A LOVE LETTER TO
This Bridge Called My Back

EDITED BY gloria j. wilson, Joni B. Acuff,
AND Amelia M. Kraehe

THE UNIVERSITY OF
ARIZONA PRESS
TUCSON

21

KARACHI, “FIRST WORLDS,” AND THE SPACES IN BETWEEN

SABA FATIMA AND SANA RIZVI

Saba:

It was March 1998 when I got my acceptance letter to Ohio Wesleyan University.

I felt ecstatic! A full tuition ride!

Then I saw my mother’s face. Ammi was smiling but looked sad. I knew she was happy that I got the scholarship. But I saw her and was hit by what I’d be leaving behind, everything I’d be losing. As my departure date got closer, the frequency of my escapes to the roof of our house increased. I’d lie on top of the water tank and memorize the sky, or often just cry. Leaving Karachi for a full ride seemed the logical thing to do, and yet . . .

Sana:

As you left, I felt a sense of guilt. We had fought a few weeks back, and I had decided this time around, I would not be the first to apologize. So when you made amends the day you were leaving, I felt angry that I had lost precious time with you. I also felt betrayed—I was happy for you but angry that you couldn't take me with you. I felt wherever you were going to had to be better than what we had here.

Saba:

The first few years were all about surviving and processing loss of home. I did make good friends in college. But capitalist nationalism was intruding my life in strange ways. In my first semester, my father's employment was not renewed because of Saudization—a nationalist scheme in Saudi Arabia aimed at employing more locals and expelling brown skilled labor. That was a big blow to Abbu, although he never did want to talk about it as such. The same year, Pakistan conducted nuclear tests in response to never ending militaristic posturings with our sisters across the border. And on the eve of the tests, the government froze all foreign bank accounts and the currency devalued overnight. I ended up with three different jobs, most in the service industry, and navigated the intersections of poverty and xenophobia in Amerika.

Sana:

1998 felt like a decade. At sixteen, I was too young to make the connection between the sudden deterioration of Abbu's and Ammi's mental and physical health and how that was intrinsically linked to our uncertain futures. I could sense their worry with regards to me—I could not see myself in a noncreative field, and yet I was beginning to understand that not all of us had the privilege and cultural capital to pick arts and humanities as our occupations. "There is no respect or jobs for people in

arts," Ammi kept saying to me. It was disheartening to turn down tuition scholarships at Pakistani art institutes. Instead, I decided to prove my usefulness and maturity to my parents, to reassure them that we were all doing better, that we were all fulfilling our parents' dreams for us. I applied and was admitted to a top business school in Karachi.

Saba:

One of my earliest memories of America from my college years was visiting a nursing home while accompanying a friend who was visiting her grandparents. I scanned the neglected bodies as I walked through the hallways. I thought to myself, is this what Americans do? I saw nursing homes as where the elderly were dehumanized, seen as mere wallets. I saw families working hard to help with the costs so that their parents could be in the best possible facility. I saw the underpaid caregivers. The only entity that seemed to be winning was the for-profit retirement industry. But more importantly, I thought to myself, is this where I was headed, the sort of person who will drown in work, struggle to survive, with little investment of personal labor in service of folks who labored their entire lives for me.

Travel home was expensive and the next time we met was at our eldest sister's wedding. Ammi and Abbu said yes to our eldest sister marrying into a family we barely knew. I felt outraged and also conflicted. What did I know about how marriages are made? I called my elder sister and told her that I'd stand by her regardless of what she chose to do. She stayed silent. I took that as consent.

Sana:

We united for a brief time at our sister's wedding. I think there was more joy of our family being reunited than of our sister getting married. We both became witnesses for the first time to the oppressive practice of

dowry, the price for a groom from *pardes* (foreign land). It was the first time I learned how common the practice of transnational marriages was a way for diasporic communities to maintain their ties with their homeland. Brides from the Global South were that bridge for them. The old colonial threads seem to make our parents dance like puppets in whichever way their strings were pulled by the groom's diasporic family. Suddenly the thought of foreign land seemed exploitative and consuming. Our family was giving so much of us by sending our older sister to *pardes*, and yet they acted as if this was good for her, and we were lucky that they, *pardesis*, were even interested in us.

Saba:

With the eldest sister married, Ammi's eyes turned to me. Ammi always believed that marriage was a patriarchal institution, even if she never used those exact words. She'd say: "If you don't study *beta*, you will end up getting married."

But even when I was leaving home the first time around, various extended family members came to Ammi and told her that she would regret the decision to send me abroad, for who would testify to my purity? Who would be my guardian?

Alas, I did get married, outside of my religious sect but somehow both families (eventually) agreed.

Sana:

I felt less angry when you got married. I think primarily because you tied the knot on your terms in the first place. There was no obligation to feel indebted to the diasporic community who had been gracious enough to pluck someone from the Global South. I have been thinking of this feeling of imposed gratitude. I did not want to feel thankful when it was my

turn to get married to my husband, also from a diasporic community. I wanted to feel happy. But like my elder sister, I was reminded everywhere I went that I was lucky to be emigrating to Great Britain. For them, I had finally gotten closer to becoming a British subject—but when were we ever not?

Saba:

The day I got my American citizenship, I felt a huge sense of guilt and loss. The guilt was precipitated by my now-explicit complicity in the oppression of "my own people" in virtue of my citizenship of the imperialist enterprise. The loss, well . . . at that point in time, Karachi had stopped feeling like home for quite some time. But this was different. There was no more 'my people.' Living within a joint family system, in a non-Shia family with diametric Pakistani and religious politics, existing within a secular academia where folks seemed to be autonomous units with no familial and/or communal obligations—in these worlds, who were my people?

It took years to realize that there were so many resistant narratives within the Global North, first- and second-generation immigrants, folks thriving and fighting, folks who, as María Lugones says, do not necessarily reject the exact same dichotomies that I do, yet live as liminals.[47] These are my people.

Sana:

My first few years in Britain were suffocating. Somehow the promise of a better future was slow in coming, and yet each day I was performing the role of a grateful subject. It was as if the South Asian diaspora was complicit in my forgetting of my home in Pakistan and was quick to

47. Lugones, *Peregrinajes/Pilgrimages.*

forge new memories about how I had finally made it. The old diasporic community was eager for me to embrace the melting pot. My loves began to be pushed out of my mind—my love for painting, singing in Urdu, and wearing *khoosas* (a type of shoes). These were the same things that my in-laws had once seen as the very reasons to bring me in as a bride into their family. I would bring culture back to them, they thought. My cultural expressions that were once seen as symbols of my purity, my morality, had now become proof of my backwardness, my *paindoo*-ness. Like Quintanales, *I paid very hard for my immigrant ignorance.*[48] I had crossed over being a Third World woman to a woman of color.

Saba:

Today, my children are growing up as part of diasporic communities, connected to the Global South via an increasingly weakening thread. They exist in their brown Muslim bodies yet reside in privilege. They must forge their own sense of self. I find myself praying that their sense of self is linked to their Muslim identity, living an ethical life, casting their ballot with other liminals, with the oppressed. I fear that they will become subjects of this oppressive empire, or worse, they may absorb the neoliberal capitalist mindset. I pray that they land in the spaces in between.

Sana:

It has been ten years since I crossed the first bridge to Great Britain. I have a son now and want him to love the place where I have come from. I have made a small place for myself within the diasporic community, and I wonder if I would build bridges for my son just so I can feel a little bit at home too? My relationship with Pakistan is complicated; we both don't recognize each other anymore. We both have changed, some aspects of

48. Quintanales, "I Paid Very Hard for My Immigrant Ignorance," 151–156.

us becoming dutiful, liberal, colonial subjects, other parts of ourselves resisting with full force. And while we both have resisted the oppressive systems imposed on us, it is no surprise that in doing so, we have drawn many a bridge between us.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Lugones, María. *Peregrinajes/Pilgrimages: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Press, 2003.

Quintanales, Mirtha. "I Paid Very Hard for My Immigrant Ignorance." In *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, 151–156. New York: Kitchen Table: Woman of Color Press, 1983.