

Trees, Hands,
Stars,
and Veils:
The Portrait in Ruins

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The role of the portrait is to *look out for* the image in the absence of the person, regardless of whether this absence results from distance or from death. It is the presence of what is absent, a presence *in absentia* that is charged thus not only with the reproduction of characteristics but with presenting presence insofar as it is absent; with evoking it (invoking it, even) and with exposing it, with manifesting the retreat in which this presence is maintained. The portrait recalls presence in both senses of the word: it brings back from absence, and it remembers in absence. As such, then, the portrait immortalizes; it renders immortal in death.

Jean-Luc Nancy

It gradually becomes clear that a portrait does not resemble because it looks like a face; rather, the resemblance begins and exists only with the portrait and in it alone; resemblance is the work of the portrait, its glory or its disgrace; resemblance is tied to the condition of a work, expressing the fact that the face is not there, that it is absent, that it appears only from the absence that is precisely the resemblance, and this absence is also the form that time seizes upon when the world moves away and when there remains of it only this interval and this distance.

Maurice Blanchot

We have been turned away from the face, sometimes through the very image of the face, one that is meant to convey the inhuman, the already dead, that which is not precariousness and cannot, therefore, be killed; this is the face that we are nevertheless asked to kill, as if ridding the world of this face would return us to the human rather than consummate our inhumanity. One would need to hear the face as it speaks in something other than language to know the precariousness of life that is at stake.... We would have to interrogate the emergence and vanishing of the human at the limits of what we can know, what we can hear, what we can see, what we can sense.

*Judith Butler*¹

There is perhaps no more pressing issue in political and ethical life than the issue of human rights. We might even say that life itself requires human rights: at the very least, the right to live. This is why, from their very beginnings, human rights always have been—with and beyond all the praxes that seek to secure them—a way to think about what it means to be human, and what it means to have the right both to live and to be human. If the challenge of human rights seems to be infinite, however, it is because we have yet to enact a politics that can ensure absolute justice and dignity throughout the world. Indeed, it would be impossible to name all the places in which the bloody conflicts of economic wars, civil wars, ethnic conflicts, wars of culture and religion, and the proliferation of racism and xenophobia have threatened human rights, but also in which these wars and conflicts, for good or ill, have helped shape and define the shifting grounds both of rights and of what it means to be human. What is clear, however—and this is one of the many lessons that Fazal Sheikh’s remarkable photographs convey to us—is that the world is not a place where humanity or rights are shared, and this despite their respective claims to universality. Instead, it is a place of inequality and injustice, a place of loss and death, a place where every day there are more refugees, more people who are displaced and dispossessed, who starve, who are mutilated and raped, who are exiled and marginalized, and who live without the full exercise of political and civic rights. It is a place where, because of the inequality and injustice often written into the very formulations and definitions of humanity and rights, the task of defining and realizing human rights is infinite, and therefore permanently urgent and necessary.

Taking her point of departure from this urgency and necessity, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Hannah Arendt famously discusses the paradoxical and aporetic character of human rights. In a chapter entitled “The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man,” she presents a genealogy of the modern mass phenomenon of the refugee, of the numerous “stateless” populations that emerged in the aftermath of the First World War, and with the rise of imperialism and totalitarianism—in a short period, 1.5 million Russians, seven hundred thousand Armenians, five hundred thousand Bulgarians, a million Greeks, and hundreds of thousands of Germans, Hungarians, and Romanians left their countries. Exiled or deported, deprived of all civil and civic rights, excluded from any form of political participation, the refugee, in Arendt’s formulation, introduces a kind of breakdown into the contemporary understanding of human rights. “The conception of human rights,” she explains, “based upon the assumed existence of a human being as such, broke down at the very moment when those who professed to believe in it were for the first

time confronted with people who had indeed lost all other qualities and specific relationships—except that they were still human.”² The crisis within human rights arises from the fact that, with the appearance of the refugee, the presumably sacred and inalienable rights of man are shown to be entirely alienable, to lack any protection or reality at the very moment in which they can no longer be understood as rights belonging to citizens of a state, or to members of a particular political community. In other words, it is precisely when the non-citizen appears, when the human is divorced from citizenship (even if it is citizenship itself that often defines the human) or forced to move from the place that grants him or her citizenship, that rights are lost.

The consequences of this loss suggests that human rights do not precede political ones; instead, political rights—without which there could be no concept or confirmation of citizenship—are what determine the recognition and definition of “human rights,” even beginning with the most elementary ones: those of survival, or of what Giorgio Agamben, following Walter Benjamin, has called “bare life.”³ At the very moment when the continuity between the human and the citizen is broken down, refugees—citizens of nowhere in the world—can no longer be “recognized or treated as humans,” and this even when, as Arendt notes, the refugee can only keep a relation to his or her very human body, when he or she is “still human.” As Etienne Balibar explains, “when the positive institutional rights of the citizen are destroyed—when, for example, in a given historical context where citizenship and nationhood are closely associated, individuals and groups are chased out of their national belonging or simply put in the situation of an oppressed national ‘minority’—the basic rights that are supposed to be ‘natural’ or ‘universally human’ [also] are threatened and destroyed.”⁴ The refugee, then—trembling at the edge of the distinction between the human and the non-human—becomes human, merely human (or, as Nietzsche would have it, “all too human”), only when, no longer treated as human, he or she is no longer capable of having rights. This is why, in Arendt’s words, “the paradox involved in the loss of human rights is that such loss coincides with the instant when a person becomes a human being in general—without a profession, without a citizenship, without an opinion, without a deed by which to identify and specify himself.”⁵ A person becomes human, that is, when he or she can no longer identify himself or herself. This reversal of the priority of human rights over political rights therefore belies the contradictions at the heart of the rights of man: if they are supposed to be inalienable and universal—free from the determinations of any particular nation or state—they also are dependent on the sovereignty of that nation or state for their definition, protection, and realization. As Werner Hamacher reminds us, it is this

“fundamental and unresolvable paradox” that “allows Arendt to speak of ‘the perplexities of human rights.’”⁶

Since the early Nineties, Fazal Sheikh has oriented his camera toward some of the most vulnerable people in the world. He has done so in order to call attention to the necessity of human rights and their accompanying discourses, even as his photographs argue for a vigilant interrogation of the terms of these discourses and, indeed, the concepts at work within them: life, death, humanity, subjectivity, relation, alterity, ethics, violence, and displacement in general. These photographs are a testament to what he has sought to present to us in his ongoing effort—in the aftermath of the continued decline and dissolution of the nation state and its sovereignty, and of the general erosion of traditional political-juridical categories (such as the citizen, rights, and nationality)—to document and record the resulting mass phenomena of the refugee: in Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi, Afghanistan and Pakistan, but also in India, Mexico, Brazil, and beyond. They seek to portray what Benjamin famously referred to as the “tradition of the oppressed”⁷—a tradition composed of, among so many other things, the silence of the displaced and marginalized, and the inexpressibility of the traumas of the dispossessed. Like Benjamin, Sheikh seeks to enable those whom violence has deprived of expression to articulate their claim to justice.

In presenting us the traces of violence, deprivation, oppression, and effacement in relation to which his subjects exist—in relation to which they live and die, and even live as if they already were dead—Sheikh’s photographs seek to bestow a kind of life and dignity on these men, women, and children, to attest to the necessity and responsibility of producing photographs that might facilitate this life and dignity, that may even speak and be heard. What is at stake, then, is not only the possibility of casting a light on those whom history has sought to reduce to silence, whom history has deprived of a voice and a face, but also the chance that the traumas they have experienced can be given expression. What is implied here is that a photograph can never be thought of solely in terms of what is printed on photographic paper: it always bears the traces of a photographic event and, if we are obliged to reconstruct this event, this act of reconstruction requires more than simply identifying what is exhibited in the photograph. It requires an act of engagement, an act of interpretation, which also responds to the several histories that, together, form the contexts within which the photograph was produced. This is perhaps especially the case when—because we may be viewing a person who has suffered some form of injury, a person who, because of this injury, now lives as if, even in life, he or she were already dead—the relation between what is visible and what is invisible is no longer certain. We know, for example,

that numerous visual and textual expressions might be able to testify to a person's injuries, even while still enabling the most visible signs of the trauma to remain unseen: in the world of the photograph, what is visible always threatens to become invisible and what is presently invisible is what needs to be read.⁸ To read a photograph therefore would mean to give an account of the several histories and contexts sealed within it, to respond to the innumerable experiences commemorated, displaced, and ciphered by it, to seek to reconstruct the circumstances in which it was produced or, better, of those it names, codes, disguises or dates on its surface—circumstances that would include the trauma of violence and loss, of dispossession and death. But precisely because the circumstances or contexts in which a photograph is produced can never be fully given (since they are interwoven within an entire network of historical and social relations), how is it that we can respond to what remains invisible, to what can never be seen directly within the image? That this question is raised by a desire to read historically is confirmed in a passage from the drafts to Benjamin's "On the Concept of History." There, he tells us that, "The past has deposited in it images, which one could compare to those captured by a light-sensitive plate. 'Only the future has developers at its disposal that are strong enough to allow the image to come to light in all its detail. Many a page in Marivaux or Rousseau reveals a secret sense, which the contemporary reader cannot have deciphered completely.' The historical method is a philological one, whose foundation is the book of life. 'To read what was never written,' says Hofmannsthal. The reader to be thought of here is the true historian."⁹ If the structure of an image is defined in relation to what remains unseen, this withholding and withdrawing structure prevents us from experiencing the image in its entirety, or, to be more precise, encourages us to recognize that the image, bearing as it always does several memories at once, is never closed. It perhaps also tells us, if it can tell us anything at all, that it is in relation to this invisibility, to this departure from sense and understanding, that our capacity to bear witness may indeed begin to take place. What is at stake in the encounter with Sheikh's photographs is not simply the possibility of seeing and understanding what cannot be seen directly within them but also the necessity of bearing witness to what history has silenced or sought to conceal (which nevertheless has left its traces on their surfaces), to what, arising from the days and nights of memory that are inscribed within them, haunts us, and encourages us to think about the loss and dispossession for which we remain, still today, responsible.

The portraits in this book are drawn from the entire trajectory of Sheikh's career and include images from his early work in African refugee camps in Kenya, Tanzania, and

Malawi, where from 1992 to 1994 he sought to capture the aftermath of conflicts in the Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Mozambique and Rwanda; his project along the Afghanistan and Pakistan borders from 1996 to 1998, *The Victor Weeps*, in which he sought to portray Afghan men, women, and children who, living for two decades as refugees in northern Pakistan, offer us a lens through which we might view the history, future, and consequences of the wars in Afghanistan; his work from 1992 to 2000 focusing on Somali women refugees in north-eastern Kenya, and published under the title *A Camel for the Son*; his portrait of Seynab Azir Wardeere, a Somali refugee who, after enduring intense trauma during the Somali civil war, tries to remain faithful to the rites and meaning of Ramadan while under threat of eviction from an asylum seekers' center in the Netherlands, published in 2001 under the title *Ramadan Moon*; his project, *Moksha*, which centered around the displacement and dispossession of widows in India who, experiencing a kind of social death, go to the holy city of Vrindavan to devote themselves to Krishna and to find *moksha*—heaven or salvation; his work on the devastating effects of traditional social mores on women in India, focusing on a wide-range of female experiences, from infancy to old age, that emphasize a life full of inequities, and published under the title *Ladli* (“beloved daughter,” in Hindi); and his work on migrant workers in Brazil’s Grande Sertão, on immigrants who cross the border between Mexico and the United States, often at great risk, and on the ways in which the rituals of Santería, an important Afro-Cuban religion, provide resources for the Cuban people as they increasingly face an uncertain future.

While the portraits that compose this book initially were produced in relation to the projects mentioned in this list, they are presented here in a way that is neither chronological nor situated only in relation to the particular project to which they first belonged. The effects of this presentation therefore are various, but perhaps the most significant one is that it helps put the different projects (and the portraits and photographs that comprise them) into relation with one another, into a kind of series—as if they were all of a piece, and as if they were an invitation for us to follow a red thread that perhaps is legible throughout the entirety of Sheikh’s corpus.¹⁰ To put it differently, each work in this series of portraits is related to the others only through its otherness—an otherness that is emphasized when the work is sometimes multiplied (Sheikh often circulates and re-circulates his portraits from one project to another), displaced, or simply serialized—which means that these works are not “related,” at least not in any determinable sense of relation. They are “together,” but togetherness here means otherness—it is what moves the image away from itself, what prevents it from existing “on its own,” what ensures it will be transformed and altered in

relation to the other portraits. While each portrait could be said to take its existence from the series to which it belongs, then, each already bears in itself a kind of open seriality, a multiplicity, an internal fissure or division that prohibits any gathering around itself and that indeed suggests that each “one” is already “more than one.” As Moholy-Nagy put it in his 1932 essay, “A New Instrument of Vision,” speaking of photographs in particular: “The series is no longer a ‘picture,’ and none of the canons of pictorial aesthetics can be applied to it. Here the separate picture loses its identity as such and becomes a detail of assembly, an essential structural element of the whole which is the thing itself. In this concatenation of its separate but inseparable parts a photographic series inspired by a definite purpose can become at once the most potent weapon and the tenderest lyric.”¹¹ I wish to stress this point since I believe it has its analogue in the subjects of Sheikh’s portraits. Like the portraits that, however singular they may be, nevertheless lose some of their singularity by being put into a series, the persons in the portraits also are both singular and never simply themselves. As we will see, this means that what we have before us is a series of portraits that are never simply the portrait of a single person, even if there is only one person in the image, but rather a kind of archive, or set of archives, of all the experiences, histories, and relations that have made “him” or “her” who he or she is, even if—because of these same experiences, histories, and relations—it becomes clear that this person is never simply himself or herself. These are portraits, in other words, that ask us to rethink what a portrait is or may be, and do so by suggesting all the different ways in which we are always, in advance, related to others, even when the distance between us and these others may seem impossibly vast.¹² This lesson is perhaps Sheikh’s “most potent weapon” and “tenderest lyric,” and it is legible at every step of his photographic trajectory.

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Among Sheikh’s earliest photographs are the images he took from 1992 to 1995 in the African refugee camps of Kenya, Tanzania, and Malawi, which were established in the aftermath of conflicts throughout the Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Mozambique and Rwanda. The number of people displaced by civil wars, ethnic and religious conflicts, and forced migration is astonishing: hundreds of thousands who left the Sudan in the late 1980s to escape a harrowing civil war, some 500,000 Somalis who by 1992 had settled in camps in Kenya to avoid tribal and clan-based violence, and 1.7 million Mozambicans who sought refuge in six neighboring countries in the course of a fifteen-year civil war. The photographs

he took were included in his first book, *A Sense of Common Ground*, and the method of work that he established in the project—which included living in the communities and learning about their experiences, collaborating with them in the creation of formal portraits and landscapes, using his subject’s names in the titles of his images and thereby challenging the anonymity that so often attends media representations of refugees, and including texts written by him and his subjects, a practice that he would develop later, when he began to include fragments of his conversations and interviews with the refugees—set the tone and stage for all of his future projects, even when these later projects emphasize or elaborate one or more of these elements more than others. In each instance—either in this early project, or in his later ones—Sheikh presents a series of portraits that become not only portrayals of the refugees (of this or that particular refugee, or this or that particular group of refugees) but also allegorical meditations on the nature of photography in general, on the possibility of offering a portrait, and, in particular, on what makes a portrait a portrait in the first place. These are portraits that are not reducible to the representation of a singular and autonomous person; instead, they ask us to think about what we mean when we say “person” (individual, subject, “someone,” or whatever name we might choose). These are portraits, in other words, which engage and enact an entire philosophy of the subject.

In the first image of *A Sense of Common Ground*, for example, we are confronted with a double portrait—a portrait of two Sudanese women, Ajoh Achot and Achol Manyen, taken in Lokichoggio, Kenya. The women are standing in front of the trunk of a tree, with other trees faintly visible in the background, and with the blurred and almost ghostly images of at least three other refugees behind them and to both sides of the tree. While it is clear that these two women are the central figures in the image, it also is clear that neither woman appears alone. This double portrait suggests that the identity of either of these women cannot be thought of without considering the relation they have with one another, or with the figures and landscape behind them. The identification between the women and the tree behind them, for instance, is legible in the ritual scars that flare across the two women’s foreheads. These scars are echoed in the splayed fingers that Achol presses to her plain dress, even as these scars and fingers rhyme with the figure of the tree itself. Indeed, the sets of superimposed Vs that have been inscribed onto the women’s



Ajoh Achot and Achol Manyen

foreheads—common patterns in African rituals of scarification—evoke the growth of vegetation and refer not simply to fertility and reproduction but also to the branches of trees. It is as if the branches that are missing from the tree in the photograph appear on the foreheads as a signal of what has been severed—as if the severed branches, that is, working as a kind of identifying insignia, suggest the way in which these two women also have been torn from their homes and identity—and this even though, within African communal life, such intricate lines often are the signs of a person’s humanness or identity, a person’s tie or bond to a particular community. Like the photograph, scarification is a mode of inscription, a means of leaving and preserving traces, and indeed a trace of the impression left by one person on another. This is why, if these faces are like trees, it is because they are not simply faces, but rather archives of traces.

This association between inscriptions and trees helps us register something else about these early photographs. In nearly every photograph that Sheikh takes in these camps there



Agai Miriam Adeng

is some kind of vegetation or tree in the background: from the trees and bushes in the backgrounds of the portraits taken in the Sudan to those in the images from Ethiopia, Somalia, Mozambique, and Rwanda. In each instance, there is a relation established between the landscape and the person or persons situated and photographed in these often desolate and difficult terrains. This is particularly the case in the very beautiful image of Agai Miriam Adeng, an unaccompanied minor in the Kakuma refugee camp, sitting in the middle of a tree with a multiply-divided trunk, and with a small figure in the distance on the left of the image, beside another tree and seemingly haunting the young Agai.

A somewhat related but more intensified image, from a different and later project in Bhutan in 1996, is the remarkable image of Bahadur’s eighty-fifth birthday, taken in a Bhutanese refugee camp in East Nepal. In the image, Bahadur is seated in front of a large, gnarled tree trunk, flanked by children sitting on the tree’s roots, which are partially above ground, and by children who are peeping through branches or standing beside the tree. The image is, among so many other things, a signal of the relationality that is always encrypted within the figure of the tree. But what is a tree, and what is it especially when it appears in a photograph? Can there be a photography of trees, or even a philosophy of trees? If a photography or philosophy of trees were possible, it perhaps would have to start with the

trace or archive, with a thought of the relation between life and death, survival and destruction, and remembrance and forgetfulness. That this is the case is legible in all the cases in which the photograph before us includes a tree or trees whose branches are intertwined with one another, as if they formed a kind of lacework or set of graphic tracings (not unlike the complicated relations exposed and encrypted in the correspondences among details in the photographs: as in the relays that exist among the scars, the fingers, and the tree in the image of Ajoh and Achol, or in the interplay between the limbs of bodies and the limbs of trees that takes place in so many of these images), and through which the play of light and shadows is legible and hidden at the same time. In the double portrait with which we have begun, the branches of the tree behind the two women are not visible, as if to suggest the lost or severed relations that inform the image's historical background—the losses or deaths experienced by the two women—as well as the decontextualization that takes place within any photograph. Like the severed branches, in other words, the moment in the image appears suspended and torn from any particular historical moment. Pointing to the deracinating force of the photograph (and of all photographs), these photographs not only tell us something about the moment in which they were taken—and about the several histories that are sealed within that moment—but also about the structure and character of photography itself. But if the invisible branches and foliage of trees in these images are often figures for the history and culture that has been truncated all across the African landscape, this history and culture lives on in the trunks and limbs of the bodies before us.



Bahadur's eighty-fifth birthday

This is why, as a figure of life and genealogy, of nature and relation, the tree also is a kind of archival image, an image of the archive, an image of the state of the archive, and perhaps even of the archive that this set of images is. We might even say that the tree is a photograph of these relations, or another instance or version of them. Like the innumerable trees that permeate the poetry of Paul Valéry, the trees in these images bear the traces of an entire history and therefore always have more than “two trees” within them. Internally divided, and cut off from any simple or single source, each tree appears as a singular plural whose multiple branches become figures for the innumerable threads and relations within which each of these photographs is produced and circulated. Indeed, the tree that naturally would cite both nature and genealogies, that would bring together the past, the present, and

the future, at least if it were given an iconic aura—as it seems to be given in many of the images here—is more than ghosted or spectral. The shades of black and white cite the origins of photography (as I will suggest in a moment, trees belong to the earliest beginnings of photography), while the entangled and interlaced branches in so many of the African images suggest the knot of relations in which we live. A kind of exfoliating network of markers and references, the tree of life or genealogies is a spectral tree that touches or contaminates (even as it is touched by) vast archival networks, and not only within these images. It therefore becomes a figure for the history that is sealed within each image. This is perhaps most legible in terms of the aura that surrounds the baobab tree (a tree that has fascinated Sheikh for some time now and that forms part of a future project).¹³ A living monument, the baobab tree is the most ancient living thing in Africa. Since there is no living thing that is closer to being permanent than the baobab, it is not surprising that it has inspired notions of animism or religion and has been viewed as a secret meeting place for ancestors, as a refuge for spirits or gods. A solitary tree—baobabs do not form part of any woodlands—the baobab also forms a kind of forest in itself, since, wherever it grows, it bears its own communities of plants and animals. It figures a self that is multiple and therefore not simply “itself.”

In most myths about the baobab’s origins, the tree is seen to be standing on its head, with its roots in the air—an uprootedness that seems particularly fitting in the context of Sheikh’s refugees (and one that may even be mimed in his image of two “unaccompanied



Sudanese unaccompanied minors

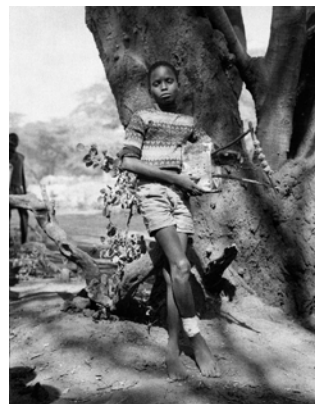
minors” standing on their heads with their legs and feet in the air, in front of a tree and before a group of onlookers)—and its famously wrinkled skin evokes the several histories that seem to have left their traces on its surfaces. The baobab tree also hovers over the intermingling of different clans or groups and therefore embodies the traces of the complicated history of their relations and conflicts. All along the East African coast, for example, the spiritual beliefs of Africa’s indigenous people have become interwoven with those of Arab immigrants. As Rupert Watson has noted, “[o]ld mosques and tombs may be relics of the Islamic tradition, but the power of their past is strong enough to

attract people of any religious or animist persuasion. They, and the trees that surround them, create a vital link between the living and the dead. While Muslims once worshipped

at the mosques, the trees overshadowing their ruins may now house the spirits of the ancestors of African animists, who still come to commune with these spirits. Nowhere are the edges between the animist spirituality of indigenous Africans and the Islamic beliefs of Arabs better blurred than in a grove of baobabs round an old Islamic town.”¹⁴ This is why the baobab, like all the other trees that populate Sheikh’s images, is also a figure of relations in general and, like all genealogical or family trees, a figure of inheritances and legacies (and this is perhaps why, given the relation between hands and the issue of inheritance and transmission that traverses Sheikh’s entire body of work, so many of the portraits that include trees here also emphasize hands—hands that are placed on chests, that hold up heads, that clasp the hands of others or are placed on shoulders or heads, that are holding objects or images, that are holding a loved one, that reach down tree trunks or reach across the front of trees in order to clasp something else or even simply to touch the ground).

Like photography, the tree exists in relation to the play between light and darkness, between the light of the sky that enables it to synthesize the nourishment it receives from the depths of the earth and the darkness of these depths.

Rooted in a kind of communication between the sky and the earth, it becomes a figure for photography itself and—as is evident in images such as that of Miriam Mac and Agot Anyang playing “bao” underneath the shade of a tree (p. 239), that of Kai Chop Deng, a young boy who, also traversed and surrounded by shadows, has lost his family and stands in front of a tree holding a handmade lyre (made from an American relief aid oil can, sticks, and wire), or that of Wezemana (p. 193), who, in a Rwandan refugee camp in Tanzania, is seated in the shadows of a large tree with her brother Mitonze asleep in a sling around her back, also with



Kai Chop Deng

a series of ghostly figures in the background—like the camera, it also is a medium for producing images. By casting shadows across itself, the surface of the earth, and the bodies or objects nearby, the tree works like a photographic apparatus and, in its collaboration with the light of the sun, recalls the earliest photographic experiments—not only those of William Henry Fox Talbot or Anna Atkins, whose “photogenic drawings” were among the first efforts to produce images without a camera, but also those of Aristotle himself. In his *Problemata*, Aristotle tells us how, sitting under a tree during a partial eclipse of the sun, he witnessed the sun cast multiple crescent-shaped images of itself on the ground before him.

As the leaves of the tree moved, the changing spaces between them worked as pinholes, allowing the sun's rays to pass through and cast images on the ground, framed by the tree's shadows. Following this observation, Aristotle built his own device, which consisted of a dark chamber with a single small hole to allow for sunlight to enter. He noted that no matter what shape the hole was, it still would display the sun correctly as a round object. His description of this device in the *Problemata* is the earliest known written evidence of a camera obscura, and the shadows produced by the trees in Sheikh's photographs are descendants of this early mode of inscription and reproduction.¹⁵

Sheikh reinforces this link between production and reproduction in the exquisite series of portraits of Somali women and their children, of sisters and brothers, and of activist women and women's groups in his *A Camel for the Son* project, which also reproduces images from his earlier African project, and which focuses on a series of Somali refugee camps in Kenya. He introduces the book with an account of the history of warfare and violence that led to the Somali exodus into Kenya in the early Nineties. Incorporating first-person accounts of the women who, fleeing conflict and drought in Somalia and experiencing extreme trauma in this flight, nevertheless raised their children in exile, amid



Abshiro Aden Mohammed

ongoing abuse, sexual assaults, displacement, and privation, and worked to hold on to friends and relations, their religion, and a way of living that was constantly threatened or touched by death, Sheikh's moving series of portraits and texts again emphasize the interrelatedness that underlies the everyday life of the refugees.¹⁶ Indeed, most of the images in this series have more than one person in them, and, even when they include only one person, the narratives placed alongside them help us understand the history and relations, the traumas and suffering, the impoverishment and loss that are sealed within the image before us—in the body, the posture, the face, the eyes or hands of the person or persons

within it.¹⁷ This point is manifested in a rather remarkable way in the portrait of Abshiro Aden Mohammed, since what we see in her eyes is the image of Sheikh taking her picture.

This inscription of the other within a self is reinforced in the images of mothers and children, most of which were taken in the feeding center in a Somali refugee camp in Mandera—and not only because they offer moving portraits of female refugees and their sons or daughters but also because they again provide us with a kind of allegory of

photography in general. Beyond the fact that these Madonna-like portraits depict a relation between mother and child that is touched by fragility, vulnerability, and even death, they become associated with photography itself, since the figure of the mother within the history of photography always has been another name for photography—as is evidenced in texts from Marcel Proust and Benjamin to Siegfried Kracauer and Roland Barthes. In accordance with this history, the mother’s body, viewed as the condition of possibility for a process of reproduction that gives something to be seen, is at once a camera, developer, and photographic darkroom. As we can see in the images in question, neither the mother nor the child can remain an independent self because, bearing the trace of the other, each can be identified with the other. In experiencing the mother’s alterity, in experiencing alterity in the mother, the child experiences the alteration “in him” or “in her” that infinitely displaces and delimits his or her singularity. This is why, from the moment of his or her birth, the child already experiences a kind of death in relation to the maternal body—a body whose material residue lives on in his or her body and therefore retrospectively confirms not only his or her body’s passage through the mother’s body but also his or her capacity to retain a relation to the mother’s body, even



Abdia Abdi Khalil and her son Hameed

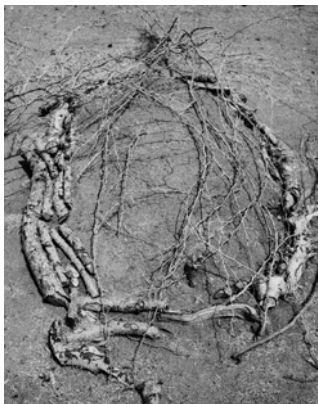


Hadija and her father

after her death. Like the mother, the photograph exists between life and death, the past and the present, interiority and exteriority, body and image, and subject and image. It opens onto a future whose lineaments are not yet known, even if what can be known enables us to delineate the contours of the horizon and limit of death. This is why the mother (not simply the mothers in these images but all mothers) is also—beyond everything else that she is in relation to the child’s life or death—nothing more nor less than a figure for the birth and death of photography.¹⁸ This is evident in all of the maternal images of this series (and there is even a maternal character to the images in which sisters hold brothers as well), and it is perhaps even more forceful when the mother is absent but nevertheless strongly present, as is the case in the photograph of Hadija and her

father Badel Addan Gadel—a photograph that circulates throughout Sheikh’s corpus. Indeed, the mother is so present in her absence that we are told that Hadija had fallen silent and been mute ever since her mother disappeared (something that also is figured in the fact that Hadija’s father is half-absent from the image: what we see instead is his arm extended toward her and his right hand on her shoulder. This sign of filial care is divided in the image between the father and her absent mother).¹⁹

This is why none of Sheikh’s African images can be reduced to a portrait of a single person or even a group of persons, since each one opens onto an entire history that includes not only the history of cruel wars and ethnic and religious conflicts, the history of loss, death, destruction, and displacement that permeates the lives of these refugees, the history of the cultural and religious myths in relation to which the refugees live and die, the relations between the refugees and a landscape that itself bears the traces of these bloody histories, of drought and famine, but also of endurance and strength, and the history of their relation to their families, friends, and communities. Each portrait, in other words, opens onto a world: it tells us that, if we wish to see this or that refugee, to understand his or her plight, we can only begin to “see” him or her by understanding his or her relation to an entire network of intensely mediated relations. This is why, in viewing these portraits, we simultaneously experience the absence of the subject as well as the fact of its “having-been-there,” the relation between life and death, between testimony and its impossibility, between the self and an other (and even several others), and, among the past, the present,



Somali gravesite

and the future. This “active” transformation of a “self” into a kind of archive is not that of someone who offers himself or herself to the camera, like some sacrificial victim, in order to be reproduced, but rather that of someone who knows that what makes him or her what he or she “is”—and therefore prevents him or her from ever being simply “himself” or “herself”—is the multiplicity that *inhabits* “him” or “her.” In the same way that the being of an object does not exist before its representation, there also is never a single, homogeneous subject or object that—even before it is placed in front of the camera—coincides with itself, since it is always, in advance, inscribed within this infinitely wide web of relations. We could even say that photography names the process whereby something stops being what it “is” in order to transform itself into “something else.” This

transformation therefore implies a kind of death—since what existed *before* the transformation is no longer present—and it is no accident that Sheikh intersperses, among his images of Somali refugees, a series of photographs of graves (the significance of these photographs is signaled again when, some years later, Sheikh reproduces them at the end of his *A Camel for the Son* project)—each of which could be said to be a “portrait,” but a portrait that tells us what is true of all portraits: a portrait is always less “the immortalization of a person than the presentation of (immortal) death in (a) person.”²⁰

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If each detail in these portraits has its force and logic, what are we to do with the hands that appear throughout Sheikh’s work, and not only within his early African portraits, where hands are, among so many other things, a means of holding and keeping in a context in which everything is unstable, fragile, and fleeting—as is the case in the portraits of Akuot Nyibol with Riak Warabek and Akuot’s daughter, Athok Duom (p. 121), of Halima Abdullai Hassan and her grandson Mohammed (p. 91), and of Shamsa Moka Abdi and her sister Shahil (p. 147), to give just three examples? How are



Gumercindo Lisboa

we to understand the play of hands in Sheikh’s portraits of the hands of Gumercindo Lisboa, or of the hands of Eves Gongora Loreng holding a sunflower in honor of Saint Lazarus in Cuba (p. 237)? What about the hands that seem to take on special significance in his *Moksha* and *Ladli* projects, where again they become a means of transmission or comfort—with widows holding books or teenage girls clasping their hands together? Or the many hands that appear in *The Victor Weeps*? There, in Sheikh’s record of Afghan refugees along the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, produced in the winter of 1997, we find several portraits of hands—some portraying just hands, holding small photographs of lost fathers, sons, and brothers, and others of women holding photographs of lost husbands and sons—as in the portrait of Qurban Gul holding a photograph of her son, Mula Awaz (p. 199). In each instance, whether the hands are holding something, whether they are holding each other or someone else, or simply resting on this or that part of a body, they imply an effort to keep and to hold, to carry and hand over, to hand down, like a kind of legacy or inheritance, a fragment of the past.

That this is the case can be seen in the portrait of Haji Qiamuddin holding a photograph of his dead brother, Asamuddin, and of Abdullah holding a photograph of his nephew, who died in a Soviet bombardment. These two photographs were taken after the



Haji Qiamuddin

Taliban's capture of Kabul in 1996 and after the series of prohibitions it proclaimed against images, pictures, and portraits in December of that year. They were taken in refugee camps, in the secrecy of night and under the light of a small lamp, and they are meant to remember and memorialize the deaths of loved ones, and indeed to remember and memorialize an earlier act of remembrance and memorialization: they are, after all, and among other things, photographs of photographs. They are meant to remind us of the violent history that led to these deaths—a history that includes the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in

1979; the efforts by the CIA and Pakistan's ISI (Inter Services Intelligence) to support Afghan resistance to the Soviets and expand it into a holy war; the devastation of Afghanistan during the ten years before the Soviet Union's withdrawal in 1989; the fact that, by 1990, almost half of the Afghan population—6.2 million—had fled the country; the civil wars and the eventual emergence of the Taliban's reign of terror in the early to mid-1990s; and, by the winter of 1997, with 2.7 million Afghans still living in exile and nearly two million Afghans dead in the period after the Soviet invasion, the reduction of a country to a landscape traversed by the traces of dispossession, destruction, and death.²¹

Like Sheikh's earlier African images, these images, however simple and straightforward they may seem to be, also evoke a history of crisis and loss—and one that is delineated in the essay that Sheikh writes for the project, which offers a history of the conflicts that have punctuated Afghanistan's history for at least the last two centuries, and in the fragments of testimony offered by the refugees and transcribed for the volume. Again, Sheikh seems to suggest that, if these are portraits, they can only be portraits if they are situated in relation to a history that remains both visible and invisible within the image, and whose effects are there to be read. This is why, like the trees of which I already have spoken, these hands also are archives that bear the traces of a life, and indeed of several lives (in this way they are like the many faces of elder Afghan men and women, whose lines and wrinkles are like those to which Benjamin refers in his essay on Proust, pointing to the condition of exile that perhaps has become the signature of our era. As he puts it, "The

wrinkles and creases in our faces are the registration of the great passions, vices, insights that called on us; but we, the masters, were not at home”²²). But, if these portraits of hands holding photographs are indeed portraits—we are given the names of both the person holding the image and the person in it—they suggest that a portrait never gives you the person as such, but always only a fragment or aspect of that person. At the same time, the play between the portrait and its title seems to tell us that this hand, this hand holding a photograph, indeed this portrait itself *is* this person holding the image, a suggestion that points to the photographic character of the portrait’s subject or subjects, and even before they were in front of the camera. As Benjamin writes in his artwork essay, “the human being withdraws from the photograph.”²³ This means that there can be no photograph without the withdrawal of what is photographed. This is why these images cannot be said to represent the act of a comprehension that begins by taking hold of something, by laying one’s hands on something. Instead, the hands in these images barely seem to hold the small photographs that lie in their palms. The image of the dead child seems to be almost floating, suspended like the hand that holds it, but that holds it lightly, barely supporting the image with two of its five fingers, each of which points in a different direction, as if to suggest, however discreetly, the mobility of reference that structures every photograph. The entire photograph is touched by a kind of fragility and vulnerability, by a sense of surrender and evanescence. All of these are also legible in the photograph of the brother’s hand holding the image of



Abdallah

his dead sibling and especially in the hand’s disappearing, withdrawing fingers. In both instances, the thought of the hand offered here is one of a hand that gives, that offers, that holds—if this is possible—“without taking hold of anything.”²⁴ If these two photographs therefore suggest the fragility, uncertainty, and indetermination from which any act of understanding emerges, they also inscribe, within the limits and contours of their permeable frames, an allegory of photography: an allegory that seeks to tell us something not only about the nature of photography but also about the possibility of reading photographs in general. The hands that extend themselves, that seek to hold or hand over, to hand down, these hands tell us what a photograph desires: it, too, wishes to offer, to keep, to convey and hand over a fragment of our memory. Like the hand, it comes to us as a mode of transmission—but a mode of transmission that asks us to think about what it means to

transmit or communicate, to bequeath something, to leave behind a legacy or inheritance through which a future might become possible. The photographs are about, among so many other things, what it means to pass something down, to hand something over—a memory, a death, a past, present or future—and not only because they confirm, in however an interrupted a manner, a story of inheritance and lineage, a story of the relations among fathers, sons and brothers. Emphasizing the singularity of a single death—and we should never forget that what is ineffaceable about death is that, no matter how many thousands, hundreds of thousands, or even millions of deaths there may be, these deaths are always singular deaths—they also suggest that, like photography itself, inheritance is both a matter of singularity and repetition, a matter of the singularity of a memory and of the repetition without which there could be neither memory nor inheritance. This association between inheritance and photography also suggests that what these hands surrender to us is what is given to us by every photograph: an image. We can never remind ourselves enough that the photograph gives us an image rather than what is photographed. We could even say that every photograph turns the photographed into a kind of refugee, tearing it from its context and displacing it into another place and moment. In these two photographs, what is torn from its context is not simply the hand that offers the photograph of a dead son or a dead brother, the act of memory and memorialization itself, but also the innumerable other deaths evoked by these singular ones. That the small photographs evoke the son's and brother's absence tells us that the photographs—the ones before us but also the ones held in the father's and brother's hands—come to us, as all photographs do, in the mode of bereavement.

This is why, if the history and events sealed within these two photographs call out for memory—and for a memory of the violence and trauma they evoke—this memory could never be a memory that aims to restore or commemorate. If the past is experienced in terms of loss and ruin, it is because it cannot be recovered. Even if we can no longer believe that memory and commemoration will help us prevent disaster in the future, we are nevertheless still obliged to imagine a means of remembering what remains without remaining, of what still demands to be preserved, even if within a history that can never enter into history. If nothing can replace what has been lost to history, is it possible to interrupt the course of history and its catastrophes, or are we endlessly condemned to reiterate and enact this condition of loss and displacement? This question tells us not only why we must learn to read the past—to read, that is, the irretrievable images of the past—but, as Benjamin would say, in a way that knows how these images threaten to disappear

to us as long as we do not recognize ourselves in them. That we should indeed recognize ourselves in these portraits is what Sheikh asks us to understand, since it is only by registering our relation to them that victors can begin to weep, and this history of conflict and violence might be softened, and perhaps even diminished.

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Among the many portraits that compose Sheikh's oeuvre, the most extended one is his portrait of Seynab Azir Wardeere, a Somali refugee who, after leaving her home with her family to escape the violence and fighting in Mogadishu, eventually witnesses her father's murder at the hands of four armed men, who then attack and rape her in front of her children. She and her husband trade their home for passage to Europe, but, because "there is only sufficient money for two people," she leaves for the Netherlands with her son, Mohammed, and her "husband and two daughters travel to his family in Baidoa."²⁵ The book that offers Seynab's portrait, *Ramadan Moon*, includes eight portraits of her face and the upper one-third of her body, and the images present her from different angles and under different light. As the images move from one to the other, it is as if her round face, changing in relation to the light and shadows that reveal and conceal it, undergoes the phases of the moon, something that inscribes her identity in relation to the moon, which circulates in the book as a figure of her relation to home—she tell us that "in Mogadishu, the moon and the stars were always with us"²⁶—and of the moon that gives the book its title and inaugurates this most holy of months in the Islamic calendar. The book also includes an account, in Seynab's own words, of the traumatic series of events that she and her family experienced, of the difficulties she and her son encountered in the Netherlands, and ends in her stated uncertainty, during the month of Ramadan in 2001, about whether or not she will be permitted to remain in the asylum center in which she and her son are living. It also closes with a timeline that traces the history of the Somali flight from Somalia to the Netherlands—which began in 1984, but which intensified in 1991 after the outbreak of civil war—and moves forward to April 2001, when the new Aliens Act in the Netherlands took effect, "limiting the asylum-seeking process and confining the rights



Seynab Azir Wardeere

of appeal.”²⁷ I mention all of this to suggest that, if this book is a portrait, it would seem that portraits can only be portraits if they include a great deal of history and indeed a set

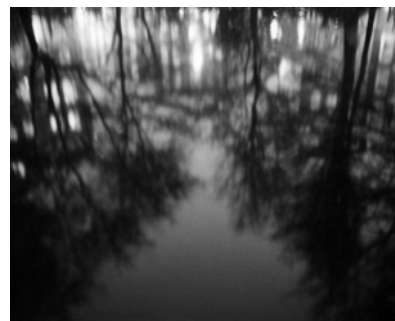


Seynab Azir Wardeere

of contexts in which to situate the portrait and therefore understand it as one—a point that again emphasizes the fact that, for Sheikh, a portrait cannot even begin to convey the “identity” of this or that person without providing at least a glimpse into the world in which the person has lived, lives, and may live. What is also significant is that, if this portrait is really meant to be a portrait of Seynab, the book that is to be her portrait begins, not with images of her, but with a series of blurry images of trees, barely visible against the night sky, but upside-down because they are reflected in water. Similar images are subsequently interspersed between the different portraits of Seynab. They include trees and

leaves that again are mirrored in water, but in a way that keeps the images unfocused. Indeed, this water will appear later in the form of condensation on windowpanes that makes it difficult to see through what otherwise would have been transparent. While the water and the blurred images appear as figures for the mobility, instability, and even dissolution of perception itself, it is perhaps more precise to say that they work against everything that

resists alteration or change. Indeed, if water is a force of dissolution and transformation, survival and destruction, life and death, what it initiates also leaves something or someone behind. Within the world of *Ramadan Moon*, water is perhaps another name for leaving, which is why Sheikh’s beginning is also a departure.²⁸ This departure is legible in the process of disappearance that he stages in this sequence of images—images that initiate his presentation of Seynab, even as they suggest the disappearance of



Night of Ramadan

landscape that introduces her to us. Evoking a play between light and darkness, day and night, and presence and absence, these images help transform the water from a reflective surface to an area of projection, but one which also evokes the traces of the tears that blur Seynab’s vision. To put it differently, these blurry images offer us a lens through which we might see the world as Seynab sees it, through her tears.

But, beyond the shadowy images of trees and leaves, and light and shadows, the book also includes passages from the Koran—the first of these is placed after the initial set of blurry images and before the first image of Seynab, as if to suggest that, in order to approach her, we first need to pass through these images and the Koran. Most of the Koranic passages in the book refer directly to Allah, and all of them evoke an entire network of figures that, circulating through the Koran, also can be associated with photography: light and darkness, the sun and the moon, dawn and sunset, past and present, life and death, memory and forgetting, knowledge and representation. Indeed, Allah himself seems to participate in a photographic landscape. As the Koran puts it, in a passage cited in the book:

Allah is the light of the heavens and the earth.
His light is as if there were a niche and within it a lamp.
The lamp is in a glass, like a brilliant star lit from a blessed olive tree.
The tree is neither of the east—getting its rays of the sun only in the morning,
nor of the west—getting its rays of the sun only in the afternoon,
but exposed to the sun all day long, its oil glowing forth,
though no fire has touched it.²⁹

It is as if the Koran were itself a kind of manual for photography, or at least for its language. One of the primary figures here is that of the star, which, captured by Sheikh's camera with a long exposure time, leaves streaks of light in the sky, as if it were writing in light. These lines of light actually seal several temporal moments onto the surface of the photograph, making the photograph itself a kind of archive of the passing of time. As Benjamin would put it, referring to the time that is inscribed in every image: "Every present is determined by those images that are synchronic with it: every Now is the Now of a specific recognizability [*Erkennbarkeit*]. In it, truth is loaded to the bursting point with time. ... It is not that the past casts its light on the present or that the present casts its light on the past; rather, an image is that in which the Then [*das Gewesene*] and the Now [*das Jetzt*] come together into a constellation like a flash of lightning."³⁰ If we are to believe Benjamin, the history of photography in fact begins with an interpretation of the stars. If Benjamin associates ideas with constellations, it is because the movement from star to constellation is also a matter of representation. In particular, this movement belongs to a representation that, bringing the past and the present together, suddenly emerges, as he puts it, "into a constellation like a flash of lightning." This similarity that emerges only in order to vanish,

this oscillation between appearance and disappearance, can be read in the light of a star. This light, which in a flash travels across thousands of light years, figures an illumination in which the present bears within it the most distant past and where the distant past suddenly traverses the present moment. This emergence of the past within the present, of what is most distant in what is closest at hand, suggests that, like the flash of similarity, starlight appears only in its withdrawal. It also suggests that the star constellation is another name for the experience of aura. Like the photograph that presents what is no longer there, starlight names the trace of a celestial body that has long since vanished. The star is always a kind of ruin. That its light is never identical to itself, is never revealed as such, means that it always is inhabited by a certain distance or darkness.

This is why there is no star, no stellar system, which is not a figure for photography, for what Benjamin elsewhere calls *Sternphotographie*, star photography.³¹ These figures of light form a kind of light-writing whose fugitive inscriptions are traced and illuminated eternally across the heavens. All stars are always in the process of vanishing and fading away. They are always already dying, and most of them perhaps already have died. Like a photograph, the diminishing light of the stars is a commemorative sign of what is no longer there. The sky and its stars tell us that it is with loss and ruin that we have to live. Nevertheless, in the face of loss and ruin, Seynab still gathers the strength to project her desire for eternity onto the skies in the form of an image: that of the star constellation, and of the moon itself. As we know, it is the first appearance of the crescent moon that signals the beginning of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar and the holiest of its four holy months, since this is the month in which the Koran first was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. If Sheikh places so many passages from the Koran in between the portraits of Seynab, as a kind of frame for the images, it is because he wishes to suggest that her identity is indissociable from this religious holiday (and indeed from her religion in general), and also, as I have tried to indicate, to evoke the photographic resonance of the Koranic figures themselves. If this latter point indicates the photographic dimension of this sacred text, it is because this text exists and proceeds in relation to a constellation of figures that belong to the language of photography.

Sheikh's book further delineates and reinforces his sense of what makes a portrait a portrait—among so many other things, it must include an entire network of relations that, both visible and invisible within the portrait's surface, points to an identity, even if, inscribing this identity within a broader set of relations and circumstances, it also unsettles it. As in all of his work, the portrait is less a portrait of a single person than it is a set of

archives without which we could never even hope to enter the world he or she inhabits. This withdrawal from the portrait in the name of a different kind of portrait does not result from Seynab's disappearance or effacement, but, on the contrary, from the multiplication and proliferation of the archival traces which simultaneously constitute and deconstitute her face, and her self. As Emmanuel Levinas puts it in his essay, "Peace and Proximity," referring to the face as more than simply a face, "the face is not exclusively a human face." It is instead an archival surface that suggests "the extreme precariousness of the other."³²

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The portraits drawn from Sheikh's *Moksha* project were taken in the first few months of 2004 in the holy Indian city of Vrindavan, also known as the "city of widows." They therefore must be read in relation to the history of the city (and, in particular, the sacred history of the city, a history that includes its being the childhood playground of Krishna), but also in relation to the way in which, "as more temples and shrines were built in Krishna's name, the city became the holy place of refuge for India's thousands of dispossessed widows," who, worshipping Krishna, "meditate on his name at the end of their lives in the hope of achieving *moksha*, and joining him forever."³³ Abandoning what was left of their lives after the death of their husbands, they have come to this holy city in order to overcome the cycle of reincarnation, to be converted into brides of Krishna, and, in this way, to achieve *moksha* and salvation. But our encounter with the widows of Vrindavan is delayed not only by the iconographic images of Krishna that open the book, but also because Sheikh emphasizes the entry into the city. To enter *moksha*, he seems to suggest, is to enter the imaginary that sustains the city, to enter the city and the stories and legends that belong to its very representation. Indeed, it is not possible to view the widows without passing through a series of mediations: we must look at them with eyes that bear the iconography of Krishna, the images of utopia, or the religious beliefs that promise happiness and Heaven, and that view the city in which they now live. We must look at them knowing that we are not only looking at a particular subject, a woman, an Indian woman, a Hindu woman who has been left a widow. To view the other is nearly impossible, Sheikh seems to suggest, since we always must look at her through something else, through the images that precede her, through the stories that justify her presence here, and even at the very moment in which the photograph is taken.

After the images of Krishna, after the images that tell us why these women have made their journey into this holy city, we enter the city, but without being able to see anything clearly. Unlike Sheikh's other images, these images are blurry, unclear, and uncertain. They are dominated by obscurity. At moments it would seem that it is a question of a river, and that we perhaps are crossing the waters that will carry us, too, to *moksha*; at other moments it would seem that we can make out a flight of steps, perhaps a door, perhaps a column. We are confronted with an urban landscape, with an entry into a city that is deliberately like a river, like the waters that separate the sorrow and darkness of the world in order to transport us into light. After crossing this river that is also a city, after looking at a city that is also a river, we can look at Sheikh's widows. And yet, the first illumined image, the first high-definition image, as it were, the first portrait of this book of portraits, is the image of a woman whose identity is occulted, since we only can see her from behind, hidden by a



Yamuna Dasi

shawl that covers her body, and that seems to bind her, to hold her tightly, to keep her in place. We will return to this later—to the many widows who remain unseen by us—but let us stay a little longer in this passage, in this suspended moment created by Sheikh, in this very delay, in this ensemble of images that we should see before seeing this entirely covered subject. In order to see, he suggests, we must pass through darkness, to see an image we must open our eyes, but, much more importantly, we must keep them closed first. It is not so much that darkness is a condition of light, but rather that the shadow, the blurred and uncertain vision, is a condition of vision. Sheikh reinforces this in his

description of his initial entry into Vrindavan, when he tells us that, “our journey had been slowed by intermittent bands of mist and as we approached the town a dense pall of fog reduced our visibility to only a few feet.... Though it was only a few hours since we had left Delhi, it felt as if we had descended through time to another era. Late that night, walking through the town still shrouded in fog.... I stumbled along the passageways.... Next morning I woke very early to be out on the streets at what Hindus refer to as one of the ‘threshold’ times—the moments after sunset and just before dawn. In this mysterious twilight the streets of Vrindavan are like an empty stage, from which the boy-god Krishna and his *gopis* have only just retired.”³⁴ Within this uncertain twilight zone, what is to be seen cannot be seen, unless we can begin to see that this uncertainty and indeterminacy is

precisely the point. Just as we cannot see the city clearly and directly, we can never see the widows directly, since they must be seen through eyes touched by at least the history of Krishna, the history of Vrindavan as a sacred city and refuge for widows, and through the apparatus of infinite mediation that we call “photography.” This is why Sheikh’s work is, before anything else, a reflection on the conditions of possibility of the gaze in general and on the conditions of possibility of the gaze of the camera in particular. Indeed, the delay that he inserts into the beginning of his book—into the space and time between the moment in which we open it and the moment in which we first can view the widows—becomes not only an allegorical meditation on the delay built into every photograph but also a first suggestion that sight can only take place through a series of mediations, that our eye requires these mediations in order to see, even if they also prevent us from ever seeing what is before us directly and in all its immediacy.³⁵

This is why the historically prescribed rituals of widowhood may help us understand why widowhood is regarded as a state of inauspiciousness. The rituals take the form of extreme and lifelong atonement on the part of the widow: celibacy, dietary restrictions, unadorned bodies that carry familiar, defining marks—a lack of jewelry or other decorative accoutrements, a shaved head or cropped hair, white saris that signal both a relation to death and an absence of desire, white ash on their forehead—aim not only to make widows unattractive and to set them apart from others but also to control their sexuality. Stories recounted since the nineteenth century reveal the torture, oppression, and cruelty that often, if not always, accompanied the experience of widowhood. As Uma Chakravarti has noted, among the upper castes, widowhood is a state of sexual and social death.³⁶ If Sheikh seeks to bear witness to the plight of dispossessed widows, his work avoids a colonialist gaze by including and multiplying the many perspectives of the women he photographs, and also by contextualizing their lives in relation to, among others, the story of Krishna and the history of Vrindavan. Moreover, his insistence on the mediatory character of vision in general suggests that, however much his work may wish to present the widows to us, to expose their vulnerability and distress so that these might be ameliorated by enforcing legislation and collective action, it never can capture or expose its subjects fully, since to do so would require its being able to incorporate the entirety of the network of mediation through which we must view the widows. In other words, by producing a series of photographs that, because of the order in which they are presented to us (an order that emphasizes the network of mediation through which we must pass even to begin to approach the widows), points to the widows, even as it indicates that they can never be

revealed to us transparently or immediately, Sheikh seeks to remain faithful to the widow's simultaneous appearance and disappearance, life and death, presence and absence, subjecthood and object-hood. This relation between the widow as object and the widow as subject replicates the internal division of the widow's subjectivity, a subjectivity that, as it seeks its own form of agency, nevertheless remains linked to a script in which she must follow her husband, even in death, like the body its shadow. It is to this complicated and contradictory subjectivity that I now wish to turn, in order to delineate the widow's paradoxical and permanent exile from herself, even before her widowhood.

What we register as we read the texts that accompany Sheikh's images is that the widows increasingly seem to experience less and less, and perhaps especially because, being widows, they are no longer who they were before their husband's death. But if these women have lost their identity, can we say that they are dead or alive? If identity is the condition of possibility for mourning, how then can those who have lost their identity mourn? If identity is the condition of possibility for memory, how can those who do not have an identity memorialize anything? What kind of temporality constitutes their strange, non-subjective lives, what is the past of the life that does not belong to any identity? Or, to put it differently, by what life do those who lost themselves live, can they bear witness to that loss even though they themselves are no more, is it possible that a witness can witness his or her death while dead, while alive but dead? And, finally, is it by chance that all such questions are most profoundly and precisely addressed in the medium of photography?

What is exposed in Sheikh's photographs is the paradox of a face that is not a face, a face that can never be seen directly as the face of the woman at whom we are looking.³⁷ This is a face that exists, in the words of Branka Arsic, as "the negative of the face: it is the face that is not, it is the visibility of the effacement in the moment of its effacement."³⁸ This is why, paradoxically, since Sheikh was not present at the moment of the widow's "death," at the moment of the death that makes her who she now is, who she now is not or no longer, he can witness only what he did not witness by allowing the other, the one who died but remains "alive," to speak through him. He desubjectivizes himself, and thus becomes—through his work, through his photographs, through his texts and through his effort to listen to and see this or that woman who is no longer—the survival of the other who did not survive. Testimony to the desubjectivation of the victim is thus a labor of the desubjectivation of the witness. In the wording of Giorgio Agamben, "Testimony takes place where the speechless one makes the speaking one speak and where the one who speaks bears the impossibility of speaking in his own speech, such that the silent and the

speaking enter into a zone of indistinction This also can be expressed by saying that the subject of testimony is the one who bears witness to a desubjectivation.”³⁹ This means that a witness always witnesses a desubjectivation of the other, but also of himself. This series of photographs, however, attempts the impossible: to produce the witness who would testify to her own non-survival. This is the paradox of a testimony that would bear witness to the moment of a death and to the testimony of this death, which is to say to a moment in which life is at the same time dead and alive. This is why the photographs bear witness to a different temporality of witnessing, a temporality in which the past is contemporaneous with its present, and in which the widow is therefore always in a moment of exile.

Indeed, the widow is a subject only when she does not have a self. This is why we can say that the “I” of devotion identifies with itself (with the other) through the process of identification, or, as we might say, by giving itself to another. The passionate passivity that characterizes so many of Sheikh’s widows defines a life of the wound, the living wound, the body that lives off of wounds so wounding that they exhaust all life and turn the life of this passive existence into perpetual dying, neither life nor death, but a life that is lived by dying. Indeed, whether or not the widow is already dead, literally dead, she already will have experienced (a kind of) death. This point is confirmed—less abstractly perhaps, but not at all less rigorously—when Neela Dey, one of the widows whom Sheikh photographs, tells us that, “in Vrindavan we are so determined in our devotion that everything else in the world is dead to us. We ourselves are dead and living with Krishna.”⁴⁰

Like the widows who live between life and death, the young girls and women portrayed in Sheikh’s *Ladli* project—a project he considers a kind of companion piece to *Moksha*—provide further evidence of the devastating gender politics that, despite the many advances that have been made, still permeates Indian society. The portraits that compose *Ladli* were taken in orphanages, homeless shelters, resettlement centers, women’s centers, squatter settlements, homes for girls, and the streets of Delhi, and are accompanied by stories of abortions of female fetuses, infanticide of baby girls, the abduction and rape of young girls who are forced into prostitution, the exploitation of child labor, and the murder of young women who do not meet the expectations of their husbands or their husbands’ families. In presenting these young girls,



Neela Dey

Sheikh offers a picture of India that not only has relays with the stories included in *Moksha*—and this even though the contexts are at times very different—but also displays the extent to which these girls remain unprotected and unprovided for. The power of some of the images has to do with the directness with which the young girls look at us. While the eyes of Manita, Minu (p. 143), Malikh (p. 113), and Gulafshah (p. 239) seem to pierce us, we know that there is no equality between the interplay of gazes that takes place here, which



Manita

is why what is at stake in viewing these images is also our responsibility toward them. In looking at us, the young girls ask us to remain answerable for them, to keep them *safe* not simply from the violence and exploitation they experience but also from the history that will continue to seek to erase and efface them from its movement.

Sheikh understands that this history of effacement and erasure is often reinforced by the photographic act itself, since the act that would capture a particular subject also risks ensuring its disappearance. That he is aware of this difficulty is legible in the fact that so many of the images in *Ladli* (and indeed throughout his work) represent subjects

whose eyes bear the imprint of the moment in which he takes their photograph. If the eyes of the young girls I have just mentioned, for example, include Sheikh's image within them, it is because, among so many other things, every photograph bears the traces of the encounter between a subject and a photographer, neither one of whom can, by himself or herself, determine how this encounter will be inscribed in the image that is taken. What intensifies this scene—in which Sheikh's portraits include a kind of optogram of the photographic act, a retinal trace of him taking the photograph—is the fact that, within the history of photography, this moment has been associated with the moment of death and, in particular, with the idea that the eye retains the very last moment of life. As an anonymous writer summarized this belief in 1883: "Every object seen with the natural eye is only seen because it is photographed on the retina. In life, the impression is transitory; it is only when death is at hand that it remains permanently fixed on the retina. Thus we are secure in asserting that no witness ever swore to a thing seen by him, without swearing from a photograph. What we call sight is but the impression made on the mind through the retina of the eye, which is nature's camera. Science has discovered that a perfect photograph of an object, reflected in the eye of the dying, remains fixed on the retina after

death.”⁴¹ When “death is at hand,” we are in the photographic realm. Indeed, as Benjamin explains, “what we know that we will soon no longer have before us—this is what becomes an image.”⁴² In photographing these girls, Sheikh knows that the photograph may survive them—it begins, even during their life, to circulate without them, figuring and anticipating their death each time it is looked at. What is most striking here is that this strange situation permits us to speak of their death *before* their death. The portrait already announces their absence, even as it seeks to present them.

This is why the images in *Ladli* of young girls with their backs turned to the camera—a strategy meant to protect them by hiding their identity—are miniaturized allegories of what Sheikh believes a portrait can and cannot do. Like the dispossessed widows whose veils and shawls prevent us from seeing them directly, the position of these young girls keeps us from being able to identify them, even when we are told their names: as with Rekha and Rani (p. 261), for example. Here the portrait is a kind of catachresis, since the “face” in these images is not a face, but instead a back and a head. In replacing the face with other parts of the body, these portraits reconfirm that a face is not always a face. In either case, though—whether we are seeing a face or not (and I would say we are not)—we are being asked to remain attentive to what is vulnerable or precarious in another life. The bodies before us imply mortality and finitude and, insofar as they bear the traces of history, trauma, oppression, or relations in general, they are both singular and related to others. They are bodies that simultaneously belong and do not belong to the girls Sheikh portrays.

This is why any photograph that would present itself as a portrait of a single person is not simply *not a portrait*, but an *anti-portrait*.⁴³ This is one of the most remarkable dimensions of Sheikh’s portraits, especially given their relation to the issues and discourses of human rights. While it is critical for Sheikh to make the plight of the young girls portrayed in *Ladli* visible to us—something he wishes to accomplish for all of his subjects—he simultaneously suggests that this or that young girl can never be represented by her face, or by her portrait (this is why he takes such pains to supplement his portraits with historical accounts, documents, fragments from interviews, and so forth). Instead, it is as if he wishes to tell us that, for representation to portray this or that person, it must not only fail to do so, but it should



Rekha

also *exhibit* this failure.⁴⁴ However much these portraits move us, however much they introduce us to the traumatic stories of so many of the world's displaced and dispossessed populations, they always point beyond themselves to a life and precariousness that, in the end, they cannot exhibit directly. Like all of Sheikh's portraits, they seek to remain faithful to subjects that simultaneously appear and disappear, and it is precisely this fidelity to the possibility and impossibility of the portrait that constitutes the ethical signature of these portraits. These portraits exist in order to resist the erasure and effacement of the women, men, and children they portray—and they do so even though Sheikh knows he can never fully present them to us, since, among other things, they always will exceed our understanding of them.

As Sheikh notes in *Ladli*, reinforcing this resistance, “in India's main cities, every six hours, a young married woman is burned to death, beaten to death, or driven to suicide by emotional abuse from her husband. According to the United Nations Population Fund, two-thirds of Indian women between the ages of fifteen and forty-nine have been beaten, raped, or forced to provide sex....The fact remains that Indian society traditionally subordinates women, and its treatment of them amounts to a cultural prejudice as ingrained as any racial or religious divide.... What India suffers from is apathy—it is clearly not for lack of legislation that women and children are still abused, but because of the unwillingness of the police, the courts and the government to enforce the laws made to protect them.”⁴⁵ That India can evoke the universalism of human rights at the same time that it continues to contribute to the regime it condemns (and here it is no different than every other nation, including the United States) is only one indication that what it means to be “human” by no means always counts with the same force—in invocations of human rights, but also in their absence. This is why the question of human rights for Sheikh is a question that remains at the heart of any politics or ethics that concerns itself not only with who we are but also with what it means to live in a world in which the call for human rights and humanitarian intervention is not always made in the name of preventing the dispossession of rights that so often defines the conditions of our human existence. This also is why the photographs that comprise this book make their claim for another means of achieving human rights, a mode of proceeding that, as I have tried to suggest, questions the terms of human rights discourse in general. If Benjamin were alive today, he might remind us that there is no document of humanitarianism that is not at the same time a document of inhumanity, inequality, and violence, and that the human rights activist should therefore dissociate himself or herself from it as much as possible. If the projects and discourses of

human rights do not wish to neglect this counsel, they will have to define themselves continuously against the inhumanity, inequality, and violence that threaten them from within as well as from without. Always and at once motivated by humanitarianism and democracy—but a humanitarianism and democracy that would correspond to other, and more just forms of humanitarianism and democracy than those we have with us today—they would begin in an aporetic praxis, one that would take its point of departure from the “perplexities” of human rights. They would seek to inaugurate a world in which displacements, racisms, nationalisms, class ideologies, sexism, and economic oppressions of all kinds would no longer exist, and would ask us to imagine what the world has never offered us: absolute freedom, justice, equality, and rights. As I have wanted to suggest, if this world can ever be inaugurated, if there can ever be a future that will not simply be a repetition of the past, it may well be enabled by work like that of Fazal Sheikh.



I would like to thank Fazal Sheikh for his kindness and generosity. I have remained very grateful for the opportunity to continue to work on his photographs, and for the gift of what, in every instance, they are able to teach me.

I also wish to say that, in the same way that Sheikh circulates and re-circulates his images from one project to another, I have drawn, here and there, from my earlier work on his *The Victor Weeps* and *Moksha* projects, and from the work that I have done with Ian Balfour on human rights. In the places where I have done this, it is also to suggest that what we see is always mediated, an insight that is critical to what I have to say about Sheikh's work. As I have said before, reading always begins elsewhere.

– E. C.

NOTES

¹ The three epigraphs here can be found in Jean-Luc Nancy's "Look of the Portrait," trans. Simon Sparks, in *Multiple Arts: The Muses II* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006): 235; Maurice Blanchot's "The Museum, Art, and Time," trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg, in *Friendship* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997): 32, translation modified slightly; and Judith Butler's *Precarious Life: The Powers of Memory and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004): 150.

² Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Meridien, 1958): 297.

³ See Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998). Following Arendt, Agamben discusses the problem of the refugee as a challenge to the thinking of human rights in his essay "Beyond Human Rights," in *Means Without Ends: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000): 15–28.

⁴ Balibar, "Outline of a Topography of Cruelty: Citizenship and Civility in the Era of Global Violence," in *We, the People of Europe?: Reflections on Transnational Citizenship*, trans. James Swenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004): 119. For an exemplary analysis of what is at stake in this articulation or disarticulation between "man" and "citizen" see Balibar's " 'Rights of Man' and 'Rights of the Citizen': The Modern Dialectic of Equality and Freedom," in his *Masses, Classes, Ideas: Studies on Politics and Philosophy Before and After Marx*, trans. James Swenson (New York and London: Routledge, 1994): 39–59.

⁵ *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 297.

⁶ Hamacher, “The Right to Have Rights: Four-and-a-Half Remarks,” trans. Kirk Wetters, in “And Justice for All?: The Claims of Human Rights,” a special issue of the *South Atlantic Quarterly*. 103: 2–3, ed. Ian Balfour and Eduardo Cadava (Spring/Summer 2004): 350.

⁷ See “On the Concept of History,” trans. Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings, Vol. 4, 1938–1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003): 392.

⁸ I am indebted on this point to Ariella Azoulay’s delineation of what she calls “the civil contract of photography,” a contract that, for her, would take into account all of the participants in a photographic act, “camera, photographer, photographed subject, and spectator,” and would approach “the photograph (and its meaning) as an unintentional effect of the encounter between all of these.” “None of these,” she adds, “have the capacity to seal off this effect and determine its sole meaning.” See Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008): 23.

⁹ Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 7 vols., ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972): I. 1238. The internal quotes within Benjamin’s passage are from André Monglond’s 1930 *Le Prémantisme français* (Gêneva: Slatkine Reprints, 2000): xii; and Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s *Der Tor und der Tod* (1894), in *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Herbert Steiner (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1952): III, 220.

¹⁰ Although I wish to emphasize the difference that presenting the portraits in this way makes for how we experience them in their relation to one another, I will organize my remarks mostly in relation to the specific projects from which these portraits are drawn. In doing so, however, I will try to make clear what I think links the projects together. In other words, I hope that this double gesture will permit me to respond to the specificity of each project, even while accenting the threads that bind them together.

¹¹ See Moholy-Nagy, “The New Instrument of Vision,” in *The Photography Reader*, ed. Liz Wells (New York: Routledge, 2003): 95.

¹² There would be a great deal to say about the relation between Sheikh’s conception of portraiture and that of the Soviet avant-garde, since both enact a theory of the portrait that works against what Benjamin Buchloh has called “the traditional principles of pictorial isolation and singularization” [Buchloh, “Residual Resemblance: Three Notes on the Ends of Portraiture,” in *Face-Off: The Portrait in Recent Art*, ed. Melissa Feldman (Philadelphia: ICA and the University of Pennsylvania, 1991): 56]. As Ossip Brik would argue, “Differentiating individual objects so as to make a pictorial record of them is not only a technical but also an ideological phenomenon. In the pre-Revolutionary (feudal and bourgeois) period, both painting and literature set themselves the aim of differentiating individual people and events from their general context and concentrating attention on them To the contemporary consciousness, an individual person can be understood and assessed only in connection with all the other people To take a snapshot, a photographer does not have to differentiate the individual. Photography can capture him together with the total environment and in such a manner that his dependence on the environment is clear and obvious” [see Brik, “From Painting to Photograph,” in *Photography in the Modern Era*, ed. Christopher Phillips (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art/Aperture, 1989), 231–32]. As Rodchenko would put it, “It should be stated firmly that, with the appearance of photographs, there can be no question of a single immutable portrait. Moreover, a man

is not just one sum total; he is many, and sometimes they are opposed” (Rodchenko, “Against the Synthetic Portrait, for the Snapshot,” in *Photography in the Modern Era*, 238–42).

¹³ There are numerous books on the baobab, but Thomas Pakenham’s *The Remarkable Baobab* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004) and Rupert Watson’s *The African Baobab* (Cape Town: Skuit Publishers, 2007) are useful introductions to the myths and superstitions that surround these rather majestic and enigmatic trees.

¹⁴ See Watson, *The African Baobab*, 168.

¹⁵ In Aristotle’s words, “Why is it that during eclipses of the sun, if one views them through a sieve or a leaf—for example, that of a plane tree or any other broad-leaved tree—or through two hands with the fingers interlaced, the rays are crescent-shaped in the direction of the earth? Is it because, just as when the light shines through an aperture with regular angles the result is a round figure, namely a cone (the reason being that two cones are formed, one between the sun and the aperture and the other between the aperture and the ground, and their apexes meet), so, when under these conditions part is cut off from the orb in the sky, there will be a crescent on the other side of the aperture from the illuminant, that is, in the direction of the earth (for the rays proceed from that part of the circumference which is a crescent)? Now, as it were, small apertures are formed between the fingers and in a sieve, and so the phenomenon can be more clearly demonstrated than when the rays pass through wide apertures. Such crescents are not formed by the moon, whether in eclipse or waxing or waning, because the rays from its extremities are not clear-cut, but it sheds its light from the middle, and the middle portion of the crescent is but small.” See *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, Vol. 2, ed. J. Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984): 1419 (912 B11–27).

¹⁶ For a concise but intelligent account of the Somali refugee crisis, see Rakiya Omaar and Alex de Waal, “The Nightmare Continues...Abuses Against Somali Refugees in Kenya,” in *African Rights*, September 1993, 12–45. For a broad review of the literature on Somali refugees, see Sidney Waldron and Naima A. Hasci, *Somali Refugees in the Horn of Africa: State of the Art Literature Review* (Uppsala, Sweden: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1995).

¹⁷ Many of the portraits in this series are of paired figures: mostly exhibiting familial relations (mothers and children, brothers and sisters, and so forth), but also affective, intimate, and social relationships. In this regard, these double portraits have relays to the African tradition of producing images of twins and doubles (as does Sheikh’s later portrait of the sisters, Sima and Shahima, dressed in identical clothes, from his Afghan project). For a discussion of the figure of twins and doubles in African portraiture, see C. Angelo Nicheli, “Doubles and Twins: A New Approach to Contemporary Studio Photography in West Africa,” in *African Arts* (Spring 2008): 66–85. See also Stephen F. Sprague, “Yoruba Photography: How the Yoruba See Themselves,” in *Photography’s Other Histories*, ed. Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003): 240–260. For an excellent discussion and survey of contemporary African photography in general, see Okwui Enwezor’s *Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography* (New York and Göttingen: International Center of Photography and Steidl, 2006), especially pages 11–45.

¹⁸ It is no accident, I think, that Sheikh published his first book, *A Sense of Common Ground*, under the sign of his mother. As he tells us in the book’s dedication, affirming her death and presence throughout his work: “This book is dedicated to the memory of my mother Nini who died in 1987 but whose spirit is present in all of my work.” See *A Sense of Common*

Ground (Zurich: Scalo, 1996): 3.

¹⁹ In his book, *Infant Figures*, Christopher Fynsk explores the relation between speaking and the death of a child. As he writes: “[I]f we accept that the opening of language is indissociable from an experience of a kind of death, there must be in our speaking, if only as a trace, the death of a child . . . the figure of the dying child insists in psychic life and in language; as though the interminable, immemorial dying in question must have a temporal figuration. No one can say fully, intelligibly, what the death of this child is, for all saying proceeds from such a death. But all saying is also haunted by it.” See *Infant Figures: The Death of the Infans and Other Scenes of Origin* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000): 50. There would be much to say, I think, about the relations between life and death, between muteness and speech, between relationality and the loss of self in this portrait of Hadija and her father, but here I can only gesture in this direction.

²⁰ See Nancy, “The Look of the Portrait,” 235.

²¹ On the history of Afghanistan, see, among many others, Diego Cordovez and Selig Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan: The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1995); Abdul Ghani, *A Brief Political History of Afghanistan* (Lahore, Najaf Publishers, 1989); Olivier Roy, *Afghanistan, from Holy War to Civil War* (Princeton, Princeton University, 1995); and Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban, Militant Islam, Oil & Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2000).

²² See Benjamin, “The Image of Proust,” in *Selected Writings, Volume 2, 1927–1934*, trans. Rodney Livingstone et al., ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, M.A.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1999): 244–45.

²³ See Walter Benjamin, “Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility [Third Version],” trans. Harry Zohn and Edmund Jephcott, in *Selected Writings, Vol. 4, 1938–1940*, 258. If Benjamin claims that, “the human being withdraws from the photograph,” he also suggests in his “Little History of Photography” that “to do without people is for photography the most impossible of renunciations” (see “Little History of Photography,” in *Selected Writings, Volume 2, 1927–1934*, 518). The interplay between these two statements articulates the primal and doubled scene in which Sheikh’s own reflections on the subject’s relation to the photograph take place.

²⁴ This phrase is drawn from Derrida’s essay, “Geschlecht II: Heidegger’s Hand,” (trans. John P. Leavey) in *Deconstruction and Philosophy: The Texts of Jacques Derrida*, ed. John Sallis (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1987): 173.

²⁵ See Sheikh, *Ramadan Moon* (Göttingen: IHRS/Steidl, 2000): 51.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 53.

²⁸ I have been moved to think about the implications of water by Branka Arsic’s reflections on water in her “Introduction: In the Mode of Water,” in *On Leaving: A Reading in Emerson* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2010): 1-18.

²⁹ Sheikh, *Ramadan Moon*, 15.

³⁰ See Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999): 462-63.

³¹ See Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings* (New York: Verso Books, 1997), 242.

³² Levinas, “Peace and Proximity,” in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996): 167. As Judith Butler explains in her book, *Precarious Life*, in a passage that has great resonance with Sheikh’s own sense of the possibility and impossibility of representing a person: “For Levinas, then, the human is not *represented by* the face. Rather, the human is indirectly affirmed in that very disjunction that makes representation impossible, and this disjunction is conveyed in the impossible representation. For representation to convey the human, then, representation must not only fail, but it must *show* its failure.” See *Precarious Life*: 144.

³³ See Fazal Sheikh, “Across the Waters of Sorrow: The Widows of Vrindavan,” in *Moksha* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2005): 258. There are approximately forty million widows in India, and roughly twenty thousand widows at any given time in Vrindavan, many (although by no means all) from West Bengal. Even though the Hindu Succession Act of 1969 made women eligible to inherit equally with men, and some individual states have legislated equality provisions into inheritance law, in actual practice widows often are deprived of their legal rights. Local interpretations of caste customs, for example, can determine whether or not a widow will be granted some permanent or temporary share of the family’s land or property and, because of this, a widow’s rights often are violated. Indeed, the common restrictions on property, residence, remarriage, and employment destine most widows to a life of economic, social, and even physical distress. What needs to be explored, however, is the extent to which their decision to come to Vrindavan, however pressed they might have been, and for often heterogeneous reasons—including the nature of the relations they have or do not have with their families, their age, their economic status, and the fact that, at times, rural widows are more likely to remarry than widows from higher castes, since the latter are more strictly bound to celibacy—truly offers them the solace they come to secure. Sheikh provides a measure of this solace by including passages from his interviews of several of the widows he photographed during his stay in Vrindavan.

³⁴ Sheikh, “Across the Waters of Sorrow: The Widows of Vrindavan,” 257.

³⁵ As Yates McKee has noted, in a discussion of the role and place of the technical media in NGOs, and of the mediated character of vision in general: “if vision acquires an inflated metaphorical privilege because of the centrality of technologies such as cameras, camcorders, television, satellites, the Internet, and PowerPoint presentations in contemporary politics, it is only insofar as they prevent vision from ever simply being itself. It is not that these technologies distort the immediacy typically associated with the optical faculty; rather, they magnify and exacerbate the general point that every visual artifact and experience is always already marked by an unforeseeably mediated network of histories, interpretations, and contexts that, strictly speaking, are not visually evident as such. In this sense, every image is a kind of text that requires both looking and reading, or rather looking *as* reading, regardless of whether an image contains or is accompanied by text in the narrow sense of the word.” See McKee, “‘Eyes and Ears’: Aesthetics, Visual Culture, and the Claims of Nongovernmental Politics,” in *Nongovernmental Politics*, ed. Michel Feher, with Gaëlle Krikorian and Yates McKee (New York: Zone Books, 2007): 330.

³⁶ See Chakravarti, *Everyday Lives, Everyday Histories: Beyond the Kings and Brahmanas of “Ancient” India* (Delhi: Tulika Books, 2006): 156–182.

³⁷ I develop this idea of a face that is not a face from Butler’s discussion in *Precarious Life* of the way in which the giving of a face at the same time can “derealize” the face. As she puts

it: “It is important to distinguish among kinds of unrepresentability. In the first instance, there is the Levinasian view according to which there is a ‘face’ which no face can fully exhaust, the face understood as human suffering, as the cry of human suffering, which can take no direct representation. Here the ‘face’ is always a figure for something that is not literally a face. Other human expressions, however, seem to be figurable as a ‘face’ even though they are not faces, but sounds or emissions of another order. . . . In this sense, the figure underscores the incommensurability of the face with whatever it represents. Strictly speaking, then, the face does not represent anything, in the sense that it fails to capture and deliver that to which it refers.” See *Precarious Life*, 144.

³⁸ See Arsic, “The Home of Shame,” in *Cities Without Citizens*, ed. Eduardo Cadava and Aaron Levy (Philadelphia, PA: Slought Books and the Rosenbach Museum, 2003): 40. I am indebted in this section—and in some of my formulations here—to Arsic’s discussion of the face’s negativity, and of desubjectivization and exile.

³⁹ See Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2002): 120–21.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Sheikh, *Moksha*, 118.

⁴¹ See “Photography in Court,” in the *Ohio Law Journal*, Vol. IV, No. 6 (September 22, 1883): 146.

⁴² See Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire. A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: New Left Books, 1973): 87.

⁴³ I would like to thank Jennifer Bajorek for her conversations with me about the portrait, and especially its multiplicity.

⁴⁴ On this point, see Butler’s similar discussion in *Precarious Life*, 144 and 146.

⁴⁵ Sheikh, *Ladli* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2007): 143 and 187–88.