaving home lead to experiences of estrangement and disconnection, which in turn reconfigure a person’s relationship to home. Ahmed posits that this reconfiguration situates itself in the collective formation of new communities that create new identities together by sharing memories (331). This perspective falls in line with Ratman’s (2018) emphasis on the sensory in that it highlights how migration leads to a reconstitution of the self in relation to home and separates “home as a place of origin and home as the sensory world of everyday experience” (341). The sensory world propels a “spatial reconfiguration of the embodied self” because it is through the senses that being in a new place is felt. For Ratman, the idea of home is situated in the material and the sensorial, intrinsically shaped by memory and identity (2), and is therefore a site of agency, through the process of homing. Home is also a site where memory and identity are tethered to the homeland, and it is therefore a place of belonging (6). Anna Pechurina (2020), in her ethnographic work with Russian-speaking communities in Britain, argues that diasporic objects are an intrinsic part of making home because they refer to “experiences, feelings and attachments that are both familiar and strange continuously reinvented through the course of everyday life” (671).

Home after displacement holds an inherent tension. It sits between past and present, belonging and estrangement, and these dichotomies refuse to settle into fixed categories. So, home becomes dynamic rather than bounded.

Central to my project is the notion that there are scales of belonging — from the intimate scale of the body and the home to the scale of the local Afghan community in Oklahoma City, to the imagined scale of Afghanistan itself — that are always in flux. In other words, belonging can happen across unstable and dynamic domains of experience. One of the domains of belonging that emerged from this research is cultural aesthetics. Rooted in the material and the visual, cultural aesthetics are an integral part of everyday practices that manifest inside the domestic space, via clothing, food, or the digital realm. Hadjiyanni (2009) examines cultural aesthetics from the perspective of building difference. Through interviews with members of the Somali, Mexican, and Hmong communities, Hadjiyanni found that difference is constructed through choosing home décor that prioritizes cultural aesthetics as a means of connection to the homeland and belonging (546). In her study of Turkish migrants in Vienna, Savaş (2014) shows how a distinctive "Turkish taste" in material objects emerges from displacement and resettlement.

These shared aesthetic choices serve as both social and aesthetic tools for building community and claiming belonging in Vienna. Exploring the experiences of Afghan women in refugee housing in Berlin, Schneider (2025), uses the concept of “guesting” to show how hospitality between Afghan women is key not only to making a sense of home, but also to belonging in strong social networks. These “networks of internal care” functioned to replace the “familial networks left back in Afghanistan” (Schneider 2025,192). Schneider recounts how the material, whether food or objects, flowed through these “guesting” relationships, establishing

relationships of reciprocity and support. Similar to other scholars in this conversation, Schneider sheds light on how the sensorial and material recall home and belonging through the objects exchanged through practices of hospitality.

Beyond (re)constituting worlds through cultural aesthetics, belonging is also performed and imagined. Here, I want to draw on Appadurai's (1996) conceptualization of imagination to explore how belonging is an imagined practice through which displaced people create community and engage in "self-making." Appadurai centers his analysis on the intersection of media and migration. It is through this intersection that communities create *diasporic spheres* via media consumption, which permeates contexts and changes how people see themselves and the world. This is especially relevant in the chapter about digital materiality and how it is used by interlocutors. However, I want to tie my assumption of *Afghanness*, as I observed it in fieldwork, as a performance of belonging, to the notion of imagination as a daily practice that "especially when collective, can become fuel for action" (7).

In his long-term ethnography of a mosque in Lisbon, Jose Mapril (2024) discusses how "imagination and materiality are mutually entangled in the ways places are made and performed (contested), and in the process, meanings and subjectivities emerge" (387). Like Appadurai, he highlights the role of imagination in developing subjectivities, but he links this process to how spaces are transformed into places through the "politics of place production" (388). For this project, framing *Afghanness* as something both imagined and enacted through belonging, and tracing its entanglements with the material, is key to conceptualizing how these entangled practices mediate and articulate notions of watan (homeland) and qaum (solidarity group or kinship group) in the Afghan community.

The concepts of watan (homeland) and qaum (solidarity/kinship group) are not abstract; they are terms that, in fieldwork, emerged as signifiers for belonging, solidarity, and attachment to place. Bernt Glatzer (2001), based on his ethnographic work with Pashtuns both in Afghanistan and Pakistan, notes that the term watan can index both an emotional closeness to a geographical or social area (usually a village or district), as well as the notion of Afghanistan as a homeland. Emotionally, watan invokes feelings of security, and images of a place where a person can feel at home, a home that demands protection as it is the locus of belonging and social warmth. Glatzer highlights that in the Afghan diaspora, the term watan collapses from a local term into a descriptor for the distance from Afghanistan itself: “only in diaspora, when Afghans feel far away from home, can Afghanistan melt into watan” (5). Similarly, the term qaum indexes the scales of kinship in Afghan society. Thomas Barfield (2012) describes qaum as the kinship group or solidarity group where people situate their primary loyalty, which could correspond to people’s “own kin, village, tribe, or ethnic group” (18). Qaums have historically “provided their members with important networks of support outside of official government channels” and are an integral part of daily life (220-221). In his work with Baluchi communities in Afghanistan, Just Boedeker (2018) explores the segmentary nature of the term qaum and posits that the term, polysemic in nature, “should be considered as the central emic concept of group affiliation on different levels” (275). Qaum is therefore a term that is flexible, denoting multiple social associations depending on the context in which it is used. Interestingly, when I was discussing the term with my Pashto teacher during one of our online lessons, as he resides in Kabul, he defined a qaum as a group of people with shared beliefs and behaviors. In fact, most interlocutors spent most of their time with members of their qaum, having very little experience (if any at all) with people from qaums outside their village or town. I found this perspective to

resonate with what I observed in fieldwork, as interlocutors would attribute behaviors and beliefs to their qaums specifically, with one interlocutor even describing another person's behavior as typical of that person's qaum. That said, to avoid totalizing discourses, I want to highlight that although watan and qaum do not operate as fixed or singular frameworks, they undergird the longing, nostalgia, and negotiations interlocutors engage in when defining what belonging and home look like in displacement.

This flexibility is not incidental. Belonging operates at multiple, shifting scales depending on context. Irvine and Gal's (2000) concept of *fractal recursivity* calls attention to the scales of belonging within the Afghan community itself. The metaphor of *fractal recursivity* specifically refers to patterns that repeat at different scales, where the notion of them and us, or self and other, is in flux depending on context or situation. Employed here, it means that watan and qaum are not fixed terms either; their meaning depends on a contextualized notion of us versus them. Being an ethnically and linguistically diverse community, the Afghan community of OKC navigates belonging fluidly. The community is flexible in the way that it imagines belonging through daily practices with other members of the community.

When interlocutors invoke qaum or watan as belonging through performance of Afghanness, it can reference the Afghan people when interacting vis-à-vis Americans. Or it can index a specific village, ethnic group, or clan when invoked in the community. Performance of Afghanness through material practices and their recursive articulations of watan and qaum emerge, for example, when Nazo engages in aesthetic negotiations of dress styles based on her future interactions with women from other provinces. But when I ask her why she makes dresses the way she does, she simply says, "Because it's Afghan." It is also perhaps why watan seems

more prominent in life in displacement in America, with many families putting up Afghan flags in their living rooms.

Beyond Discourse: The Afghan Diaspora in Scholarship

Scholarship on the Afghan diaspora has productively theorized how Afghans maintain identity and build community across displacement. What remains underexplored is how this happens materially and sensorially, through the everyday objects, aesthetic practices, and material transformations of space that produce and sustain Afghanness.

The Afghan diaspora before 2021 has been extensively studied from various perspectives. Alessandro Monsutti (2021), perhaps one of the most prominent ethnographers of Afghan communities both in Afghanistan and around the world, understands the Afghan diaspora through the lens of mobility in and out of Afghanistan, calling attention to its "transnational dimension" through ethnographic vignettes that trace movement, labor, and kinship networks across borders (7). Nile Green (2008) takes a more historical approach, tracing how Afghan diasporic identity has developed in relation to, and sometimes in tension with, identity formations within Afghanistan itself. Alongside Nushin Arbabzadah, Green (2013) extends this analysis through literary production, showing how Afghan writers negotiate belonging between diaspora and nation through narrative and cultural texts.

These scholars focus primarily on discourse, narrative, and transnational connections rather than the material practices of everyday life. Cvetkovich (2011) and Rokay (2021) shift attention to lived experience, Cvetkovich through oral histories of second-generation Afghan Americans navigating identity after 9/11, and Rokay through critical ethnography that examines how Afghan community members "engage with their hyphenated identities" through archival practices (178). Najibullah (2022) explores how Afghan communities in Switzerland construct

biographical narratives around jihad that counter dominant European discourses. Through feminist perspectives, Zarlisht Sarwari (2025) explores the role of women in sustaining identity in the Australian Afghan diaspora through the various generations of Afghan women now present in Australia. Sarwari situates the home as a central location for the continuation of cultural practices in the diaspora that “constitute critical forms of knowledge production” (95).

Most relevant to this project is Mir Hekmatullah Sadat's (2008) work on "Hyphenating *Afghanity* (Afghan-ness) in the Afghan Diaspora," which examines how Afghans in North America, Europe, and Australia preserve “the authenticity of *Afghanity* through ‘ethnographic examinations of habits and practices’” (329) such as the way gender norms are articulated in the diasporic context or the negotiations implicit in practicing Afghan Islamic practices in the West. For Sadat, *Afghan-ness* becomes "the instrument through which their participation and allegiance to Afghan culture can be measured," tethered to concepts like watan and other cultural attributes (330).

Even Sadat, who attends to habits and practices, focuses primarily on cultural rituals, language maintenance, and community institutions rather than the intimate material and sensory worlds through which Afghanness is daily enacted. What has received less scholarly attention is how Afghanness is materially constituted in displacement—how rugs transform apartments, how clothing negotiates identity, how food smells anchor memory, how digital images circulate watan and qaum across distance.

Other scholars have looked at the experiences of Afghan communities in Iran, Turkey, and Canada, among others, centering the experiences of Afghan communities across both established communities and those in transitory situations, such as asylum seeking (Hakimi

2023; Hiitola & Savo 2022; Yarbakhsh 2021; Zandi-Navgran 2023), attending primarily to questions of legal status, integration, and community formation.

Scholarship on the lives of Afghan women and their experiences in the diaspora brings to the fore perspectives about changing gender roles (Saidi 2019 and 2018; Ahmed and Hari 2023 and 2015; Afrouz, Crisp & Taket 2023), religion (Shirazi, Shirazi & Bloom 2015) and health (Lipson and Miller 1994; Gill, Safi, & Worabo 2024) as key axes of experience. This work focuses on institutional and social dimensions of diasporic life rather than the intimate material and sensory practices through which Afghan women construct home and belonging.

Studies on Afghan material culture tend to focus on historical craftsmanship (Olesen 1994; Patel 2019), artistic production (Pennoyer 2016), and food traditions (Monsutti 2010; Saberi 2016), but they do not address how material culture functions in contemporary diasporic life after the rupture of 2021. Even research on Afghan material religion (Wyndham 2019) and the social life of objects (Skuse 2005) does not extend to the U.S. context or focus on belonging.

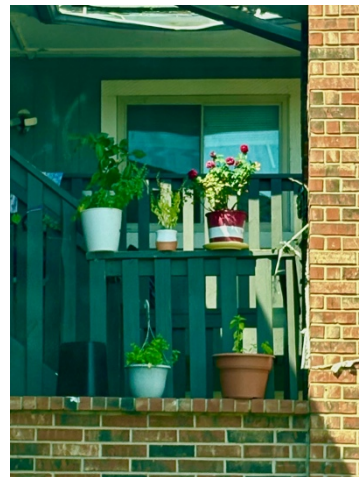
Making Home After Rupture

My focus on the Afghan experience in the United States, specifically in Oklahoma City, develops a picture of the particular material experiences of interlocutors as they navigate their lives in protracted displacement. The sudden and painful rupture from Afghanistan, from watan and qaum, created a set of circumstances where the negotiations of daily life, often through the material, centered largely around rescuing that which was suddenly lost. Interlocutors have found agency in creating a sense of home and fostering belonging, despite the singularity of their situation that sits at the convergence of a myriad of factors. In this context, Afghanness through the material, cultural aesthetics, and the sensorial has proven to be a key component in breathing

life into what often seems like a hopeless situation where the pain of the distance from watan and qaum can be overwhelming.

The chapters that follow explore the material and sensory domains through which Afghanness has been sustained, negotiated, and imagined in Oklahoma City after the community arrived in 2021. Chapter one contextualizes the spatial practices interlocutors enacted to construct a sense of home and belonging. I trace the material negotiations, rooted in Afghanness, that transformed living spaces. Chapter Two turns to food, exploring how Afghan foodways, hospitality, and kitchen materiality created sensory continuity after rupture, with pressure cookers, ingredients, and shared meals becoming terrains of belonging and cultural assertion. Chapter Three examines clothing as a site where Afghan women negotiate Afghanness on the body, moving between the registers of making and wearing to show how dress mediates identity, piety, and community belonging across the public and private spheres of diasporic life. Chapter Four explores the digital realm, examining how platforms like WhatsApp and TikTok, alongside stickers, GIFs, and shared videos, create a sonic and visual ecosystem that honors watan, expresses faith, and sustains transnational connection across distance.

Chapter 1: Making Home and Domestic Spaces Feel Right



Bibi Marwa has fashioned a miniature garden in the brick stairwell leading to her second-floor apartment. Flowerpots line the brick ledge, each holding peppers, tomatoes, or flowering plants. On one side, a lush plant grows upward along the arched wall, its vines reaching a piece of recycled fabric tied across the arch where it meets another plant's thin coils climbing from the opposite ledge. The fabric suspends the greenery horizontally in the air, creating a canopy. A pot of blooming roses sits in the sun, tied down with more recycled fabric so the wind won't knock it over. In this communal outdoor space, Bibi Marwa has created something distinctly her own.

When I get to her door, the smell of food transcends the boundaries between me and her apartment. I selfishly hope that she is making those lentils I really enjoy. Around me, shoes are scattered on the piece of carpet that lines the outside of her apartment. Next to the door, a bookcase holds shoes ready for those departing. I knock, and Bibi Marwa answers. We exchange greetings as she invites me inside. I take my shoes off and head to my usual spot on the cushions lining the living room floor. As I make my way to the living room, I look at the wall on my right; it is covered in the school picture day order forms that contain photo proofs. It's only the boys' pictures; Bibi Marwa is very proud of them. There are girls in this family, too, but it would be inappropriate to put their pictures up on the wall because pictures of women's faces are immodest. This apartment has an "open concept" floor plan, so from the living room, I can see into the kitchen, which is separated from the living room by a counter where people might usually put bar-height stools. In this house that counter is used to place a water dispenser, a tray of cups, and a few other objects for use in the kitchen.

As I sit in my usual spot, Bibi Marwa is still in the kitchen getting tea ready. I look at the floor. Although the apartment is carpeted, the living room is covered by a large Afghan rug with a red-and-white floral pattern. Long cushions made from similar fabric hug three sides of the rectangular space, arranged for people to sit on—no couches, no dining table. Against the wall, a table holds the men's large work lunchboxes, ready for their long shifts. A couple of pieces of Islamic art hang on the wall. A television sits in the corner opposite where I am sitting. Next to it, a set of built-in shelves contains glass cups, water bottles, medicines, and, on the lowest shelf, notebooks. I feel the firm cushion behind my back and cross my legs, letting my feet rest on the floor. From my vantage point, I can see everything except the three bedrooms, which in this apartment I've only gotten quick glimpses of. Bibi Marwa brings me tea and nuts. Her nut dish is

my favorite. It rotates. I have fun rotating it to get to the pistachios or the almonds. Once we finish chatting over tea, her oldest daughter prepares lunch, sets out the plastic tablecloth on the carpet, and we start eating. She had, in fact, made my favorite lentils, and I thoroughly enjoyed them with bread and rice.

Once we all eat lunch and are drinking tea again, we chat about her flowers in the stairwell. Bibi Marwa tells me that in Afghanistan, she had her own garden where she grew many vegetables. I ask if she has a picture I can see. She looks at her daughter and tells her to go grab her phone. She scrolls through her phone for a few seconds, then flips it to show me her garden on the screen. It was an extremely well-tended garden, green and fertile. Bibi Marwa then shows me pictures of her village and points to her house. Bibi Marwa is trying to use her English, and she is doing a great job. I am happy to let her practice. She says, “my house, my daughter house.” I tell her how nice it must have been to live right next to each other. During this exchange, she has a smile on her face that is difficult to describe. It’s a mix of nostalgia and pride, happiness and longing. She swipes to the next picture, “This my room.” Next picture, “This is my son room.” I want to ask precisely who slept there, since there are many siblings, and I am surprised the son got his own room. She tells me that she slept in a room with her youngest daughter and her husband. She shows me a video of the inside of the house. It’s quite colorful, with large windows. Carpets line every floor, and unlike her apartment now, her house in Afghanistan is not open concept. “This my house,” she says. I ask her if she wants to go back, and she tells me she does, to see her family. I think she is trying to clarify that she does not intend to stay there but wants to visit anyway. Her daughter is smiling too as Bibi Marwa shows me these pictures. Her daughter, who is married, lived with her husband’s family next to Bibi Marwa. Then she shows me pictures of the family they left behind. These images progress from

land to house to people. These three together evoke a smile, a moment of eagerness to share. We look through pictures of family members. “This my *pader* (father). This is my brother,” she says as she swipes from picture to picture on her phone. Her daughter then shows me pictures of her husband’s family, specifically her mother-in-law. She tells me she is so nice. To me, she looks incredibly young, and when she then shows me a picture of her husband with all his brothers, I exclaim, “Oh my gosh! How many brothers does he have?” She chuckles. We look at a couple of pictures one more time.

Once Bibi Marwa turns the phone screen off, her smile fades as well. In that brief moment, the transition from viewing her Afghan home to returning to her Oklahoma apartment, I understood the complex relationship she navigates between two places, her memory of watan (used both in Pashto and Persian) – homeland – and the United States. The rupture from her previous home in Afghanistan inflects the current space she inhabits. An ongoing negotiation of what home means in America is emotional, relational, material, and perhaps even in tension with what Bibi Marwa imagines for the future.

For Boccagni (2017), whose prolific scholarship on the concept of home sheds light on various aspects of the Afghan experience, the subjective constructions of the meaning of home are not stagnant in one place or at one time. His concept of “homing” offers a framework for understanding this ongoing process. Rather than treating home as a fixed place or achieved state, Boccagni theorizes home as practice, an active, continuous effort to create familiarity, security, and control in new spaces. For migrants and displaced people, homing involves material, relational, and imaginative work.

The arrival of the Afghan community in Oklahoma City marked the beginning of a process whereby Afghan families attempted to rebuild the lives they left behind after

displacement. This process, undergirded by the experience of rupture from watan, was profoundly affected by the spaces families had to inhabit. From their arrival in OKC, new domestic spaces became sites of cultural investment, with their material and spatial design at the center of how families (re)constituted home. To understand how this process of home-making took place and continues today, a “time-sensitive perspective” is needed to shed light on the experiences of the women I spent time with, their families, and the community at large, avoiding the risk of situating their experiences in one place at one time (Boccagni, 2017). Creating a sense of home for interlocutors has meant different things at different times and in different spaces; each context requires its own examination because it highlights how, after rupture, families sought to reestablish spaces that felt right, in tune with their memories of home, aesthetic sensibilities, and rhythms of daily life.

There is an inherent tension between standardized spaces shaped by American design sensibilities and implicit occupation habits, and Afghan cultural notions of how spaces are to be utilized and structured. In other words, the spaces themselves are sites for negotiation because Afghan cultural norms for the function and visibility of domestic spaces are at odds with how many domestic spaces in America are designed. There is a fundamental disjunction between space, function, and practice that interlocutors have had to contend with, negotiate, and transform in their home-making experience. In what follows, I examine how, through material objects and furniture, homes became sites of negotiation. This chapter unfolds in three parts. First, I examine the institutional processes of furnishing apartments: the list of required furnishings, volunteer involvement, and the disjunctions between federal requirements and Afghan cultural practices. Second, I trace how families transformed these furnished apartments to “feel right” (Dudley 2010, 155) by discarding, repurposing, and acquiring new objects,

dismantling bunk beds, adding carpets, and hanging curtains. Third, I analyze how material transformations enacted spatial practices rooted in Afghan notions of watan and qaum, creating spaces where hospitality, gender relations, and daily rhythms could construct a sense of “being at home” (Dudley 2010, 10).

Arrival: The Hotel and The Reality of Rupture

Afghan families began arriving in September 2021. Catholic Charities, the agency managing the resettlement of one thousand Afghans in Oklahoma City, contracted a hotel near the airport to house all incoming families. The caseworker I interviewed for this project, Diana, recalled that at that time in 2021, the Catholic Charities office of Oklahoma City, only had a staff of three people. Given the structural realities of the agency’s capacity to resettle individuals, they informed the governor’s office that they could accommodate thirty Afghan individuals. The governor’s office was insisting that Catholic Charities resettle around three thousand Afghans in Oklahoma despite repeated protests from the executives at Catholic Charities. Diana recalled, “and basically, Governor Stitt was like, fine, then you are gonna take one thousand, and like didn’t really give a choice, which I don’t know how that happened, but he had the final say... And then a week and a half later, we started getting people... The first family was eleven people, the second family was ten people.” She remembers that families started arriving “once a day, twice a day. And then I’d be at the movie theater at midnight, get a call, and there’s a family that we didn’t know were coming, and I’d like have to leave the movie.”

As families were packed into the hotel, challenges began to arise. Diana described how, as a caseworker to an increasing case load of Afghan families, or 115 individuals, she was not given any significant training to better support the incoming families in a meaningful way.

“CAIR (Council for American Islamic Relations) Oklahoma gave us Muslim trainings on

Muslims, which was not super helpful. The training was like take your shoes off before you go into their house, and don't give them the thumbs up. Oh, and don't like, it was very much like, if you are a woman, don't make eye contact. Don't shake their hands." She felt ill-equipped to deal with the realities of incoming families who had left everything behind a few weeks before and possessed only a couple of bags of clothing. She instead decided to approach this situation with empathy and a posture of making sure her assigned families had their needs met.

The institutional structures leading this process of arrival focused on functional processes to meet basic needs, neglecting the emotional and cultural context and complexity of displacement. This is not singular to the Afghan situation. Greta Uehling's (2015) work sheds light on the goals of the federal refugee resettlement program, whose main objective is to "responsibilize" resettled individuals, where "the onus is on how the refugee can fit in with the local community and economy rather than how the community can observe the human rights or embrace the needs of the refugee" (9). This disjunction between institutional approaches and on-the-ground realities was also felt by volunteers who signed up to help families.

Arriving at the hotel was the first time families had privacy after their journeys from Afghanistan and their stay in the military camps. It was the first moment of stillness, as the settling dust meant coming to terms with the reality of the uprooting from their homeland that had occurred weeks earlier. The hotel rooms did not have kitchens or separate spaces for men and women. Volunteers recall that men would often gather in the lobby, while women would stay in their rooms. This proximity to people outside one's qaum had never been experienced before by many families, especially the women. In short, the spatial configuration of the hotel facilities and rooms was not culturally attuned to Afghan urban and rural residential practices or to the way Afghan homes are designed.

Food was distributed at every meal from a conference room in the main lobby. During mealtimes, a long line of men and kids would wait for their turn to take food up to their families. Children were the only individuals who could comfortably transcend the boundaries of the ad hoc spatial configurations that the families flowed into to accommodate their cultural preferences. Children roamed the hotel, playing outside, riding the elevator up and down, sitting with their dads in the lobby or in the hotel driveway, or sitting with their mother's upstairs in their rooms. Oftentimes, women would gather in one family's room so the men could gather in another room to drink tea and visit.

Diana recalled that, despite the evident tensions between how Afghans began to transform the hotel space and the expectations of how the space should be used by other guests and hotel staff, families were active in trying to make the hotel room their own. The women were especially vocal about their need for food, hot plates, dishes to cook for their families, and tea kettles. The disjunction between "expected form" and "expected use" in the hotel created "conflicting spaces" where the events that take place in a space, even the movement of bodies within a particular space, do not match the basic architectural design of a space (Tschumi 1996, 147). Here, the lobby became the hangout place for groups of kids, the hotel sidewalks and entrance became a space for men to congregate, and the rooms and hallways became spaces for women to drink tea and socialize. There was a spatial negotiation, one that was significantly gendered, which reworked the space for all the families waiting for more permanent housing.

Families advocated for the objects they needed to make the hotel space align with their cultural practices and everyday rhythms. This intentionality was driven by the emotional weight of displacement—the temporal discontinuity and spatial disconnection from home. When I asked Amy, a volunteer who had worked with various families since their arrival in 2021, about her

experience in the hotel meeting families, she said it was “shocking for everyone. Every single person in that place looked shell-shocked, and it was really hard for them.” Another volunteer, Kim, related to me how she received a call from Catholic Charities asking her if she could go to the hotel to meet the family that she was going to be helping. The next day, along with her kids, she went to the hotel. “It was pure chaos.” She remembers thinking that many of the men hanging out in the lobby and on the sidewalk next to the hotel had a look of “desperation”; she had a feeling their needs were not being met. Once she was taken upstairs to the room to meet the family, she looked around and noticed that the room was packed and felt as though “there was no space.” What she thought was just going to be a meet and greet became a moment where she realized the magnitude of what it would take to help this family get settled, especially when the father in the family said through a translator, “We need all the help that a human can need.”

The hotel was a place of pause where families awaited news of relocation to more permanent housing in apartments. It was a place of both connection and disconnection. Families were connected to volunteers who would be given the responsibility of furnishing their new homes in America, and who, in many cases, became ad hoc caseworkers fulfilling the many needs expressed by families. It was also a place where the temporal and spatial rupture from Afghanistan became more tangible, even as families sought to bridge that discontinuity by using the space in line with their cultural practices and beliefs. In my fieldwork, I did not broach the topic of the hotel with interlocutors in depth. There were a few times where it came up in conversation, and it was always discussed as “hard,” but in trying to follow a trauma-informed approach—taking seriously that for them recounting the experiences that brought them to Oklahoma, can reopen a series of difficult and painful emotions— I did not press further.

This characterization of the hotel as “hard” resonates with broader scholarship on reception spaces. Calcagno and Bologna (2019), in their ethnographic study of asylum seekers in Italian refugee reception centers, describe how these institutional spaces produce “alienation and segregation,” where life becomes “assistance-based” and “void and repetitive,” threatening the “psycho-social well-being of the vulnerable person” (74). Though the OKC hotel was not an official reception center, it functioned similarly. Afghan families depended heavily on assistance; their daily activities were circumscribed to the hotel space, and institutional control shaped their experience of arrival. Yet what followed the hotel was a process of (re)constituting home or homing (Boccagni 2017). Apartments were furnished, deconstructed, and transformed.

The List: Its Limits and Disjunction

As families waited in the hotel for a call from their caseworker saying an apartment was ready for them to move into, Catholic Charities faced the monumental task of finding and furnishing apartments for every Afghan family coming to Oklahoma City. The organization connected with churches in Oklahoma City. “Catholic Charities reached out to a bunch of churches, put things on the news, and said, “We just need people who will go in and furnish apartments,” Diana recalled during our interview. There was a list of federally required items that had to be in every apartment. The plan was for caseworkers to reach out to church volunteers, assign them an apartment to furnish, and give them the key.

When the apartment was furnished, caseworkers would do a walk-through, checking off items from the federal list. Once complete, volunteers were to give the key back and allow the family to move in. Diana remarked that this process did not work as intended. Some volunteers met families in person, and families asked for help with doctors' appointments and other needs beyond furnishing. Diana was overwhelmed with a caseload of over 100 people, so the

volunteers' involvement was welcome. In interviews, volunteers remarked they received no training and were often left doing a caseworker's job. Diana added that at the institutional level, there was no policy for how to deal with volunteers, so every caseworker had different approaches.

A disjointed dynamic developed, with expectations among volunteers, families, and caseworkers creating tension. In conversations with the community during that time in my work with a non-profit organization, families would often approach me after viewing their future apartments and show me pictures and videos of their homes in Afghanistan. They would express disappointment that they would now have to live in an apartment like the one their caseworker had taken them to view. In Afghanistan, working for Americans and Europeans meant that many of these families were paid in dollars. They had enough funds to build their own houses and buy apartments in the nice parts of Kabul. There was also a sense of disappointment with their former American bosses, who had promised to take care of them once they came to the United States.

In the case of photos of former homes in Afghanistan, it seemed the images evoked a dissonance Afghans felt between their past relative affluence and their current housing prospects. These photographs of home, much like the ones Bibi Marwa showed me during my visits, did more than document what families had lost. Dudley (2010) argues that not only do photographs elicit emotions and memory, but they also, through “their very materiality,” make possible the enculturation of a new environment because they “render the present in some way continuous with the past,” and this has spatial implications in how families navigate new domestic spaces. As “visual narratives,” photographs become a reference point of culture and spatial practice that helps bridge the pre-displacement past with the present (p. 152). In her work with Indigenous Australian community engagement with ethnographic photos, Elizabeth Edwards (2006)

discusses photographs as social objects that index relationships and histories, and “are enmeshed in oral stories” (37). Photographs are not images out of context; instead, they contextualize memories, people, and social dimensions of people’s lives.

Despite the ongoing issues among volunteers, caseworkers, and families, the furnishing of homes proceeded. In interviews with volunteers, the home furnishing process was central to their experience helping families since they were essentially tasked with making homes *for* Afghans. In the context of furnishing apartments, there was a level of affinity in volunteers’ experiences from a material perspective. For many volunteers, the lack of training and the dearth of cultural accommodation regarding furnishing homes were, in their opinion, detrimental to families’ experiences as they started life in the United States. A couple of the volunteers had previous experience furnishing homes for refugees in the traditional refugee resettlement program, but none had any experience with Afghan culture.

Volunteers remembered that they were given a list, created by the federal reception and placement program, that had a standardized number of tables, beds, kitchen utensils, and other furniture that needed to be in the apartment. In seeking to meet the apartment list requirements, volunteers activated their church and personal networks to collect all the necessary items. Amy was part of a church effort to help the Afghan community that raised thousands of dollars, recruited about 140 volunteers, and signed up to furnish the apartments of multiple families. They collected so much furniture that a church member volunteered his airplane hangar to use as a storage place for the furniture while families waited for move-in day.

When describing the process of furnishing the family’s home once a move-in day was coordinated by the caseworker, Kim, a volunteer, described it as “a train wreck.” On top of collecting all the furniture for the new apartment, she related that she was incredibly

overwhelmed with also providing the family with all their other needs. “We kept trying to call Catholic Charities and be like, hey, they need all this stuff, and they were like, well, can you do any of it? And we’re like, I mean, yes, but like you told us this was furnishing an apartment, and it turned into like being a social worker for at least 50% of the week.” Kim found herself in a situation where nobody had the resources they needed to meet all the needs in the Afghan community. Structurally, the system was not equipped to meet the material, cultural, emotional, and financial needs of one thousand new arrivals.

I want to highlight here that the involvement of volunteers varied quite broadly across the Afghan community. This was mostly due to the disjointed and perhaps irresponsible approach to volunteer involvement taken by Catholic Charities. Although in this thesis I refer to interviewees as volunteers, they were presented to the community as *sponsors*—a term that carries specific legal and relational weight in refugee resettlement, implying sustained involvement beyond the practical task of furnishing an apartment. Some families were paired with sponsors like Kim or Amy, who became involved with families at a level beyond apartment furnishing for months; other families were assigned sponsors whose participation ended once the furniture was in place, sometimes not interacting with families outside of that scope. Within the community, word got around about what a good sponsor could help you with, and every family hoped that they would be assigned a good sponsor to help them. This inconsistency was not a failure of families’ expectations, but a failure of institutional planning.

My conversation with Jan Gul about these early days highlights the consequences of this institutional gap directly. Jan Gul heard from other community members about their positive experiences with volunteers. Given the experience of other Afghans in the community and how the resettlement agency articulated the role of sponsor in community meetings, he assumed the

volunteer assigned to his family would be deeply involved and help them transition into life in the United States with substantial support. Walking into his new apartment after it had been furnished, he felt disappointment at what he perceived as bare minimum furnishings. His wife was deeply affected by this as well. He called the volunteer and spoke to him about the apartment furnishings. The volunteer told him that his job was to furnish the apartment, and that is what he had time for. This discrepancy in his family's experience versus that of other Afghan community members was hard to reconcile and felt like a failed promise. As Jan Gul described this situation to me, his tone of voice was full of emotion. I got the feeling that there was an element of shame in being given a bare bones apartment, a shame not about the apartment itself, but about what kind of host he could be in it, since this is directly tied to his standing in the community.

Guests are central to Afghan culture and everyday life. With such a thinly furnished apartment, he would feel ashamed to bring guests for tea or for a meal. Jan Gul showed me pictures of his home in Afghanistan. He explained that he lived in a home with over ten rooms that he shared with his brothers and their families. The outside of his house was surrounded by beautiful greenery. While we looked at pictures of the salon, the room where the men ate and drank tea together, he cracked a big smile. He reminisced about his home in Afghanistan with gusto and nostalgia, acknowledging both how perfect it was for him and his family, but also how much he missed it. Looking through his home pictures, I felt great empathy with Jan Gul. The overwhelming difference between his apartment here and his home in Afghanistan profoundly affected his first experience making home in the United States. Despite this institutional and cultural disjunction, as soon as families moved into their apartments, they began transforming

spaces, contesting furnishings, and reconstituting Afghan practices of daily life through objects and spatial arrangements.

Interlocutors did not have any input into how their homes were furnished before moving. The furnishings list, based on federal guidelines, guided the volunteers' decisions on what to put in the apartments. Much of the furniture that volunteers put in homes was used, though a fair amount, especially if volunteers counted on the financial support of their churches, was brand new. Christine described how people in her church "actually went out and bought stuff and brought it." She detailed her approach for furnishing an apartment for a family of seven. She was aware of the space limitations in the apartment and tried to work within them when deciding how to stock the kitchen with supplies. "The kitchen was super, super small. What can we fit in here?" she asked. Another volunteer, Shannon, recalled how, at first, her involvement was primarily about furnishing an apartment for a family, but later realized there would be a relational aspect that she could not ignore. She said her church was very active in providing all the furniture needed. As we sat in the dining room of her home, I ask her about the process of furnishing the apartment. She said, "Well, we, um, you know we, we had the list. Which I guess was formulated not by Catholic Charities locally, but nationally, for all. Yes, um, boy, do I have thoughts about that." I asked her to tell me about the list.

Okay. Um, that's important. It's just so, so much of it is so inappropriate. You know, we, so one of our people at church worked for Mathis Brothers, and so she got us a deal on bunk beds. Okay. Nine kids. Um, and that was the only way we, we could see for them to sleep. You know, girls in one room, boys in another with bunk beds. And, um, so we, we did that. But within a few months, those bunk beds were dismantled and gone, you know, and I understand that. I, yeah. I wasn't offended at all.

Volunteers had to contend with the disjunction between apartment size, design, and family size. In navigating this, volunteers made choices about how to furnish intimate spaces,

such as bedrooms, to maximize the space available in the apartments. Fitting nine kids into a three-bedroom house meant utilizing space vertically with bunk beds. The list given to volunteers by Catholic Charities specifically stated, “beds appropriate for the age and gender compositions of the family. Only married couples or young children may be expected to share beds.” Japoo, a volunteer who has worked with families since their arrival, described choosing bunk beds for the bedrooms to be about function: “I would say it was more about function. Okay. For example, one of the requirements was that you have to have a bed for every person. Well, if you’re getting a bed for every family member, you have to do bunk beds. So, we put in bunk beds immediately,” Kim recalled, “so you know, we had six kids plus she was pregnant with twins. We went around and got like cribs and small toddler beds and like, you know, all the different beds for all. We got bunk beds for the twins because they were going to be in a three-bedroom apartment in the apartment complex, and there were gonna be, ten of them.” Like Japoo, she chose functionality by utilizing bunk beds.

The list of home furnishing requirements also required “one kitchen table per family and one kitchen chair per person.” Amy wanted to set up a dining area where the families could eat on the floor since she had knowledge of Afghan cultural practices. “We originally bought, like I knew that that was like going to be a thing sitting, sitting on the floor. But we had that list from Catholic Charities of like, you have to get them a couch, or you have to get them a dining room table, and chairs,” Amy recalled. Through the process of procuring furniture, volunteers often struggled to make sense of the list of requirements. If a family had ten people, how would they fit ten chairs into a small two or three-bedroom apartment? Dining tables designed for American nuclear family meals were incompatible with Afghan practices of communal eating on the floor

with members of your qaum or close friends. Their later removal made space for the relational density of Afghan hospitality.

In my own recollection of this time period, when families were moving into volunteer-furnished apartments, I remember a few families pulling me aside after having recently moved in to ask me for carpets. Families would tell me that living in a home with no carpets was unpleasant, and someone, especially the kids, could get hurt. One dad told me that his daughter hurt her foot from walking on cold wooden floors. At that time, Mozhgan, who had only known me for a few months, called to tell me that her daughter had gotten hurt because her home had no carpets and had to take her to the hospital. At the time, I did not understand why not having carpets would be so dangerous, but thinking back, I realize that this perception of danger and coldness had much to do with how carpets are situated in Afghan worlds of meaning about home; carpets were, in fact, warmer, softer, and, most importantly, aesthetically relevant. Carpets and floor seating enabled the spatial arrangements necessary for hosting visiting qaum, or large gatherings where extended family and community members sit together on the floor for meals and tea, practices central to Afghan relationality.

Carpets were not on the list provided to volunteers, and so they did not purchase them, but seeing families struggle to accept bare wooden floors was perhaps one of the first signs that the list, and Afghan material notions of home and domestic space, were as far apart from each other as Afghanistan is from the United States on a map. What followed in the months after move-in was a process of transformation of spaces, contestation of the list and its requirements, and an affirmation of Afghanness, as families began to remake these American apartments according to their own spatial logics and domestic practices.

Transformation

The days after families moved in proved to be the beginning of a materially transformative period in Afghan homes. Although this period of transformation was gradual and different for every family, I recall its beginnings once my commute shifted from the hotel to the apartment complexes. Upon entering the parking lot at the complexes, I began to notice large pieces of furniture by the dumpsters, such as bed frames, tables, chairs, and mattresses. Families were beginning to reshape their apartments as they imagined them, transcending bare functional or material necessities (according to the list) with creative efforts to make homes into culturally Afghan-inflected living and gathering spaces.

Mazumdar and Mazumdar (2016), in their study of South Asian immigrants in Los Angeles, theorize how migrants transform domestic spaces to align with cultural values and practices. They argue that home becomes a site of “cultural investment,” “cultural accommodation,” and “cultural repository”: spaces that “facilitate culture-specific living,” “accommodate cultural values and preferences,” and “become a container of artifacts” (35). For Afghan families in OKC, this process looked similar. Families discarded volunteer-furnished items and gradually filled apartments with objects, furniture, and décor arranged according to cultural aesthetics that could support Afghan practices of hospitality and daily life.

The transformative period began as soon as families moved in. Diana began to receive calls about how families were not only throwing away furniture without putting it inside the dumpsters, but also going inside the dumpsters, pulling furniture out, and bringing it into their homes. Diana remarked that by dictating what needed to be inside a person's home, the list and the refugee program by extension "was trying to force everyone to be American."

Diana's assessment of the situation reflects Euhling's (2015) argument that refugee programs are geared towards preparing refugees to own their future through responsabilizing as a way to achieve self-sufficiency, success, and individualism (1004), even when cultural notions of the self and success do not align with American ones. Yet families' negotiations of what objects needed to go in the house and which ones did not, subverted this narrative by materially transforming the home and making it a place that culturally aligned with their own needs and practices, not with the institutional objectives of the resettlement program.

In dealing with volunteers, Diana understood their predicament: providing furniture that families dismantled and took apart. But ultimately, the institutional reporting requirements meant that Catholic Charities had an obligation to outfit homes with items on the list and in spaces that accommodated the number of people in a family. After the first few families moved in, Diana recalled volunteers asking if they could buy carpets instead of couches and dining room tables. She had to deny volunteers' requests repeatedly. Diana remembered, "Every single volunteer told me they [the families] took the mattresses apart. They would take entire bunk beds apart to fill cushions and stuff like that."

The pattern was consistent across the community. Kim furnished an apartment, made it "look really cute," and brought the family over. They were happy, she recalled, but kept asking why they needed beds. Kim explained it was a requirement from Catholic Charities, and they could do whatever they wanted after move-in. Within days, the beds were dismantled and shoved into a closet. Kim's frustration was not directed at the family, but at Catholic Charities; watching the family transform their home, she realized the changes "made more sense for their family." Abby witnessed similar transformations. One family took apart donated mattresses to make sleeping mats for children, while a crib meant for an expected baby became storage space.

Women across households would take mattress and couch stuffing, sew cushion covers with newly bought fabric, or buy cushion covers from the Afghan markets, and make brand new cushions for their new living room layouts.

Japoo described how the family he was helping took all the stuffing out of a couch and made long, sitting cushions, which the family also used as sleeping mats. “I noticed that probably sixty to seventy percent of their sleeping devices had been replaced with their pillows. Now most of them [referring to the families he is involved with] keep a bed in the master bedroom, or I’ve noticed that they keep, which they call a sponge [foam mattress]. So they keep sponges, usually in the master bedroom, per se.” Japoo noticed how families were also transforming their spaces, not just objects. In this case, the couch stuffing was used to make sitting mats which then doubled as sleeping spaces, “the pillows you sit on right while you eat tea and visit with them are the same ones that people sleep on.” For the family Japoo interacted with, the boundary between the bedroom and the living room was not clear-cut and was instead refitted to the rhythms of that family’s cultural practices. Japoo also felt that the height of the bunk beds was of concern to the parents of the family. He noticed that they were just not used to sleeping high up on a bed, and the parents felt that bunk beds were just not safe.

For Shannon, it was interesting to watch how the dining room chairs gradually disappeared.

I think there were eight or ten chairs, and we were just, yay. Almost everybody could sit, you know? Well, they didn’t use that. It just took up a lot of room, and gradually the chairs began to disappear, you know? And finally, the table did. And I still wonder what they did with that stuff. I hope they sold it or gave it to someone, but I don’t know who they’d give it to. But a lot of other sponsors [volunteers] say stuff just ended up in the dumpster. Well, that’s what I’m afraid of too, but you know, that’s ok. The person who gave those things never knew that, they did it with a good heart. We all did it. I mean, we were doing what we were supposed to do. Right?

Christine related a similar experience, except the family she had given a table to did not put the table in the dumpster but took it apart and put it in a closet instead. For her, it was confusing why you wouldn't use the table as counter space even if you did not eat there. She felt the apartment's kitchen was so small that they could have used the extra space. Centering functionality was a priority for Christine in how she visualized the use of furniture, but for the family she was helping, the mere presence of the table disrupted how they envisioned the use of their space.

Carpets were an incredibly important part of the post-hotel transformation of homes in the community, but they were absent from the furnishings list provided by Catholic Charities. Many families often found old carpets in dumpsters, prompting Catholic Charities to hold community meetings about the health risks involved in taking things out of dumpsters. Abby recalled walking into the apartment she had furnished and noticing the family had found old carpet from renovation dumpsters. Realizing the health risk, she bought the family carpet squares and large rugs to replace them. Amy took a family to Walmart after they requested carpets, where they explained that carpets had to be thick for walking and sitting, but not shaggy, since food would spill on them, and they needed to be able to clean them. The family clearly expressed to Amy how carpets were used and how the carpet's materiality was relevant to that function. Amy realized Walmart's limited sizes wouldn't work, so she turned to rugs.com, ordering oversized carpets to cover entire rooms and cutting the excess into hallway runners. Frustrated with the federal list of requirements, Amy used her church's funds to provide what families actually needed to make their homes feel right, a place where the sensory, the aesthetic, and the functional made sense culturally.

Anthropological work on refugee resettlement underscores how displaced people resist institutional control through material practices in the home. The disjunctions between mandated furnishings and Afghan cultural practice represent what Beeckmans, Singh, and Gola (2022) describe as a "struggle for empowerment," as families sought to find their "bearings," where reappropriating institutionally assigned objects becomes a political act within the "power geographies" born out of displacement, foregrounding displaced people as active agents in the process of making home (14, 20).

Afghan families in Oklahoma City embodied this active agency through material transformation, refusing passive acceptance of institutional norms and instead remaking spaces to align with their own cultural logics and practices. These transformations shed light on how ordinary objects, encounters, and spaces within the home offer meaningful insights into what it feels like to belong somewhere, and how even in displacement, communities actively remake home as a practice shaped by the intersection of sociocultural, temporal, economic, political, and spatial forces at work in their lives (Ratnam 2018; Beeckmans, Singh, and Gola 2022).

A New Chapter in Homemaking: The Afghan Markets and Home Today

As families settled into their new apartments and more men acquired driving licenses, families began to travel to Dallas to visit the various Afghan markets. These markets sell Afghan household goods, Afghan carpets, Afghan clothes, and Afghan food. Shannon saw the changes in the apartment she had furnished, "They drove to Dallas for some reason to meet somebody, and they bought some fabric, 'cause it was like overnight. They had the, the cushions covered in the rugs, you know, rug material." She described personally struggling during visits because there were no chairs to sit on, and it was very hard on her body, but ultimately, the family had

completely reshaped their living room to have no couches, just Afghan carpets and sitting cushions.

Kim and her family decided to purchase a house for the Afghan family they were helping, and moved them out of the apartments. The family expressed safety concerns about living in the apartment complex, and Kim decided that it made more sense for the family to live in the safety of a single-family home in a suburb of Oklahoma City. When it came time to move into the new house, Kim did not have to adhere to a list of federal requirements and was able to take a completely different approach by giving the family the freedom to shape the spaces in their new home as they saw fit:

Within two months of moving in we came over one time, and they had like these square cushions, like around the living room. Kind of on the perimeter that were super bright, like red and gold kind of printed material.... Within another couple of months, they had full area rugs, like over every square inch of their living room. Like wow. And they were all like bright, you know, those bright reds and like those kinds of oriental rugs, kind of that you know, just very colorful rugs, lots of red and gold.

Diana noticed these changes as well during home visits with families on her caseload: “I feel like there were obvious changes as far as the color of things, the vibrancy of things and the texture. There was like a carpet, maybe texture everywhere, like the ground on the things you were sitting on.” Similarly to Japoo, she noticed that the boundaries between American spaces like the living room and the bedroom blurred as each room was furnished with carpets and cushions instead of beds and couches, “I feel like one surprising thing is always that their like sitting room is in a bedroom and trying to figure out where people sleep. And I don’t always understand like where people are sleeping. ‘Cause my understanding is that they just all kind of sleep in the same room together.”

By 2023, families no longer had to travel to Dallas to visit Afghan markets. The owners of the Afghan market in Dallas realized the need for a market in Oklahoma City and opened one near the apartment complexes. Japoo remembers the aesthetic and material transformations in family homes that happened as families had more access to Afghan goods. “It was an evolution, though. Because initially it was mostly beds, which then those quickly went out, and then it evolved into the pillows. But the pillows were fabric, and I say pillows as a mattress, right? Then six months or a year later, really after the arrival of the Afghan market, that’s when I saw everyone getting the ornate version of the mattresses and pillows.”

I followed up by asking Japoo if this evolution took place in all the homes that he visited. He told me, “Oh, one hundred percent. Like and then slowly they’ll start with the main room, which is the main hosting room, or where the men sit. Then it [the evolution] goes into the women’s room. And then, finally, the last room will be the kids’ room. But that was kind of the pecking order of things for everything.” Japoo commented that in his view this spatial “evolution” had a lot to do with the family’s ability to host other people in their home, which is why the main room for the men to sit came first. He also noted that there are distinct aesthetic differences between how families of different ethnicities, rural and urban backgrounds, organize their homes, noting that Persian families from Kabul kept couches in their living rooms while also utilizing Afghan rugs.

Afghan markets and their role in transforming Afghan homes by providing access to Afghan home goods, such as carpets and cushions, are part of what Savaş (2014) calls a “taste culture.” For Savaş, studying Turkish migrants in Vienna, this taste culture emerges not from inherited tradition but from the specific experience of displacement and dwelling in a new place. Turkish migrants developed collective aesthetic preferences through shopping at Turkish stores,

circulating objects between Turkey and Vienna, and creating homes that visually and materially signaled Turkishness. This taste was shaped by “the desire for authenticity and the wish to reproduce traditions” as a performance of collective identity “embodied in the visual and material everyday” (203).

For Afghan families in OKC, a similar dynamic unfolds. Afghan markets provide objects that carry cultural and biographical significance: carpets, cushions, tea thermoses, and pressure cookers. Shopping at Afghan markets rather than Walmart becomes a way of asserting Afghanness through consumption. The objects purchased there enable families to create homes that look and feel Afghan, not because these objects are simply authentic imports from Afghanistan, but because they become meaningful through the Afghan experience of displacement. This “taste culture” is mapped onto domestic spaces and represents an agentic role taken by the community in shaping their homing experience post-displacement.

Curtains and “Culture Things”

From 2021 until the summer of 2025, when the fieldwork for this project took place, families indeed transformed their spaces and furnishings to suit their tastes, needs, culture, and comfort. In my own ethnographic work, I tried to take stock of what the homes of interlocutors looked like in 2025, four years after displacement and after having gone through the transformations that I detailed in the paragraphs above. In Oklahoma City today, there is not one, but two Afghan stores. Both stores carry the items that imbue Afghan homes with the Afghanness that permeates most aesthetic descriptions I have drawn from my ethnographic work.

One item that stood out to me, not only during fieldwork but also upon reflecting on my own experiences seeing Afghan homes transform through time, was the curtains. I am not referring to curtains for windows, although I also saw window curtains from the Afghan market in a couple of homes. I am referring to the use of curtains to recreate gendered spatial divisions, where men's and women's spaces are distinct. This practice is rooted in a cultural and religious framework. Anthropologist Andrea Chiovenda (2020), who conducted ethnographic research with Pashtun men in Afghanistan, notes that public shame and honor are key parts of the culturally constructed notion of the public and private spheres in Afghan life, where “any kind of relationship between two people of the opposite sex who are not closely related by blood or marriage is avoided as shameful” (41). Women are positioned as the bearers of the family honor, their behavior scrutinized, while men are expected to embody *ghairat*, publicly demonstrating virility and manliness (44). One of Chiovenda’s interlocutors describes “a typical” Pashtun household as one surrounded by walls (54). Walls are crucial for understanding how homes in Afghanistan are spatially organized because they play a role in “the control by men over women’s autonomy in the public sphere” (60). A neighbor being able to see over the wall would threaten a family’s honor (74). It is this spatial and moral logic, *purdah*, the separation of genders, enforced through architecture and material culture, that Afghan families map onto their American homes.

During an interview with a male interlocutor about home décor that wasn't quite clicking, I blurted out, “Tell me about those curtains?” He looked up at me, surprised by my interruption, and said, “We just want things to look nice.” I asked if the colors of the curtains mattered, and he said no. I wanted to ask other questions, but I opted to let him tell me what he wanted to say. His house is particularly important because when he lived in the apartments, he used curtains to

partition the living room, creating a space for the men separate from the dining room and the kitchen, so his wife could sit with the other women when friends visited. In his new house, also acquired with the help of volunteers from a local church, every section of the house was partitioned by curtains. The main entrance leads into three doorways. Two of these doorways, the ones that lead into the living room and the kitchen, have curtains hanging from them. The third doorway leads into another hallway where the three bedrooms and a bathroom are located. One bedroom has a queen-size bed. The room is covered in the thick red Afghan carpets everyone buys at the Afghan market. Cushions line the walls around the bed, creating a mini sitting space within the bedroom. The room where the kids hang out has a television, some cushions on the floor, and one bed with no blankets or sheets on it.

From speaking with the interlocutor's wife, all the little kids sleep in the main bedroom with them. The third room is used for male guests and for the teenage boys to sleep in. This bedroom is also covered in thick Afghan carpets. It has a couple of chairs against a wall, and the perimeter is also lined with Afghan sitting cushions that double as sleeping mats. If guests come over, the wife cooks in the kitchen, where the other women sit with her, as there is a carpeted dining room space. She then takes the meals to the men's guest room and leaves the food outside the door for one of the men to bring inside. The male guests know not to go behind the curtain leading to the kitchen. The main living room space is used for large numbers of guests and is also covered in an extra-large Afghan rug. The perimeter is lined with both couches and floor cushions. The curtains call attention to how this family culturally curated the space of the home. The curtains direct the flow in the home, setting boundaries, defining spaces, and the movement of bodies, and yes, some of them also make the home look nice. More importantly, the curtains are intentionally placed to ensure that other male guests cannot see the wife and the other women

who come to visit, thus mapping cultural and religious practices around modesty onto the domestic space of the home. Other families described very different beginnings. Jan Gul, for instance, recalled his experience of walking into his rental apartment in Oklahoma for the first time.

After leaving Afghanistan with one backpack, one change of clothes, and one extra change of clothes for his youngest son, Jan Gul and his family found themselves resettled in Oklahoma City. When it was time to move into the apartment, his caseworker contacted him. Jan Gul found it very unfair that he couldn't see his apartment before signing a one-year lease that committed him to paying one year of rent. As is the practice in many apartment complexes in the United States, a model apartment is shown to the prospective renter, and the renter does not see their apartment until move-in day. He said that when he moved in there was one couch, four beds, and no carpets. He recalled that, "there was nothing in my house." As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the volunteer who furnished his apartment made it clear his job was to furnish his house, and he did not have time for further involvement. Nevertheless, Jan Gul began a process to transform his own home into one he deemed suitable for his family. He explained to me that he got rid of all the beds and reworked the layout in the two bedrooms. One bedroom was for his family, where he would sleep with his wife and kids, and the second bedroom became a room for guests.

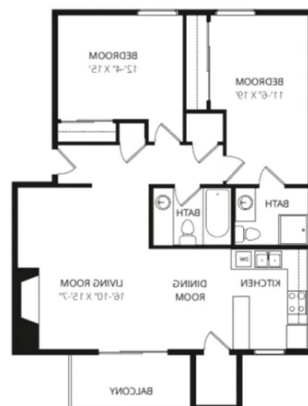


Figure 2: Jan Gul apartment layout

The room for guests, one of the two bedrooms in this two-bedroom apartment, is covered in Afghan carpets, and every wall is lined with Afghan sitting cushions. Against one wall in the living room, they put a couch, and against the other, they set Afghan floor cushions to sit on. The dining room table, which sits against the wall next to the kitchen in this open concept apartment, is used to set food and other kitchen items, and all meals take place on the floor in the living room. Jan Gul explained to me that he needed to make one of the bedrooms a guest room because if family members come, they need a room to sleep in as well. He added that if the guests are men, they can eat and sleep in the guest room without having access to the kitchen and the living room, where the women would hang out. He explained that other men should not see his wife's face, so they can just sit in another room. He described this as "culture things" as he explained how important it was to keep men and women separate. He was very candid in explaining the gendered dimensions of how he felt the space needed to align with his and his family's cultural practices.

Jan Gul's accounts of what was spatially important to him in transforming the domestic space in his apartment call attention to how transforming the home activated the domestic spaces to fit cultural notions of space distribution, function, and gender. He portrays these notions as "culture things," and they are in the sense that they reveal a deeply embedded pattern of meaning that, although negotiated in this American setting because of the inevitability of existing in American-designed space, nonetheless largely dictates how people and objects need to move and position themselves within the home. I asked him what he hoped for the future, and he specifically said that he would like to own his own house without paying interest. He wants four bedrooms and a three-car garage. Jan Gul wants a house he can call his own with enough space for his growing family and hosting family comfortably. Interestingly, these aspirations of home

ownership, multiple bedrooms, and garage space, align closely with American middle-class desires, even as Jan Gul articulates them through Afghan cultural notions of home: enough space for a growing family, for hosting guests properly, and financial independence achieved without interest.

These interviews elucidated how these individuals (and their families) imprint a moral order onto their domestic spaces (Dumovich 2024, 346). Both men sought to spatially and materially reinforce the dynamics that ensure familial honor and modesty by choreographing the movement of bodies within the home according to gender. By disregarding the spatial logic of their American-designed homes, they imaginatively reprogram their space through material culture. Through the strategic placement of curtains and through singling out specific rooms for men to sit in apart from women, the flow of people in this home was curated to ensure separation of genders, and to ensure that the men don't see each other's wives' faces. This way, men can sit in a room with a closed door, while the women prepare food in the kitchen and bring the food to the door without risking their faces being seen, ensuring *purdah* or secluding women from public view. Interestingly, Chioventa also explains how men who have been lifelong friends since childhood "will never see each other's wives" (104). For the women, this means being able to keep their modesty and perform their shyness, modesty or shame, their *sharm*, which is fundamental to their reputation as women and the husband's reputation as well.

Bibi Naghma and Home Today

Around the apartment complex, Bibi Naghma has a reputation for accumulating stuff. When you walk into her house, it is filled with all kinds of objects that she has obtained. Most objects she owns, she has acquired for free. She advocates for herself and makes friends easily. One friend gifted her a blue KitchenAid mixer that sits in a corner of the living room on a

wooden table. At an event that was held at her children's school, she acquired a vacuum robot, which sits somewhere in her bedroom. My favorite object in her house is a large rug with Santa Claus on it. This rug sits below the television in her living room, and when I asked her where she got it, she said, "Goodwill." I asked her and her oldest daughter if they knew who Santa Claus was, and they both said no. I tried to explain, as best I could, about an old, chubby man who flies in the sky and brings presents on Christmas, but Bibi Naghma and her daughter seemed totally uninterested in this explanation.



Figure 3: Bibi Naghma living room wall

Ever since Bibi Naghma and her family moved into the apartments, they have always had an Afghan flag hanging in the middle of the living room wall. It is centered to maximize visibility, and it is integral to how Bibi Naghma's home is uniquely constituted. During one visit, Sheer Khan, Bibi Naghma's husband, showed me how he taught their toddler to salute the flag—he kept telling me to look at how the little girl looked up at the flag and saluted the way he used to in the Afghan army; palm facing out, head held high, stiff body.

Over time, other wall decorations began to join the flag on the wall. First, a small round plaque with a Qur'anic inscription on it. Then, a couple of years later, a medium-sized handmade wall hanging of the word Allah in Arabic. Months later, a circular wooden carving with all the names of Allah in white. This particular wall hanging was hung in every room. Bibi Naghma wanted Islam and the Qur'an to be on her walls—visible from many angles. These are constant reminders of something she holds dear.

The prayer clock rings dependably at every prayer time, marking the everyday rhythms of home. Everywhere you look, the Qur'an is present. Every afternoon, her daughters go to Qur'an class at a neighbor's house. If you drive through her apartment complex at a specific time in the afternoon, groups of girls, all with Qur'ans in hand, walk to the house of the woman who teaches all the neighborhood kids' recitation. One day, I enquired why everyone went to this woman's house and not the mosque, since the mosque has Saturday Qur'an classes. The simple answer I was given was, "because she is Afghan." It is important for the community that an Afghan teach the Qur'an.

This is the answer that I get to most questions about domestic spaces and the choice of specific objects that populate them— "because it is Afghan." Behind this seemingly simple answer is a world of meaning that informs decisions made about domestic spaces, furniture, objects, and movement in the home. When Bibi Naghma has guests, they sit in a specific place depending on the occasion. During a party, special guests sit in one of the bedrooms, while the other guests sit in the living room. She also prepares the nut plates and tea thermoses in her bedroom out of view from her guests. The food is prepared beforehand, so when the other women arrive, the food is already prepared in the kitchen. When I visit alone, I sit with Bibi Naghma in the living room, where we often have lunch with her husband and kids. She always

asks me to sit and wait while she prepares the tea, often kicking me out of the kitchen and telling me to go relax. She grows cucumbers and peppers in the small patch of dirt in her concrete apartment patio, serving them with lunch as she uses them to make chutney. During winter, the thick Afghan blankets are available for warmth, all stacked in their plastic containers in a corner of the guest room.

This is Bibi Naghma's house. Her cultural practices, mapped onto the spaces of the apartment, imbue the space with a palpable Afghanness that permeates the senses and aesthetically exemplifies what she feels a space needs to look like, to feel like. This is not Afghanistan, her watan, her homeland. Yet her apartment recalls elements of watan as she materially constitutes it through space and objects. Despite the list, despite the rupture, Bibi Naghma curated a space to fit the rhythms of life, the desire for relationality, and the cultural practices that assuage the tension between loss and reconstitution.

Much like Bibi Marwa's home, with the garden of flowerpots lining the brick stairwell and the Afghan rug covering the carpeted living room floor, Bibi Naghma transformed an American apartment into an Afghan home. When Bibi Marwa showed me the video of her home in Afghanistan, her smile revealed the pain of distance from watan. Yet in her Oklahoma apartment, surrounded by cushions arranged on three sides of the room, Islamic art on the walls, she has created a space where she can sit with guests, pour tea, and enact the hospitality practices that define Afghan relationality. The apartment is not Afghanistan, but it carries Afghanistan within it through carpets, curtains, cushions, and the spatial arrangements that enable families to live as they imagine Afghans should live.

Across the community, Afghan families engaged in similar acts of transformation. They discarded bunk beds and dining tables, hung curtains to partition spaces, covered floors with Afghan rugs, and filled their homes with objects that carried biographical and cultural significance. These material transformations were not simply about aesthetic preference or nostalgic attachment to the past. They were acts of agency, resistance, and world-making: ways of contesting institutional norms, asserting Afghanness, and reconstituting home after rupture. Through objects and spatial practices, families mediated the tension between watan and their new lives in America, creating homes that honored memory while responding to the realities of displacement.

The home, in this context, became more than a shelter. It became a site of cultural continuity, relational belonging, and the ongoing negotiation of what it means to be Afghan in Oklahoma City. As Boccagni argues, home is not a fixed place but an active, continuous process of homing: creating familiarity, security, and control in new spaces. For Afghan families, homing involved material, relational, and imaginative work. It meant transforming physical spaces through hanging curtains, layering carpets, and converting rooms to guest rooms. It meant rebuilding social networks in a new community by developing new rhythms of sociality with neighbors in apartment complexes. And it meant negotiating between memories of origin and realities of resettlement. This chapter has shown how that work unfolded in the intimate spaces of apartments through curtains, carpets, cushions, and the daily acts of arranging, curating, and dwelling that turned American apartments into Afghan homes.

Chapter 2: Food and Hospitality

Bibi Naghma's beans have always been my favorite. She takes a simple can of red kidney beans and turns it into a delicious dish with just a couple of ingredients. Sometimes when her daughter makes them, they taste even better. The mix of salt, cilantro, and the spicy pepper she slices into the beans as they cook creates a flavor profile that pairs perfectly with the flatbread Bibi Naghma bakes every day in her little apartment kitchen. As I sat in my usual spot in her living room, I listened as she opened the can of beans. I heard her pour them into the hot oil—she added enough oil to sauté but not to completely fry the beans as she cooked them. A very soft, gentle sizzle emanated from the pan. I decided to stand up and watch as she cooked lunch. As the beans simmered gently, she worked on the rice in the pressure cooker. This was the smell that began to fill the house. A mix of spices and chicken.

First, she pressure-cooked the chicken. She then took it out and used its juices and more oil to cook the rice she had soaking on her kitchen counter for the past hour or so. As the rice cooked in the pressure cooker, and the beans continued to simmer, she took a ball of dough from the counter where she'd been resting the bread dough from that morning and shaped it into a flat piece of dough. She sternly slapped the dough, and it echoed every time she switched the dough from hand to hand to shape it. She laid the dough directly on the oven rack and cooked it under the broiler. This is how all the women cook their bread in this apartment complex. She closed the oven door and cupped her hand over the pressure release of the pressure cooker, and smelled a tiny bit of steam she had released into her hand, a brief hiss punctuated the space. This was how she gauged whether the rice was ready or not. She let the rice cook for a couple of more minutes. She opened the oven door, flipped the bread, and closed the oven door—the smell of freshly baked bread taking shape as the bread baked on both sides. Bibi Naghma then generously added

salt, cilantro with its sweet-woody smell, and chopped spicy green pepper into the beans, stirred them all together, then covered the pot and turned off the heat. Now the rice was ready. She put the chicken back in the rice, mixed it all, and it was ready to serve. I have watched Bibi Naghma cook these dishes many times. She moves through the steps of making meals like a well-rehearsed choreography, reestablishing many of the rhythms she had to leave behind through the daily practice of making food.

Food emerged as a consistent site for (re)constituting home and belonging after a painful rupture from Afghanistan. Since the community arrived in 2021, food has marked how interlocutors have sought to create cultural continuity amid what may feel like endless cultural negotiations in a new place. In this particular context of Afghan displacement and resettlement in Oklahoma City, food practices are inflected not only by culture, gender, and religion, dynamics well-documented in anthropological studies of food (Meneley 2011, 23), but also by the experience of becoming a diasporic community in a place where even the aesthetics of American streets cause discomfort and longing for Afghanistan. This discomfort elevates the status of food as a site for cultural continuity not only because food practices are deeply embedded in Afghan culture, but also because they can be readily reproduced from memory, embodied knowledge, and the imaginative practices of everyday life. Through food, interlocutors were able to recreate the smells and tastes of home and (re)engage in the daily practices that punctuated the rhythms of life in Afghanistan.

Afghans, as they seek to recreate their favorite dishes and create the sensory world of home in the United States, incorporate the material in culturally specific ways. Here, interlocutors' notions of Afghanness come to the fore as they choose pots, pans, utensils, and ingredients. The material and aesthetic composition of kitchens, meals, and material interactions

with food create moments for Afghanness to emerge, be asserted, and create a sense of belonging. A similar point is made by Savas (2014), in their ethnography of the Turkish community in Vienna, which depicts the “forms and spaces of Turkish material culture as belongings that serve as terrains of a collective sense of belonging once they have been appropriated as part of Turkishness in Vienna.” This material expression of Afghanness through foodways and hospitality “define an area of control” that is essential in how communities navigate diasporic identities and the “recontextualization” of Oklahoma City as home (Savas 2011, 192).

The previous chapter outlined the process of how volunteers furnished homes for Afghan families. Here, I detail the parts of this process having to do with the kitchen specifically, to avoid redundancy and because a particular focus on the kitchen is necessary to contextualize the material terrain of food practices in the home after living in the hotel (Savas 2014, 193). The dynamic nature of how food practices and hospitality developed in the apartments versus the hotel is an important contextualizing factor because it highlights not only the changes and flux of how families reestablished food practices once they had their own kitchen, but also because it highlights how materiality and material culture are sites where Afghanness is constituted, daily rhythms are established, and a culturally inflected sensory experience ensues.

In what follows, I illustrate how food mediates Afghanness, not only in sensory dimensions through the comfort of making and eating Afghan food, but also in how it acts as a glue for relational practices in the community through hospitality. In short, food practices are essential to the Afghan experience of resettling in Oklahoma City. I contextualize these practices within different moments to indicate the ways that food and culinary objects, such as pressure cookers, mediate the desire for cultural continuity, maintain an Afghan aesthetics of flavor, and

fashion a modicum of comfort after displacement. I conclude with an ethnographic sketch of making cookies with an interlocutor in the summer of 2025 as a way to paint a picture of the “terrains of belonging” of food practices and hospitality that compose a sense of home and belonging (Savas, 2011, 191).

2021: The Hotel, Walmart, the Halal Mart, and Hot Plates

Volunteers who have been working with the community, including the interlocutors of this project, often characterized the time the community spent in the hotel as difficult for many reasons. The hotel became the first place that newly arrived families began a process of picking up the pieces after fleeing from Afghanistan. The hotel rooms were the first place families had privacy after the military camps. In the ad hoc reception camps the military put together to support the arrival of Afghans fleeing from Kabul during the Kabul airlift, families shared living spaces, and families were often separated just by a hung-up sheet that acted as a wall. It was a chaotic and stressful time for many.¹

¹ An interlocutor described how upon arrival at the military camp in Fort Dix, New Jersey, there seemed to be no plan for how to provide food for the hundreds of Afghans arriving weekly. The men at the camp formed a “*jirga*,” a council that makes decisions based on consensus, and collectively decided to ask the military personnel running the camp if Afghan men could work in the kitchen. Their request was granted and they were able to cook Afghan food for the stream of arriving families. This was the experience of one interlocutor in New Jersey, but experiences for other Afghans varied across the other seven military bases across the United States set up to receive families. In September 2021, an Afghan man named Hamed Ahmadi tweeted on the platform “X” about the food he was receiving in the military camp in New Mexico upon his arrival after leaving Afghanistan and received backlash, mostly in the form of racist vitriol, from other “X” users for complaining about the food. Despite this, he was able to secure meetings

In OKC, the resettlement agency provided families with all their meals at the hotel - the rooms were not equipped with kitchenettes, and families were told that cooking in the rooms was against hotel policies. At mealtimes, one representative from each family would go downstairs to a room at the end of a hallway on the first floor of the hotel and pick up to-go boxes containing halal food (meaning food that is permissible under Islamic law) for their families. In my own recollection of this time, I often remember families quietly expressing their frustration with these meals. The food was unfamiliar and tasted nothing like home. Volunteers shared with me their own recollections of how families took matters into their own hands and decided to start cooking some of their own food despite the outlined hotel policies.

When I asked a volunteer, Kim, if she bought her assigned family a hot plate for their room, she said, “Yes, which I found out later was forbidden by the hotel, but everybody had them. Yeah, they were so happy.” Japoo recalled, “We ended up getting them a, um, hot plate and just a simple pot and a pan. And they started doing some cooking outta their own, you know, hotel room, which wasn’t ideal. Cause I know the hotel wasn’t happy about it, but they were all

with high level military personnel to discuss issues “like food, safety, hygiene and integration,” (Ahmadi 2021). Hamed added in a following tweet that he had collected feedback from other Afghans on the food situation and had shared it with the officials he had been meeting with. The interlocutors’ experience and the experience described by Hamed Ahmadi show not only how different experiences took shape at different camps, but they also show how food became a site of agency during this time where advocacy around food surfaced from the community itself.

doing it.” Japoo went on to explain that he noticed that cooking was such an important part of the family’s identity and was also an attempt at making the hotel room feel a bit more like home. He remembers noticing how being able to cook some food was particularly important for the women. I asked Japoo if he felt as though what he observed might have been the women having agency in these ad hoc hotel food practices, and he said, “Correct. Cause that’s their identity, that’s their responsibility to welcome someone into the home. They are responsible for providing those things. Not necessarily directly to me as a male, but definitely to anyone that walked in.” Japoo observed how families sought the ability to establish hospitality practices and how intrinsically they were linked with having the tools to make bread, tea, lunch, or dinner. Schneider’s (2025) description of *guesting* practices among Afghan women in refugee accommodations in Berlin echoes the dynamics that emerged in the hotel once people began buying hot plates, tea kettles, and thermoses.

Volunteers supported Afghan families in establishing food practices at the hotel and would drive family members, mostly the men, to Walmart or a store called “India Bazaar” for food shopping trips. During this time, I recall driving groups of Afghan men to India Bazaar for quick grocery runs, even though Walmart was within walking distance, so that they could have access to halal goods. I often wondered how I would fit the groceries of five people in my car, but we always managed to squeeze in everyone’s purchases. These grocery trips were not just for cooking every meal on the hot plate; they were also intended for purchases of a steady supply of nuts and tea to have in the room for visits, continuing cultural practices of hospitality, or just to snack on throughout the day.

These shopping trips were possible because each family received welcome money, and once families began to receive their federal government identifications from their caseworkers,

they became eligible to receive SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program). In other words, since their arrival in Oklahoma City, families were given specific cash amounts based on family size, and later they received food stamps (USDA 2021). Japoo related to me how Catholic Charities, “at the time, was so overwhelmed they were handing me their welcome money and saying, ‘Here, could you help distribute it?’ And so, I was the one handing it out and getting a signature sign-off. Both cash, checks, and cards.” The cash support these families received allowed them to engage in food practices on their own terms.

Jan Gul described to me the first time he went shopping at the Walmart near the hotel. He emphasized the shock he felt after he converted the cost of eight tomatoes from dollars to Afghanis. He recalled thinking how expensive America was, but he used his money to buy grapes, bananas, and apples at Walmart. Another interlocutor related how he was struck by the size of Walmart as a store. He described how he had never seen that much merchandise and food in one place; it was overwhelming. Kim described how two Afghan men she took to Walmart “froze, and they were just staring around, and I was trying to keep up the talk and, you know, like what, what do you need?.... So, we walked through the food, the food took forever because they didn’t understand the packaging and everything.” Kim said she started to pull up pictures of foods on her phone, showing the men, and then directing them to where they could find them. She bought them large amounts of rice and flour, and spices like paprika. She added that the families of the two men requested yeast, but it took some time for her to figure out what exactly they were asking for, and once she did, she showed them where yeast was located. Despite language barriers, families found ways to make Afghan bread from scratch in the hotel using a hot plate. After obtaining bowls, women began to use flour and yeast to make dough, *khameer*, in the morning. Once risen, they shaped the dough into balls. After resting the dough, the women

slapped it between their hands, flattening the balls of dough one by one. Then it was immediately placed on a pan to cook on both sides. This resulted in warm, Afghan flat bread to have with meals.

Afghan families were engaging in what Parin Dossa (2011) describes in her multi-sited ethnography with widows in Kabul and Afghan refugee women in Vancouver as reconstituting the world with dignity through collaborative work for maintaining social and cultural practices (99). The yearning to reestablish food practices was not just rooted in satisfying hunger; it was rooted instead in reestablishing a place where people were able to engage in the social practices of hospitality that define much of Afghan relationality. Cooking Afghan food meant that families could have a guest or two over, that social roles could be integrated into daily life once again, and that families could imagine from memory what had been stripped away in displacement. Kim's memories of going to Walmart with these two men only described the experiences of the men seeing Walmart for the first time. But all the foods they sought were then cooked by their wives and their daughters and were then eaten together in the privacy of their hotel rooms, thanks to "collaborative work." Dossa's work shows what food can bring to light. In the hotel, the food practices families sought to reestablish, brought to light a deep desire for home, for kinship, and for the sensory comfort of home-cooked food. After each family was placed in apartment housing, a new process of constructing their new kitchens began.

Constituting Afghan Kitchens in OKC: Pressure Cookers and Thermoses

As the resettlement agency began to gradually place families in apartment complexes around the city, volunteers were tasked with the work of furnishing Afghan homes according to federal refugee resettlement guidelines. In interviews with volunteers introduced in the previous chapter, this list came up frequently. Although most could not find a copy of it, one volunteer

shared her notes from a meeting for volunteers with Catholic Charities staff, and another volunteer gave me a “partner families guide” put together by a non-profit organization, which also included a list of home items suggested by Catholic Charities. In this chapter, I will touch on the kitchen-specific aspects of this list.

The kitchen items section of the list provided in the “partner families guide” included: kitchen table, kitchen chairs, one place setting of table ware for each family member (forks, knives, spoons), one place setting of dishes (plate, bowl and cup), water glass set, place mats, pots and pans, mixing/serving bowls, set of kitchen utensils (spatula, wooden spoon, knife, serving utensils), hot pads, cutting board, large cutting knife, can opener, dish rack, dish rags, cutlery tray, kitchen towel, dish soap, trash can, trash bags, cleaner, broom/dustpan, food allowance until EBT cards arrive, additional culturally appropriate food items and a microwave. Volunteers were supposed to obtain these items and put them in the kitchen before families moved in so that they would be ready upon move-in.

Kim describes this as a “full kitchen set up” when recalling with overwhelm the different parts of the home she would need to furnish for the ten-person family she was assigned as a volunteer. Much like what happened with home furnishings for other parts of the house, volunteers were caught between the bureaucratic constraints set by Catholic Charities through the federal list of required items and the needs the families themselves were articulating as essential for their new kitchens. In interviews, volunteers described the discrepancy between what they had to put in the kitchen and what the families considered essential cooking supplies. The frustration from these memories was palpable in their facial expression and tone. In other words, the list did not attend to how Afghans make bread, what pressure cooker they prefer for making rice, or the material of the utensils used in cooking, such as metal cooking spoons.

Volunteers had to fulfill the list requirements and then fulfill the family's needs outside of the list as well.

In interviews, only one volunteer, Amy, had awareness of Afghan food practices because of her father's past in the military and the stories she heard from military personnel coming back from deployments to Afghanistan. She was keenly aware that the list did not contain items that were essential for an Afghan home: "And I just knew from the list, none of this stuff is things that they're going to use or be familiar with." Other volunteers, after supplying the items on the agency list, used their own funds to buy the extra items and food requested by the families. Kim recollected how bread-making supplies were pivotal to the family she worked with. Kim did not know about Afghan bread-making practices. She describes navigating this lack of knowledge through language barriers, "It was so hard because I did not even know what Afghan bread looked like.....You're like, you're like, is it a loaf of bread? Is it flat bread? So, I'm like, oh, like a loaf pan and you know, no, not like that." After "a lot of back and forth" with the family, Kim took the mom to the store with her to show her what was available for cooking bread. Because the bread is flat, the mom in this family chose a "big sized pizza system that they've set on top of their burners."

Constituting the kitchen in the apartments became a pivotal site of negotiation and tension as bureaucratic standards were imposed in the lives of people who owned very little and were invested in reconstituting their places of food-making in a way that felt right, and essentially, Afghan. Jan Gul described moving into the apartment as especially difficult for his wife, who, upon noticing the kitchen supplies furnished by volunteers, began to cry. The small pots, five plates, five spoons, five cups evoked a reaction, "She was crying, how will we cook?" remarked Jan Gul. As we sat on the floor, Jan Gul's kids sitting around us, his wife farthest away

from me, bouncing the baby, he continued to tell me how there was no food in the fridge and how he called his caseworker to tell them he had no food and he needed to go to Walmart. This was quite different from what volunteers related in their experiences stocking the kitchens of the families they worked with and their intentional efforts to provide a minimum of food staples upon the families' move-in. For Jan Gul and his wife, the lack of kitchen supplies, food, and utensils made the house feel as if his house was empty. He recalls thinking he needed a big metal spoon, a pressure cooker, and a big pot, which Afghans refer to as a *deegh*. As time passed, Jan Gul was able to purchase his own kitchen supplies, and during our interview, he remarked about his wife, "She was so happy when we got our things."

Although Jan Gul's experience was not universal, even families whose kitchens had been stocked more comprehensively contested what the list assumed as basic kitchen supplies. This contestation sheds light on the gendered nature of Afghan food practices. Jan Gul cites his wife crying at the sight of the paltry set of kitchen supplies they were given, and Kim realizes she has to take the main bread maker—the mom—to the store with her to pick out bread-making supplies. Constituting the kitchen to fit Afghan needs required the input of women because they are the ones who make food every day.

These ill-suited kitchen supplies had an agentive quality, prompting the families to transform their kitchen into what they considered a properly stocked kitchen that could support Afghan food practices. The wrong-sized pot or a plastic cooking spoon were in tension with the embodied food practices the women sought to reestablish in their new homes. These transformations were guided by women, who advocated to their husbands or a volunteer what supplies were necessary for their different cooking techniques. Similarly, Daniel Miller (2001) describes the ways that specific objects in the kitchen are not neutral and have the power to

shape and reflect the gendered dynamics of his interlocutors' London kitchen in his study of home possessions. Miller discusses how do-it-yourself technology in the kitchen reconstructed gender roles because it allowed for "a male role in the house, contrasted with females who took exclusive responsibility for aesthetic decisions" (113). In other words, gender roles can inflect the material terrain of the kitchen and reflect specific gendered dynamics in a home.

Finding Ingredients and Halal Meat: Afghan Markets

Access to food ingredients and foodstuffs was facilitated by the various halal markets in the city that provided halal meats and products that, although not Afghan, regularly circulated in Afghanistan and were known to much of the community. Interlocutors, often with the help of volunteers, navigated a landscape of halal markets that allowed families to make Afghan food at home. Aside from specific vegetables, such as gandana or Afghan leeks, which are not grown in the United States, interlocutors were able to make bread, beans, rice, soups, and traditional dishes such as Kabuli Palau. Shannon, a volunteer, remembers how taking the family she was helping to different halal markets was fun and "opened my eyes [to] Some of the good stuff." Amy recalls using her network to connect families with a man in Spencer, Oklahoma, who would sell the families fresh goat meat, and going to various stores to look for the specific type of pine nuts a family had requested.

Once families acquired cars, they were able to travel to cities such as San Antonio, Dallas, and Wichita to visit the Afghan markets where imported goods, such as kitchen utensils, were readily available. The first local Afghan market opened a couple of years after the community resettled in Oklahoma City, and now there are two markets, both including kebab restaurants that serve traditional Afghan dishes. Visiting these markets is like stepping into a place completely imbued with the Afghanness that interlocutors actively seek to infuse into their

homes, their clothes, their foods, and their daily lives. Afghan markets have become integral to how the community materially sources objects and foods central to mediating Afghanness as it is imagined in this new diasporic environment. That said, interlocutors often complain that they prefer to shop at Walmart and Aldi because the Afghan markets are too expensive. Sourcing food is not a one-dimensional, straightforward activity for interlocutors. They love finding things at the Afghan store—especially sweets, tea, freshly made bread, and energy drinks, but they are also conscious about money, how much is on their food stamp card, and therefore, make shopping choices that fit their means. Afghan shopping strategies resemble what Miller (1999) describes for north Londoners in *A Theory of Shopping*. Miller demonstrates “how shoppers develop and imagine those social relationships which they most care about through the medium of selecting goods” (3). He contends that “the treat”, special purchases, and “thrift” (strategies shoppers use to save money), are central concepts to how people experience shopping (4).

Even with this accessibility to ingredients and meat, interlocutors preferred to slaughter their own meat and would do so frequently. One day, when I was dropping in for a visit with Baran, I walked into the kitchen to find her and her husband cutting up the meat of a goat the husband had just slaughtered in the proper halal way at a farm outside of Oklahoma City. A distinct bloody meat smell tinged the air and filled my nostrils. They were splitting the different chunks of meat into different plastic grocery bags for freezing. I saw a couple of metal bowls on the ground that contained bloody water from cleaning all the pieces of meat by soaking them in cold water for some time. Baran grabbed the last chunks, skillfully scooping them out of the water all at once. I saw the blood water swirl as her hand grabbed the meat, whose fatty and cartilaginous texture called my attention. Baran’s husband engaged in conversation with me, telling me about how far the goat farm was, but that he slaughtered the goat himself to make it

halal. Baran walked around, cleaning up and putting the remaining bags of meat in the freezer. He then told me that he split this goat with his friend so that it would be cheaper. I wondered if half a goat is enough. About ten people are living in his home. Ten people who eat three meals a day require a lot of food, I thought to myself. As he talked, I quickly remembered how last summer he had chickens and how important it was for him to eat fresh chicken. We talked about the goat a bit more, and I headed out. Although I had no problem talking about the goat slaughtering, I was afraid that they would ask me to stay to eat some of the new meat. I do not enjoy the taste of goat, so I swiftly made my exit.

Bibi Naghma's family similarly prioritized fresh, slaughtered meat. A couple of years ago, I went to her home for a visit during the Eid holiday. When I walked in, a blue tarp covered a portion of a cow that Sheer Khan, Bibi Naghma's husband, had slaughtered and split with a friend. That day was the first time I was not sure what part of the cow I was eating in my meal. I also could not see exactly what part of the cow was under the blue tarp. By its texture, I could tell organ meat made up most of the dish. This summer, during the fieldwork for this project, Bibi Naghma very proudly fed me fresh chicken her husband had just slaughtered.

More recently, Bibi Naghma invited me to what she called "the Mexican Market" located on the outskirts of Oklahoma City. When I arrived with my two kids in tow, I realized that Bibi Naghma had invited me to a swap meet. She wanted to show me where she shops for live chickens. We walked around with her family shopping and having a nice time. When we would come upon a cage with chickens, Bibi Naghma would open it, slip her hand under the chicken's body, lift up, and evaluate whether the chicken was worth buying or not. She would ask me, or one of her kids, to ask the seller for the price of specific chickens—that day, none of the chickens went home with Bibi Naghma and her family. I was able to see her embodied and sensory

approach to picking chickens: squatting to the ground, feeling the chicken's weight, and evaluating their health by looking at their body language. She would point out if a chicken wasn't healthy and look through the different cages to see if a chicken was suitable. Bibi Naghma's interactions with the chickens reflect what Grasseni (2007), in her work with Italian cattle breeders, calls "skilled visions": A form of embodied, multi-sensory expertise developed through apprenticeship that is deeply tied to identity and belonging (42).

As we walked around, a couple of sellers asked me in Spanish about Bibi Naghma and her family, curious about the language we were speaking together and where they were from, then relating to me that they see Afghans all the time but did not really know where they were from. Sheer Khan, who kept buying my kids \$1 or \$2 toys every time they asked from the junk bins at different stalls, told me that they liked this market because it reminded him and his family of home. The outdoor stalls, the noise of the animals, and the interactions with the sellers felt to them like an outdoor market in Afghanistan, lively and busy, human in a way that strip malls aren't. In this seemingly unlikely place, this family feels an affinity for home as they recall it in their memories. The notion of freshness is highlighted to me every time the meat is from a freshly slaughtered animal. Much like Baran's husband, Bibi Naghma and her husband invest time and money in finding affordable fresh meat to have for their meals and for the meals they feed guests.

An emphasis on freshness reveals several aspects of interlocutors' relationship to their food practices. There are cultural, sensory, and cosmological dynamics simultaneously at play in securing fresh meat. Parin Dossa's (2011) ethnographic work with Afghan women, referenced earlier, consistently describes how meat is central in the relational and social dynamics between families and friends in Afghanistan. Not having meat for guests is a source of shame and women

would borrow from neighbors to secure fresh meat if relatives, in-laws, or friends were coming over. Anne Meneley's work in Yemen (2011) similarly attends to the weight that generosity with food carries in social relationships, noting that what a family served you, whether meat or fish, configure social dynamics (22). For his part, David Sutton (2010) offers the concept of *gustemology* to capture how taste and sensory aspects of food organize cultural meanings and cosmological understandings (213).

The gustemology of fresh meat here is undergirded by spiritual notions of what constitutes halal meat and the continuity of a taste of home, where fresh meat was not only slaughtered by Afghans, but it was also always bought fresh from a butcher or slaughtered from personal animal stock. Being able to slaughter animals yourself ensures the purity of the halalness of the meat, reinforcing the religious cosmological order of an Afghan inflected Islam. The taste of fresh meat then invokes a sensory experience rooted in what interlocutors continue to remember and actively imagine to be the taste of home, recreating aspects of the material and sensory terrain that they left behind.

Pressure Cookers



Figure 4: Mozhgan's Afghan pressure cooker

As volunteers stocked kitchens according to government lists and then restocked them based on Afghan families' input, one object emerged as particularly significant: the Afghan pressure cooker. Of the interlocutors who participated in this project, only one did not have an Afghan pressure cooker—Nazo refused to have one after one exploded while she was cooking back in Afghanistan. For other interlocutors, the Afghan pressure cooker is a staple in their kitchen.

As Shannon said about navigating the list of home objects she needed to get for the family she was helping, “the one thing that was not on the list and should have been for a lot of people is the pressure cooker. You know? ‘cause that was the first thing they, they asked for.” I followed up by asking her if she got one for the family. She responded, “Oh yeah, yeah.” Similarly, the caseworker I interviewed for this project bluntly stated, “They wanted rice cookers.”

Amy, who was tasked with stocking the kitchens of five different families, acknowledged that although every family was different and perhaps they each had their own specific food

practices in Afghanistan, “they all mentioned these pressure cookers that they used, and so we found them online and sourced them from Afghanistan and bought them for each of our families for Christmas.” She reminisced that as soon as the families opened their gifts and saw the pressure cookers, they were eager to invite Amy and her group of volunteers over to eat, “They were so excited. Um, they were just looking, and everyone was comparing theirs and talking about how much food can fit inside of them. And then everybody immediately was like, ‘Oh, you guys have to come eat now. You have to come eat.’ And so that was super fun. ‘cause even now when I go over, it’s like years later they also have their pressure cookers.” For families, receiving pressure cookers provided an avenue to reconstitute their hosting practices in the United States by inviting the American volunteers.

In my visits to Afghan homes, I always felt the pressure cooker was an object that had the ability to vainly become the center of attention. Although it always sat on the stove, its noises could always perk up my ears to whatever was going on in the kitchen. Whether someone was washing it, or cooking with it, the clunks from its heavy metal structure and the rhythmic hiss of released pressure always snuck their way into the atmosphere, like a momentary symphony of noises that wafts into a room like an air current. Every time I took pictures of a pressure cooker on a stove I would notice two or three other pots on the stove. The Afghan pressure cooker, with its imposing presence, belittled the other non-stick pans whose Teflon had been scraped off mercilessly. Though its physical presence easily affirmed the Afghanness of the kitchen, the sounds and the smells it exuded transformed the kitchen atmosphere into an all-encompassing one. The released steam not only signaled that it was closer to mealtime, but it was also part of how some women could gauge the readiness of the rice. Before releasing the full power of the melodic stream of steam, women release a little bit onto their palms, their fingers cupped, ready

to receive the steam. Smelling this bit of steam on their hands indicates to them whether the rice is almost ready or not. The tension hangs there as the bit of steam is inhaled; the pressure cooker waits to see if it's time to let loose or if it needs to keep cooking the rice.

Japoo's experience with pressure cookers reveals tensions between cultural practice and health concerns. He purchased a \$250 Afghan pressure cooker online for the family he volunteered with, recognizing how essential it was for their cooking. Later, when multiple Afghan children showed elevated lead levels in blood tests, he learned that many Afghan pressure cookers contained lead that leached into food during cooking. Despite his attempts to convince the family to throw it out and offering to buy a safer replacement, the mother refused. She had cooked with pressure cookers her whole life in Afghanistan, and Japoo understood her resistance. As he reflected, "I don't blame the women as to why they would want to keep that, but they couldn't see the danger because if you've been cooking in one of those your whole life, why would you throw it away all of a sudden? Because this one American guy says you need to throw it away." Eventually, after the youngest daughter's lead levels came back dangerously high, Japoo insisted the family dispose of it. The pressure cooker that he had bought was ultimately thrown out by Japoo himself. For Afghan women, this was the tool without which proper rice could not be made, but in this new diasporic context, it became part of the myriad of negotiations that sprang up in daily life.

This situation with the pressure cooker unpacks several layers of interactions with this object, its materiality, and its cultural meaning. Tim Ingold's (2007) perspective on materiality helps shed light on how the pressure cooker is not merely an object subject to the cultural affections of the Afghan women who use it. Instead, its materials are shaped through use, always changing, and carry the history of how they have been handled rather than fixed traits (15). What

ended up getting thrown out by Japoo was the history of a series of materials converging together in a factory in Afghanistan, leaching into food through its materials heating up on the stove, and seeping into bloodstreams.

The pressure cooker's materiality is significant because it is key to understanding this object's "cultural biography," as conceptualized by Kopytoff (1986). The pressure cooker entered a new phase of commodification in the United States with the arrival of Afghans in 2021, reclassified as a culturally inflected object necessary for engaging Afghan food practices after rupture. The interactions between two different systems of commodification between Afghanistan and the United States are uniquely shaped by the diaspora's needs once arriving in a new country. The different ways that volunteers procured the pressure cookers, whether online or by calling an Afghan shop in Dallas, revealed the stable classification of the pressure cooker in Afghan society, with its adherence to the idea that the Afghan pressure cooker is the one to use, as many families conveyed to volunteers. When lead problems emerged, American health officials and Amazon reclassified them as hazardous and pulled them from circulation (King County 2022; Ingalls 2023). The pressure cooker became the ground for negotiating between competing systems of value and knowledge, between Afghan culinary expertise and American health policy, between what makes food culturally important and what makes food safe. The pressure cooker's meaning remained in flux, simultaneously essential, wanted, but ultimately discarded. That said, outside of Japoo and the specific family he discusses, the Afghan pressure cooker is widely used in the community.

Thermoses

One category of object that stood out to me the most during a visit to the Afghan market in Oklahoma City was a series of dozens of Afghan tea thermoses lined up on a top shelf. There were thermoses of different colors, sizes, and textures. Aside from the physically imposing pressure cooker that sat on stoves whenever I would visit interlocutors, the other object that had a constant presence in my visits was the tea thermos.

Normally, I would walk into a family's house, find a spot on the carpet, sit down, and soon after, a tea thermos would take its place near me on the floor. I began to notice the tea thermoses in my visits because they were all aesthetically different, and they all faithfully sat with me as I navigated conversations with interlocutors. Some of them dispensed hot tea by unscrewing the top, others by pressing on the lid. The attention of my female hosts would oscillate between our conversation and the level of green tea in my cup. Once I had finished a full cup of tea, my host would swiftly grab the thermos and refill my cup with steaming green tea. The rhythms of conversation and the filling of my cup from the thermos marked off two separate spheres that constituted the experience of my visits (Surak 2017, 3). These two spheres were attuned to me as the guest, where my cup full of tea and the attention to our conversations ensured that I would not get tired as a guest (*mehman/melma*). The thermos' movement, tilting, the noise of the tea pouring out, and the feeling of warmth as I held a tea glass in my hand helped me attend to the "extraordinary within the ordinary" as these moments of pouring tea transformed my perceptual awareness to how the thermos took its place in everyday life (Surak 2017, 3).

These thermoses, full of green or black tea, were always filled and ready to pour. Because the type of tea Afghans use loose leaf tea, once the water boiled in the kettle with the tea leaves,

sometimes accompanied by cardamom pods, interlocutors would just pour the hot water into the thermos and let the tea steep in the thermos all day. The thermoses have a double function: they are containers for steeping the tea, and they keep the tea leaves out of the cups when tea is served because of the spout mechanism at the top that holds the leaves back. As people in the house wake up, they reach for the tea for breakfast, as kids get home from school, a cup of tea might accompany a snack, and if a guest comes over, the thermos is ready to engage in the practices of hosting that characterize Afghan culture.

I attempted to ask interlocutors about the aesthetic choices behind choosing a tea thermos, but the answers I received did not shed much light on the reasons behind using one tea thermos over another. Baran in particular seemed perplexed by my questions around her silver and grey thermos. When I asked her if she chose it, she looked at me as if she was unsure if this question should arouse suspicion or if it was just one of those things Americans ask – in other words, she was confused by my curiosity. I eventually found out her husband chose it. In Bibi Naghma's house, I asked if the design on the thermos mattered. Her daughter interjected and told me that some people like designs. Again, I felt that my questions were neither here nor there. Perhaps I was asking the wrong question, not about choice or design, but about presence and necessity.



Figure 5: Bibi Naghma's thermos

One interlocutor, Nazo, had a more receptive posture to my comments about the thermos. As she was showing me pictures of her family in Afghanistan, I noticed that there was a thermos in all the pictures. Pictures of her parents included a metal thermos on the floor next to them; pictures of picnics with her husband included pictures of a nut plate and a thermos set near a pond. The thermos was like an integral part of the family, posing for the person snapping pictures. She enthusiastically zoomed in on the thermoses so I could snap a picture.

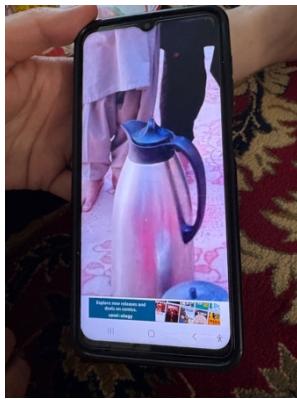


Figure 7: Family picture from Afghanistan zoomed in on thermos

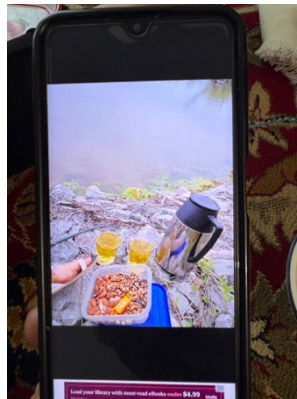


Figure 8: Nazo thermos on a picnic



Figure 6: Another picnic another thermos

Mozhgan, in her eagerness to help me with my project, told me what thermoses to take pictures of in her house. “*Aks beger*”, she would say, “take a picture”, as her hands positioned her two thermoses for optimal photographic effect after she noticed me taking a picture of just one of the pair of thermoses she had on her table. I gladly snapped pictures away on my phone and thought about the aesthetic qualities of this photo she set up for me to take.



Figure 6: Mozhgan thermos picture she set up for me



Figure 7: Mozhgan thermos picture I took.

Although interlocutors were not terribly interested in talking about thermoses, I paid attention to the ways that thermoses mediated rhythms of daily life and relational moments between people sharing tea. After looking at so many thermoses in interlocutors' homes, I realized that although women did not tell me about their thermoses, there were aesthetic considerations that were part of how they (or their husbands) chose thermoses for their homes. Bourdieu's (1984) discussion on taste foregrounds how people "confer aesthetic status to objects that are banal or even common" (6). The thermoses, even in their banality as objects that dispense liquid, participate in what Sara Pink (2009) highlights as the multi-sensory aspects of visual cultures (24). The thermos's aesthetic qualities, its colors, patterns, and material, are inseparable from the sensory experiences it enables: the sound of tea pouring, the rising steam, the warmth of the glass in one's hand, the rhythmic refilling that punctuates conversation. Its unique taste, a warm mix of cardamom and green tea, makes for a refreshing yet comforting flavor. Through these thermoses, a visual culture of Afghanness emerges not as representation but as lived, sensory practice. Thermoses are also integral to hosting guests, providing hospitality, and keeping guests from becoming "tired". In discussing the "guesting" practices of Afghan women in Germany, Schneider (2026) contends that "tea is a particularly fundamental

part of guesting and central to the sensorial production of sociality” (195). Across these scenes, the thermos works as both an aesthetic object and a social instrument, enacting hospitality and Afghanness at the same time.

Making Cookies with Mozhgan

I arrive at Mozhgan’s apartment ready to make cookies. Mozhgan suggested we make cookies together so that I could show them in my project. We have a cup of tea and, as always, she is talking very fast and asking me a million things, again asking me to convince her husband not to move. I say in a very serious manner to the husband who is sitting in the living room, “*An welayat kheili geran ast*” – “That state is so expensive [referring to the state they were moving to].” I don’t really think I can convince him. I can tell he is resolute in leaving Oklahoma, but I feel I need to say it for Mozhgan’s sake. Happy that moment is over, I follow Mozhgan to the pantry where a dark blue plastic container sits on the ground. She takes the lid off and inside is a sifter. She picks it up and begins to sift flour. I ask her if she always sifts the flour, “*hamishe een kar ra me konee?*”, she looks at me and says an emphatic yes. As the flour sifts onto the plate she’s using to collect it, I realize why she sifts the flour. On the sifter are bugs of different varieties and some small pieces of plastic. Happy the plastic is out of the flour; I am sure the heat in the cooking will kill any remnant bug left in there.

Before leaving the pantry, she shows me her extremely large metal dumpling steamer. She asks me if I want it since she cannot take it with her when she moves. I tell her that I will take it and ship it to her. She was not expecting that and heartily agrees to let me do that. We move to the counter where she has gathered some ingredients. The kitchen is small, but I feel quite comfortable. She keeps asking her eldest daughter to bring this or that. She looks through the cupboards for more ingredients, randomly pulling out empty recycled plastic containers she

uses for storage, then prompts me to take pictures of them. Once everything is ready, she begins to mix the eggs, cardamom, baking powder, and milk in one bowl. When she grabs the baking powder, she says, “*poodere cake*”—Oh, baking powder is cake powder, I think, learning this new word. She tells me to get videos of her mixing the ingredients. She is the lead here, and I just follow. I specifically capture her hands immersed in the ingredients.

In visits with other families, I never ask for videos, and I do not even take notes with a pen and paper. There is always a recoiling from the families if I am seen to do that, so most of my jottings are on my phone. The families are comfortable showing me their displeasure with any sort of recording or videoing, so I honor that boundary. I have permission from them to take pictures of their things, and that is it. Mozhgan, though, is happy to share this moment with me in a more public way, letting me take videos of the food, even speaking in the background.

As Mozhgan puts the ingredients together, she uses her hands to mix the wet ingredients with the flour. I ask her if her mom taught her how to cook, and she says, “Yes, at 18.” She says her mother taught her how to be *zarang*—this means clever. Her mom is always in our conversations. Slowly, the contents of the bowl become a dough. She works the ingredients with her hands. It is not a hard dough to knead; in fact, all this seems second nature. There is no recipe book; she did not use measuring cups; instead, she used her memory, her ways of knowing passed down by her mom. Perhaps this is why her mom is present in so many of our conversations. This calls attention again to Grasseni’s (2004) notion of “skilled visions,” where an embodied perceptual engagement with the ingredients is evident in how Mozhgan gauges ingredient quantities through the process.



Figure 9: Mozhgan mixing wet and dry ingredients.



Figure 10: dough starting to come together.



Figure 11: Dough.

Once the dough is fully formed, she begins to tear pieces off and to roll them into little balls. Each little piece of dough is shaped by hand movements that I attempt to mimic, but I simply don't have the skills, so I rely on my own embodied knowledge and roll the piece of dough into a ball straight on the counter. Mozhgan is moving so fast, not once does she use the counter to roll the dough; she can create the shape just with her hand movements.



Figure 12: Dough balls on the counter.



Figure 13: Mozhgan rolling the dough.

Mozhgan covers the dough balls with a cloth to let them rest. Meanwhile, she sends a voice message to her son through WhatsApp, listing off items she needs from the grocery store. I don't know how long we let the dough rest, and I wonder if it wasn't the dough that needed a break, but Moshgan. She grabs one of the dough balls that she dips in a bit of flour and begins to roll it out. She keeps saying, "*Sai bosh Maegan. Sai Bosh* -look, Maegan. Look, this is how you do it right." I am not sure if she wants me to try and roll out a ball or just look. I decide to just keep looking. Once the dough is rolled out into a thin piece, she rolls the dough onto itself, creating a layered roll of dough that she then cuts up into small chunks with a diagonal slice of what seems like a very dull knife. Throughout this process, she is consistently adding flour to the dough and spreading it evenly.



Figure 14: Moshgan cutting the dough with a dull knife.

As she works on some of the other pieces of dough, she speaks rapidly, telling me stories and gossiping. I am trying my best to observe her interactions with the dough, but Farsi is not my native language, and she speaks very fast with a thick accent from her region, so I find myself focused on being present with her words so that I can respond. She tells me about having to sleep

in a giant warehouse somewhere in Italy after they left Afghanistan. She was very concerned about sleeping in the same place as other men, so her husband and her sons slept around her and her daughters to protect them. There were hundreds of other Afghan families in the same situation as they waited for their flights to the United States.

As she is gossiping and telling me what she thinks about another woman in the community by calling her a cow, she pours a large amount of olive oil into a saucepan and turns the heat on high. I nervously chuckle. This is Mozhgan's domain; there is no need to worry, except that about a month before, she caused a fire while frying something, and her husband ended up with a burnt arm that has kept him out of work for the past few weeks. As these thoughts run through my head, the pot starts to smoke. I panic and quickly head to the living room. Her husband, in the living room, starts to laugh at me and asks me, "Don't you cook at home? Why are you scared?" I have no reply. I know he thinks I am exaggerating. I want to tell him to look at his arm, but I refrain and move to the table where I sit just far enough away from the smoking pot. As I sit there, Mozhgan says, "I don't think about Afghanistan when I am with you." This weighs heavily on me. Mozhgan is quite a cheerful person, but sometimes she says things like this that reveal the pain that thinking of home brings her. Rupture seeps into conversation when I least expect it.

I recall the first time we met, and I think perhaps that is why she has always wanted to stay in touch with me. She was waiting to see a doctor at a clinic we had set up with the organization I was working with at the time; I walked by her and asked her in Farsi if she had her identification and her paperwork. Her eyes got so big when she heard me, an American, speaking Farsi, then her eyes watered. This exact moment happened to me many times with other women

during the days of early arrival when they realized I could translate for them instead of an Afghan translator.

She fries the first batch. Her son tries one and tells me they aren't good. I try one, and I can see why; they are raw inside. Mozhgan tells us she cut the dough too thick. She had me try and roll out one of the dough balls left on the counter. I forget that as she rolls it out, she adds flour and spreads it over the dough many times. Once it starts to stick, I remember this step and start adding flour. As I am rolling out the dough, Mozhgan is watching over my shoulder and tries to guide me, but the simple fact is that I am awkward with this dough. I tell her I am finished after I deem the thinness of the dough to be enough, and she laughs out loud at the shape of my dough. The bottom ridge of the dough is not a straight line; it curves in the middle. To Mozhgan, this looks like some sort of crotch shape, and she begins to make jokes about how I rolled out a crotch shape dough square. It was not my intention to roll out a crotch shape, but this absolves me from having to roll out any more dough. She tells her oldest daughter to continue working on rolling and cutting so she can continue to fry all the cookies before I have to leave.

The oldest daughter is like Mozhgan's assistant. She is expected to learn the ways of the kitchen and is responsible for cleaning and cooking. This is something I see in other homes as well. The eldest daughter is expected to work in the kitchen. In Bibi Marwa's home, the oldest daughter cooks most of the food, and because the middle daughter is getting to an age where she will be expected to help, the oldest daughter gets to impose the hierarchy on her as she is next in line, and she often does so in an unkind manner.

The domestic hierarchies in this home emerge during my visits. The oldest daughter helps with domestic labor in the home. She is expected to handle herself in the kitchen and is the first person Mozhgan calls on when she needs a task completed, like washing dishes, making tea, or

finding something upstairs. The oldest son helps out by going to the grocery store with his dad or accompanying his dad on errands. As Claire Nicholas (2011) demonstrates in her ethnographic piece about cooking and power in a Moroccan household, kitchen labor can be deeply gendered and “enacts household hierarchies” that subordinate younger women and girls to the authority of the mother, or the eldest woman in the home. In this context, these domestic hierarchies are recontextualized and negotiated in diasporic home life.

Mozhgan plugs away at frying all the cookies. The pot is no longer smoking, and I move myself from the table to the stove next to Mozhgan to watch as she fries cookie after cookie. Earlier, as I hastily stepped away from the smoking pot, I had asked Mozhgan, “*Az rogan nemee tarsee?*” – “Aren’t you scared of the oil?” I was trying to index the fire that happened a month back. She replies, “*To mi tarsee waqtee ke motar ranandeggee mikonee? Waqte ke engleesee mi nevissee?*” – “Are you scared when you drive a car? When you write in English?”

I see the point she was trying to make. For her, my embodied knowledge was situated in driving and also writing, not in the kitchen. Why would I be scared of something she has been making since she was eighteen years old? To her, the smoking pot was no big deal; it was just oil smoking. She pointed out this division between us, and I felt marked as an American in some way. Despite her cheeriness and welcoming demeanor, the boundaries between us arose in unexpected moments when she would point out our differences. I did not feel uncomfortable because I did not see this as a negative, but I also did not know what to make of this dichotomy she was drawing between us. Perhaps, this was her way of telling me she is Afghan, her culture is Afghan, everything about her is Afghan—and I am not.

Once she had fried up all the cookies, she sprinkled them with a lot of powdered sugar, put them in a Tupperware, and had them ready for me to take home. Our goodbye was as long as

it always is. We chat in the living room as we make our way to the entrance. We chat while I put my shoes on. We keep chatting outside for a bit. She tasks her daughter to carry the Tupperware with cookies to put in my car, and her daughter keeps chatting even as I put my seat belt on. I yell out the window, and I tell Mozhgan I will come next week to pick up her dumpling steamer to ship to her new address. Mozhgan blows kisses as I drive away. The smell of the fried cardamom cookies sits in my car with me. It represents the product of Mozhgan working the ingredients together using embodied knowledge, gestures, and a sense for materials honed over years of practice. This embodied knowledge passes from her to her daughter, even after rupture from Afghanistan, emerging as a site of cultural continuity. It speaks to the memory work that Mozhgan does to reproduce what her mom taught her, and it recreates a multi-sensory engagement with the memory of Afghanistan in a tiny apartment kitchen in Oklahoma City.



Figure 15: Fried cookies sitting on the stove top next to the pressure cooker.

Chapter 3: Negotiating Modesty and Afghanness in Making and Wearing Women's Clothing

This chapter explores how interlocutors used clothing to embody identity and create belonging. Clothing uniquely situates the expression of Afghanness on the body and allows interlocutors to engage the experience of displacement on their own terms. Clothes are distinct from home decoration because they transcend the boundary of the private and the public in a way that home objects cannot. They are therefore incorporated in semiotic processes that structure how women navigate and negotiate the public and the private as relative “co-constitutive cultural categories,” but in a new context (Gal 2002, 80). How a woman dresses is closely linked to her reputation and signals an embodiment, negotiation, or contestation of the cultural and religious ideals that structure aspects of how Afghanness is performed and lived in the community in Oklahoma City. In this chapter, I examine how Afghan women's clothing choices in Oklahoma City operate as material embodiments of identity and belonging in displacement.

Anthropological scholarship has shown how bodily adornment and clothing function as what Terence Turner (1980) calls a “social skin,” a symbolic medium that constructs social identity and mediates between individual and society. Catherine Allerton (2007) extends this by theorizing garments as “super-skins” that accentuate ordinary aspects of skin while becoming entangled with the biographies of wearers. Daniel Miller (2010) argues that clothing is not superficial, but instead “made us what we think we are” (13). By centering identity as a key lens for understanding clothing, Miller’s empathetic engagement with clothes builds a schema that situates clothing as “the main medium between our sense of our bodies and our sense of the external world” (23). Put simply, identity can be felt through what we wear. This schema is a starting point to position my discussion on the experiences interlocutors have had with clothing since their arrival in the United States.

In Afghanistan, ethnic and kinship boundaries shape much of women's social life. But in Oklahoma City's Afghan diaspora, these boundaries are blurred. In this unstable context, clothing becomes a site through which women imagine and negotiate Afghanness, both through making and wearing garments. Through wearing and sewing, women created what Miller (2010, 41) describes as “sensual realms” and places of “feeling right,” coping with rupture through memory and comfort while negotiating identity, creativity, and social action in displacement.

In fieldwork, the tension between a broader repertoire of clothing in the U.S. and clothing that indexed watan gained extra significance. Bibi Marwa would gesture to her dress and comment, “Afghan,” emphasizing the word. Mozhgan negotiated between her Ross purchases and her Afghan dresses, wearing pajamas at home, changing into hijab and a dress for a neighbor's visit, showing me videos of special occasions where she wore more traditional Afghan party dresses. Nazo showed me orders she'd completed for other women, telling me how important it is for Afghan women to wear Afghan dress. Even volunteers noticed this desire to make Afghan clothing. One told me how, through her personal network, she obtained free sewing machines for women in one family, then took them to a fabric store where the women bought “yards and yards” of different colored fabric. When I asked interlocutors why certain styles mattered, answers circled back to a single phrase: “because it's Afghan.” But what “Afghan” meant, in cut, color, modesty, and style, varied between women, revealing how Afghanness itself was being negotiated and imagined through cloth.

Sometimes when chatting with interlocutors about clothing and life in America, I got the sense that wearing Western clothing would be an immense source of shame for these women, even though their husbands sported t-shirts, jeans, and old military pants as their everyday outfits. This revealed a stark gendered divide: Men could incorporate Western fashion without

question, but for women, what they wore from American stores directly concerned their Afghanness in the eyes of the community. Early in my fieldwork, I witnessed instances where clothing ideologies were explicitly expressed, with one woman even calling my pants the devil, *sheiton*. That is not to say that all Afghan women feel this way; one interlocutor, for instance, wore pajamas with pants at home, but would never do so in public. Yet across my fieldwork, clothing choices are undoubtedly grounded in the maintenance of a unique Afghan identity, and an imagined notion of how women are to perform their Afghanness, rather than an open posture towards Western clothing.

I argue that clothing creates belonging for interlocutors because it constitutes Afghanness in a diasporic context and continuity after the rupture of displacement. Through wearing and making clothing, interlocutors express cultural sensibilities, aesthetics, and norms, always negotiated with what is available to them in a new place. These negotiations occur in the realms of the public and the private, setting new boundaries and blurring old ones, asserting piety and Afghanness while in tension with a new culture. Judith Irvine and Susan Gal (2000) describe how public/private distinctions play out in slightly different ways across different contexts and scales, from community to household to body (38). I draw on their framework to think about how these distinctions operate within the Afghan cultural field, where the aesthetic choices in dress made by interlocutors foreground a world of meaning where religion and culture intersect and are rooted in the watan (homeland) they were forced to leave behind.

This chapter moves through two registers of clothing practice: first, making as a site where Afghan women navigate attachments to family, memory, and cultural aesthetics while responding to the multi-ethnic OKC community; second, wearing as performance where these negotiations play out in interactions with multiple kinds of others: Afghan women from other

regions, non-Afghan neighbors, and Oklahomans in public spaces. While dress marks Afghan women as visibly other in American public spaces, it is paradoxically within the Afghan community itself, among women from different regions, ethnic groups, and generations, where clothing choices are most scrutinized and where negotiations around modesty, cultural aesthetics, and Afghanness become most fraught. This chapter attends to both registers, but lingers especially on the intra-community dynamics of dress, where the stakes of performing Afghanness correctly are highest and where the social consequences of getting it wrong are most keenly felt.

Dress Making with Nazo

Nazo described a feeling of *nafas tangee* or tightness of breath when describing what she felt when she first arrived in Oklahoma. All day, she sat in a hotel room with no kitchen, no family, just stillness. Everywhere Nazo looked was a reminder that she was no longer home, and her family was far away. Everything about the hotel stay in the pre-apartment days aesthetically and materially mediated the deep loss that hung in the air and in everyone's mind. While at the hotel, Nazo tells me that she went to the doctor for this "tightness of breath," and the doctor told her to "stay busy."

Eventually, the sponsor assigned to her by Catholic Charities brought her a sewing machine. Sewing, something she did extensively in Afghanistan with the other women in her family, filled up her time. The muscle memory of pulling threads, the auditory memory of the sound of the sewing machine, and the tiny vibrations felt by the needle coming up and down were able to bring her closer to home, even if outside of that, life was constantly changing. Following the doctor's orders by keeping busy making dresses, Nazo found some relief from her *nafas tangee* in a positive way by allowing her to engage with materials, objects, and movements

that she was familiar with. During our shadowing sessions, she highlighted this in a vivid way as she recounted stories of her life back in Afghanistan, where her days revolved around her family and spending time together. Brief smiles marked the tenderness in those memories as she pulled threads and pressed her toes to the sewing machine pedals. Whenever I sat with Nazo while she sewed, this homely familial comfort was palpable. The intimacy between her and the materials created a cocoon of total familiarity that was visible even in her unhesitating interactions with tools, like sewing scissors, and in her confident body language.

At the beginning of summer, when I was discussing this project with Nazo, I tried to stress that she could make anything she wanted for the times that I would shadow her during a sewing session. Of course, in a culturally appropriate way where deference to guests is prioritized, she withheld from assertively deciding what to make for this project. I tried to emphasize to her that she could make anything she desired, but ultimately, I put forth the idea of making an everyday dress and a party dress, thus putting the onus of the decision-making on me, meaning the idea was mine, and so she agreed because she was absolved from the act of explicitly agreeing. I chose these two types of dresses based on my knowledge of Afghan dresses and what is considered appropriate for different occasions. When I visit homes for tea or a meal, women are wearing everyday dresses made with patterned fabric, but if there is a birthday party, celebration, or holiday, women wear more elaborate party dresses that come in different styles and get “fixed up.”

Together with our friend, Aram Hadza, we took a trip to the fabric store to pick out some fabric for Nazo to make an everyday dress. Aram Hadza is a friend from my time at the resettlement agency. She is acutely in tune with the needs of the community because of her keen cultural competency. Aram Hadza responds to the needs of the community by listening to

women as they drink tea in a circle on the floor in their homes. We have a special bond. When the community first arrived, we were thrust into what should have been treated as a humanitarian emergency, but instead was dealt with as casually as any other issue present in Oklahoma City. She spoke Pashto; I spoke Farsi. We were two people who could communicate with the community in its own terms, and this meant dealing with a tsunami of needs. We worked long hours and would often go without lunch, driving members of the community to the doctor or to the halal mart. When I asked Aram Hadza if she would help me contact Nazo for a research project, she enthusiastically agreed and even offered to come with me and help me with my Pashto. Although I had met Nazo a couple of years before and I could have reached out on my own, I was glad to have Aram Hadza by my side.

To make the everyday dress, Nazo needed patterned cotton fabric, and she told me exactly which fabric store she wanted to visit. We decided to ride in Aram Hadza's car, as mine was full of toys and snack wrappers my kids littered about. I felt embarrassed and enthusiastically supported the decision to ride with Aram Hadza. After nine minutes, we arrived at a standard American strip mall, the sign above the store peeling, its letters spelling "OKC Fabric Market." I pulled the door handles, which are shaped like two giant tailoring scissors, and we all walked into a room where the aisles were full of fabric that overwhelmed my senses. I felt as if there were colors, patterns, and textures coming at me from all directions. Aram Hadza had never been here either, but Nazo is visibly very pleased. She usually takes the bus here, on her own, to buy fabric when she needs it. She knows this store very well. Without hesitation, she turns right, straight into an aisle. We follow; she is leading the way.

We walked down the first aisle, where all the fancy fabrics are rolled up in fabric tube shelving. Nazo stopped in front of a mesh light blue fabric with flower adornments scattered all

over. She told us she liked this one, pointing with her finger. Further down, we turned the corner into the next aisle, and we stopped in front of a fancy glitter fabric. She turned to Aram Hadza and said something about Afghan men not liking the glitter fabric because the glitter gets on them, and we all sort of chuckled. As we walked, I asked her what flowers mean to her, and she said, “happiness.” I thought about how flowers are consistently aesthetically present in the images and things Afghans value and hold affect for. I recalled many pictures friends in the community have shown me where flowers are featured in different ways as part of life in Afghanistan: pictures of flowers around grooms’ necks, behind men’s ears, on women’s dresses. I remember the excitement during visits in previous years as Afghan friends showed me the flowers they were able to plant in their apartment patios.

We turned another corner and found the fabrics we were looking for—the ones she will use to make an everyday dress. Nazo scanned the piles of fabric tubes with her eyes, and with precise movements, she pulled out one tube of fabric that was peppered with red flowers. She displayed a confidence born intrinsically from embodied knowledge gained through years of making dresses. She pulled out another tube, this time another fabric speckled with flowers. Both tubes sat on the concrete floor waiting to be picked by Nazo. She chose the fabric with the white background and red flowers. She felt the texture of some white fabrics she had to use for the second layer and picked a white cotton fabric. Then she told the store attendant she wanted three and a half yards of each fabric.



Figure 16: Fabric for the dress Nazo would sew.

Throughout this shopping trip, I wanted to be very clear that she did not need to defer to me for any decisions. Even though my presence as a researcher was articulated when I asked Nazo for consent to include her in this project, she would still treat me as a guest. Our interactions took place in her home, drinking tea; I was a researcher in name, but a guest in practice. Aside from the fact that I could tell she already knew what she wanted with the way she zeroed in on her fabric choices, it is customary to defer to guests in Afghan culture. I knew that would be hard and cause some unexplained tension, but this was really an exercise in her creative process. She often deferred to Aram Hadza on some matters, glancing at her before making a choice, letting her pronounce her opinion before voicing her own. This was not because Aram Hadza was directing her decisions, but because Nazo was performing what she understood as culturally appropriate respect for an older woman. This dance of deference was subtle and centered on Nazo visibly honoring Aram Hadza's status and indexing their relationship outside of these moments. Nazo was using her own cultural "metanarrative

repertoire,” a cultural insider’s conventions guiding social interactions (including talk), as she navigated this shopping trip with Aram Hadza (Briggs 1984, 40).

After our shopping trip, we headed back to the apartment and took our seats in Nazo’s living room. She brought out the tea thermos and a flower-shaped nut plate, where each petal cradled a different type of nut and some individually wrapped fruit candies or “chocolates,” as many Afghans call them. We discussed when she would sew the everyday dress and pick a day the following week.

As I held the cup of hot green tea in my hand, I asked Nazo about the first time she sewed. She told me that she learned to cook at eleven and to sew at twelve. Aram Hadza asked Nazo to bring out some embroidery to show me. I was surprised by the boldness of her request, but I was also thankful, though I don’t think Nazo would ever refuse a request. We are, after all, her guests, and I wanted to remind myself of this. She is enthusiastic, though, and quickly brought out all her materials to start embroidering before I got a chance to ask if she’s too tired.

Nazo, again with precision, brought out a pile of folded white fabric she uses for embroidery, and cut the fabric with an almost sternness in her hands. There were no doubts in her movements. She pulled all the embroidery threads out of a pink pouch. They looked like a tangled mess to me, but she worked through them as if she knew where each thread was tangled; her hands knew this puzzle. She was looking for the needle in this thread maze that she skillfully navigated. Although I feared she was going to stab herself, she found the needle quickly and then began to split the threads. She used her big toe to hold one of the threads and her mouth to hold the other while her fingers plied apart the different threads she would use to show us some embroidery. I asked her if she had all these materials in Afghanistan, and she told me yes with an

emphatic *ho* (yes). Almost as if to say, of course we did. Aram Hadza interjected and explained that since Afghanistan is close to China, they have cheap access to sewing supplies.

Nazo started moving the needle through the white fabric to make a flower. She stopped and pulled all the threads out. She said the threads were too thick, re-split them, and restarted the flower. This time it was just right. She told us she learned to embroider from her sister-in-law. These skills with fabric and thread were clearly developed over hours and hours of spending time with these materials and the women in her family who guided her through learning them.



Figure 18: Embroidery Threads



Figure 17: Embroidery supplies and tea

I was interested in how sewing was reintroduced into her life after leaving Afghanistan. I asked, “How long after you arrived did you start sewing?” She told me that once she arrived at the military reception camp after arriving in the United States, they provided her with a sewing machine. There was an incredible amount of donated clothes from the local community, and she used her sewing machine to alter the donated garments to fit people. Once she arrived in Oklahoma, her sponsor gifted her a sewing machine and fabric. I didn’t want to probe further

about those times of arrival. I stayed silent for a moment, just watching the thread morph into a flower with every stroke of her hand. She finished the flower and looked around, then grabbed a red thread. As she began to embroider a new flower, she caught my eye; I was clearly curious about what she would make next, and with a hint of pride and warmth in her eyes, she said, “pavorite plower” in English, the Pashto /p/ and /f/ alternation evident in her pronunciation.



Figure 19: Nazo's Favorite Flower

The thread and needle moved up and down, fast. The threads build on top of each other, giving this flower a chunky 3-D texture that stands in relief from the fabric. She told Aram Hadza and me the story of how she learned to make this flower. She was at a relative's house for a wedding, and her sister-in-law's cousin was showing someone how to embroider this flower. Nazo did not have any fabric to learn alongside this person, so she found a piece of paper, along with a needle and thread, and copied the design as much as she could. When she got home after the wedding, she rushed to find some fabric and replicate the design. As she told us this, I could

hear the tiny sound of the needle continuously piercing the fabric. She finished the flower and added tiny green leaf motifs around it—then held it up for us to look at.

Nazo did not learn sewing from a class or from a YouTube video. Her skills and intimacy with the materials stem from growing up in a home where the daily rhythms are marked by engaging her craft alongside other women in her family. The physical embodied practice of sewing textiles, creating outfits, or embroidering cloths gives Nazo a direct connection to home and to a plethora of micro moments of continuity. This direct connection is part of the milieu of objects and moments that make Nazo's apartment her own, and in some sense her home.

These moments of continuity and connection permeated my other visits with Nazo. I came over to sit with her as she sewed an everyday dress, a week after we bought the fabric at the store. As we chatted while she sewed, she mentioned the people in her family who taught her how to make dresses, even showing me dresses that family members have made for her as gifts. Memories from home undergirded her dress-making skills in every interaction with the fabric, threads, and sewing machine.

Making this dress took up the whole living room. The fabric was extended over the floor; the sewing machine propped up on a cushion. She first laid out the fabric on the thick Afghan carpet that covers her living room, and she began to take measurements to cut the fabric. Nazo measured her own dress to determine the length of the fabric she needed for the dress she was going to make. She is not using a store-bought pattern or working off a paper pattern; she knew this pattern from memory. She took a measuring tape, measured the skirt of the dress that she was wearing, and then used that measurement to cut the flowered fabric lying on the floor.



Figure 20: Living sewing set up.



Figure 21: Nazo's sewing machine.



Figure 22: Nazo Cutting Fabric.

I sipped tea as I watched this unfold, and I recalled seeing other women use their hands to measure fabric when sewing, so I asked her where she learned numbers to be able to measure with the measuring tape, or “inchy tape” as she later referred to it. She told me her brother taught her numbers, and that’s why she doesn’t have to use her hands. She continued to move through this process. I could see she understands the fabric; she understands every single thread. It is as if the fabric had its own language, and Nazo is fluent. She pulled apart certain stitches, cut the fabric into different sections so that the fabric’s patterns would match up once she sewed it all into a dress. As she pulled a stitch, it made a zipping noise; she deconstructed to reconstruct it. I took a pause to ask her who taught her how to sew clothes. She told me her mother taught her some, but also her sister-in-law taught her much of what she knows how to make.

The sister-in-law is a central figure in Nazo’s memories of sewing with her qaum, her family, her relatives. When she spoke about her, she took a pause and swiftly stood up, went behind the curtain in her living room, and came back with a couple of dresses her sister-in-law had made in Afghanistan. She set out a white tunic dress, with tiny mirrors sewn into it and small embroidery motifs that fill up the white fabric at the sleeves and torso. Nazo told me she wore this dress for Eid here in Oklahoma. I could tell she misses her sister-in-law. She doesn’t say she misses her; she doesn’t have to. The act of showing me the dress, of naming who it came from, carries that weight. I began to see a pattern: every skill this woman possesses, every technique she shows me, is linked to people who taught her, people she misses and feels her physical distance from daily in this situation of displacement. Nazo and her sister-in-law can only connect via WhatsApp. This dress mediates their connection, too, and when she wore it, she embodied their kinship connection, indexing belonging back home.

In that moment of stillness, we both admired the white tunic dress. With a deep breath, Nazo left the dress at my feet and went back to working on the sewing project. I asked her why it is important for Afghan women in the U.S. to dress this way. Tactfully, I wanted to understand why Afghan clothes are so important. There are hundreds of shops across the city, yet Nazo chooses to make her own clothes, and other women in the community pay her to make their clothes as well. She told me that in Afghanistan, women dress this way, so it's important Afghan women wear Afghan dress, it's just Afghan—her shoulders shrugged a little as if to say, this is just what Afghans do. This is an answer I often get from interlocutors who attribute most practices and customs to “just being Afghan.”

She used a blue pencil to mark the pattern on the fabric freehand. It is a pattern she has made many times before. The dress started to slowly take shape. First, the torso of the dress came together quite quickly. A while later, she attached sleeves, and the top of the dress was done. It looked like a crop top, but it's going to be attached to the skirt, which she began to work on with the pieces of fabric she had previously cut. I heard the subtle sound of the small aquarium she has in the corner—the sound of the bubbles peeking through as Nazo skillfully arranged the long pieces of fabric to sew together to make a skirt. At one point, she stood up with one end of the fabric in her hands and the other end attached to the sewing machine. It looked like she was holding up a banner, except she was just making sure the seams between the bottom white layer and the outer layer of the dress perfectly matched up. Here, Nazo's creative aesthetic intentions shone through. She wanted the skirt patterns to go with the patterns printed on the flowery fabric and for the dress to have a specific look.

In Afghanistan, Nazo always had people around her. Whether she was sewing, eating, or going to a celebration, being alone was not common. There she lived with her family, then her husband's family. Even after marriage, she would visit her family frequently and spend long visits together. Her sewing creations were her own, but they were always anchored to the context of the family she shared her time with. The aesthetics of the garments she created reflected the communal nature of Nazo's everyday life. Her choices emerged from an attunement to both cultural aesthetics and social expectations, a skilled practice of making dresses that feel Afghan while responding to individual bodies and preferences.

I view this as a two-fold process: Nazo's creations were a product of her mind and the aesthetic sensibilities that are completely imbued with her imagining of Afghanness, the styles popular in her world, and inspired by the world around her; they are also a product of the relational dynamics between her and the women around her. Just like I sit with friends and perhaps discuss an outfit, Nazo had a lot of time with the women around her, so aesthetic choices were part of the fluid relational dimension of her sewing practice.



Figure 23: Nazo Everyday Dress

Once the dress was finished, she smiled, held up the dress, and said to me, “My try?” Emphatically, I said, “Yes!” She came out from behind the curtain wearing the new dress. The print of the fabric was perfectly matched with the pattern of the skirt. Nazo twirled around a few times; I told her it was so beautiful and commented on what an impressive job she had done. One dress took her under two hours to make. I felt like I could relate. I love it when a piece of clothing fits me well. I had initially thought that she had picked this fabric of red flowers because red was her favorite color, but as she was showing me how well the dress fit, she mentioned that black is her favorite color, and her husband’s favorite color is red. Her aesthetic choices here centered around what her husband likes. Likewise, she said that she has made him black outfits as it is her favorite color. Nazo and her husband use their clothes to aesthetically materialize their union.

A few weeks later, when I visited to observe another sewing session, she explained to me that the dress style she had chosen, this time for a party dress, was the style that her husband liked. She also told me that this was a new design that she had not made before, and was going to try a new type of neckline as part of the design as well. Nazo’s creative process was so evidently fluid. There is an aspect of her sewing practice that is concerned with skills and learning different types of patterns and techniques, and then there is an aspect that is playful and imaginative. Aesthetically, she focuses on the Afghanness of the dress and making it in a style and color that would highlight her marriage, her husband’s tastes, and her own love of specific aesthetic elements such as flowers. But Nazo also wants to imagine new looks.



Figure 24: Party Dress Fabric

With this party dress, she began by making the neckline. She was using a new-collar design that dips in the middle just below the neck. She cut the fabric, created the pattern, and sewed the under layer and pretty blue flowery mesh fabric together. It is the same pretty blue fabric that she pointed out to me the first time we went to the fabric store—she clearly had been wanting a dress made from it. Then she ironed the pieces of fabric she had just sewn together to secure the shape of the collar. Once this was finished, she grabbed a recycled glass jar from her sewing supplies and pulled out different types of little ornaments that she planned to attach to the part of the collar that dips down.

This time, Aram Hadza joined us. During this process, Nazo was asking Aram Hadza's opinion on how she was going about her new dress and collar design. This was not so much to give Aram Hadza creative license over the dress; this was about including Aram Hadza in this process and recognizing her presence. Nazo held up one charm above the sewn collar, then held up another. She was trying to decide which one she would use. Aram Hadza and I both

volunteered our opinions; we both thought the little silver sphere would look best dangling there. I asked her where she bought those decorative pieces, and she told me she took them off another dress that she had. After the top of the dress came together, Nazo began to work on the sleeves.



Figure 26: Collar



Figure 25: Finished Collar

She looked at the fabric, and the three of us discussed the sleeves. She told us she was trying to decide if she would make the sleeves double-layered, meaning a solid color with the mesh flowery fabric on top, or just make the sleeves out of the mesh fabric that would expose her arms. Aram Hadza and I asked her if her husband would mind a dress with exposed arms, since we both know many Afghan women who would never wear sleeves like that. Nazo quickly said that he would not say anything—then what she said next made her hesitation clear, and it was not about her husband. She shared her thoughts, “People from my region don’t care, but Khosti and Kunari people would.” She said this because the two largest groups of Afghans in Oklahoma City come from the region of Khost and the region of Kunar. She routinely interacts with the

community; she attends sewing classes and is invited to gatherings, so her calculations about how her aesthetic choices might mark her in the eyes of women from other regions are relevant to her daily life and her standing in the community.



Figure 27: Sleeves.

She went on to explain some regional differences in how women are allowed to express themselves with fashion and makeup. She explained that Khosti girls like to wear a lot of makeup, but once they become brides, they don't wear makeup anymore. In her region, Nazo explains, it's the other way around. Once a woman is married, she can wear makeup. Nazo decided to go with the mesh sleeves. Aram Hadza and I encouraged her, and once they are finished, they look great. The dress is still modest, even with mesh sleeves.

Talking through the issue of the sleeves with Nazo further sheds light on the notion that aesthetic choices are not purely motivated by artistic individual satisfaction, instead they are part of a web of relations, social dynamics and personal calculations around reputation and women's

modesty. Here, two competing factors were at play in Nazo's creative imagination. First, her desire to aesthetically mediate her marriage, and the desire to appeal to her husband's tastes. He likes the specific dress style she was making, and they both love flowers. During this visit, she showed me many pictures of her husband standing next to flowers, watering flowers, and solely pictures of flowers. This is a playful, creative, and imaginative part of the process because it situates the garment she is making within webs of meaning where a dress can embody the pride in her marriage, a special affinity she has with her husband, and the happiness that flowers represent, as she had mentioned before that she associates flowers with happiness. The second factor centers on the social consequences of her aesthetic choices in the community. Specifically, what will other women say about her if her dress has mesh sleeves? Although Nazo ultimately chose the mesh sleeves, she had to think through the consequences this aesthetic choice would have for her. Put simply, Nazo's sewing practice is dynamic; it highlights memories and gives her glimmers of continuity after a painful rupture from her home and family. But it is also part of the world she lives in now, where she makes aesthetic choices that materialize what matters to her and also carry social consequences. In this sense, aesthetic choices are social actions situated within a community dynamic of relational and cultural belonging.

Nazo's attention to other women's opinions isn't solely about reputation, though that remains significant in Afghan cultural dynamics. It's also about her place in the ad hoc community created through displacement. There is a necessary element of belonging at play: Nazo navigates these aesthetic choices not purely out of personal modesty or piety, but because of her role in this new community. The negotiations around the sleeves of her dress mediate her relationship to other Afghan women in Oklahoma, women with whom she's building connections in a place far from home. A community born out of a rupture, and because of that rupture, a

common national Afghan origin, rather than a regional or tribal origin, becomes the more salient dimension of identity and belonging in this context. Nazo's comment also reveals how the regional and tribal cleavages present in Afghanistan are significant here, but are in negotiation and in tension with the desire for a feeling of home and belonging.



Figure 28: Finished Party Dress

In Afghanistan, the interlocutors of this project spent a lot of time, if not all their time, with their qaum, meaning immediate and extended family. Life revolved around cousins, visiting parents, visiting neighbors, and a steady presence of their closest family members—life was ultimately a project of kinship. After displacement, this was no longer the case for interlocutors, and the rupture from the land paled in the pain felt from the rupture from their qaum. For

interlocutors, home was not primarily a territory, but a web of relations, and what was lost in displacement was first and foremost the daily presence of kin.

In Oklahoma, qaum begins to mean something different. Nazo would not have had a large group of regionally diverse friends in her hometown, but in Oklahoma, an Afghan togetherness substitutes the togetherness that was organically available through kinship in Afghanistan. Women who would not have been close in Afghanistan become something like kin in Oklahoma City, and the boundaries of what kin means expand to hold a new community together. Afghanness becomes the vector for belonging in a group with similar lived experiences, where the rupture from the homeland is what led to the creation of the community in the first place.

Pajamas, Hijabs, and the Public vs Private

Interlocutors are constantly faced with choices about how to navigate life in America. There is tension in these choices because aspects of life in the United States are often at odds with what interlocutors have known their whole lives. This is especially true for women. The cultural norms that dictate modesty for women in many Afghan qaums are irreconcilable with most American and Western dress. Still, there is more diversity in these norms within Afghanistan, which Euro-American media have obscured with their representations of Afghanistan. These norms of modesty were important to the interlocutors of this project.

Baran once told her youngest daughter that she would marry her to an American, specifically my son, if she liked wearing pants so much. She said, “If you want to be like them, then I can marry you to them.” Needless to say, pants hold a special place in this world of meaning, and they also symbolize a departure from the values and culture that intrinsically shape

much of Afghan culture. “Them” marks a clear boundary between the outside world and the inner Afghan world in the home and in the community.

Not all Afghan women are opposed to pants. Educated women from Kabul in the community, who were not interlocutors for this project, often wear jeans, and two of them even refuse to wear a headscarf. They suffer the judgment and derision of other women in the community. That said, and it must be noted, most of the women in the Oklahoma City community solely use clothes from the Afghan market, shipped clothes from Afghanistan or homemade dresses because wearing pants, jeans, or t-shirts is simply a boundary that they will never cross in public, and many not even in the privacy of their homes. As Nazo told me during a sewing session, when I asked her why dresses are important, she simply responded, “Because we are Afghan.” This statement equates being Afghan with being modest, with wearing a specific type of dress, and with expectations around how an Afghan woman should situate her body in this new American context. Throughout my time doing field work, I noticed how women not only had to navigate dressing in a new context, but also in the context of the community itself, amongst other women.

Although these boundaries are seemingly strict and appear somewhat coherent, Mozhgan’s experience shows how she navigated these boundaries, blurring them and contesting them. Her clothing choices reveal how dress and belonging are negotiated situationally in everyday life. My favorite part of arriving at Mozhgan’s house was always walking through the curtain that separates the entryway from the living room and seeing what outfit Mozhgan would be wearing that day. Mozhgan’s daughter was always in a long maxi dress and hijab, but Mozhgan herself played around with clothes, often answering the door in pajama pants and a

nice blouse. Inside her house, behind the doorway curtain, she was allowed to wear whatever she wanted, and she did.

One day, I crossed through the curtain, and Mozhgan was wearing bright pink Bebe pajamas and no hijab. She looks at me and says, “I am in my pajamas, is that ok?” –the look in her eyes reveals her anticipation at my reaction. I tell her, “Yes, it is. You are now American.” We both chuckle and continue greeting each other. She was relieved, and part of her knew I would not care that she was wearing pajamas. I wonder what the other women in the community would say about her in her thin Bebe pants from Ross. I think about how much she loves Ross. She tells me she shops there all the time. She is not the only one; other interlocutors and members of the community also exalt the great quality and prices of Ross. I suppose part of me does not understand this since they are not likely to find culturally appropriate clothes there, but perhaps that is the point: how cultural boundaries blur for the community as they navigate the retail ecosystem in the United States. Perhaps my being American enabled this moment of playful transgression; with me, she could try on American clothes without the social consequences she'd face if other Afghan women saw her dressed this way. My outsider status created a space where she could blur boundaries that remained firmly policed within the community.

Back in Mozhgan's house later that day, after a meal and a long chat with her kids about ghosts in Afghanistan, our attention turns to the television where the oldest son is projecting pictures and videos from Mozhgan's phone onto the screen. We sit around as they show me videos of celebrations and walks in a quaint park in the city full of flowers. I have seen this park in pictures other Afghans have shown me, and I wonder if it's the flowers that make that park so popular in the community. In these videos Mozhgan and her kids are projecting onto the

television I see Mozhgan and her husband. She is wearing a traditional Afghan dress, the kind you would wear to a special party. It is made out of black velvet, festooned with silver adornments that make this dress apt for a special occasion. She wears this dress in the park as she holds hands with her husband and smiles at the camera.

The next video shows Mozhgan, her oldest son, and her husband on the couch. It is a video from the same day as she is still wearing the same dress. I tell her she looks so good in her dress, and she tells me to keep watching. On the coffee table in front of the three of them sits a large birthday cake. Serving dishes with nuts and other foods surround this cake, adding a rich texture to the table's birthday celebration aesthetic. Mozhgan takes a fork and feeds her son some cake; her husband then does the same. It's the son's birthday, and they are celebrating by feeding him cake and having a party. As I watch these home videos, I think about the stark contrast between Mozhgan's Bebe pajama and her dress in the video. She would never wear these Bebe pajamas outside of her home, but most women in the community would not even wear them inside their homes. This is a negotiation that Mozhgan makes: Publicly, she asserts the rules of modesty, but in her home, she wears what she buys from Ross.

This is illustrated in another experience I had when visiting Mozhgan. When I walk up to her house, a young man is waiting outside of Mozhgan's door, which was wide open. I decided to walk in and announce myself. I peek from behind the curtain and see that Mozhgan has a guest, and she is wearing a long maxi Afghan dress and a bright yellow hijab. The woman visiting her is perplexed by me, an American woman speaking comfortably with Mozhgan. I take the time to greet the woman, who is wearing a black maxi dress and a black hijab. After my quick greeting, she takes her leave. Mozhgan engages in the formulaic goodbye, smiling and walking with the woman to the door past the curtain.

When Mozhgan comes back inside, she begins to take her dress off and peel off her hijab, revealing the blouse and black pants she had under the dress. She says, “Hala Amreekai me sham,” “now I become American.” Right there in front of me, she morphed into another person. I chuckle while I watch this metamorphosis as she puts away the dress and the yellow hijab. I ask her what the woman wanted, and she explains she wanted to borrow her dumpling steamer. Then she tells me she doesn't like Pashtuns (the other woman was Pashtun). I was struck by this: she had dressed properly Afghan for this quasi-insider/quasi-outsider guest, performed gracious hospitality and Afghanness, lent her dumpling steamer, then immediately shed that performance the moment the door closed. Her dress choice reflected her ambivalent relationship with the Pashtun woman; ethnically Afghan enough to require proper hosting and modest dress, but ethnically *other* enough to trigger animosity. More importantly, this woman was her neighbor, who knows all the other Afghan neighbors in the apartment complex. Mozhgan was not just performing Afghanness for her interaction with this woman, but by extension, she was doing so for her reputation with the other Afghan neighbors, too.

Mozhgan could have chosen to receive the other woman in her home wearing her black pants and blouse, most likely bought at Ross, but she chose to put on Afghan clothes. Much like Nazo and the sleeves on her dress, Mozhgan negotiated this moment through the garments she chose to wear. An Afghan dress and hijab are not simply symbols of identity and piety; they represent an intentional negotiation of how Mozhgan lives her experience in the United States and situates herself within the larger multi-ethnic Afghan community. Here, the boundaries of Afghan cultural dynamics lose the strict coherence afforded in Afghanistan.

Similarly, Bibi Naghma told me a story of how another woman in the community confronted her for wearing a Pakistani dress during a walk outside. Bibi Naghma had received

this dress from Aram Hadza as a gift. They are friends, and Aram Hadza brings her fabric and dresses frequently. Bibi Naghma tells me the other woman saw what she was wearing and loudly asked her why she was wearing something Pakistani and not Afghan – Bibi Naghma did not hesitate and told the other woman that she stunk and needed to wear deodorant. I chuckled loudly as I popped the pistachios she peeled for me in my mouth, followed by a sip of green tea.

Within the Afghan community itself, women monitor each other's clothing choices, especially when those choices cross ethnic or national boundaries. For Bibi Naghma this is another facet of her experience in the United States, where she contends with the new friendships she has made in Oklahoma, and her reputation with the other Afghan women in the apartment complex who seemingly police each other when it comes to dress and appearance. She is caught between how she has created relational belonging with new people and the relational belonging she has constituted with the Afghans in the apartment complex.

“Not for America, For Afghanistan”

The semiotic manipulability of dress in public and private spaces significantly marks how interlocutors negotiate the tensions that arise in the intersection of their cultural identities and life in the United States. In many of the afternoons we spent together, Bibi Naghma related to me stories of the different ways that her dress has forced her to contest and negotiate who she is in this new life and place.

As we sat on her fluffy crimson carpet, having tea and nuts, the topic of the burka came up in conversation. Bibi Naghma tells me her teenage daughter told her to throw it away, that there was no need for it anymore. I pay close attention to her expressions. Bibi Naghma's eyes seem unsure about something. I wonder if she thinks I am going to agree with her teenage daughter, but the truth is I am extremely curious about this contentious garment that has become

a symbol of women's oppression in Western media. While she is telling me about her teenage daughter's opinion on the burka, her face is forward, confident. Then her gaze lowers and her torso slightly caves in, as if to hide from me. She tells me she told her daughter no, she was not going to throw away the burka – she tells me it's not for America, it's for Afghanistan. Her eyes and expression change when she says Afghanistan, and that's it, I think. Bibi Naghma doesn't want to wear the burka. She wants to be able to go back to Afghanistan, and that means using it to cover up in public there, it allows her to keep imagining an eventual return. Surprisingly, for her, the burka is hope, because she loves Afghanistan and what it entails—specifically her relatives, her brothers, whom she shows me on her phone at least once every time I visit. Similarly, Harjant Gill (2020) explores how Sikh migrants wear their turbans when traveling back home “to claim gendered belonging,” even when they don't wear them in places like America (3).



Figure 29: Wearing a burqa.

I ask her if I can see the burka; she utters a noticeably emphatic yes and brings me the burka. She tells me her toddler is afraid of it, that whenever she takes it out her daughter gets very scared. She puts it on to show me and chases her toddler around the living room as the little girl runs away, making fearful noises. She stops and tells me her daughter even gets scared seeing her family in Afghanistan over video chat. She wants to take her there to visit as soon as she can; she feels this will fix this fear because she will see the family in person and not over video chat. It is a matter of fact for her. To go back to Taliban controlled Afghanistan, she has to wear the burka, and the hope of going back is keeping the burka out of the trash.

I take a minute to think about the nuance around this garment in this instant in Bibi Naghma's living room. The garment is contentious in many spaces, but in this moment, for Bibi Naghma, it is something that she will don to be with family again. Bibi Naghma is not keeping this garment to stake a claim in support of Afghan notions of piety or the Taliban. She is keeping this garment to intentionally prepare for seeing family again because they are part of who she is, and the rupture from them is painful to bear. This also calls attention to wider international discourses about the burqa, or what Abu Lughod (2002) has called an obsession with Muslim women that has situated Afghan women as in need of saving and used as symbols to justify war on Afghan soil (784).

How Bibi Naghma dresses has a direct impact on her daily life, even outside of the confines of the Afghan community she is a part of. During one visit, Bibi Naghma and her husband, Sheer Khan, told me an anecdote about a trip to the grocery store Aldi. With a serious expression, Bibi Naghma tells me that when they were at the checkout counter, the cashier told her that her clothing was "not good." During this trip to the grocery store, Bibi Naghma was wearing a black abaya and a black hijab. As she described how the person uttered their opinion

on her clothes, she repeated the words “not good” to emphasize to me how the cashier described what she was wearing. Her husband added that he thought the cashier was just telling Bibi Naghma that it was too hot to be wearing a head covering and a long dress. She did not agree with his recollection of that moment and looked annoyed, but he seemed to be sure that it was not an ill-intentioned comment. Bibi Naghma felt discomfort at being the object of the cashier’s comments about her dress. For her, her dress and hijab sit at the intersection of her identity as Afghan and Muslim; they are inseparable.

As we kept talking, her husband further explained why he did not take the comment seriously. For Sheer Khan, it was simply a matter of fact that for Americans it is weird to see Afghan women’s dress—“*adat nadarand*” he said— “they are not used to it.” He expresses that perhaps for Americans it is weird (*ajeeb*) to see someone in Afghan dress and hijab. He goes to tell me about a time he asked his daughter to take off her facemask at an outdoor market. Many Afghan women use facemasks to cover their faces anytime they leave the house and go to a public place, specifically where they might find other Afghans. Sheer Khan describes asking his daughter to ask a vendor about the price of something and recalls how the vendor’s expression was one of confusion. He thought perhaps the vendor was wondering why his daughter would be wearing a mask outside, so he told her to take it off. When she hesitated, he explained to her that for people at this market, it is weird to see women covered up like her and that they do not understand the reasons behind her covering both her face and her hair. He ends his story by expressing his understanding that when you are in a new place, you should try to follow the rules of that place, just like an American would have to if they went to Afghanistan.

Sheer Khan is negotiating the ways that he chooses to participate in a culture that is so far from his own. He became aware of how the mask was marking his daughter in the eyes of other

non-Afghans and decided she should take it off to make interactions smoother. His exchange with his daughter and his daughter's hesitancy provide a compelling example of the different ways that modesty and culture are in tension with the world outside of their home and outside of their Afghan community. An Afghan woman's choice in clothing or face covering becomes a vector for the hundreds of micro moments where identities and cultures are contested, asserted, and in flux in a diasporic experience.

These negotiations also need to be contextualized in the political climate of Oklahoma. In 2010, almost 70% of voters in the state of Oklahoma voted to pass a law to ban Sharia Law. This law was shortly after struck down by a court ruling that found this law would violate the First Amendment of Muslims in Oklahoma. Sixteen years later, in January of 2026, a representative in the state house of representatives filed a resolution to "address concerns about the influence of Sharia law." These political moves index narratives that call to the fore notions of terrorism, women's veiling, and women's oppression that are inherently intertwined with assimilationist discourses and are inevitably part of the tensions interlocutors must engage with in this diasporic situation.

The private and public negotiations interlocutors make in their daily lives with regard to how they dress are multi-layered and fluid. The power of dress to make the identity of interlocutors visible in different contexts is a complex facet of their diasporic experience. Not only do interlocutors contend with their dress choices in non-Afghan spaces, but they do so seemingly more in Afghan spaces. Nazo's choice about her dress sleeves, or Bibi Naghma's experience in Aldi, show how dress is a primary marker for the assumptions people make about them. These assumptions are heavily gendered, but they are also laden with claims to pure Afghanness, modesty, and even functionality.

Across my experiences with interlocutors, there was a consistent pattern of upholding the cultural belief that how a woman dresses is the first token of adherence to modesty, piety, and Afghanness. Clothing was the site of social action, not only to validate relational and cultural belonging, but also to assert an identity that was reconstituted after a rupture from the places and people that so deeply shaped their identity in Afghanistan.

Chapter 4: Digital Materiality: Community and Online Communication

If I missed a call from Mozhgan, I would get a follow-up of three to six digital stickers. One day I missed Mozhgan's call and all at once she sent a sticker of an AI image of a baby excitedly talking on the phone, meaning she wanted to speak to me; a graphic of a lemon holding a cup drinking its own tears that poured into the cup it was holding, meaning she was sad I did not answer; a GIF of a woman blowing a kiss, an image of hearts of different colors that moved, and a sticker graphic of a little white person figure on a hospital bed crying, hooked up to an IV. I decided to send her a voice message to tell her I was busy and would call her later upon receiving this barrage of stickers and she replied by sending more stickers; one of a cat holding a heart with floating hearts around it and one of a graphic of a little girl with flowing hair and a red dress, and her hands in the shape of a heart.



Figure 30: Mozhgan missed call stickers.

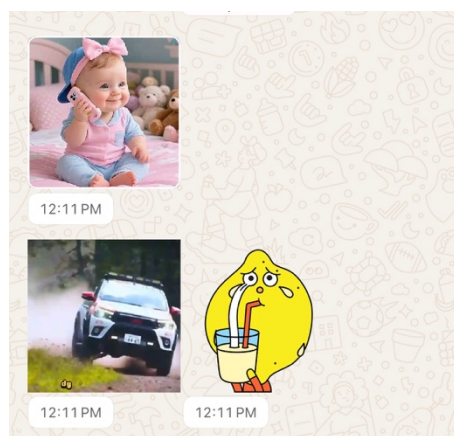


Figure 3: Sticker reply to message after missed call.

Upon seeing both digital stickers, I knew she had received my voice message. I wondered where she found all the stickers she used in our conversations, especially the culturally aesthetic relevant stickers that she so often sent. It was like she spoke some secret sticker language. I could understand it, but I couldn't speak it. Anytime I tried to search for similar stickers, I could never find them. Anytime we sent messages back and forth, our communication looked like this:

she would send a voice message, I would reply with a voice message, and she would reply with a digital sticker. If I missed her call, she would follow up with digital stickers and then perhaps a voice message. It was like our own digital sticker-message dance. Sometimes I would just see missed calls and no stickers; it would always feel odd when that happened, like hitting a pothole on a usually smooth road. Most of the time, though, the stickers were there, adding meaning and color to our communication.

Mozhgan's use of digital stickers in WhatsApp conversations is not unique. In a community where text-based communication is often inaccessible, digital stickers became part of everyday communication. They express and convey sadness, love, thankfulness, agreement and can be quite humorous additions to conversations. Digital stickers are an integral part of a sensory ecosystem of digital communication that transcended literacy. This ecosystem was made up not only of digital stickers, but also GIF images, TikTok videos, and voice messages. The sonic and the visual combine to create avenues for digital communication that have become embedded in broader communication practices of the Afghan community in OKC.

This chapter explores the digital materiality of interlocutors' interactions with the digital realm. I examine how platforms like WhatsApp, TikTok, and digital images like videos, stickers, and GIFs are used to create a sonic and visual culture that mediates the diasporic experience, expresses devotion, emotion, and maintains transnational connection. Everyday life is punctuated by interactions with the digital, and it is seamlessly woven into everyday face-to-face moments: scrolling together, applying henna designs, and choosing new outfits. TikTok acts as a source of inspiration where interlocutors engage in imaginative practices that resonate with different ways to express Afghanness.

Scholarship on digital culture and diaspora offers frameworks for understanding these practices. Pink (2009) argues that visual culture is inherently multi-sensory: images evoke textures, smells, sounds, and emotions beyond what is literally depicted. Miller et al. (2016) show that people use visual images to express culturally specific aspirations and values, particularly when literacy is limited. Bernal (2005) explores how diaspora communities construct cyberspaces that bridge the cultural distance between displacement and home. Gonzales (2023) critiques the reduction of Islam to a discursive tradition, arguing that the sacred is also affective and mediated through phenomenological properties that stimulate the senses and emotions. These frameworks help illuminate how Afghan women's digital practices create a sensory, relational, and creative ecosystem that honors watan (homeland), expresses faith, and sustains connection across vast distances.

I first examine how WhatsApp became the primary communication infrastructure for the community, enabling both advocacy and transnational connection despite widespread illiteracy. I then analyze stickers and GIFs as creative visual expression, focusing on how images convey affect, politeness, and devotion. Finally, I explore scrolling as a shared social practice, showing how digital content such as TikTok videos, Qur'anic imagery, and Afghan aesthetics circulate within an Afghan diasporic visual ecosystem that is woven into the fabric of everyday life.

I follow Markham and Lindgren's (2014) concept of “network sensibility” in approaching digital culture. Rather than attempting to map “Afghan TikTok” as a coherent, bounded community, I recognize that meaning-making online is layered, shifting, and relational. Different interlocutors engage with different content flows even within what might appear to be a shared digital space. I follow these flows as they appear in everyday practice, observing what Mozghan posts on her status updates, what Bibi Naghma scrolls through during our visits, how henna

designs move from TikTok screens to physical hands, and how Qur'anic videos circulate during moments of emotional upheaval. This approach acknowledges that digital interactions are ongoing processes in flux, shifting as new videos circulate, new aesthetics emerge, and personal circumstances change.

Contextualizing Digital Communication in the OKC Afghan Community

Digital communication has been at the center of the Afghan experience in Oklahoma City. From the beginning, WhatsApp has been the main medium of communication for families. Once the community was settled in apartments and out of the hotel, WhatsApp groups formed in every apartment complex so that non-profits and the resettlement agency could put out information for all to hear in one place. Groups were gender segregated, meaning for one apartment complex, there would be a women's-only and a men-only WhatsApp group. In the men's group, information about resources, resettlement agency office times, school schedules, and agency information was shared, and the women's groups shared information about English classes and community events. Case workers and volunteers felt that gender segregated WhatsApp groups were the most culturally appropriate way to engage in digital communication with the community. This also allowed women who still had Afghan numbers to be able to participate in these groups, given that their Afghan phones just required wireless internet and not a SIM card with a phone plan.

All of my non-face-to-face communication with interlocutors happened through WhatsApp. In this application, users can send audio messages, start video calls, send pictures, and chat. In the Afghan community, this is the primary mode of communication. Through WhatsApp, women and men stayed in touch not only with me, but also with their families in Afghanistan and other countries around the world. For example, Mozhgan used WhatsApp to

communicate with people in Oklahoma, with her brother in Europe, and with her family back in Afghanistan. WhatsApp also has a function named “updates” where users can update videos, similar to Instagram stories. These videos are technically “status updates,” but the Afghans I spent time with mostly uploaded videos from everyday life, social media reels, and TikTok videos they wanted to share with their WhatsApp contacts. Because of WhatsApp’s accessibility in terms of audio and video, individuals can easily communicate with others without having to use textual communication. This feature is particularly salient for the community, who rely heavily on visual and audio communication to send messages to their contacts since they cannot read or write. Like many other women in Afghanistan, the five women who participated in my project did not receive a formal any schooling.

Here in the United States, illiteracy has become a major obstacle to navigating social services, medical care, paying bills, etc. That said, Bibi Naghma and many women from the community do not let a lack of literacy deter them from participating in textual forms of communication and have shown incredible creativity in negotiating text-based communication on their phones. She downloaded an application that translates received messages, reads them aloud to her, and then translates and writes her replies. Afghan women also heavily rely on their teenage children to navigate the text-based world we live in, where life consists of filling out one form or another and reading mail and emails.

WhatsApp became an important channel for advocacy by giving them and other women in the community a direct line to case workers and volunteers. By using audio messages, Afghan women can ask for help with medical appointments or invite someone to tea or dinner. Yet WhatsApp is not just a communication infrastructure; it is also a space where visual and material culture circulates. Through the app's status update function, interlocutors share and consume a

rich stream of images and videos: video clips of family gatherings paired with Afghan songs, TikTok videos of Qur'anic imagery, GIFs, and digital stickers featuring culturally specific aesthetics like birds, flowers, praying hands, and hearts. These digital objects are not just decorative. They mark relations, express emotions, assert versions of Afghanness, and mediate faith. Shared imagery creates a visual language through which the community recognizes itself and maintains connection across vast distances.

This rich interpersonal digital communication dynamic has been important for the individuals I spent time with for this project. Not only does it give them easy access to their relatives in Afghanistan, but it has also allowed a modicum of continuity with the lives they left behind. When I visited their homes, women would share with me videos of recent parties and weddings sent by their relatives back home, often repeating these videos various times. Video calling during these events is also common and has given members of the community the opportunity to see some of these events as they happen.

Phones enable women to record important things in Oklahoma as well. They take pictures of their children and husbands to send to relatives in Afghanistan and to make short video clips that they edit and post on TikTok and WhatsApp status updates. These videos were edited using the CapCut application, which pairs still pictures with user-selected music and visual filters. A typical video lasts about thirty seconds and functions like a slide show where, for example, photos (usually husbands and sons) appear sequentially, zooming in and out, accompanied by emojis floating across the screen, peppered with hearts, flowers, or emojis. Afghan songs make up the backdrop to these videos. Bibi Naghma, for example, in one video posted photos of her youngest son in his best outfit. A popular Pashto song played in the background, and heart emojis drifted across each frame. This video conveyed affection and pride: This was her son, in

his best outfit, set to music that highlighted a distinct Afghanness. These videos most always have a musical element that aesthetically portrays a subjective notion of Afghanness. Some songs evoke a longing for home; lyrics might be about romance, or the song itself is from a specific region, evoking a regional identity. These choices in song, people featured in the video, and elements like emojis are intentional and mediate a form of personal expression.

There is a palpable visual culture in these videos that distinguishes the way that the community uses the digital realm to connect, create, and express emotions, desires, and a unique Afghan aesthetic. I observed this while sitting with interlocutors as they scrolled through status updates and TikTok, specifically scrolling together with Bibi Naghma. Visual cultures, as Pink (2009) argues, are richly captured in digital content and reveal “a wider sensory context” where images function as “multi-sensory objects” that evoke “textures, smells, tastes, sounds and more” (24). The CapCut videos that circulate across the community are “visual texts” that have “culturally and biographically specific meanings” (Pink 2009, 24).

Yet these videos are not purely visual; they are also sonic. Music paired with images creates a multi-sensory experience that mediates memory and connection with watan. John Baily’s research on the circulation of music across the Afghan diaspora argues that music is important to the Afghan diaspora because it was present in people’s daily lives; it is what they were familiar with, what they grew up with back in Afghanistan (2010). It also mediates a desire to keep and maintain culture and to show their culture to others, undergirded by an implicit element of identity (Baily 2010, 171). Baily’s observations highlight what Jo Tacchi (1998) argues in her ethnographic work on radios – the ability of sound to “create a textured soundscape within the home” (25). In the context of interlocutors’ lives, the soundscapes created through videos index the familiar, the memory of daily life in watan, emotions, and imaginings. These

are engaged with when videos are created, shared, and viewed. The meanings and feelings evoked through images and music in videos are “immediate, intimate and direct” (Tacchi 1998, 26), but also in flux as different songs and images have different meanings and can “reinforce a sense of social self” (Tacchi 1998, 27).

Hearts, Tears, and Prayers: Mozhgan’s Use of Stickers and TikTok.

This visual culture extends beyond videos and permeates everyday WhatsApp conversations through stickers and GIFs. Throughout my fieldwork, scheduling visits with interlocutors involved audio messages paired with stickers. I would send a voice message asking when I could visit; they would reply with a voice message confirming a day, followed by a sticker, perhaps hearts, flowers, or a thumbs up. The stickers added emotion and emphasis, confirming agreement while expressing warmth or politeness. Bibi Marwa reached out to me one time by sending a GIF of an Afghan woman pouring tea from a thermos in a car and then lifting up the cup of tea as if to offer it. I knew this meant she wanted me to come over, so I sent back a sticker I had made of my face smiling and a voice message asking when a good time would be to visit.

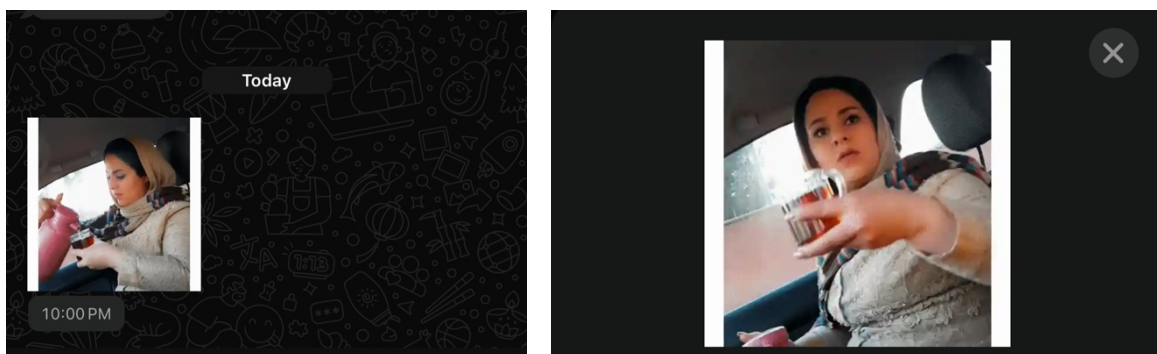


Figure 31: Bibi Marwa digital sticker of a woman offering tea.

Stickers and GIFs take many forms and can include looping images, emojis, graphics, and pictures of real or cartoon people and animals. They express a vast range of emotions and use Afghan and Islamic imagery. In my communications outside of fieldwork with family and friends, I use GIFs comprised of images from American pop culture to show how I'm feeling or for humor. Afghan women engage in similar practices but within their own cultural field of meaning—indexing gestures, dress, colors, emojis, and aesthetics that hold cultural value. These images offer a mode of expression not based on textual understanding but on visual language.

Mozhgan's use of stickers was profuse. In our WhatsApp communications, the stickers Mozhgan posted expressed affect, agreement, sadness, and faith. Stickers were purposefully and creatively employed in our conversations and even in our silences. After she moved to another state in late July 2025, most of our conversations were over video chat on WhatsApp, and any other communication was through voice messages and stickers.

Usually, video chats with Mozhgan lasted about an hour. Our conversations had their own rhythm, and she always seemed to follow up on things we had talked about in other conversations as if she had a list she would study up on before calling me. Our conversations always started with her telling me how much she missed Oklahoma and how horrible her new home was. I always felt it was hard to empathize with this because of my own feelings about living in Oklahoma, but there was not one conversation where she did not speak at length about how much she missed her life here. She would often reminisce about going to the lake or visiting her friends and neighbors. She liked her routine here; she liked that her kids had a school bus; and she liked that Americans were always there to help her family navigate many obstacles. For her, being around Americans at the preschool where she worked was exciting and a brief respite from some community pressures.

Mozhgan's favorite topics are medicine and beauty. Every once in a while, she would send me pictures of a friend's pregnancy test for me to translate the results or medicines she needed me to give her instructions for. She would look at me and say, "Maegan, I am beautiful?" -- "Do I look good?" -- "I am looking young?", I'd take a breath, not really sure why we have to go through this every time we talk, even though it made me chuckle, but I would tell her, "Of course!" She asked these questions repeatedly, and I would share with her my own skin care regimens. I'd tell her that I use ice on my face every morning when she mentioned puffy eyes. She looked surprised at this, so I took my ice mask out of the freezer and showed her. She loves it and immediately asks me where to buy it. I'd say "Amazon," knowing full well she's a Temu shopper. I tell her she can find it on Temu or even at Ross in the beauty section.

We hang up after a long one-hour chat, and exactly two minutes later, she sends me a voice message asking me where to get the ice mask. "She forgot," I think. Following her message is a sticker of two hands in the position of *Dua*, a direct prayer to Allah. Above the hands, the word *Amin* in Farsi script hovers in bubbly font, and the word *Yarab* hovers below in the same blue and green bubbly font. This sticker is not about prayer in this context. This sticker is about politeness and not wanting to bother me. Through this, she is acknowledging that our conversation took a long time. At the end of conversations, Persian-speaking Afghans will often say, "*Vaqteton nemegeeram*," meaning I will not take your time anymore. It is culturally unacceptable to make a guest or friend "tired." In this case, this sticker is engaging in that work of recognizing my time, in being polite, and also not wanting to appear as a burden. Mozhgan could just say that she is sorry for taking my time again with this question; instead, she chooses to use this sticker to put all of those words, feelings, and intentions into one image. Stickers become concepts; images compress into emotions, feelings and ideas.

In these interactions, Mozhgan uses visual stickers and GIFs to “effectively facilitate performative daily communication” and also to maintain social relations in everyday phatic communication (Wang and Haapio-Kirk 2021). Julia Elyachar (2010) similarly emphasizes the “phatic labor” of communication in her ethnographic work with women in Cairo, describing how Egyptian women’s practices of sociality created an infrastructure of communicative channels whose purpose was maintaining relationships. The interactions between Mozhgan and me exist within a specific communicative infrastructure that emerged out of a specific context, the resettlement of Afghans in OKC. Mozhgan’s use of this communicative infrastructure extends beyond her conversations with me and extends to her interactions with relatives in Afghanistan, neighbors, and coworkers. Through WhatsApp status updates, TikTok engagement, voice messages, and stickers, she performs “phatic labor,” creating a digital social infrastructure that enables the Afghan community in OKC to engage as a community after displacement.

Perhaps the most salient use of stickers and GIFs in our conversations happened when Mozhgan was preparing to move to another state. This was a difficult time for her, although her kids were excited to leave. She struggled with the idea of leaving Oklahoma City. During the weeks before the move, she would bring up leaving multiple times during my visits, putting me in an awkward position with her husband, who had the final say. He wanted to move for a job opportunity and was tired of his current work. She would ask me to tell him how expensive it would be there, looking at me with desperation. He would shrug his shoulders as if to say we are leaving no matter what. I could see her frustration, but she understood she had no choice, so she would drop the subject. I had the feeling her advocacy to stay in Oklahoma did not end in those moments, but was ongoing in their family life.

Once they started packing up furniture for shipping and selling some of their possessions, Mozhgan's sadness became more pronounced every time we communicated. Her mood was low, and the stickers she used conveyed this sadness through images. She would send more heart stickers after her voice messages, where her voice sounded as though she had been crying. In all likelihood, she had. She consistently used a specific sticker of a young woman with dark hair whose sad face and overall look were those of someone who had been at home crying for a long time.

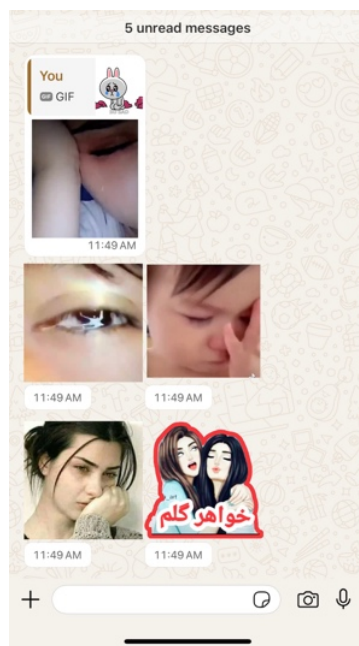


Figure 32: Crying woman.

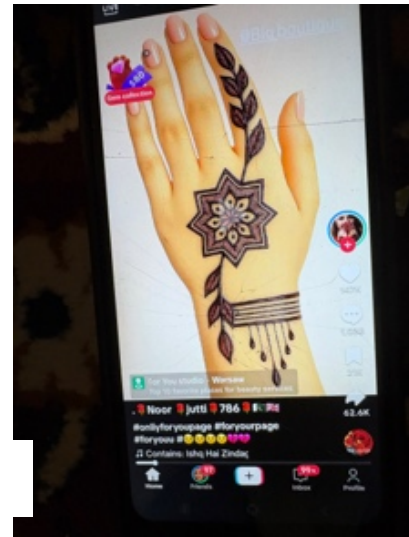
Mozhgan was a prolific social media user. She would often sit next to me and show me a new medicine or vitamin she had found on TikTok or Facebook, and would ask me if she should buy it or not. One time, she found pills advertised as fertility pills with the hefty price tag of \$400 on Facebook and showed me the messages of the seller in the Philippines who promised real results and fast shipping. She would look up recipes of Afghan food to share with me on TikTok so I could use them for my project whenever I needed to write about Afghan food. One day before she left for California, she showed me a beautiful henna design she found on TikTok

and told me she was going to draw the same design with henna she had just gotten from the Afghan market. I said, “Wow, you can really do this design?” She replied, “Yes, and then you can tell everyone Mozghan did this henna for you.” She then told me one of her kids had thrown the henna behind the fridge and would need to get it out. After both the husband and the oldest son moved the fridge and handed her the henna, I extended my hand onto her lap and she began to lightly squeeze the henna onto the back of my hand. I could hear the crinkling of the plastic on the henna packet, barely making noise as Mozghan knew exactly how much pressure to apply.

After a few minutes, I realized that the design she had found on TikTok was not the design currently taking shape on my hand. Quite the opposite; it was nothing like it. As she kept attempting to recreate the shapes on the screen, she kept telling me to look at her skills and how she was going about recreating the design. As we sat on the carpet and I watched her, I began to get the uncontrollable urge to laugh. Mozghan’s oldest daughter smiled at me, and I could not do anything but bow my head and hold in the barrage of laughter building up in my diaphragm. Her husband came over and sat next to me. He never does. He was smiling too. Mozghan was so focused, noticed us, and asked if anything was the matter. At this point, tears streamed down my face because I could no longer contain my laughter. I just let it out. She asked her daughter to help her with part of the design; she also could not replicate any part of the design and seemed to make it worse. Everyone just smiled as we all held space for Mozghan to complete her attempt at the TikTok design.



Figure 33: Henna design and TikTok inspiration picture



This moment illustrates how digital content circulates into and through everyday life, not as separate realms but as interwoven, mutually constitutive spaces. The henna design began on TikTok, circulated among Afghan users as a shared aesthetic reference, caught Mozhgan's attention, and then moved into the physical world: She bought henna from the Afghan market, moved the fridge to retrieve it after one of the kids had thrown it there, and attempted to recreate the digital design on my hand in real time. As she worked, her phone sat nearby with the TikTok video playing, the screen glowing with the "correct" design while her hand created something entirely different. The digital and the physical collapsed into each other: the design on the screen, the henna on my hand, the laughter filling the room, her family gathering around to watch. Digital space inspired action: material reality (her novice henna skills) diverged from digital inspiration, creating humor and laughter. This is how digital culture works in Mozhgan's life, not as escape or representation, but as a source of inspiration that flows seamlessly into everyday imaginative practice, even when the execution fails to match the digital ideal.

This was the last time I saw Mozhgan before she left Oklahoma. Every visit with Mozhgan included this type of indexing of digital content by weaving digital references into interactions. She would pull out her phone mid-conversation to show me things from TikTok,

WhatsApp, and social media, shaping our face-to-face conversations. Even after she moved, this would continue over WhatsApp communication. Showing care for this project, she would send me TikTok videos of Afghan recipes, or she would seek advice based on something she had seen online. The digital was present when we were together, and then when we were apart.

Once she moved away, posting digital content about the Qur'an on TikTok filled Mozghan's status updates on her WhatsApp. These Qur'anic TikTok videos have a distinct visual aesthetic to them and, through images, emojis, colors, and sounds, depict not only a visual beauty associated with the Qur'an, but also an emotional connection. These themes are expressed aesthetically in a variety of ways and center around devotion, paradise, and Allah's creative authorship. Devotion is graphically realized with the use of GIF images or stickers in the shape of hands praying dua. Videos that center on the theme of devotion use images that are connected to the embodied act of praying or reciting the Qur'an. For example, one video features a woman in a flowered niqab praying, holding a Qur'an. The video exemplifies the devotion theme: images of embodied prayer, sacred text, and floral beauty combine to express piety and connection to the divine.



Figure 34: Qur'an digital image.

Another central theme in Mozhgan's engagement with content is paradise. Here, one video depicts a digital rendering of the Garden of Bliss that is often referenced in the Qur'an. This digital image includes flowing streams, greenery, and clear skies. The word *mashallah* in sticker form is placed at the top and at the bottom of the image. A set of hands cradling a heart pop out of the left side, and a large Qur'an rests on the bottom of the image, overlaid by another stream of flowing water. As I clicked through Mozhgan's WhatsApp status update, I thought about how perhaps this is a comforting image for her in the midst of her emotionally wrought move from Oklahoma to another state. One day before the move, Mozhgan was so upset she became ill and delayed the move by two days. Adherence to the Qur'an's teachings promises entry to the Garden of Bliss. This image might also represent the hope of that in some way. There is an element of comfort in this video that spoke to Mozhgan and prompted her to share it in her status update.



Figure 35: Qur'an paradise image

Comfort is also perhaps drawn from the notion that Allah's creative authorship over the world is demonstrably the most concrete display of his power. Throughout this time of constant

posting during her move to a new state, Mozhgan's sharing of TikTok videos on her WhatsApp status updates frequently centered on sharing videos with natural imagery, such as birds and flowers, coupled with either an image of the Qur'an, a Qur'anic recitation, or both. In one video, two hummingbirds fly suspended in the air as they draw nectar from colorful red plants.



Figure 36: Qur'an flowers and creation image.

In another video, an open Qur'an fills the bottom of the screen, on top a large red flower, at its center Qur'anic calligraphy. A Qur'anic recitation emanates from the video. Nature's majesty in these videos is powerful. Interestingly, these videos with birds, hearts, and flowers also recall an Afghan aesthetic that connects these symbols with feelings of affect for specific cultural aesthetics. Birds hold a special place in Afghan culture and are often portrayed not just in Qur'anic TikTok videos, but in videos about other topics as well. Flowers symbolize happiness and beauty as interlocutors have described to me; they are on clothes, at weddings, on

cards, and often men like to put a small flower behind their ear as they wear traditional Afghan headwear.

Victoria Bernal's (2005) work on the Eritrean diaspora and cyberspace explores how a diaspora imaginatively constructs a space where those who have experienced displacement can understand themselves by building a social context that bridges the "cultural distance" between the world inhabited in a diaspora and the world inhabited before displacement. In these cyberspaces, the continuing process of diasporic identity formation is made socially meaningful and becomes part of social relations in a community.

Similarly, Mozghan shares videos that not only reflect a specific emotive state, but they are also videos shared by other Afghans and are part of an Afghan cyber ecosystem of digital expression. She not only shares these videos on TikTok, or rather engages with this content on TikTok, but she then takes the TikTok content and shares it on her WhatsApp. This platform is much more intimate. Here, her relatives and friends in Afghanistan and in the United States would specifically see these videos as her status update versus TikTok, where it is engagement through liking or reposting in a much more public manner, where both followers and non-followers can view her posting.

Daniel Miller et al. (2016), through research in nine different ethnographies on digital media in various places around the globe, argue that "people use visual images to express aspirations," adding that those aspirations are unique, local, and specific. In different contexts, engagement with social media showed that the reasons for posting images are not necessarily to "look your best," but rather for "presenting the self in line with social expectations" (163). Posting images has also become a way that people with low levels of textual literacy can access online communication, where images can be used to express "opinions, values and taste" (170).

TikTok and WhatsApp allow Mozhgan to engage with the same content in different ways depending on the audience. Based on what Mozhgan has shown me, she likes a myriad of content on TikTok—from beauty content, to content about Henna designs, to Afghan music. On WhatsApp, she shares content from TikTok that is specifically for the audience of her WhatsApp contacts, who she personally knows and is intentionally trying to express something specific.

It is relevant to note that Mozhgan does not write statuses describing how she is feeling or talking about what she might be going through, such as a painful move to California. Instead, she uses images and videos that resonate with her in a way that transcends textuality because they employ sonic and visual elements that are distinctly associated with how the Qur'an is situated affectively. Valerie Gonzales (2023), in a critique of Talal Asad's notion of Islam being a "discursive tradition," argues that situating Islam solely as a "discursive tradition" fails to recognize what she considers intrinsic to the Muslim experience which is an "affective understanding" that "specifically concerns the experiential aspect of the divine-human relationship" (2). The sacred in Islam has a texture made up of phenomenological properties that "stimulate the faithful's sensory and affective faculties" (3) that surpass the Qur'an's narrative and literary qualities because of the way that Qur'anic text is communicated. Gonzales argues that it is in this phenomenology of the sacred that meaning-making also takes place in Islam and not solely in the discursive. These digital videos mediate these phenomenological qualities, connecting the sacred to everyday life and everyday experiences. Mozhgan's engagement with the digital world, in this case, presents an interesting moment where the connection between painful emotions, life events, and faith is expressed through the sharing of Qur'anic videos. Perhaps through the digital, Mozhgan is also performing what Saba Mahmood (2005) describes as the practice of *sabr* (patience). The women in Mahmood's ethnography relied on notions of

sabr, “enacting a different modality of agency” in the face of injustice or painful situations. Sabr “allows one to bear and live hardships *correctly*” (172) by affirming a higher will and a higher order. Similarly, Claire Nicholas (forthcoming), in her ethnography of Moroccan weavers, discusses how the practice of sabr “sustains individuals as they negotiate or reconcile complex and sometimes competing obligations by deferring conflict or allowing time to work on altering the field of possibility” (121). In other words, Mozhgan felt the move was an injustice, but her response to the move, which she had no control over, was partly managed through the available ecology of Islamic media.

Scrolling Together: Bibi Naghma and TikTok

Sitting there with a full stomach, I lean back. Bibi Naghma has already brought out the post-lunch green tea and nuts. She sits next to me, and we start to scroll together. Her daughter is there too, and the three of us are huddled around the phone waiting to see what TikTok will show us. We scroll onto a video of an Afghan man, somewhere in Afghanistan, leaning on a fancy sports car as he faces the camera. He is speaking in a specific rhythm, as if telling a story. His Pashto is too fast for me to catch, so I ask Bibi Naghma and her daughter what he is talking about. I suspect he might be reciting some poetry, but my suspicions were wrong. They tell me that this guy killed another guy in Afghanistan. I ask why. Bibi Naghma’s daughter gives me a summary in English: “someone killed someone close to him, so he had to kill back.” I feel confused, but also very curious. What is the context of this video? Why is this man dressed so nicely? What is the cultural context behind not only this aesthetic, but also behind what he is saying? I ask her if he went to jail, and she tells me he did, but now he is free. In previous years, I heard rumors from other members of the community about feuds like this, especially in a specific region. I decide not to press further because I am not sure if this is something they want

to talk to me about, but it seems as though, for Afghan men, TikTok videos are a medium for specific types of masculinity and social dynamics.



Figure 37: Pashto poetry TikTok

The majority of videos we come across are of Afghan men speaking, singing, taking selfies, or hanging out with friends. I swipe up, and we come across another video of a man. This time, this man is actually reciting poetry in Pashto. The aesthetics of the video are different. The shot is zoomed in on the man's face; his expression is more relaxed. He has luscious, shiny black hair. Perfectly shaped eyebrows. An Afghan flag sits on his shoulders, and a round black and red hat sits on his head. Below in the caption, a hashtag that accompanies so many videos from Afghanistan was placed: *#تاجیک_هزاره_ازبک_پشتون_ترکم* (*#tajik_hazara_pashtun_turkmen*). This hashtag listing of ethnolinguistic signifiers invokes a diasporic shared Afghan belonging to watan across digital spaces in different forms of content.

We keep scrolling. A few videos of Afghan dress shops pop up. We discuss what colors we each like on the different dresses. In one specific video, I ask them where the store in the

video is located. Bibi Naghma's daughter tells me it is in California and that they have ordered from this store before. She tells me that they just contact the store through WhatsApp, and then they ship them whatever dress they choose directly to their house in Oklahoma City. We look at other videos. We watch a video of an Afghan flag on a pole at the top of a green hill, waving in the wind. We come across the songs of a singer Bibi Naghma enjoys. His name is Javid Amirkhil. I know his songs too, and I enjoy listening to his music on TikTok with Bibi Naghma. He writes many songs about Afghanistan specifically. He sings a song titled *Jannat Afghanistan*. – *Afghanistan, Paradise*. In describing Afghanistan as a paradise, Amirkhil sings:

I am its Majnun, and it is my Leila. My country is my true love. My homeland is everything.

It is my life; it is my love. It is the cure for my broken heart. It is a beautiful flower garden.

My homeland is everything. My country, Afghanistan, is like a paradise.

I am the sacrifice of your lofty mountains. I am the sacrifice of your lofty rivers.

My homeland is as sacred to me as religion and faith.

My homeland is my true love. My homeland is everything. My country, Afghanistan, is like a paradise.

We scroll for a few more minutes, and then I have to leave. Whenever I say I need to leave, Bibi Naghma always asks me to wait ten minutes. She even says it in English, "ten minutes." I sit back and continue to sip on green tea. Meanwhile, she is packing food for my family. Every time I leave her house, I leave with a full meal neatly packed in an assortment of containers and a large slice of her home-made flat bread. I put my shoes on and begin to say my goodbyes. I feel as though our visit went by quite quickly. Usually, Bibi Naghma's husband is there, and we all chat together, but today Bibi Naghma, her daughter, and I just scrolled and chatted, it was a pleasant time, we laughed, and we gossiped. After I leave and arrive at my own place, as always, I send her

a picture of my husband and my kids eating her food with a thumbs up. She always replies with a sticker.

A few things come to mind when thinking about the different times I have sat with Bibi Naghma scrolling through her TikTok and my other experiences getting a peek into the world of Afghan digital interactions. The Afghan community's digital practices, stickers, status updates, TikTok videos have become normalized with remarkable speed. Horst and Miller's (2012) concept of normativity and materiality offers a framework for understanding how digital culture becomes second nature, changing with different trends and new content. Building off Bourdieu's (1977) concept of practice and how, through practice, culture becomes second nature, Horst and Miller contend that when it comes to digital materiality, this dynamic, where culture appears as "natural or second nature," is best captured by the notion of normativity. Because the digital world is rapidly changing with new content and new technologies, the digital world becomes ordinary at extraordinary speeds. Digital materiality, therefore, rapidly socializes into areas of practice composed of new technologies and content. Afghan TikTok, as shared with me by interlocutors, is part of a diasporic digital community that grew rapidly out of the community's arrival in 2021. Its aesthetics and its content have become, to some extent, "second nature." The use of stickers presents another example of the way that the digital becomes the normative at incredible speeds. The dynamic of sending audio messages and replying with stickers, often specifically aesthetically and culturally relevant stickers, is not merely an adaptive process to not being able to read and write. It also speaks to how a community rapidly adopted an application to communicate in culturally relevant ways that included images and sounds to express emotions, thoughts, and desires. The connection between TikTok and WhatsApp is important as well

because it shows how interlocutors choose videos from one application to publish as their status updates in the other.

In interviews, volunteers noted that TikTok was central to community dynamics and the experiences of the families they were interacting with. “They’ve been really into Afghan TikTok, and spend a lot of time there, and it’s like they need to find spaces where they can immerse themselves in the things that they miss and the cultural things they miss, they can communicate widely,” related Amy. She added that she had observed how TikTok has become a place where the community crowdsources information, both related to happenings in immigration, the situation in Afghanistan, and news in general from relatives in different states. Another volunteer and a caseworker noted the gendered dynamics of how the community engages with TikTok. Abby noted that “the men love taking selfies of themselves in like new clothes and stuff” and that they are “on TikToks constantly.” Diana, a caseworker, described how it was frustrating for her to see TikTok videos of men in the community “on vacations, like at the Grand Canyon or in the mountains. And I’m like, where is your wife? Like she’s stuck at home.”

TikTok and its use have therefore rapidly become their own field of practice with its gendered dynamics and expressive aesthetics of Afghanness. More importantly, though, it has also been normatively adopted as a source of information where transnational connections and connections across state boundaries come together as a fountain of information for the community in an accessible way. That said, “Afghan TikTok” is not bound to the audience in Oklahoma City. The Afghan diaspora stretches all over the United States, Canada, Europe, and Australia, so it would be shortsighted to attribute the findings from my interactions with interlocutors as a window into a well-defined whole.

As I outlined in the introduction, Markham and Lindgren's (2014) concept of “network sensibility” emphasizes that digital spaces should be understood through shifting relations rather than fixed structures. While both Mozhgan and Bibi Naghma engage with Afghan TikTok, they interact with different content flows in different ways, Mozhgan posts Qur'anic videos and beauty content, while Bibi Naghma scrolls through music, dress shops, and family videos. My observations of interlocutors in Oklahoma City offer insights into specific uses of digital platforms within one local context, but the Afghan diasporic digital ecosystem extends far beyond OKC, encompassing diverse practices across the global diaspora.

Zusanna Olszewska (2023) explores Afghan diasporic social media poetry in her research with Afghan content creators after the fall of Kabul in 2021. Olszewska focuses on poetry created by highly literate Persian speakers who are part of her digital ethnography of "Afghan poets and intellectuals from the global diaspora" (142). The poets narrate experiences of displacement through centuries-long traditions of Persian poetry, engaging in what Olszewska calls "purging one's *dard-e daruni* or inner pain" (151). These poems, published on social media, contain "many-layered histories and memories of past events" (142).

Olszewska's interlocutors differ sharply from the women in this project in terms of literacy and mode of expression. Afghan content creators in Kabul are poets writing intricate Persian verse, while interlocutors here in OKC are women who cannot read or write and engage with visual and sonic content. Yet both groups foreground the notion of Afghanistan as paradise, a place to be longed for and hoped for. For the poets in Olszewska's work, this emerges through written language and historical literary forms. For interlocutors in OKC, mostly Pashtun women from various regions, it emerges through TikTok videos of birds and flowers accompanied by Afghan songs, CapCut videos pairing photos with music evoking watan, and scrolling through

content that elevates Afghan pride. What I observed in my fieldwork is a sliver of various Afghan digital spaces that manifest differently for each interlocutor in their specific contexts. Their interactions with content reveal their own inner worlds, emotions, and meanings more than a concrete online place called Afghan TikTok.

Through stickers, GIFs, videos, and shared screens, Afghan women create a multi-sensory visual culture that honors and recalls watan, expresses devotion, and maintains connection across vast distances. This digital ecosystem is as materially and emotionally significant as the carpets, curtains, and cushions that fill their Oklahoma homes. Digital platforms enable what Elyachar calls phatic labor: the daily work of keeping communicative channels open and maintaining relationships despite displacement. Mozhgan's stickers after missed calls, her WhatsApp status updates filled with Qur'anic imagery, Bibi Naghma's careful selection of videos to share, these are not trivial acts but essential practices through which community is sustained, Afghanness is performed, and the rupture from watan is mediated. Digital space and physical space collapse into each other in Afghan women's everyday lives. The result is a creative, relational ecosystem where inspiration flows from screens to hands, where images convey what words cannot, and where the digital becomes another site, alongside homes, markets, and gardens, where Afghan women actively constitute belonging in displacement.

Multiple notions of home come to the fore in displacement, blurring some boundaries and reasserting others. In the absence of qaum, what other means emerge as critical to creating a sense of belonging? How do cultural practices and material objects steeped in Afghanness, domestic furnishings, clothing, food, and digital images, come to index what was left behind and shape what the present should look and feel like? This project set out to explore how, in the aftermath of sudden rupture, the material and sensory dimensions of everyday life become the primary terrain

through which interlocutors negotiate, assert, and reimagine what it means to be Afghan in America.

Conclusion

When Mozhgan was telling me about the day she left her Oklahoma apartment to move to another state, she told me that when she was leaving, she kissed the walls of her apartment as tears poured out of her eyes. Two days prior, the pain and stress from moving literally made her body sick. I received video calls from her husband while he shopped for medicine for Mozhgan, asking me which medicine would be best, which would help her get better. After a couple of days, she felt well enough to travel, and they set off on the road to their new home. During the road trip, Mozhgan called me a few times. She would often cry and tell me over and over that she was coming back to Oklahoma. I felt for her. From my perspective, this move was another rupture. It invoked the feelings of leaving a place she had gotten used to and had curated to be her own. It invoked the feelings from the displacement from her watan. Her apartment in Oklahoma, full of new memories and objects that she had intentionally filled her home with, was now in the past. Her reaction to moving caused me to reflect on the fact that perhaps she had achieved a sense of home and belonging in displacement. In our calls, she would often bring up the park near the lake where she could picnic with other Afghan women and her kids. She had established rhythms and community, an ad hoc qaum in America. Now her future in another state required another (re)constitution of home and belonging, a new apartment, a new space, and new people.

My analysis has moved through four material domains to show how Afghanness is not only remembered and mourned but actively constituted in displacement. Chapter One showed how Afghan families transformed institutionally furnished apartments into culturally meaningful homes, exercising agency by discarding, repurposing, and acquiring objects that made spaces feel right. The transformations detailed in this chapter were not only aesthetic, but they were also

part of how families mapped worlds of meaning onto their physical surroundings, asserting their cultural practices despite institutional strictures on home through the federal list of mandated furnishings. Chapter Two showed how food and foodways became the most immediate terrain for cultural continuity, sustaining community through hospitality and the smells and tastes of home. Objects such as pressure cookers and thermoses transformed American kitchens, filling them with the sounds and smells of watan. More importantly, Chapter Two delved into how food practices were a conduit for asserting Afghan values around hospitality and generosity. Chapter Three examined clothing as the domain where Afghanness is most visibly performed and most intensely negotiated, revealing that the most fraught conversations around dress happen not between Afghans and Americans but within the Afghan community itself. This chapter contributes to scholarship on migration/displacement and dress by showing how clothing can become a site of creative agency. Chapter Four explored how digital platforms like WhatsApp and TikTok have become woven into everyday material life, creating a sonic and visual world through which interlocutors honor watan, express faith, and stay connected across vast distances. This chapter also highlighted the daily work of maintaining communicative channels and relationships despite displacement.

Current political developments in the United States are already having significant consequences for the Afghan community in OKC. The Trump administration's gutting of refugee funding has jeopardized the ability of resettlement agencies to provide services to communities across the United States. This means effectively fewer resources are available for resettled communities to engage in activities like English classes or employment training. Recently, a candidate for governor in the state of Oklahoma demanded the removal of all Afghan refugees from the state entirely, echoing assimilationist discourses articulated at the federal level

of government. Legislation passed in 2025 eliminated the ability of resettled refugees to receive food assistance through SNAP and cut access to Medicaid, which families relied on especially for their children's healthcare. This emerging context of hostility towards the community has important material consequences, and the negotiations of home and belonging that this project has documented will only intensify. Discussions around what it means to be Afghan in America in a hostile political climate will continue and should be studied ethnographically.

Along with challenging assimilationist narratives, this project contributes to broader anthropological conversations about diaspora, material culture, and home and belonging after displacement. Material culture and diaspora scholars have productively explored the experiences of refugees and migrants both in refugee camps and in the new places they seek to (re)constitute their lives. Discussion about diasporas and their transnational connections, their identities, and the discourses that shape their experiences has greatly shaped how anthropologists engage with communities whose experiences are far from a homeland. Given this rich context of ethnographic explorations and theoretical engagements, my goal with the project was to show how sudden and total rupture, followed by rapid resettlement, created different material negotiations than gradual migration or refugee camp life. The 2021 Kabul airlift families experienced displacement differently; they left with one backpack and were resettled in Oklahoma City within weeks of fleeing Kabul. This abruptness shaped how families engaged with making home and belonging.

In describing the experience of the Afghan community in OKC, I have shown how the process of homing is not static and how belonging in the community operates at multiple scales, with cultural aesthetics being a focus of how belonging is constituted. Interlocutors showed through their experiences that their notions of qaum and watan are flexible and context-

dependent concepts and are also inherently part of mediating belonging through material practices after rupture. I show how these concepts are not abstract, but are enacted in everyday life through dress, home décor, food practices, and digital communications.

This project also contributes to Afghan diaspora studies specifically. Scholarship on the Afghan diaspora focuses largely on discourse, identity, and institutions. Material culture studies of Afghans focus on the rich and diverse traditions of artisan crafts and food traditions, but do not delve into what this looks like in sudden displacement. My contribution shows how Afghanness is materially constituted in daily life through culturally significant objects. What distinguishes this project from existing scholarship on the Afghan diaspora is its attention to the material and sensory dimensions of everyday life. Where previous studies have theorized Afghan identity through discourse and transnational connection, this project has situated rugs, pressure cookers, burkas, and GIFs as the everyday objects and practices through which belonging is not just imagined but felt, smelled, worn, and touched. As I argued earlier, dress in particular, especially the burka, has too often been flattened in U.S. discourse into a sign of oppression deserving rescue, an object of pity that obscures the women who actually wear it. Engaging these material terrains contributes to broader anthropological conversations about forced migration and material culture by attending to a community whose experience of sudden rupture and rapid resettlement in OKC has been largely absent from the literature.

The experience of the Afghan community in OKC is complex and in flux. Negotiations shape everyday life and are part of how interlocutors define themselves in a new culture and a new environment. The different domains of material culture are sites for these negotiations, their boundaries expanded and asserted, contested, and questioned. The community's experience

cannot be understood through an assimilationist lens, because the community has fundamentally asserted belonging and home on its own terms.

Looking forward, it is also important for future ethnographers to include the voices of the children and second-generation members of the community, whose own negotiations with life in America and their own subjectivities as Afghans will differ from those of their parents, who lived the experience of displacement in a different way after the Kabul airlift. How will the children who grew up in America after the Kabul airlift understand *watan* and *qaum*? Will younger generations preserve the material practices of their parents who came on the airlift, or will they develop new hybrid practices born out of a different set of negotiations? Future research should attend to how future generations negotiate Afghanness as they grow up between worlds. Lastly, scholars should attend to how the Afghan diasporic digital ecosystem changes over time and how it contributes to sustaining a transnational Afghan identity.

When interlocutors consistently express a desire for their world to be infused with Afghan cultural material and visual aesthetics, for the continuation of Afghan cultural practices, and for the continued relationality with other Afghans based on being Afghan, Afghanness emerges as the fuel for the daily imaginative practices that constitute interlocutors' worlds. Afghanness performed in the everyday, rooted in material domains, buttresses the act of world-making as interlocutors imagine what belonging and home should feel like, look like, smell like, and sound like based on the memory of home in Afghanistan and the negotiations they must undertake in displacement.

It is my hope that this project sheds light on the creative, imaginative, and agentic aspects of the experience of the Afghan community in OKC, creating a sense of home and belonging in a land that is far from their *watan*, far from their *qaums*. More importantly, I hope I

have done justice to what interlocutors wanted to share with me: that their culture is Afghan and they love it; it is their glue as families, as a community. That Afghanness is important to them; it shapes who they are and how they have navigated these painful moments of loss and nostalgia for what they lost in the rupture from watan. The women and families I spent time with want to make the best of life in America, despite its difficulties and discomforts. To be sure, the imaginative practices of the everyday will continue to shape how the community negotiates its presence in the United States, leading to new material transformations as the making of home is never a settled process.

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