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The "Then" and "Now" Politics of Fear: A Multilingual Intimate Duo-Ethnography at the Crossroads of Language, Religion, Immigration, and Education.

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ABSTRACT

This temporal multilingual intimate dual and duoethnography in education forwards duoethnography as an affective and temporal inquiry and explores how fear, language, religion, and immigration shape the lived and scholarly experiences of two immigrant women—one from Syria and one from Germany, working within U.S. educational contexts. Organized through *Then* and *Now*, not as a linear chronology but through felt time, this work constitutes a methodological and emotional movement between our research studies and the personal, political, and relational dimensions of our lives and our languages. We highlight how a duoethnographic approach offers methodological hope amid heightened fear and anti-immigration rhetoric that is anti-Muslim, anti-Black, and anti-Arab. The first study examines Arab immigrant women's educational experiences through a transnational Arab feminist lens, while the second centers Black immigrant women through a transnational Black feminist approach. Through friendship and dialogue, we trace how fear weaves through our research, writing, and ways of being. Our duoethnographic method becomes both a site of resistance and healing, revealing how intimacy, affect, and multilingual relationality can trespass the rigid boundaries of educational research and reimagine education as a deeply human and interconnected space. This work challenges the individualistic knowledge logics of the U.S. academy by centering intimacy and relationality across differences, mobilizing connection to confront the structures of fear that govern language and education in the United States. Through multi-layered duo-ethnography, we show how our research stories interconnect, capturing the intimacies of lived experiences that are rife with systemically imposed fear. We start this manuscript by introducing our affective states through a temporal representation of the "Then" and "Now" feelings as immigrant women scholars navigating U.S. educational contexts-feelings offered not as confession but as methodological testimony to the affective economies (Ahmed, 2004) that govern our multilingual lives.

Keywords: Islam, fear, immigration, duoethnography, language and education

This temporal, multilingual, intimate inquiry engages with duo-ethnography as an affective and temporal methodology in education. It examines how fear, language, religion, and immigration shape the lived and scholarly experiences of two immigrant women working in U.S. educational contexts, one from Syria and one from Germany. Rather than following a linear chronology, the work is organized through "then" and "now" as felt time. This structure allows us to move between past and present as they are lived, remembered, and carried forward. The article constitutes a methodological and emotional movement between our research studies and the

personal, political, and relational dimensions of our lives and languages. We highlight how duoethnography offers methodological hope in moments marked by heightened fear and intensifying anti-immigration rhetoric that is anti-Muslim, anti-Black, and anti-Arab.

The first study focuses on the educational experiences of transnational Arabic speaking women through a transnational Arab feminist lens, with particular attention to Ulfa and intimate literacies (Caldas & Deiri, 2026). The other centers on Black immigrant women using a transnational Black feminist approach. Through sustained dialogue, we trace how fear weaves through our research practices, our writing, and our everyday ways of being, as well as the intimacies of fear that emerge. In this work, duoethnography functions as both a site of resistance and a site of healing. It reveals how intimacy, affect, and multilingual relationality can move beyond the rigid boundaries often imposed on educational research. In doing so, we reimagine education as a deeply human and relational space.

This study challenges the individualistic knowledge logics within the U.S. academy by centering Ulfa, intimacy and relationality across difference as a site of research practice. It mobilizes connection as a way of persisting and living within the structures of fear that govern language and education in the United States. Through multi-layered duo-ethnographies, we show how our research stories interconnect and how they capture the lived experiences that are rife with systemically imposed fear.

We begin the manuscript by introducing our affective states through the temporal register of "then" and "now". These feelings are not offered as confession; rather, they function as methodological testimony to the affective economies (Ahmed, 2004) that govern our multilingual lives as immigrant women scholars in U.S. educational spaces.

Then Feelings

Youmna

The only feeling I have is fear. I am arrested by it. My thoughts, my body, and my sense of existence are bound by fear: fear of homelessness, fear of loss, fear of not securing a job post-Ph.D., fear of breaking my family more than it already is, fear of losing my kids to alienation, fear of failing all my ancestors, the women who walked away and the women who could not, the women who fought for their education and never got it.

I fear becoming my mother, with her constant prayers—*الله بيعتلكن أيام أحسن* (May God grant you better days ahead) and the many women like her, once full of hope and later consumed by longing and yearning for their children. Their pain feels too real, so I switch to another fear: the fear of publishing something foolish, of asking the wrong questions in my doctorate, of failure itself. I ask myself what to say if I fail. I left Syria three months before the proxy war even began. I did not live through it. What do I say to my friends who tell me, without a shred of jealousy and with open hearts, *وانبسطي وحقيقي أحلامك مشانا* (enjoy your life and attain your own dreams for us)? I feel I have no excuse to fail. Failure feels like betrayal. I cannot go home if I fail. My home is absent.

Fear stretches across borders. Fear of where the next bomb will fall, fear of the next phone call. Death feels omnipresent. Life does too. I look at the women wearing lipstick, so professional, and simultaneously remember the women in my city as I see them on the news, wearing their tears, dignified, sometimes outspoken, other times speaking in silence wondering where their children's youth, hopes, and dreams have disappeared. Their fear feels just, yet I wonder how I can justify being riddled with fear too.

I fear hallway conversations with self-proclaimed liberal colleagues whose words drip with surprise and amazement, layered with reminders of if I were you, I would do this and that. I restrain my thoughts from its intuitive spiral and curb my tongue; isn't that the premise of your entire colonial problem? I fear that my words will betray me and say, "You will never be me, and I have no aspiration of becoming you." Isn't this the politics of the empire, to occupy and reduce us to "war-torn" at best? Aren't the politicians writing fear all over my being, my language, my education, my family, and what matters to me most? There is no home in the emotional sense, even though my family home still exists. My fear had nowhere to go, so I hid it in rage and dried, finite tears. I hid it in lipstick and in procrastination. I hid it in search for a homeland through my dissertation and my research with, through my language, and through women who bring their fears and light into my work, through our shared language. My dad's words echo in my ears, spoken two months before he passed away: "Finish your Ph.D. It will mean something."

But I also know this: despite all the fears, all I have is courage. And that is what the empire will always fail to conquer.

Tanja

Overwhelmed, anxious, afraid. My work visa is the legal tether to the life I have been building for years. My work visa is fragile. My legal status can end from one moment to the next once my limited-term postdoc ends. No legal status? We will deport you. My child is American, I am not. My partner is American, I am not. Our life

depends on my income, but year after year, the academic (and non-academic) job market feels like a crapshoot. I have a phone interview in my car after getting the tires stuck in the snow during a blizzard. I am freezing cold and not sure how I will get my car back out, but I answer all the questions. I am not a good fit, and I am not selected. I feel cautious hope during an on-campus interview. My partner asks: "So we're moving to this small town in the middle of nowhere?" I feel responsible for our future. Two days before the interview, I develop an ear infection from a daycare illness. My ears hurt and hammer, but I smile and present my research. I am not selected. I am disappointed, but at least we won't have to move to the small town in the middle of nowhere.

I am scared all the time. Worried all the time. I try to untangle my lack of measurable success trying to secure a stable position from my self-worth. I work to untangle my aspirations from what I want my future to look like. I don't want to be anxious all the time. I don't want to go to the hospital due to a suspected heart problem to find out I am having severe panic attacks instead. I want to know what it feels like to be well and whole and worry-free. I want to stop worrying that my friends lose their livelihoods and legal status.

Now Feelings

Youmna

I cannot locate my feelings, but they have the urgency and resonance to leave. The same feeling I had a year before the proxy war started in Syria. The feeling that death is lurking at the border. Fear surrounds me. I visit a friend who was detained by ICE once a week as much as I can. Most of my fears about family separation have already materialized through courts and coercive colonial versions of due process.

I have a bit more assertion, one could say. When someone revoices my words starting with, "Did you mean…?" I respond, "Is that the way you understood it?" I am more careful with my emotional labor. I am more forthcoming about my comfort being the "Other." In the end, the empire and the people who uphold it can call me whatever they want. Xenophobia, after all, is reflective of the fears and the state of mind of those who hold it, not those who receive it.

My life has the appearance of normalcy, I liv onla Frontera. I work with bi/multilingual students in a multilingual institution. I love working with my students and I have a loving and caring community of women and colleagues around me. I feel a sense or strange privilege. In five years, I have been asked only once where I am from. When I answered Syria, the response was, "Ay, muy lejos," not suspicion, but connection. The conversation that followed was warm and unexpected and ended with "Thank you for teaching me." Now I know that what I share is an act of generosity, not obligation or activism. This is what privilege can feel like: Not being asked, not being marked.

It is a paradox to live so close to borders and brutal immigration policies, where I see with my own eyes family separations, and the detention of mothers, while also experiencing moments of ease and serenity with the community. I am reminded of my own privilege growing up grounded in who I am, despite the proxy wars that ruined so much life and so many memories. I carry language, love, memory, and everyday poetry with me.

Tanja

I find it difficult to capture how I am feeling now. I am not able to process it all. Raids in American cities, raids on the ocean, raids elsewhere. When I block out the news, I miss crucial information. When I immerse myself in what is happening, the cloud of anxiety returns. Many days feel like a balancing act on a tightrope, and I am not dexterous. I am more careful in choosing my words in a way I have never been before. I am on the tenure track in a city I love, doing the kind of work I had hoped to do. I have been meeting women who tell me the kinds of stories that make my mind and heart whir with excitement and gratitude. I am learning life lessons. Scrutiny and surveillance have quickly changed how we talk, teach, and research. I don't know what will be possible in this moment. I am grateful for the here and now.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In this temporal and intimate duoethnography, we organize our conversations through time-as-affect (Shahjahan & Zembylas, 2025) in the "then" and "now". We do not use these terms to imply a neat or linear progression of time. Instead, they structure how we think, write, and feel time moving in our shared experiences. More than ten years ago, we began our conversations about our work as graduate students. At the same time, we were navigating different, though closely related, struggles pertaining to our immigration experiences, racialization, and, at times, feelings of alienation in our graduate program.

In conversations that lasted many hours at a time, we began to develop a shared language for the questions that preoccupied us about research, methodology, and our lives, seeing both the connections and the particularities. We often spoke about language, colonization, and feminist praxis in qualitative inquiry and

ethnography. These conversations created a space where our thinking could unfold relationally. This article emerges from the conversations we established "then" and continued into the "now".

These conversations move us between personal reflection and methodological reflection. They move between the "then" of the first Trump administration, from 2017 to 2021, and the "now" of our present moment in 2025. Consistently, our research centered on multilingualism and education, families, and feminist thought, all closely woven with our experiences in higher education. In the "then" and "now", time has felt progressively denser, heavier, and at times unbearable, interspersed with joy, friendship, and lightness in our work. For this reason, we employ temporal inquiry in our duoethnography. Additionally, our earlier studies were rooted in intimate experiences and qualitative methods shaped by proximity (Tillman, 2015). Many of our participants were also our friends, sisters, and community members. Some relationships were closer to us than others, but all were relational. Our conversations about language and education unfolded alongside our own precarious experiences as immigrant scholars working within institutions that often felt unstable and conditional.

In this work, we document the fears experienced in the "then", particularly those tied to education, research, language, and the many other intimacies that structured both our lives and the lives of our participants. At the same time, we reflect on the "now". We attend closely to the temporal dimensions of duoethnography as it engages the current political moment in educational spaces. Through this process, we bring past stories into conversation with the present, allowing them to take on new meanings.

The idea for turning our conversations into an article first emerged in 2018, although our conversations started in late 2016 and early 2017. At the time, we often described ourselves as two fortunate immigrants who had secured positions in academia against all odds. Though neither of us landed a tenure-track position, we were post-docs. Over the years, this paper has been half-written many times. Sometimes, we spoke about it with great enthusiasm. At other times, we sighed at yet another unfinished project. Each conversation would materialize into a presentation, a new idea, or simply an entirely different manuscript.

By dominant Western academic standards of time, efficiency, and productivity, this article might appear to be one of the least efficient of all time. Yet, within another temporality, what we call the temporality of relations, it feels sacred. The time we spent talking about life, children, and memory unfolded in a cyclical space where progress was not linear. Experiences repeated. Pain resurfaced. Racism and xenophobia returned in familiar forms.

It is as if one continually relives and is retraumatized by racism and xenophobia, as has been starkly visible in policies such as the January 2025 Executive Order 14173, which ended what the administration described as discriminatory and illegal diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) preferences in higher education (Trump, 2025). Throughout 2025, the administration advanced a series of higher-education mandates that restricted DEI initiatives, limited access for international students, enforced sex-based participation in sports, and jeopardized the future of our children through misinformation about vaccination (Trump, 2025). All these actions were framed under the guise of merit-based accountability, integrity, and transparency.

Duoethnography, particularly in its temporal aspect and capacity, allows stories to be told anew (Breault, 2016). It also fits the cyclical oppressive times of the "now". Rather than relying on linear time, this approach turns toward Kairos, a conception of time that is cyclical, affective, relational, and embodied (Shahjahan & Zembylas, 2025). Kairos refers to "right or sacred time" rather than chronological time (Shahjahan & Zembylas, 2025, p. 4). It opens what Shahjahan and Zembylas describe as affective "temporal interstices of experience" (p.4). These moments allow for presence, reflection, as well as relational awareness, and defy the colonial logics that organize experience within higher education institutions (Shahjahan & Zembylas, 2025).

Through this temporal inquiry and duoethnographic approach, we center two qualitative research studies rooted in distinct yet connected feminist epistemologies. We reconnect and remember our own lives alongside the lives of our participants. Our participants remain in the "then". We write from a non-linear then-and-now. We present shared findings from our research studies and situate them within the dialogic conversations we had about them (Breault, 2016). We then reflect on how our own connections to participants have shifted "then" and "now". Throughout, we weave our identities as researchers, mothers, and immigrant women of color from different cultural and racialized backgrounds. Alongside our participants' experiences at the time the studies were conducted, we also reflect on years of grappling with fear, language, politics, and connection.

Spanning a decade of U.S. immigration policies and public discourse, we use duoethnography as a methodology to highlight how ethnographic and qualitative research can historicize lived experiences related to language. We argue that language is intimately connected to racialization, gender, and religion. As we, the researchers, engaged in conversations about our respective research over the past decade, our exchanges became both a method and a mirror, reflecting our commitments to research, community, and each other as we investigate the intimacies of fear, language, religion, politics, and immigration.

I, Youmna, identify as a Syrian immigrant woman and multilingual researcher in the U.S. I grew up in Aleppo, Syria, where I experienced the intimacy of cultural practices, diverse populations and religions, and a long history

as one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, absurdly situated within the violent structures of dictatorship, both at home and in the United States. Although there have been changes and regime shifts that have revealed the violent crimes committed by a dictatorship against its people, this does not mean that the proxy war has ended or that the occupation of lands and people to which I belong has ended. I write from moments of disjointed openings and foreclosures (Shahjahan & Zembylas, 2025), and from an absence of homeland shaped by the intimacies of xenophobia, racialization, gender, and language, all as affective states nested within the violence of the empire's acquisition of economies, languages, and peoples, which brings the structures of colonization into intimate proximity. As an educator and researcher navigating imposed categories, my work aligns with Arab transnational feminist thought that writes against culture (Abu-Lughod, 1993) and with work that emerged from my dissertation on Ulfa, literacies of belonging, and that resonates with Indigenous ways of being and knowing (Kovach, 2017). I center Arabic-speaking women and families, education, racialization, immigration, and multilingualism as intimate and relational experiences. I now describe my positionality through an affective state of avolition. I do not use this term clinically. I use it to name an embodied political condition of exhausted will, influenced by systems that demand participation while simultaneously devaluing it. This state feels estranged yet familiar. It carries a sense of home. It holds my multilingual belonging, spiritual yearning, and dislocated but intact sense of self in suspension. Political engagement, in this space, feels driven by urgency rather than by a promised sense of agency.

One of the most striking differences between "then" and "now" is geographic. I moved from the Midwest to la frontera along the U.S.–Mexico border, where the politics of multilingualism, immigration, and education are inseparable. My work now centers Ulfa, or intimacy-based frameworks in education (Caldas & Deiri, 2026; Deiri, 2025; Deiri & Bashri, 2024; Eqeiq, 2025). My early research was based on the educational experiences of Saudi families and bi- and multilingual Arabic teachers. Later, in la frontera, my work weaves community storytelling with bi- and multilingual teachers, including Arabic- and Spanish-speaking educators.

"Then" and "now", I, Tanja, identify as a Black German woman. In some scholarly readings, this identity is treated as contradictory or impossible. In others, it is an identity that challenges dominant scripts about nation, race, belonging, and diaspora (Campt, 1993; El-Tayeb, 2011). As an immigrant in the U.S. and a former international student, I draw from a similar, yet different, set of experiences as Youmna.

My research is grounded in transnational Black feminist framework (Burkhard, 2021). I explore the educational narratives of Black immigrant and transnational women. Here, I examine how language, race, and identity are negotiated inside and outside of U.S. educational spaces. I also attend to how the nation-state impacts the experiences of women at the intersections of race, class, gender, and immigration status.

The similarities and dissonances in our experiences as immigrant women—our shared dislocation, our commitment to relational research, and our grappling with institutional violence—have drawn us into close intellectual and personal proximity. These intimacies, which have moved us far beyond feminist ideals of solidarity or coalition building (Nash, 2019), have become a generative site for mutual witnessing, reflection, and theorizing, allowing us to trace how fear and care operate in our lives and in the lives of our participant friends (Ashlee & Quaye, 2020). We anchor this paper in the duo-ethnographic encounter as a method of inquiry and site of relational knowledge production. We also center friendship as a method (Tillman, 2015). Through this view, we explore the work of developing intimacies that disrupt the individualistic logics of knowledge production within the neoliberal academy. In doing so, we consider the role of fear among marginalized researchers and their participants as one avenue toward meaning-making within what Attarian (2010) describes as a pedagogy of exile.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework guiding this study is grounded in raciolinguistics (Alim, 2016), pedagogies of exile (Attarian, 2010), Ahmed's (2004) affective economies of fear, radical intimate inquiry (Diri-Rieder, 2018; Deiri & Bashri, 2024), and time-as-affect (Shahjahan & Zembylas, 2025). Together, these frameworks allow us to examine the intimacies of how language, race, fear, and education intersect during xenophobic times and within the violent structures that shape not only the participants' lives but also the researchers' lives, accounting for the density of time and how language moves through time as affect, felt with intensity during moments of fear across these intimacies.

Raciolinguistics examines the inseparability of race and language, emphasizing how racial and linguistic identities are lived, felt, co-constructed, and negotiated over time within social contexts (Alim, 2016). It shows how linguistic practices are racialized and how racial identities are produced through language in everyday interactions (Alim, 2016). From this perspective, language is never neutral; it is entangled with histories of power, exclusion, and surveillance. Radical intimate ethnography, as a method, prioritizes building genuine, reciprocal relationships with participants, moving beyond mere data collection to co-constructing knowledge within Ulfa, intimate literacies of belonging, and the creation of homeland through language during diasporic times, in ways

that honor the lived experiences of all involved, in which the researcher is a participant who understands the power structures that shape participants' lives intimately (Deiri & Bashri, 2024). Pedagogies of exile focus on the experiences of marginalized communities, particularly those displaced by colonial and neo-colonial forces, and seek to create educational spaces that are inclusive and affirming of their identities and histories (Attarian, 2010; Boylorn, 2013). The conceptual framework of this study is grounded in the notion of Ulfa (Caldas & Deiri, 2026; Deiri & Bashri, 2024), within the larger contextual backdrop of what Attarian (2010) describes as the "pedagogies of exile."

Pedagogies of exile focus on the experiences of marginalized communities, particularly those displaced by colonial and neo-colonial forces. They aim to create educational spaces that are inclusive and affirming of the identities and histories of these communities (Attarian, 2010). Moreover, the relationship to the past and present is reshaped by dislocation, loss, and hauntings, which emerged in the data as well as our conversations. We also draw on Ahmed's (2004) concept of affective economies, where emotions circulate among bodies and signs through collective exchange. Ahmed notes that "emotions are not simply 'within' or 'without,' but rather create the very effect of the surfaces or boundaries of bodies and worlds" (p. 118). In these affective economies, immigrants or outsiders are often imagined as incapable of the same emotional depth as the dominant group. Their fears and emotions are dismissed, while the emotional spectrum of nationalist, racial purity ideologies become the norm. As Ahmed observes, "it is love for the nation that makes the white Aryans hate those whom they recognize as strangers" (p. 19). In this framework, the ordinary is already under threat, defined by imagined others whose proximity is perceived as a crime against both person and place.

METHODOLOGY

Duoethnography allows us to explore ourselves through dialogue, helping us understand shared experiences between "then" and "now" (Norris & Sawyer, 2012). It is a method that resembles writing for ourselves (Ashlee & Quaye, 2020). It allows us to unpack intimate emotions and experiences within particular encounters. Duoethnography positions the researchers as the site of research. Our lives, reflections, and interactions become a curriculum that allows a mutual reclamation of the self (Breault, 2016).

Both our studies emphasize intimate inquiry. Our research was shaped through friendship, kinship, and long-standing relational ties. We approached our respective projects through relational proximities to our participants, challenging traditional divides between "researcher" and "subject". These relationships, familial, communal, or forged over years of dialogue, were foundational to our methods. We center friendship as method and an ethic of care, particularly in research with communities targeted by racialized and xenophobic state violence.

Conversations

The temporal aspect of our intimate duoethnography has unfolded over more than ten years. During this time, we worked together while sharing life's struggles. We raised children, pursued our education, balanced our roles as women, and navigated the emotional weight of racialization and academic life. During our doctoral studies, we met weekly for coffee or tea. These meetings often lasted for hours. Later, when we lived in different states, those conversations became two-hour Friday calls that continued for an entire year. As our responsibilities expanded and life became more demanding, the conversations did not stop. Conversations happened while traveling, while picking up children from school, and in between everyday moments. They always found a way to move with the rhythm of our lives.

Descriptions of Research Projects in Two Projects

My first project grew out of work with Saudi families and women's educational experiences. At its core, the study explored Ulfa, Mawada, and Hamimia as forms of intimacy that influenced how participants related to one another and to me as a researcher. The project initially emerged through "finding way, just like an ant" and relied on friendship as a method (Tillman, 2015). Over time, it evolved methodologically into what I later theorized as multilingual intimate ethnography (Deiri & Bashri, 2024).

The study examined how four transnational Saudi women studying in the United States experienced their bodies as sites of literacy, identity, and survival within racialized and linguistic hierarchies. It was grounded in critical literacy, trans-Indigenous Arab feminist thought, and decolonial frameworks. Conceptually, the project brought Arab and Muslim feminist thought (Abu-Lughod, 1993; Mahmood, 2005; Naber, 2012) into conversation with raciolinguistics (Alim & Smitherman, 2012) and Indigenous methodologies (Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008). Through friendship ethnography, theorized as radical intimate ethnography (Banerji, 2009; Lerum, 2001; Pope & deMarrais, 2017; Tillman, 2015), this study positions relationality, emotion, and bilingualism as legitimate sources of knowledge. It traces how participants navigated the ways their bodies were read, regulated, and written upon through the white gaze (Yancy, 2012), and how they authored themselves differently.

What should constitute data in traditional research followed the participants' preferences and what would fit into their daily lives, accounting for the Ulfa (intimacy) in these encounters. Such methods of data collection included multimodal field notes, participant observations, artifacts, photographs, drawings, and poetic interludes. Analytically, the project identified three interrelated modalities of critical literacy. The first was the name of the body, which examined naming, misnaming, and renaming as sites of linguistic struggle and self-definition. The second was what is on the body, which treated clothing and adornment as texts of cultural and spiritual literacy. The third was language and the body, which explored how Arabic and English intersected to reveal and resist racialization.

Across the three modalities, fear emerged as a major force. Participants described how their bodies were marked through fear, surveillance, and anticipation of harm. Rather than writing against cultural particularization (Abu-Lughod, 1993), the project argues that researchers should shift the gaze. It calls on researchers to anchor inquiry in the meanings participants give themselves and to engage in research with communities rather than write against participants.

Methodologically, Youmna's project sits at the intersection of autoethnography and ethnography through radical intimate ethnography. It employs an Ulfa framework of care and relationality alongside a multilingual intimate ethnographic methodology. Together, these frameworks argue that body and language form a living text of education, documenting how immigrant women inhabit, resist, and author ethnic, religious, and linguistic belonging within monolingual and colonial academic structures that promote racial purity. The study extends post-qualitative inquiry by centering emotion, friendship, and bilingual writing as epistemologies in their own right. At the same time, poetic interludes embed me alongside participants, revealing the academic emotional labor of racialized and transnational scholars. In doing so, the project treats affect not as a byproduct of research, but as a way of knowing.

The project further conceptualizes research itself as a form of homeland. Arabic-speaking practice becomes a homeland for diasporic and transnational scholars. Access to research sites is reframed as access to hope, memory, and relationships. From this view, research conducted from diasporic bodies becomes a practice of healing rather than mere data collection. It contributes to literacy pedagogy by anchoring the body within multiple transnational contexts and languages, positioning the body as both a site of oppression and a language of survival and creative authorship. The study invites researchers to engage in language projects that begin with the meanings communities give themselves, encouraging scholars to read with participants rather than against their bodies.

Data collection combined participant observation, field notes, and audio-recorded interviews, including biographical and follow-up conversations. Recordings of women's group meetings and informal discussions were also included. Multilingual dialogue shaped all interactions. Additional data included photographs of artifacts, everyday objects, artwork, doodles, and poetic expressions shared by participants. Member checking was used to confirm interpretations, and conceptual audio logs supported thematic organization and analysis. Together, these methods formed a cohesive and interconnected dataset that reflected both the women lived experiences and the intimate nature of multilingual ethnographic interactions.

Tanja's study is a qualitative study grounded in Black transnational feminist thought and methodology. It examines the educational and linguistic experiences of seven Black immigrant and transnational women, with Naima emerging as a focal participant. Tanja's long-term relationships with participants, spanning between three and twenty-five years, deepened the trust and openness that made this work possible. Data were collected over one year, from 2015 to 2016, through interviews, shared reflections, artifacts, and long periods of "hanging out" (Ibrahim, 2014). Naima, the focal participant highlighted in this article, was central to shaping Tanja's methodological reflections and helped contextualize the events discussed in this manuscript within broader frameworks of anti-Black and Islamoracism.

Duo: Conversations About the Projects

The duality of our work and our conversations as researchers and as human beings, along with the intimacies of our experiences, with their distinctness around racialization, education, language, immigration, fear, and gender, created space for questions we often felt hesitant to ask in our graduate courses. After moments when our questions were met with confusion or dismissal, we became more cautious about voicing them publicly. In conversation with each other, however, those questions became central to our inquiry. We asked questions that sit at the heart of qualitative research but are rarely addressed directly; for example: How do you write field notes in a context of multilingualism and language within one's own community, or a community you consider intimate—friends, neighbors, people with whom there is warmth and closeness? Do you put a pen and paper between you and the participants, or do you wait until you get to your car? How and where do you place the audio recorder? How do you attune to what they need and respect those needs?

Together, our conversations and fieldwork became a meta-site of qualitative inquiry. Our duo-qualitative approach rests on eight core tenets: 1) currere: tracing how our meanings shift across time and experience (Breault, 2016); 2) polyvocal and dialogic: holding our voices in productive tension and relation; 3) Difference: unpacking the divergences in our histories, identities, and positionalities; 4) bringing insights from past stories and making them anew; 5) self-reflexivity and trustworthiness: ensuring knowledge is in transition as we excavate meaning within ourselves; 6) accessibility to multiple audiences: making the stories helpful and accessible, and 7) honoring shared stories.

Duo-Data Collection

Data collection involved detailed story-sharing sessions between us as researcher friends. These story sessions were informal among us as friends talking about the details of our research and how to navigate difficult relational challenges. The detailed story-sharing sessions were born out of a necessity to grapple with the complexity of our own experiences, as well as the complexities of the conversations we were trying to understand and analyze. Trusting that we had developed a praxis as critical friends (Stolle et al., 2018), we worked to offer each other humanizing-oriented insights that attended to the particularities and the complexities of what our research participants were sharing: vignettes and conversations between the researchers and their participants. Then, adding to the data collected from our participants, we would connect over conversations about the similarities and differences in our experiences with research. These interactions were shaped by the socio-political contexts and personal experiences of the researchers and participants, but also by our and our participants shared geographic location and experiences with immigration. The following vignettes illustrate the depth of our duo-ethnographic inquiry.

Duo-Event: Active Shooter Incidents and the Weaponization of Language in Educational Spaces

Vignette: Youmna

In my living room, I was resting on the couch after a sleepless night, holding my two-month-old daughter. I heard the safety alert messages ring on my phone as I checked it. I felt the terror of reading "an active shooter on campus." My thoughts started racing. I texted friends and students to check if they were safe. I felt conflicted, afraid for my friends and students, but also afraid of the fallout should the incident be framed in a particular way. I texted one of my students, whom I knew was on campus. When she confirmed her safety, I replied, "I really hope the shooter is neither Arab nor Muslim. I cannot deal with more than what we are already dealing with here." The student, who was also Muslim and Somali, shared that she feared the same.

As the day unfolded, it became clear that there was no shooter, only a student with a knife on campus, and not to minimize the gravity of the incident, the only shot fired was by a policeman who killed the Somali student. This incident evoked feelings of anger and fear, highlighting the alienation and discrimination faced by Muslim and immigrant students. I wondered what drove the student to come to campus with a knife. In the media, it was intriguing that one of the first discussions was whether or not the student belonged to a terrorist organization. I had a series of conflicted emotions, but as the day progressed and the story was no longer about an active shooter, I felt relieved, while bracing myself for the next day.

Vignette: Tanja

On the way to campus with my five-month-old baby in the backseat, I received a frantic message from a friend: "We are locked in the basement of the library. Active shooter—do not come to campus." After pulling over to read the message, I made a U-turn and drove back home, glued to the local news. I was dead afraid for my friends and colleagues, images of school shootings and violence playing in my mind. The news story developed: a student had driven into a crowded sidewalk and wielded a knife, injuring several people in his way. Not a shooter on campus, but violence occurring, nonetheless. Campus police killed the perpetrator almost immediately and were later praised for their swift response. No other deaths were reported. The next day, the campus looked the same, although there were banners put up to encourage students to remain strong. However, I felt shaky and uncomfortable, reflecting on the fear and racial tensions that permeated our campus community.

Dual Qualitative Inquiry and Duoethnographic Data Analysis and Findings: Language Education, Layers of Fear

The fear inscribed on Noura's body as a participant and on my body—both of us being Muslim and Arabic-speaking women—operates on different scales, as Noura's hyper visibility through her niqab in public spaces, language, and political rhetoric within educational contexts echoes Tanja's relationship with Naima. In both cases, surveillance, Islamophobic discourse, and state policy shaped even the possibility of recording an interview. By moving from my vignette into theirs, we show how fear travels across bodies, spaces, and time, marking us differently yet connecting our stories.

Participant 1, Vignette 1

A few weeks after the incident on campus, I met with Noura to conduct a conversational interview. We met in the lounging area of her apartment complex, where she brought coffee, tea, snacks, and dates. Her youngest son comes from school earlier than his siblings, so she also brought some toys for him to play with while we talked. She greeted me with her usual cheerful self. Noura was part of the women's group I was conducting research with, though she was not one of my closest participants. I had known her only within the group, so this was the first time we met one-on-one. Before moving here with her husband, who is pursuing his doctoral studies, Noura had also worked in the field of education in Saudi Arabia. As we were drinking the tea that she made, I asked her about her experience in the U.S. so far. She seemed to have conflicted feelings, but she explained that she feels afraid, given that while she is not wearing the niqab right now, when she is going to the university or running errands by bus, she wears it, which has caused fear for her safety and for her family's safety.

When I asked Noura what she meant by saying that she does not speak English, I did so know that she does, at least enough to manage her daily life. She clarified that what she meant was that she does not "have enough English". For her, "I don't speak English" means she does not speak in a way that would allow her to defend herself if someone were to attack her, or to contest an accusation if she were to be put in a dangerous situation (see **Table 1**). This fear becomes especially pronounced when she wears the niqab and takes the bus, where she worries that someone might attack her.

Table 1

Vignette 1: Noura and Youmna Lounge Conversation: "Especially, I Don't Speak English"

English	العربية (Arabic)
When the incident happened at the university, when the Somali student, Ya'ni [like], I became, I became afraid after that. Seriously, I became afraid. Because he is Muslim… he was holding a knife and there was so much sensationalism. I just started taking the bus. I was so happy… I took the bus only twice… then my spouse said don't take the bus… you never know who you will be riding the bus with. He became afraid. He said do not take the bus, I will take you… especially I don't speak English.	"صرت، يعني الصومالي، بعد دا الجامعة، في صارت اللي الأخيرة الحادثة سكينة، ماسك كان مسلم، لأنه ...خاف ... صرت جد .بعدها أخاف صرت مرتين، فرحانة، وتوني باص أركب كنت بعدي وكنت شوشرَة، وسوّت فكان مين، مع تركبي ماتعرفي أشكال ...الباص ماتركبي زوجي فَقالي بتكلم ما انا وخصوصاً ...اودّيكِ انا الباص، ماتركبي وقال يخاف، إنجليزي..."

Her explanation reflects how linguistic insecurity and the securitization of Arabic-speaking (Bale, 2010) and symbolic power shape one's perceived ability to speak or defend oneself in high-stakes encounters (Bourdieu, 1991; De Costa & Norton, 2016; McKinney & Norton, 2024). It also illustrates how raciolinguistic ideologies position racialized multilingual speakers as linguistically deficient regardless of their competence (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Noura explained that it was a shared decision for the whole family's safety and her safety in conjunction with her dress and not having the type of English that allows her to contest and defend herself. Her experience is not uncommon, and it aligns with earlier research documenting how Muslim immigrant women plan safe routes, choose specific forms of transportation, and avoid certain streets or spaces altogether (Sarroub, 2005). Fear of being attacked combined with her fear of not speaking English in a way that allows her to defend herself, is compounded by the sensationalism in the media, which produces and circulates racialized fears of Muslims and immigrants (Alsultany, 2022a, 2022b; Jaber, 2022).

The attachment of her body to public space, where collective emotions circulate between bodies, combined with speaking Arabic as an indigenous language, and moving through those spaces intensifies fear and vulnerability (Ahmed, 2004; Ghaffar-Kucher et al., 2022; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2015). Her niqab, linguistic repertoire, and embodied presence index culturally meaningful signs that are read through fear (Deiri & Bashri, 2024) and broader ideological and semiotic processes that construct social difference and vulnerability (Agha, 2023; Blommaert, 2013; Gal & Irvine, 1995). All of this is intertwined with the fact that her husband, herself, and their children are here in the pursuit of education, a context in which multilingual students negotiate linguistic, affective, and social vulnerabilities (Canagarajah, 2017). Hence, her "I do not speak English" and her use of Arabic in public spaces become intertwined with her English learning, revealing how affect, fear, and vulnerability circulate alongside linguistic repertoires.

There are multiple signs and modalities through which fear circulates in language, whether through paralinguistic cues or broader social semiotics. Fear does not simply reside within individuals; it moves, attaches to bodies, and circulates through discourses and signs, shaping who is read as threatening and who is rendered vulnerable (Ahmed, 2004). Symbols such as flags, stickers, and political signs index ideological positions and often signal alignment with belief systems that marginalize immigrants, brown and Black international students who are also multilingual speakers, and, as in this case, those who fall outside Christian nationalist identity norms. These signs participate in semiotic processes that construct social difference by iconizing certain bodies

and erasing others as 'Eastern,' situating them in opposition to Western ideals through an orientalist lens (Gal & Irvine, 1995).

Within this landscape, Noura's body and her Arabic linguistic practices, in conjunction with the modality of her religious dress, render her hyper visible. She becomes the subject of fear and the very human positioned as someone to be feared in dominant discourses on Arabic-speaking Muslims, reinforcing them as foreign and fear-worthy (Abu El-Haj, 2015; Jaber, 2022; Naber, 2014). Her social identity becomes positioned in contrast to the imagined figure of the "deserving" American who claims access to safety, education, and national belonging (Flores & Rosa, 2015).

Although Noura's neighbor is not interviewed, their willingness to publicly display these signs suggests an investment in the sociohistorical meanings attached to them. As Blommaert (2013) argues, signs must be interpreted within the ideological and historical orders that give them value. Meaning can be inferred from examining how these signs operate in stratified semiotic regimes. In this sense, a displayed flag or sticker becomes part of an ideological repertoire—a semiotic resource that indexes acceptable forms of belonging within a particular sociohistorical order (Agha, 2023). Such semiotic cues contribute to the affective and linguistic vulnerabilities experienced by multilingual migrants navigating hostile or exclusionary environments (Canagarajah, 2017). Therefore, Noura's statement, "I just hope we finish this scholarship in peace and go back home safely," (see **Table 2**) becomes a very apt and timely wish—one that was urgent in 2016 (then) and feels even more urgent in the present (now).

Table 2

Vignette 2: Youmna and Noura Lounge Conversation: "I Just Hope We Finish This Scholarship in Peace and Go Back Home Safely"

English	العربية (Arabic)
I used to have neighbors in my first house. They were not the neighbors right next to me. Ones who had their car parked and he had this sign supporting Trump on his car. And I was like [she makes gestures with her hands indicating fear]. I did not know how he looked like but knowing that there might be a person here [in her previous apartment complex] who may hold animosity and hate toward us… I just hope we finish this scholarship in peace and go back home safely.	كان في عندنا جيران في بيتي الأول، كان مو الجيران اللي جايين من حاطط كده، علم ترامب على سيارته، فخلاص كده (تعبّر بيديها بالخوف) ماني عارفة شكله ولا شيء بس انه في إنسان هنا ممكن يحمل لنا العداوة والكره. المهم نخلص المهمة – البعثة- بسلام ونعود لوطننا سالمين

Youmna: A Broken Mailbox, Rambo Trump with a Machine Gun, and the Appeal to Heaven and Nation

In the spring of 2017, I lived in a rural area where many homes displayed "Hillary for Prison" signs during the 2016 election. Those signs impacted how safe I felt and made me cautious about where I allowed my family to settle. I have always been leery of such signage, what Ahmed (2004) calls the "passing by" of the object. Over time, my neighbors across the street and I built a good relationship; we looked out for each other, and our children often played together. One morning, I heard a loud bang from the street but did not investigate. Moments later, my neighbor came over, visibly worried. As I greeted her, I saw the mailbox knocked down and dented. She explained she had rushed over because she had seen three men pull up and hit the mailbox with a baseball bat. By the time her husband went out to get the license plate, they had sped off, leaving the broken mailbox on top of a car belonging to a family who had just moved in. I could not shake the feeling it was not random. No other mailboxes were damaged, and I knew the neighborhood was strongly anti-immigrant, a sentiment I felt daily.

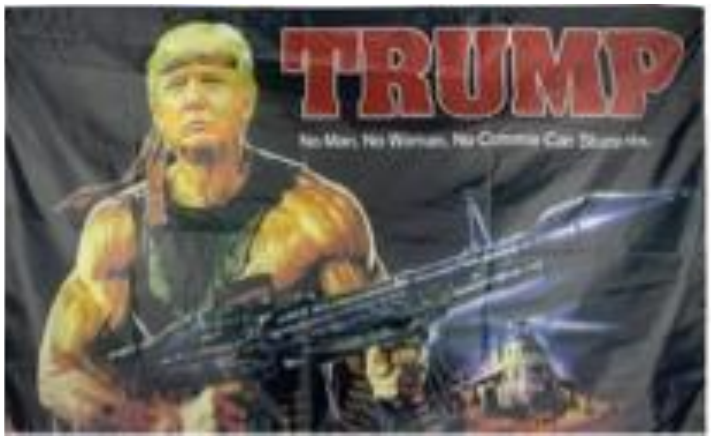
Years later, in 2023–2024, when Trump supporters resurfaced with renewed anti-immigrant rhetoric, I still owned a house in another Midwestern rural town where I lived part-time while working in Texas. A neighbor across the street hung a large fabric poster on his driveway showing a muscular man with Donald Trump's face, dressed like a soldier and holding a large machine gun, clearly modeled after Rambo (See **Figure 1**). I remain bewildered by the machine gun and what displaying such symbolism was intended to signal beyond violence or hate. The neighbor often mentioned that he was in the military and owned a gun.

With multiple overlapping anti-immigrant incidents and openly xenophobic comments, personal, educational, and environmental, I eventually chose to relocate fully to Texas following a long custody battle and separation from my children. In that process, no amount of language I possessed was sufficient to prove that I, as an immigrant mother, was worthy of raising my children at the same degree to their white American-born father. Until my own immigration experiences were weaponized while the facts, my education, and everything else about my existence were ignored, I had not even thought about how origin or nationality could be weaponized against the subject. When I later remarked that some of the behavior and what was said to me tilted toward racial and

xenophobic undertones, I was told by a family member, "You are using the immigrant card," which I will leave to the reader to deduce if that statement, in and of itself, reveals the racial undertones and family court silencing of immigrant voices (Lens, 2019; Phelan et al., 2019). Again, in this situation, I relate to Noura as I too had to change my behavior and navigate social and public spaces, determining what was safe and what was not-not only for work but for the severity of life circumstances that one experiences through immigration. While I have obtained my U.S. citizenship, as recent as two days ago before writing this article, I have been constantly stopped by immigration and customs, pulled to the side, and subjected to additional secondary security screenings.

Figure 1

Trump as Rambo flag. The image was displayed by a neighbor in 2020 and then again in 2024 and photographed provided by the author.



The first time I saw these signs, (see **Figure 1 & Figure 2**) downtown in late 2020, in the city where I was living at the time, I remember wondering how different this really was from extremist movements that take shape across the world under different names, flags, and religions. While I value freedom of expression, the messages displayed (see **Figure 3)** - "GOD'S HAND IS ON THIS NATION," "TRUTH WILL PREVAIL," "JUSTICE WILL BE SERVED," "FREEDOM WILL WIN," and "AMERICA WILL BE PRESERVED" - circulated what Ahmed (2004) describes as the distribution of fear. These phrases travel through public space, attaching themselves to bodies and moral imaginaries, reproducing fear as both an affective and political force. The language folds together nation, religion, and moral virtue, creating what I understand as a linguistic moral hierarchy in which faith, truth, and nation become one and the same and treated as unquestionable. The line "What is DONE IN SECRET will be REVEALED" intensified, in my own body, the already pervasive culture of surveillance projected onto immigrant bodies. It positioned belonging as conditional and monitored.

Figure 2

Storefront display with 'Appeal to Heaven' flag and AWAKE poster. Photographed by the author in 2021 in a Midwestern town

Note. Photographed by author in 2021 in a Midwestern town. The photograph is from the author's personal collection. In the background behind

A.W.A.K.E.: Left Banner (Vertical, red and blue text):
Arise from Apathy
Watch Diligently
Awareness of Times

Know HIM & His Heart
Execute Righteousness
Time is NOW for the sleeping giant known as the Church to AWAKE!
Stir herself to take her place as the Bride Restoring Truth in Love.
Not God Bless America, but AMERICA BLESS GOD!

This intertwining of religious urgency with civic engagement, as the underpinning of nationhood, shifts the conversation from questions of religious freedom and freedom of religion toward questions of who has the right to exercise which religion within the nation-state. The concern, then, is not merely fear born of religious difference but how such language positions the immigrant student, educator, or researcher in relation to the nation, whether with it, against it, or always on its margins.

Figure 3

Close-Up of Storefront Religious-Political Sign Reading 'WE BELIEVE'

Note. Photographed by author in 2021 in a Midwestern town. The photograph is from the author's personal collection.

WE BELIEVE
GOD'S HAND IS ON THIS NATION
Truth Will Prevail
Justice Will Be Served
Freedom Will Win
"LIFE" Will Be Secured
AMERICA WILL BE PRESERVED
What is DONE IN SECRET will be REVEALED

This rhetoric from 2020 directly echoes what is now circulating in policies about education, teachers, students, and their families. On March 1, 2025, Executive Order 14224 declared English the official language of the United States. The order "rescinds a Clinton-era mandate" that required agencies receiving federal funding to provide "extensive language assistance to non-English speakers." It asserts that English "strengthens the fabric of our society," that the United States has long needed an official language, and that adopting English as the national language will "promote unity," create "efficiency," and "empower immigrants to achieve the American Dream." It frames multilingualism as something that can be "celebrated," but only if it is subordinated to a single national language. The language of the executive order, that English "opens doors to greater opportunities," that it "affirms national cohesion," and that more than 30 states have already adopted it, reinforces a political orientation toward a nation-state built through English-only ideologies and the quiet rescinding of multilingual citizens' civil rights.

What was felt emerging in 2016 and 2017 (then), and what we felt emerging in 2020, has now materialized into policy in 2024 and 2025 (now)—spatially, temporally, and discursively. Ahmed (2004) and Heidegger (2004) help us see that this temporal accumulation is not abstract: fear from the past attaches to bodies in the present. But whereas Ahmed writes about white supremacist fear as irrational projection, the fears we describe, mine, Noura's, Naima's, are grounded, material, and lived. They affect our livelihoods, our education, our children, our futures, and our intimate relationships. These fears shape the conditions under which multilingual people learn, teach, and live.

Writing Fear and Reading Fear: Youmna and Noura, Political Signs and Othering Semiotics

Noura's story shows how fear is inscribed onto her body as a communicative modality. Her niqab, her linguistic repertoire, and her racialized body draw surveillance. In turn, she surveils her own movement, even choosing not to take the bus out of fear of being attacked and out of fear that she does not have "enough English" to defend herself. Here, language and the body are inseparable: the dominant gaze writes itself onto her, producing fear that shapes not only how she moves but how she understands her own English.

This is not paranoia; it is produced by public discourse, media, political slogans, posters like the ones in my neighbor's yard, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) practices, and policies that treat multilingual, racialized bodies as inherently suspicious. I have visited detained friends who were fully documented and authorized to be in the U.S., the very contradiction that justifies ripping people from their families under the guise of "law." In the same vein, Naima's fear of being recorded is not a personal insecurity but a learned awareness of how surveillance travels across Muslim, Arab, and immigrant bodies.

Noura's wish, "I just hope we finish this scholarship in peace and go back home safely," carries the same emotional weight I feel as a multilingual educator navigating a climate that rhetorically and materially delegitimizes the bodies and languages of people like us. The constant "Did you mean…?" after every sentence, the emotional labor of explaining ourselves, the expectation that we carry the burden of clarity while the nation rejects our languages—all of this is part of the linguistic economy of fear. These posters, executive orders, news clips, signs, symbols, and political artifacts are tools of meaning-making. They create a language of fear. Whether we internalize it or resist it, that circulation attaches to our bodies and our multilingual realities. Book bans and language bans are not simply about language; they are about the people who speak those languages, their races, their bodies, and their perceived place in the nation.

As duoautoethnographers, we ask these questions not for shock, but for intimacy, for an affective, visceral understanding that whoever you are, your use of language, signs, symbols, and words affects all of us, and the stakes are not theoretical. They are lived. These dynamics show that multilingual education cannot be understood solely as the acquisition of linguistic skills but must account for the sociopolitical, emotional, and ideological conditions in which multilingual learners navigate educational spaces. All these events are also surrounded and contextualized within the executive order commonly called the "Muslim Ban" officially Executive Order 13769, "Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States," which listed Syria, and Somalia among the affected countries but not Saudi Arabia (Trump, 2017). The immigration application I had submitted for my father was terminated at that time. He passed away a few months later, and although he made it clear that he did not want U.S. citizenship or a green card, I went ahead and applied on his behalf anyway.

Vignette 3: Naima and Tanja

Naima and I, Tanja, became friends when I started tutoring her and her friend after her English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher connected us. Naima had troubling experiences in these classes, particularly with respect to her instructors, which in part helped me to shape my inquiry. At the time, I had been working as an adult English as a Second Language/English as a Foreign Language instructor (acknowledging the problematic framing of both constructs) for several years, both in the U.S. and abroad. Through my training in teaching language, I had become interested in the ways students were taught culture through language.

> *Fieldnote of December 1, 2016. Location: At Naima's home. No recording upon request I met with Naima today to catch up and chat. After telling me a long story about her sister, Naima comes out with it: she is afraid. On Monday, a young Somali American man carried out an attack on campus that has left her reeling. She worries that now more attacks will happen to Muslims, that because of the administration's Islamophobic rhetoric, her mother will not be able to enter the country. She says: "If he had been a white guy, the FBI would have called him mentally ill. Because he is Muslim, he is considered a terrorist". I ask her whether I can record this conversation and she says no. "I don't want them to think I'm ISIS."*

Nine years after meeting at Naima's home in 2016 to collect interview data for my study on the experiences of Black transnational women in U.S. educational settings, I can still recall the brief moment of disappointment I experienced when Naima requested that I not record our scheduled interview. I was an exhausted new mom and doctoral student with limited time, and I was struck by a moment of fear that I would not be able to collect enough data to finish my research. However, the feeling evaporated quickly when Naima and I talked about the attack on the university campus, in which a young man rammed his car into students walking and proceeded to stab them with a knife, injuring 13 people. Killed right where students walk, final exams on their minds, holding hands, grabbing coffee, living their normal lives. Naima was hurting too. This was a young man, a child, really, from the Somali community, and she felt empathy for his family, but also fear about becoming the victim of a targeted attack due to wearing hijab, given that she spent quite a bit of time outside of her home, navigating stores, coffee shops, and shopping centers. She was also in the process of bringing her mother to the United States, and the incident caused her to fear that she would lose the opportunity of being reunited with her mother.

Naima was right. The plane her mother traveled on landed in another country as soon as Executive Order 13769 that became known as the "Muslim ban" was instituted.

> *Field Note 2 (January 2017): I respond to Naima's text message requesting a call in the morning. She cries on the phone and even though I am busy, her desperation alerts me. She pleads "I need you to write an email to the immigration lawyers for me. There are some people who will help me." I try to explain that, because her mother is not currently in the United States, she will not be able to receive help. At her house, she asks me to call Ethiopian airlines over and over again to ask whether they allow Somali citizens with immigrant visas to board planes. I call different places, each growing annoyed because she asks me to call again and see if someone else will answer. I end up exhausted and having to rush out. I realize that this was the first time I didn't see her smile for our entire meeting.*

Collecting data and wanting to be a supportive friend to the participants in the study during these times was sometimes an incredibly emotionally taxing experience. As the impact of executive orders and policies hit our lives in real time, it was rarely clear what could be done. As described in the field note above, I found myself making phone calls to gather information over and over again, since Naima believed that my less obvious foreign accent would yield a more favorable response. Ultimately, Naima's mother spent weeks unable to board her flight, despite having received her documentation to move to the U.S. During this time, the tutoring sessions with Naima had taken on different roles, moving our focus from language learning to responding to immediate crises related to the shifting political, legal, and discursive contexts of immigration in the U.S.

Intimacies of Fear, Language, Religion, and Politics

The duo-ethnographic approach revealed the deep-seated fears and anxieties experienced by both researchers and participants. Fear of violence, discrimination, and systemic racism emerged as recurring themes. Our conversations with participants, such as Naima's fear of being perceived as a terrorist and Noura's fear of public transportation, highlighted the pervasive impact of anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant rhetoric. These fears were compounded by the socio-political climate, including the Muslim ban and heightened anti-immigrant sentiment.

Intimacies of Listening, Love, Language, and Connection in Multilingual Education: A Duoethnographic and Dual-Qualitative Inquiry

Despite the fear and violence, our research also revealed moments of connection, support, and resilience. Participants' willingness to share their stories, and the researchers' commitment to honoring these narratives, created a space for mutual understanding and solidarity. This collaborative process underscored the importance of listening and the role of language in fostering meaningful connections.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Our analysis is rooted in the concept of intimate colonial violence—the subtle and overt ways systemic racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia infiltrate the everyday lives of immigrant communities. Through a duo-qualitative approach, we trace how fear is written upon and through bodies marked by language, religion, immigration status, and racialization.

Our conversations with participants, including Naima and Noura, highlight how structural policies like the Muslim Ban and media framings of violence produce an ongoing state of hypervisibility and suspicion. Fears of surveillance, misinterpretation, and harm—particularly for visibly Muslim women and undocumented or precariously documented immigrants-limits mobility, speech, and even the possibility of grief. Naima's refusal to be recorded ("I don't want them to think I'm ISIS") and Noura's fear of riding the bus without "enough English" to defend herself reflect how both language and silence can become sites of risk under monolingual and racialized logics. These fears are compounded by language that permeates public spaces through political campaigns, signs on cars or laws, store windows, and media rhetoric that perpetuates and demonstrates the layers of woven fear while one is simply coming to a country to seek education.

These experiences reveal the intersections and distinctions between anti-Muslim, anti-Black, and anti-Arab racisms, particularly in the aftermath of a campus incident where the only life lost was that of a Somali Muslim student. Our analysis emphasizes how such violence collapses into one another, creating shared yet distinct conditions of fear and exclusion.

Conclusion, Implications, and Discussion

Our story-sharing sessions, spanning 10 years of friendship and collaborative research, became both method and mirror. As immigrant women navigating U.S. academia, our dialogue allowed us to theorize fear, belonging, and racialization from within our own dislocations. These conversations were not supplementary to our research; they were the generative core of it. We therefore position duoethnography as a methodology of repair—one rooted in friendship, refusal, and relational accountability.

One central implication of this research is the need to reconsider how violence and exclusion are analyzed. In our reflections, religion emerged first—not as personal belief, but as a structure of power. Islam, in particular, is weaponized to justify imperial violence abroad and securitization at home. From U.S. invasions in the Middle East to the surveillance of Muslim students, religion functions as a pretext for fear, discipline, and force. The killing of a Somali Muslim student on our campus made this real and personal. Language is inseparable from this violence. For both participants and ourselves, language is a site of racialization: accents, silences, and refusals are read through suspicion and risk. A participant's fear of riding the bus in hijab, or another's refusal to be recorded, speaks to the risks of being heard, or misheard, as Arab, Muslim, or foreign. In our own research encounters, language was never neutral; it carried the weight of surveillance, vulnerability, and mistranslation.

Citizenship, too, appeared as racialized and unstable. Legal status did not protect our participants or ourselves from hypervisibility or exclusion. One participant worried her mother would be barred from entry under the Muslim Ban; another feared she would be perceived as a terrorist for speaking Arabic. These fears are not irrational—they reflect a lived landscape shaped by state policy and media logics. We intentionally position race after religion, language, and citizenship—not to diminish its role, but to reflect our specific locations. One of us navigates anti-Arab and anti-Muslim racism; the other, white European privilege complicated by dislocation.

Thus, the power of this temporal duo-radical intimate inquiry emerges not from convergence or divergence alone, but from how these dimensions weave together across our decade-long friendship and research conversations. Our methodology refuses neat separations between "our" experiences and "their" experiences, between "researcher" and "participant," between past data and present analysis, between private fear and public policy. Instead, we theorize and enact research as entangled, relational, and temporally recursive. The campus incident of November 2016—where a Somali Muslim student was killed by police after driving into students and wielding a knife—became a point of convergence that collapsed all boundaries and entered the intertextualities of Ulfa among participants and researchers across two different studies. This incident entered Youmna's research as her participant Noura expressed fear ("I just hope we finish this scholarship in peace and go back home safely"); entered Tanja's research as her participant Naima refused recording ("I don't want them to think I'm ISIS"); entered our own lives as we texted friends frantically, held our babies, and wondered about safety; and entered public discourse as media sensationalized "terrorism" while campus praised "swift police response." The incident was simultaneously a point of convergence of two studies and a shared trauma in our friendship, a racialized spectacle in public space, and a temporal marker connecting "then" (2016) to "now" (2025), as administration policies once again target Muslim, Arab, and multilingual speakers and Black immigrants through executive orders.

Our methodology holds all these registers together. It collapses and complicates identity markers such as race, religion, and language. Naima's Ulfa intersects with Tanja through racial connections and longstanding friendship, while Youmna and Noura's Ulfa intersects with Naima through Muslim spiritualities. We showed how fear circulates (Ahmed, 2004) not abstractly but through our participants' bodies (Noura afraid to ride the bus in niqab; Naima afraid her mother won't enter the U.S.), through our own bodies (Youmna's broken mailbox and Trump-as-Rambo poster in her neighborhood, and for a long time the lack of a home or country to return to as Syria was ravaged by proxy war; Tanja's fears of losing her livelihood), and through language itself (Arabic as "indicted," accents as markers of foreignness, English proficiency as survival strategy). We attend to how public space becomes hostile—Trump signs, "Appeal to Heaven" banners, Islamophobic rhetoric, DEI rollbacks—while simultaneously analyzing how intimate spaces become refuge through women's groups, friendship, shared meals, bilingual conversations, refusal of recording when recording feels like surveillance.

Our data collection occurred through story-sharing sessions between us as researcher-friends: we would meet, talk for hours about our participants' experiences and our own, analyze together what was happening, and hold each other through exhaustion and fear. These conversations were not "member checking" or "data triangulation" in conventional qualitative research terms—they were the research itself, enacting the duo-ethnographic principle that researchers' dialogic meaning-making is legitimate knowledge production (Norris & Sawyer, 2012). Moreover, our work enacts temporal recursively: we analyze data from 2015-2018 in 2025, finding that participants' fears during the first Trump administration ("I hope we finish in peace") have materialized again under current policies (Executive Order declaring English as official language, DEI restrictions, threats to international students). The "then" becomes "now" not linearly but cyclically, as Kairos—where past trauma resurfaces, where policies repeat, where fear returns. This temporal dimension distinguishes our work from snapshot ethnographies: we show how transnational women's experiences are not frozen in time but unfold, recur, intensify. Finally, our methodology models methodological hope through intimacy: despite fear, surveillance, and institutional violence, our sustained friendship, our commitments to each other and to participants, our refusal to abandon this work across a decade, these constitute resistance.

Multilingual research-as-homeland, language and the ability to speak Arabic in safe spaces of Ulfa becomes a practice of survival, spaces where we exist despite the academy's violence, where multilingualism is honored,

where our racialized, immigrant, mother-scholar bodies are held with care. The duo inquiry enables us to witness each other, validate each other's experiences across our differences, and produce knowledge that neither of us could generate alone knowledge about how fear operates simultaneously through Islamophobia, anti-Blackness, anti-Arab racism, and xenophobia, how language becomes weapon and refuge, how education promises belonging while enacting exclusion, and how transnational women survive by creating intimacy against the power structure that shapes our lives.

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Ethical Statement

Both studies were IRB-approved. Participants' privacy was protected via the use of pseudonyms and omission of identifying information.

Competing Interests

No competing interests were identified

Authors Contributions

Youmna Deiri, the corresponding author, led the conceptualization of the study, including the development of the framing, outline, and theoretical framework. She authored her designated sections, as well as the methodology, discussion, and implications sections, did the revisions. The second author contributed to their respective sections and participated in ongoing scholarly discussions throughout the development of the manuscript.

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