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"You Bring Me Light": Saudi Women Educators' Ulfa (الألفة) Literacies Through Language, Affect, and Artifacts

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ABSTRACT

This bi/multilingual intimate ethnography examines the educational experiences of four transnational Saudi women living in the United States, tracing how Ulfa (الألفة) as theorized through Tectonic Ulfa/ Tectonic intimacies shapes their navigation of multilingual, racialized, and geopolitically charged academic spaces. The methodology of this study is grounded in a framework that conceptualizes Ulfa as cyclical entanglements of structural linguistic violence, collective resistance, and healing. The study draws on qualitative ethnographic conversations, fieldnotes, and artifacts, among other modalities, with participants. Findings show that English-only environments produced intimate educational harms, including epistemic erasure, linguistic coercion, and the exhaustion of perpetual linguistic labor. Yet the women created tectonic ulfa by refusing colonial linguistic hierarchies through critical analysis of language and colonialism, collective knowledge-making, humor, sensory home-making practices (bakhour, coffee, handwritten Arabic signs), and creative self-authorship. These practices formed pedagogical spaces where vulnerability, brilliance, and belonging could coexist despite rupture and surveillance. For example, artifacts such as square Kufic jewelry illustrate how language became both subtle defiance and intimate self-narration in monitored environments. The study advances "Tectonic" Ulfa as a theoretical and methodological contribution to postcolonial education research, demonstrating that the learning and survival of Saudi women educators are not sustained by violent educational institutions but through relational, affective, and multilingual practices that hold resistance, and hope together.

Keywords: Ulfa (الألفة), framework, al-Ulfa/intimate literacies, multilingual literacies, transnational Saudi women, Arabic language practices

Early in this study, I was curled into my usual spot on Zain's couch, while she sat on the floor with her back against it, the way we always settled when watching TV together. It was the first episode of the new season of *Arab's Got Talent*. The scent of bakhour drifted through the room, the tea kettle sat on the table, and a plate of dates and chocolates rested within easy reach. Zain has always been a generous host, attentive to the details and customs of hospitality. One of the contestants was an Italian illusionist of Iraqi heritage. When he stepped onto the stage, an Italian mother, an Iraqi father, we fell into our usual rhythm of half-watching and half-talking and discussing. Was he 'Arab enough' to be on this show? Was he Iraqi or Italian? Did his European upbringing and passport give him more of a European privilege than other contestants? Should he be on the Italian version of this show instead? And if he claimed an Arab identity, wasn't he as Arab as anyone who spoke the language, even if he did not? These small discussions drew me into bigger questions I carried quietly: How would my own children identify as Syrian American, half Syrian and half American or as West Asian? Her sister's children are identified as Saudi American. What are the limits of hyphenated identities, and what possibilities do they open up? (Naber, 2014). Wouldn't they be as fully Syrian as they are American? And are the boundaries of belonging determined by

language, birthright citizenship, or gender, given that, to this day in Syria, I cannot formally grant Syrian citizenship on my children as a woman? This is not a reduction of my rights; unfortunately, my rights as an immigrant woman in the United States are limited, and they are limited in Syria as well. There is little privileging of womanhood, whether in the belly of the empire or in lands subjugated by it. But do language and belonging rights stretch far beyond that? What are the limits of being possibly both indigenous to lands and transnational? What does this mean for future generations shaped by constructed communities, especially in times when language and belonging feel under siege?

Introducing the Research Scenes and Participants Through Everyday Moments of Ulfa—Intimacy and Closeness

As with most participants in the broader ethnographic study of Saudi families, and in the subset focused on Saudi women, Zain was in the United States primarily for educational purposes. Engaging in these conversations became part of the everyday intimacies of participant–researcher relations, moments in which *ulfa*[1] blurred the boundaries between our roles. Such instances were not isolated. Zain assisted me in doing my makeup because of my dissertation defense, and she insisted that I could not present myself with a frumpy face since she had already provided me with detailed feedback.

Bahyya brought me a *skibeh*—a homemade portion of bone-marrow —*marag*—when I gave birth, a meal that felt as sweet as the pride in her voice as she explained that her husband had prepared it under her instructions so I could get the nutrients I needed in my post-partum "نِفاس." This kind of community- and family-based recovery, rooted in the forty-day postpartum tradition common across much of the Middle East, unfolded around me with a familiar tenderness. Sarah, another participant and friend, prepared frozen meals, brought her family to celebrate my daughter's birth, and instructed them to listen closely for anything Khaleh/ Auntie—me—might need that day. And Zain, of course, held my daughter at times so I could write field notes. When I asked participants what they hoped to gain from this research, drawing on de-orientalizing approaches to ethnography (Naber, 2014)—their responses were almost unanimous. They understood how hard it is to gain access to a research site and to carry doctoral work on one's back, and they offered the kind of support they hoped someone might extend to them when they, too, would one day be in my shoes. I reciprocated as well, when Sarah and her spouse needed to attend to paperwork, I was also entrusted with the children of another Saudi family for three days while they managed student visa requirements. Their attention, their embrace, and even the interruptions—whether personal, bureaucratic, or triggered by academic obligations—shaped the relational landscape of this study. The research unfolded during the first Trump administration, a period marked by heightened surveillance and the criminalization of Muslim communities following the so-called Muslim Ban (Executive Order 13769). This context remains deeply relevant in global societies where anti-Arab discrimination, Islamophobia, and xenophobia continue to structure the experiences of transnational students. The urgency of this work only intensifies under the renewed wave of anti-immigration, anti-multilingual, and anti–race-conscious policies of the current Trump era.

While some of these relationships ruptured under the pressures and competitiveness of pursuing one's education, these ruptures in *Ulfa and in relationships*—**تصدّعات الألفة**—as the reader will see, are part of the macro layers (in a structural sense) of Ulfa. Ulfa can bring us together at the individual level, but it can also entangle us in the coercive nature of oppressive structures. These fractures reveal how intimacy becomes bound up with the very violences that shape the participants' and researchers' lives or the lives among intimates: friends, family members, spouses, colleagues and so on. Through these intimate breaks, the violences of colonial ways of being and knowing make their way into the body into the internalizations, the expectations, and the lived experiences of the women as they navigate their educational journeys. It is important to note the political environment at the time of data collection, a time that was characterized by widespread anti-Muslim discourse, a rise in hate crimes against Arab Americans, and heightened monitoring of Muslim international students. This resulted in a lived reality where the bodies of Saudi women became the grounds of the racialized scrutiny in the U.S. academic institutions (Abu El-Haj & Bonet, 2011; Colgan et al., 2024; Mesouani, 2025). These circumstances remain even in present times, so the framework of the study will be particularized to Arabic-speaking, Muslim, and other populations who have experienced colonization.

LITERATURE REVIEW

At the time of this study, transnational Saudi women and families were among the largest and most rapidly expanding international student groups in higher education institutions in the United States and yet, et their experiences remain highly underrepresented in education research (Aldaej, 2024; Arafeh, 2020; Hersi, 2021; Heyn, 2013; Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern, 2015; Shaw, 2009; Sendi, 2019). This omission reflects broader

[1] The word Ulfa on its own means warmth, proximity, and intimacy. The most accurate translation is intimacy.

patterns of epistemic and affective violence (Spivak, 1988; Smith, 2012; Ahmed, 2004), as well as the institutional dismissal of epistemic struggles that bury the knowledge of those who do not conform (Ahmed, 2021). Through these processes, the bodies, languages, and knowledge systems of Arab and Muslim women are actively marginalized in Western academic discourses (Abu El-Haj & Bonet, 2011; Karam, 2005).The academic literature on racialization shows that Arab Muslim women are consistently presented through an Orientalist gaze that others Muslim and Arabic-speaking women and renders them unintelligible, a mode of vision that casts them as inherently oppressed, submissive non-subjects, or exotic others in need of salvation from their own cultures (Said; 1979; Naber, 2006; Abu-Lughod, 1993; 2008; Aziz & Ahmad, 2018). These representations operate through what Ahmed (2002) theorizes as the dominant gaze, a racialized manner of interpreting bodies that strips them of the contexts and meanings through which people write themselves.

The educational experiences of Saudi women in U.S. higher education have begun to appear in recent scholarship, although significant gaps remain. Davis (2014) conducted preliminary qualitative work on Saudi women's cultural adaptation, capturing the multidimensional maneuvering required when moving across vastly different cultural environments. Sendi (2019), in a comparative study of ten Saudi graduate scholars pursuing English-related master's degrees in the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, found that those studying in the United States received strong academic support but navigated environments with weak cultural and religious accommodation, whereas those studying in Saudi Arabia benefited from sociocultural support but encountered institutional barriers. Using Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory, Arafeh (2020) examined the experiences of ten Saudi women sophomores and found that they reported greater maturity, confidence, and independence—with paternal support playing a key role—while still relying heavily on peer networks due to insufficient campus support.

Alruwaili and Ku (2020) explored the identity negotiations of 14 Saudi women scholars on social media, noting that participants felt culturally constrained in Saudi Arabia but more at ease expressing their identities online in the U.S., even as they moderated visibility through strategic privacy controls. Al-Krenawi et al. (2021) studied 84 Saudi women scholars in the Washington, DC area and found that unfavorable institutional settings—not religiosity or language proficiency—predicted stress, though participants still demonstrated resilience. Hersi (2021) documented how two Saudi scholars crafted their identities through academic writing, using nuanced rhetorical strategies to maintain their values while entering academic discourse. Most recently, Aldaej (2024) applied segmented assimilation theory to examine how Saudi international students navigated the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite these contributions, research on how Saudi women educators create relational connections through language, navigate racialization in educational contexts, and employ embodied literacy practices to write themselves creatively—and within ethnographic methodological contexts—remains rare. Through multilingual intimate ethnography with four Saudi women pursuing graduate education, I traced how participants negotiated the disjuncture between how they authored themselves—through names, apparel, jewelry, and language—and how dominant gazes authored meaning onto their bodies across social and educational spaces.

Research Question

How does intimacy (أُلفة/Ulfa) shape Saudi women educators' navigation of multilingual educational experiences in U.S. higher education?

Sub-Questions:

1. How do linguistic coercion and epistemic violence operate as intimate educational harms in graduate education contexts?
2. How do multilingual literacy practices and collective knowledge production function as pedagogical resistance?
3. How do sensory, relational, and cultural practices create learning spaces characterized by hope, care, and transformation?

Theoretical Framework: Multilingual Ulfa

Intimacy has long been treated in Western scholarship as a private, emotionally coherent sphere. Feminist, postcolonial, and affect theorists instead demonstrate that intimacy is structured through power, hierarchy, and historical violence—that it produces closeness but can also operate as oppressive force within systems shaped by racism, colorism, capitalism, and other forms of domination (Berlant, 1998; Ahmed, 1997). Berlant (1998) argues that intimacy is not a natural refuge but a publicly organized structure shaped by racial, gendered, sexual, laboring, and colonial hierarchies that generate normative models of family and the "good life," obscuring the political regulation of desire, belonging, and emotional expression.Colonization pushes people to continually improvise relational practices to sustain connection within systems organized against their intimate lives, for it is precisely the

obstruction of intimate life that makes colonization—and the exploitation and the erasure of people possible. Similarly, Ahmed (1997) rejects the expectation that intimacy should produce unity or transparency, arguing that intimacy becomes meaningful through asymmetry, vulnerability, and the friction of embodied histories. Encounters across difference are shaped by colonial legacies and racialized positionalities that determine who can approach safely and who risks exposure. Intimacy is thus a fragile, unsettled process in which rupture and discomfort are integral to how closeness unfolds, requiring accountability rather than the erasure of uneven conditions.

Lowe (2015) extends this critique transnationally, showing how modern domesticity and private affection are built upon erased global intimacies produced through slavery, indenture, Indigenous dispossession, and migration. She identifies dominant intimacy—bourgeois domestic life—as upheld by suppressing residual intimacies (ongoing but obscured connections generated through empire) and emergent intimacies (new alliances among displaced and racialized communities), revealing intimacy as a lens through which the political economies of labor, displacement, and attachment are organized.

In line with Berlant and Ahmed, multilingual research understands intimacy as both an everyday relational practice and a site where power structures—colonial, racial, linguistic—press against the ways people carry, share, and negotiate their languages with themselves, their communities, and their intimates. Ulfa Literacies and Ulfa Frameworks *are located within these paradigms of understanding*. In women-of-color scholarship, intimacy emerges through relational, narrative, and linguistic practices that build solidarities across difference (Deiri, 2022; Nadar, 2019; Nash, 2018; Lowe, 2015; Eqieq, 2025), exemplifying intimacy as simultaneously fragile and generative, shaped by the very conditions that complicate it. When placed in conversation with multilingualism, intimacy illuminates the affective and political stakes of language use (Baugh & Zentella, 2024; Bale, 2010; Martínez & Mejía, 2021; Baker-Bell, 2020; McCarty, 2018; Rosa & Flores, 2015; Zentella, 2018).

Language is deeply intimate—carrying memory, interiority, emotion, and cultural practices and belonging—yet profoundly public, structuring legibility, credibility, and institutional access through stories, songs, dances, and the intimacy of land and heart (Anzaldúa, 1987; Abu-Lughod, 1990; Simpson, 2017). Multilingual students navigate this tension as they move across linguistic worlds that serve as sources of connection and resistance but also coercion and exclusion. Language can wound through accent discrimination and colonial language policies, and it can repair through translanguaging García & Li Wei) and transdialecting (Deiri & Bashri, 2024) and heritage-language reclamation (Alqarni & Dewaele, 2020; Al Masaeed, 2020, 2014; Trentman, 2021).

Like intimacy, language is dynamic, relational, and historically situated—capable of rupture and repair. These dynamics unfold across micro, meso, and macro levels: racialized multilingual students navigate internal linguistic landscapes shaped by affective histories; communities negotiate relationships through code-switching and translanguaging; and institutions regulate language through schooling, migration regimes, and ideologies of "standard" language. In each case, intimacy—and speaking one's language in shared communal practices with family, friends, and that one considers intimate—builds connection to language, culture, and heritage (Hermes & King, 2013). These interactions with intimates demonstrate how language and intimacy intersect, both structured by uneven power relations and both carrying the potential for solidarity as well as constraint. Within language education, teaching and learning are fundamentally intimate encounters in which multilingual learners negotiate linguistic expectations that may affirm or erase their identities, and teachers navigate the affective labor of creating space for complex, hybrid language practices (Deiri, 2023). Understanding intimacy as both critique and relational practice reframes language education as a site where multilingualism is negotiated emotionally, ethically, and politically.

Tectonics of Ulfa (*تكتونيات الألفة*) addresses the relationship between violence, resistance, and hope in academic, social, and educational contexts, focusing on Global Majority scholars (Deiri & Bashri, 2024). The framework illustrated in **Figure 1** analyzes colonial power dynamics in knowledge production using tectonic shifts—borrowing from geological plate dynamics to describe radical affective and epistemic shifts within colonial academic institutions. Ulfa (*الألفة*) signifies not simple proximity but an emotional and epistemic site of tension producing alternative, embodied knowledge rooted in everyday practices. The framework manifests through three interconnected layers: (1) Ulfa of Violence (*ألفة العنف*)—where structural oppression penetrates personal and academic relationships, imposing silence, surveillance, cultural erasure, and epistemic exclusion; (2) Ulfa of Resistance and Liberation (*ألفة المقاومة والتحرر*)—where care, multilingualism, joy, narrative, and collective practices become epistemic and ethical tools resisting colonial knowledge production; and (3) Ulfa of Hope, Care, Joy, Healing, and Transformation (*ألفة الأمل والرعاية والفرح والشفاء والتحول*)—where possibilities emerge for collective healing and reshaping language, existence, and knowledge outside colonial frameworks. These layers are cyclical and interconnected, simultaneously lived within individual scholars while generating collective epistemologies challenging colonial knowledge production (Deiri & Bashri, 2024).

The framework emerged from analyzing scholarly contributions by Global Majority researchers spanning Black/African (Council et al., 2024; Flake & Lubin, 2024; Walcott, 2024), Arab (Mellor, 2024; Murad, 2024;

Shehneh, 2024), Assyrian (Murad, 2024), Latinx (Mendoza et al., 2024; sánchez loza in Abdi et al., 2024), Indigenous (Brandehoff, 2024; curanderismo traditions in Mendoza et al., 2024), South Asian (Gajasinghe, 2024), Hmong (Vue in Abdi et al., 2024), and Somali (Abdi et al., 2024) communities across geographic contexts including the United States, South Africa (Dalvit, 2024), and transnational Arab contexts (Mellor, 2024; Murad, 2024). Their scholarship demonstrates Ulfa's three layers through documenting intimate colonial violence, theorizing resistance through storytelling and collective mothering, and centering healing practices through Indigenous knowledge systems and relational care—affirming that these forms of Ulfa are interconnected, cyclical, and embodied (Deiri & Bashri, 2024). Subsequent theorizations have expanded Ulfa's conceptual reach.

In collaborative work with Blanca Caldas, we theorized Ulfa as Ulfa/cariño/*الألفة*, close friendship, warmth, and connection operating at macro and micro levels as multilingual openings (See **Table 1**) and solidarity across communities (Caldas & Deiri, forthcoming). This extends beyond connection; Ulfa carries us through alienation in immigration experiences, where multilingualism becomes our lineage. Ulfa is wrapped in terrains of love, respect, trust, struggle, and emotions, requiring researchers and teachers to come together toward creating an otherwise (Murat, 2024; Caldas & Deiri, Forthcoming). Similarly, Eqeiq (2025) theorized Ulfa between Palestinian and Mayan communities, articulating *الألفة* as constantly moving and evolving, "dissolving" the unfamiliar as friendship and kinship while positioning Ulfa as anti-colonial and liberatory (p. 60). Collectively, these theorizations position Ulfa (*الألفة*) as dynamic, multilayered, and fundamentally decolonial—operating across violence, resistance, healing, and transformation. For the purposes of this publication and future use, *Ulfa* and *Tectonic Ulfa* (*Tectonic Intimacies*) are used interchangeably.

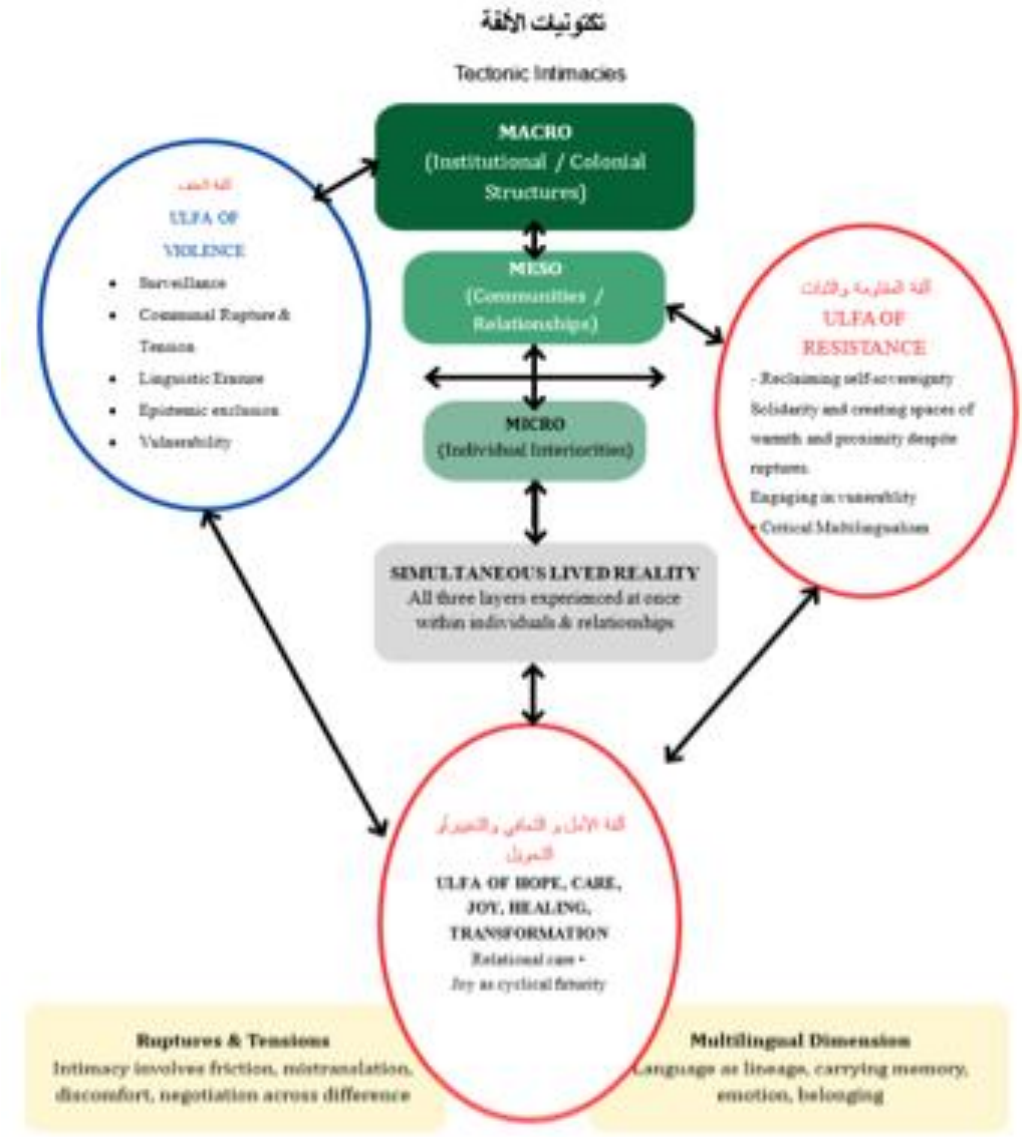

Figure 1. Tectonic Ulfa model

Table 1. Tectonic of Ulfa (تكتونيات الألفة)[2] or Ulfa Theoretical Farmwork

العربية (Arabic)	English
تكتونيات الألفة (Deiri & Bashri, 2024) تتناول العلاقة بين العنف والمقاومة والأمل في الأوساط الأكاديمية والاجتماعية والتعليمية، في الفضاءات العامة والخاصة، وفي الصداقات والعلاقات، مع التركيز بشكل خاص على باحثات الأغلبية العالمية. تحلل ديناميات القوة الاستعمارية في إنتاج المعرفة وتأثير هذه الديناميات على عواطف الأفراد والمجتمعات باستخدام مفهوم التحولات التكتونية. تسلط الأعمال الضوء على كيف تعمل أفعال الألفة في البقاء والتأكيد الثقافي والرعاية الجماعية كأشكال من المقاومة، مما يخلق تصدعات داخل المعرفيات الاستعمارية ويسهل ظهور المعارف ما بعد الاستعمارية.	Tectonic intimacies (Deiri & Bashri, 2024) address the relationship between violence, resistance, and hope in academic, social, and educational contexts, in public and private spaces, and in friendships and relationships, with a specific focus on Global Majority scholars. It analyses colonial power dynamics in knowledge production and the effect of such dynamics on the emotions of people and communities using the concept of tectonic shifts. The contributions highlight how intimate acts of survival, cultural assertion, and collective care serve as forms of resistance, creating ruptures within colonial epistemologies and facilitating the emergence of postcolonial knowledges.
الطبقات الثلاث المترابطة لتكتونيات الألفة:	Three Interconnected Layers of Tectonic Intimacies:
١. ألفة العنف (Intimacies of Violence): إحداث الوعي بأفعال العنف من قِبل الهياكل الاستعمارية التي تشكل حياتنا والعواطف التي تثيرها في السياقات الأكاديمية والاجتماعية والتعليمية، في الفضاءات العامة والخاصة، وفي الصداقات والعلاقات، كقوة للنقد وخلق تصدعات داخل الأنظمة المعرفية الاستعمارية. تشمل ممارسات وأفعال العنف الحميم: المراقبة والسيطرة، الإكراه والتغريب، المحو واللاإنسانية، الإقصاء والرفض، والعنف المعرفي والعاطفي داخل الفضاءات التعليمية والبحثية والعلائقية.	1. Intimacies of Violence: Shaking up the foundations by bringing awareness to the actions of violence of colonial power structures that shape our lives and the emotions they evoke in academic, social, and educational contexts, in public and private spaces, and in friendships and relationships, serving as a force to critique and create ruptures and fractures within colonial systems of knowledge. Practices and acts of intimate violence include control and surveillance, coercion and alienation, erasure and dehumanization, exclusion and dismissal, and epistemic and affective violence within educational, research, and relational spaces.
٢. ألفة المقاومة والتحرر (Intimacies of Resistance and Liberation): تتجلى من خلال أفعال الحب الذاتي الجذري، الحب الجماعي، والمقاومة، التي تُعاش داخل ألفة كينونة الفرد ومن خلال بناء التضامنات بين المجتمعات القريبة، في الصداقات والعلاقات، عبر الفضاءات العامة والخاصة. هذه الأفعال المترابطة تولد تحولات وتوترات تدفع المقاومة والتحرر عبر مجتمعات متنوعة وتضخيم الأصوات داخل المجتمع الخاص للفرد والمجتمعات الجماعية الأخرى المتأثرة بالعنف الاستعماري في إنتاج المعرفة. تشمل: استعادة الوكالة والمعرفة، بناء التضامن، تعطيل المعايير، أفعال الرعاية والمقاومة، السرد وسرد القصص كمقاومة.	2. Intimacies of Resistance and Liberation: Manifesting through acts of radical self-love, collective love, and resistance, experienced both within the intimacy of one's own being and through building solidarities among close communities, in friendships and relationships, across public and private spaces. These interconnected acts generate shifts and tensions that drive resistance and liberation across diverse communities and the amplification of voices within one's own community and other collective communities impacted by colonial violence in knowledge production. These include reclaiming agency and knowledge, building solidarity, disrupting norms, acts of care and resistance, narrative and storytelling as resistance.
٣. ألفة الأمل والرعاية والفرح والشفاء والتحول (Intimacies of Hope, Care, Joy, Healing, and Transformation): خلق تضاريس جديدة كنماذج ناشئة تشكلها أصوات ومعرفيات تشارك في التعبير الإبداعي من خلال الفن والشعر والسرد وسرد القصص والأشكال الأصلية لسرد القصص والذكريات الإبداعية ما بعد الاستعمارية، إلى الحب الذاتي والجماعي الجذري، في السياقات الأكاديمية والاجتماعية والتعليمية، في الفضاءات العامة والخاصة، وفي الصداقات والعلاقات. تشمل: الرعاية العلائقية، التأكيد الثقافي	3. Intimacies of Hope, Care, Joy, Healing, and Transformation: Creating new landforms as emerging paradigms shaped by the voices and epistemologies engaging creative expression through art, poetry, narrative, storytelling, and Indigenous forms of storytelling, postcolonial creative memories, to radical self and collective love, in academic, social, and educational contexts, in public and private spaces, and

[2] Ulfa (ألفة) signifies intimacy as a site of epistemic, affective, and relational cyclical and iterative multilingual process that encompasses violence, ruptures and tensions, resistance/liberation, and hope/healing/transformation across academic, social, and educational contexts, in public and private spaces, and in friendships and relationships—not simple closeness or familiarity. The framework emphasizes storytelling and Indigenous forms of storytelling as crucial forms of resistance, healing, and knowledge production (Deiri & Bashri, 2024).

Table 1. Continued.

العربية (Arabic)	English
والشخصي، الفرح كمنهجية، الممارسات الترميمية، الرعاية الجماعية والتضامن، سرد القصص وشفاء السرد، تصور مستقبلات مفعمة بالأمل.	in friendships and relationships. These include relational care, cultural and personal affirmation, joy as methodology, restorative practices, collective care and solidarity, storytelling and narrative healing, envisioning hopeful futures.
الطبيعة الدورية والمترابطة:	Cyclical and Interconnected Nature:
في هذا التفاعل من تصنيف أصوات الأغلبية العالمية في إنتاج المعرفة عبر السياقات الأكاديمية والاجتماعية والتعليمية، في الفضاءات العامة والخاصة، وفي الصداقات والعلاقات، تصبح الطبيعة المتشابكة والدورية لهذه الأُلفة واضحة. بينما تركز كل فئة على تجربة معينة—سواء كانت مجتمعية أو ضمن حدود الفضاءات الأكاديمية أو في العلاقات الشخصية—التجارب الجماعية غالبًا ما تكون مشتركة ومعاشة في آن واحد داخل الفرد الواحد. هذا يعني أن تجربة الإقصاء ليست فريدة، وكذلك تجارب المقاومة والتحول. جميع أشكال الأُلفة الثلاثة، بدرجات متفاوتة، مترابطة ومنطبعة على نفس الشخص، مما يشكل واقعهم المعاش وإنتاج المعرفة عبر جميع هذه السياقات.	In this interplay of taxonomy of Global Majority voices knowledge production across academic, social, and educational contexts, in public and private spaces, and in friendships and relationships, the interlocking and cyclical nature of these intimacies becomes evident. While each category focuses on a particular experience—whether community-based, within the confines of academic spaces, or in personal relationships—the collective experiences are often shared and simultaneously lived within a single individual. This means that the experience of Othering is not unique to one another, and so are the experiences of resistance and transformation. All three forms of intimacies are, to varying degrees, interconnected and imprinted upon the same person, shaping their lived realities and knowledge production across all these contexts.

METHODOLOGY

Multilingual Intimate Ethnography

Researcher Poetic Interludes/ Immigrants of Brilliance/ Won't show my intellect, / or convince my colleagues that I have some! / ...such brilliance is so desired, / only when tamed and maimed, / otherwise in the academy such brilliance is disdained.

These lines, written during my doctoral journey, capture the intimate violence many transnational and immigrant scholars navigate within Western academic spaces—spaces where our brilliance is simultaneously demanded and dismissed, our voices solicited yet silenced, our bodies hyper visible, yet our subjectivities rendered invisible. This tension between recognition and erasure, between being seen and being understood, forms the heart of this study examining how transnational Saudi women navigate the multilingual, embodied literacies through which they read and write themselves within contexts that read and write them reductively.

My position in this research emerged from layered forms of intimacy, distance, and solidarity. Born in Jeddah to Syrian parents, fluent in multiple Arabic dialects, and navigating life as an immigrant woman and mother in U.S. academia, I occupied what participants described as a productive "blur"—not fully insider or outsider. Syrian rather than Saudi, I remained culturally and linguistically close enough for trust while still marked as different in ways that opened space for disclosure. This positionality shaped the research and informed what I call multilingual intimate ethnography (Deiri, 2023), a methodological approach that centers the humanity, relational practices, and linguistic repertoires of researchers and participants while refusing extractive paradigms.

In this approach, language is understood as fundamentally intimate and relational. It holds our love, fears, desires, memories, and nostalgia (Deiri, 2023) and emerges through the connections we build with families, communities, and ourselves across histories of power and emotion. Indigenous scholars remind us that language is carried through relationships—mothers, grandmothers, clan mothers, and the kinship lines that form who we are (Lessard et al., 2020). Language bears both tenderness and violence; it expresses our interior lives while being shaped by surveillance and colonial regulation (Anzaldúa, 1987; Deiri, 2018, 2021; Macedo, 2000). For multilingual individuals, language becomes both refuge and battleground: wounded through discrimination, accent bias, and English-only ideologies (Baker-Bell, 2017, 2020), and strengthened as a site of resistance, belonging, and cultural continuity (hooks, 1989; Macedo, 2000). Our linguistic relationships—whether marked by shame, trust, anxiety, or love—are conditioned by educational and political structures that dictate which languages are valued, which are erased, and which selves become possible in academic spaces (Bonfiglio, 2007, 2010; Flores, 2016; Cormier, 2018; Court & Abbas, 2013).

Multilingual Intimate Ethnography (MIE)-formerly Multilingual (Radical) Intimate Ethnography—treats language not as commodity but as intimate relation. It requires researchers to interrogate the monolingual, colonial frameworks inherited from Western academic training (Deiri, 2018, 2022; Kovach, 2017) and to understand how power shapes the lives of multilingual participants and researchers through linguistic violence, surveillance, and erasure. Drawing on Indigenous epistemologies (Kovach, 2017; Smith, 2011; Wilson, 2008) and ethnographies of the particular (Abu-Lughod, 1991, 2008), MIE resists homogenizing narratives and attends to the specificities of multilingual experience while remaining grounded in relationality and broader political structures. In practice, MIE requires researchers to trouble their own gaze; understand language as political and intimate; blur boundaries between ethnography and autoethnography through creative expression; weave linguistic positionality throughout the process; work with people considered intimates (friends, family, close colleagues) in ways that destabilize researcher–participant hierarchies; and call out the politics of transcription and representation. MIE rejects diluting multilingual scholarship for monolingual audiences (Deiri, 2018, 2022). Instead, it honors full linguistic repertoires, recognizing multilingual conversations without translation as legitimate forms of knowledge production that resist empire-centric research norms (Chávez-Moreno, 2020; Deiri, 2018; Gaudry, 2015).

This retrospective Multilingual Intimate Ethnography revisits data collected during 2017-2018 with four Saudi women scholars, reanalyzing it through the lens of Tectonic Ulfa (Deiri & Bashri, 2024). Following Abu-Lughod's (2008) practice of returning to ethnographic data with new theoretical and linguistic framings, this study examines the same empirical material through frameworks unavailable at the time of initial collection. The conversations that I collected, which occurred through this multilingual intimate ethnography, was based on translanguaging and the notion of language and language education as home land where constructs a home in the absence of living in one's land through language to create belonging and spaces of joy and survival both for immigrants and for international students whose lives have been touched in one form or another by colonization. The conversations constituted 54 hours of audio-recorded interviews (both individual conversations and group gatherings inside and outside the women's group meetings), 29 fieldnotes from participant observation at bimonthly women's group gatherings and informal "coffee time" meetings, phone calls, and artifacts such as photographs, handwritten signs, and objects from participants' everyday lives. The women's group met twice monthly for approximately two hours in various locations, including participants' apartments, cafés, and campus spaces, creating what participants described as "a piece of home" in the United States. It is also worth mentioning that I did not fully join the actual women's group in the literal sense. Rather, the women create a subgroup from a larger women's group that they attended on a weekly basis and for the duration of my ethnographic work, they would meet as an additional time. Showing that in-between positionality of not being fully a member but also being included as a member individually. Overall, the women as graduate students knew the struggles of research and their agenda was to help me as much as it was about understanding their experiences as well.

Participant Profiles

As a continuation of the Ulfa-based participant descriptions, I offer here a more structured approach. Rather than weaving the women, the participants, friends, and members of an intimate community—into the narrative as I did earlier, they appear in a more traditionally organized form in this section. All the participants were educators or in an education-related field, such as school counseling. And all had college degrees and spoke English to various degrees of confidence. They all were in ESL classes or seeking their M.A. or Doctorates or had already had an M.A. from Saudi Arabia and were here with the family for educational purposes.

Zain was a third-year doctoral student from Jeddah who initially moved to the United States with her siblings. She became a central figure in facilitating this research, introducing me to the women's group and offering unwavering support throughout including insisting on doing the researcher's makeup before my dissertation proposal defense because such an important milestone deserved celebration and care. She also sang and brought balloons after my dissertation defense and did the usual زغاريد ululation sound made (usually by women) at weddings, celebrations, and moments of joy across the middle east SWANA (South west Asia and North Africa) as she waited for me outside the dissertation defense room and then held an impromptu party and invited my committee chair to the all-women's party organized with another friend I had.

Bahyya was the youngest participant at 26, an ESL student from the suburbs of Jeddah who was married with one child. She brought a thoughtful, critical lens to conversations about feminism, religion, and identity, and she was very smart and keen on learning and asked a lot of research questions.

Bedour was a second-year doctoral student from Riyadh, married and pregnant with her second child during data collection. She articulated the women's group gatherings as the only time she felt was "about her and only her," emphasizing self-care amid the pressures of graduate school, motherhood, and transnational life.

Noura was a stay-at-home mother of two from Riyadh, pregnant with her third child during data collection, who accompanied her spouse to the United States for his graduate studies. She wore the abaya and niqab and brought thoughtful perspectives to the women's group conversations.

Retrospective Thematic Analysis Through Tectonic Ulfa Framework

This study employs retrospective analysis, returning to ethnographic data collected in 2017-2018 with new theoretical and linguistic framings unavailable at the time of initial collection. Following Abu-Lughod's (2008) practice of revisiting ethnographic material with evolved conceptual tools, I reanalyzed 54 hours of audio-recorded conversations, 29 fieldnotes, and artifacts through the Tectonic Ulfa framework (Deiri & Bashri, 2024). This retrospective approach mirrors Abu-Lughod's return to her Bedouin women ethnography with a deepened understanding of how to write against culture while honoring particularity—what she calls "the ethnography of the particular" (Abu-Lughod, 2008, p. 27). Similarly, this analysis returns to Saudi women scholars' stories with language and frameworks that more fully capture the cyclical, interconnected nature of violence, resistance, and hope in their transnational lives.

The Tectonic Ulfa framework provided the analytical lens for understanding how intimacy operates simultaneously as a site of colonial violence, terrain of resistance and liberation, and space for hope, care, joy, healing, and transformation. Rather than treating these as sequential stages, the framework recognizes their cyclical, interconnected nature—violence and joy breathing together in the same gathering, resistance emerging from naming pain, hope insisting on its presence even when so much is at stake (Deiri & Bashri, 2024). This analytical approach centers *ألفة* (intimacy) not as simple closeness or familiarity but as an emotional and epistemic site of tension producing alternative, embodied knowledge rooted in everyday practices (Deiri & Bashri, 2024)

Bilingual Data Analysis

Analysis occurred bilingually, attending to what Arabic conveyed that English could not translate and what insights emerged from moving between languages. Following Kamala and Komori (2018), I treated translation not as neutral transfer but as interpretive practice requiring continuous reflexivity about what gets lost, gained, and transformed across linguistic borders. Audio recordings captured conversations primarily in Arabic with English loanwords and code-switching, revealing how participants navigated multiple linguistic worlds simultaneously. Rather than translating data into English and then analyzing, I analyzed in both languages, writing analytical memos that moved fluidly between Arabic and English, using Arabic when concepts resisted translation and English when connecting to scholarly conversations.

This bilingual approach proved essential to the analysis of *Tectonic Ulfa*. For example, Bahyya's use of *"يقهر"* (to crush, to overpower, to compel oppression) and *"إحباط"* (frustration) to describe epistemic violence/ erasure carried an affective and political weight that the English term *frustrating* flattened. Similarly, Zain's handwritten sign, *"نورتوني"* ("you brought light / you bring me light"), enacted relational intimacy through a metaphor unavailable in English. Rather than simply marking arrival, *نورتوني* recognizes the guest's presence as a gift—their coming into the home as bringing light, being, and relational vitality into the space. Where *welcome* flattens relational space into a neutral acknowledgment of entry, *نورتوني* affirms the guest as illuminating the home through their presence itself. Attending to such linguistic choices reveals *Ulfa* as something enacted through language, where intimacy through language, relational closeness and familiarity, and care are produced in the moment of encounter. In these moments, Arabic functioned as fresh air—a breeze of home or homeland, producing warmth, closeness, healing, and joy. These practices exceed Western frameworks that read minoritized language primarily as resistance; instead, they foreground Arabic as a healing language, a space of full expression, and a collective practice of knowledge-making within and against English-only academic spaces.Coding Process Analysis followed iterative coding process moving between data and Tectonic Ulfa framework's three interconnected layers: (1) Ulfa of Violence (*ألفة العنف*), (2) Ulfa of Resistance and Liberation (*ألفة المقاومة والتحرر*), and (3) Ulfa of Hope, Care, Joy, Healing, and Transformation (*ألفة الأمل والرعاية والفرح والشفاء والتحول*). Initial coding identified moments reflecting each layer using codes outlined in the coding scheme (see Appendix [X]). However, consistent with the framework's emphasis on the cyclical and interconnected nature of Ulfa, analysis attended particularly to moments where multiple layers operated simultaneously—where violence and joy coexisted, where naming pain generated solidarity, where care emerged from witnessing suffering.

Throughout coding, I wrote analytical memos exploring patterns, contradictions, questions, and insights. Memos attended to: (1) how specific data segments revealed Ulfa's cyclical nature, (2) what Arabic communicated that English could not, (3) how context (sensory details, gathering dynamics, necklaces, clothing, food and drink, smells that bring joy and affect) mattered, (4) what the data taught about friendship as methodology and epistemology, and (5) how findings connected to broader theoretical conversations about racialization, linguistic imperialism, and decolonial knowledge production. Memos were written bilingually, using Arabic to capture concepts that resisted translation and to remain close to participants' ways of meaning-making. This section presents findings from retrospective analysis of ethnographic data collected with four Saudi women scholars during 2017-2018, reexamined through the Tectonic Ulfa framework (Deiri & Bashri, 2024). Findings are organized according to Ulfa's three interconnected layers: (1) Ulfa of Violence, (2) Ulfa of Resistance and Liberation, and (3)

Ulfa of Hope, Care, Joy, Healing, and Transformation. Throughout, data are presented bilingually, and context is woven into analysis to honor the relational, sensory, and affective dimensions of participants' educational experiences.

Phase 1: Open Coding Across Layers

I read through interview transcripts, fieldnotes, and artifact descriptions, coding for instances of each Ulfa layer. This phase identified moments of surveillance and epistemic violence (Layer 1), instances of linguistic resistance and collective knowledge production (Layer 2), and practices of care, joy, and cultural affirmation (Layer 3). Codes were applied to segments of data ranging from single utterances to extended conversational exchanges to entire gathering contexts.

Phase 2: Cyclical and Interconnected Coding

Recognizing that Tectonic Ulfa's power lies in revealing how layers weave together, Phase 2 specifically examined how violence, resistance, and hope operated simultaneously or flowed into each other. I added codes marking "cyclical" moments (all three layers present at once) and "interconnected" moments (one layer generating another). For example, Zain's story about feeling invisible in her first semester revealed violence (erasure in English-only classroom), resistance (refusing to let that semester define her identity), and hope/healing (telling the story in Arabic with women who witnessed her brilliance) in spiraling, inseparable ways.

Phase 3: Contextual and Relational Coding

Because Ulfa is fundamentally relational and contextual, Phase 3 attended to how physical spaces, sensory details, and interpersonal dynamics shaped the data. This phase coded for context (Zain's apartment, coffee/tea, bakhour, seating arrangements), affective climate (laughter, silence, tension, ease), and relational moves (one woman finishing another's thought, teasing that affirms, questions that open space for vulnerability). This phase revealed how the women's gatherings themselves—with their sensory richness and relational warmth—created conditions for Ulfa to flourish.

Analytical Memos

Throughout coding, I wrote analytical memos exploring patterns, contradictions, questions, and insights. Memos attended to: (1) how specific data segments revealed Ulfa's cyclical nature, (2) what Arabic communicated that English could not, (3) how context (sensory details, gathering dynamics, necklaces, clothing, food and drink, smells that bring joy and affect) mattered, (4) what the data taught about friendship as methodology and epistemology, and (5) how findings connected to broader theoretical conversations about racialization, linguistic imperialism, and decolonial knowledge production. Memos were written bilingually, using Arabic to capture concepts that resisted translation and to remain close to participants' ways of meaning-making. This section presents findings from retrospective analysis of ethnographic data collected with four Saudi women scholars during 2017-2018, reexamined through the Tectonic Ulfa framework (Deiri & Bashri, 2024). Findings are organized according to Ulfa's three interconnected layers: (1) Ulfa of Violence, (2) Ulfa of Resistance and Liberation, and (3) Ulfa of Hope, Care, Joy, Healing, and Transformation. Throughout, data are presented bilingually, and context is woven into analysis to honor the relational, sensory, and affective dimensions of participants' educational experiences.

FINDINGS

The findings section will show how the multilingual *Tectonic Ulfa* or *Ulfa Framework* shows in sample artifacts and conversations among participants in the context of intimate violences of educational spaces.

Macro level: Ulfa of Violence (أُلفة العنف): "This is frustrating"

During the fourth women's group gathering at Zain's apartment—with Saudi coffee, tea, and dates within reach, and the familiar scent of bakhour in the air—Bahyya voiced a frustration that had been building throughout her semester. Speaking in Arabic, she described the epistemic violence of English-only classrooms:

باهية: هذا الشي يقهر، يعطيكي إحباط، يعني أنا لما أكون في الـ
وعندي فكرة أبى أقولها مو قادرة أقولها انه أنا ماعندي اللغة الكافية وبنفس الوقت ماني قادرة أتخيل انه الشخص الثاني عنده دي class
الفكرة وأنا أبغى أصلحها ومو قادرة

Bahyya: *"This is frustrating. I feel frustrated. Ya'ani, I am in class and I have an idea and I cannot. I cannot. I do not have enough language and at the same time I have an idea. I want to correct it and I cannot."*

The Arabic verbs Bahyya chose to reveal the depth of this violence. "*يقهر*" (crushing defeat) carries weight far beyond English "frustrating"—it suggests being overpowered, beaten down, rendered powerless. "*إحباط*" conveys profound discouragement and futility. The repetition—"*مو قادرة، مو قادرة*" (I cannot, I cannot)—performs the struggle linguistically. Bahyya possesses intellectual contributions ("*فكرة*"—idea) and recognizes when others are wrong ("*أبغى أصلحها*"—I want to correct it), but English-only academic spaces silence her knowledge.

Zain, listening closely, offered language for what Bahyya was experiencing:

زين: هل تحسين أنك غير مرئية؟

Zain: *"Do you feel invisible?"*

Bahyya responded, repeating the word as if testing whether it fit:

باهية: ممكن، ممكن، ممكن غير مرئية

Bahyya: *"possibly, possibly, possibly, invisible"*

This exchange reveals that colonial and structural linguistic violence is an epistemic violence that acts as an intimate wound accumulating in the body as defeat, discouragement, and invisibility. Significantly, Bahyya could only name this violence in Arabic, in a gathering where other women who knew her brilliance could bear witness.

The conversation turned to China's economic rise and predictions that Chinese might become globally dominant. Bahyya's response revealed the exhaustion of perpetual linguistic coercion:

باهية: فقاعدة أقول شكرا، أنا أبغى أموت إذا بتصير اللغة الصينية الأولى، مو ألني عنصرية ضد لغتهم، أنا ماعاد فيني أتعلم أي شي تاني

Bahyya: *"And I will say thank you. I want to die before Chinese [becomes] the number one language in the world. Not because of discrimination against Chinese as a language but because I cannot bear learning anymore."*

Meso-Level: Ulfa of Resistance ألفة المقاومة والثبات Critical Multilingualism, Relational Solidarity within communities

During the fourth women's group gathering at Zain's apartment—with tea refilled, bodies shifting between couch and floor cushions, bakhour smoke curling through the air—the women built critical multilingual and sophisticated geopolitical analysis together in Arabic and by engaging in this ulfa of resistance, they built solidarity and self-reclamation at the meso level by engaging in discussions about linguistic hegemony and subverting the dominance of American English language. Through the sharing of vulnerability, they created a sense of intimacy. Bedour articulated how language and power interconnect:

بدور: يعني الدولة الأقوى سياسيا بالعادة اللي تتحكم بالعالم، انه لها سلطة أكثر على أنحاء العالم، أكيد أنه لغتهم هي اللي بتصير مسيطرة حتى شوفي الإنجليزي مو البريطاني هو المسيطرة، الأنجليزي الأمريكي هو المسيطر فأنا أتخيل اه عشان كده حتى مضطرين نتعلمها

Bedour: "Ya'ani, the country with the most political prowess usually controls the rest of the world. I mean, it has more hegemony around the world. So, for sure their language will become more dominating. Like you see now, it is American English that is dominating not British. That American English is the dominating one, so I can imagine that is why we are required to learn it."

Bedour's Arabic terms name the violence directly: "*تتحكم*" (controls), "*سلطة*" (hegemony), "*مسيطرة*" (dominating), and crucially, "*مضطرين*" (required/forced/compelled). The verb *مضطرين* carries weight beyond English "required"—it suggests compulsion, lack of choice, being forced by circumstances beyond one's control.

Bahyya added:

باهية: ولغة المممم

Bahyya: *"It is the language of the media…"*

Bedour continued:

بدور: وأزيد اللغة الاقتصادية، اذا صار الاقتصاد حق لغة معينة يصير الغلبة للغة

Bedour: *"I want to add it is also the language of economy. If the economy of any language became the economy, then that language prevails."*

The violence here is structural and colonial; at the macro level, it interconnects at the meso-level where the women in this group gathering understand the linguistic colonial structures that shape their educational experiences intimately. The experiences are not remote and are shared with one another. Bedour creates a sense of intimacy and solidarity with Bahyya by highlighting that the personal frustration Bahyya feels is shared but not for a fault in Bahyya or a lack of her ability. American English acts as a global power imposing linguistic demands on Saudi women and others seeking education in the United States while positioning American English as the ultimate monolingual privilege. In addition, there is the subtext that Saudi Arabia also shortened the funding and the timeframe of scholarships. Not only Bahyya but her entire family is subject to that change, therefore foreclosing her futurity. But even though the structural violence is there, the remaining women share with Bahyya and find a space of understanding, solidarity, intimacy and proximity to her experience while critically highlighting that Bahyya is not necessarily the problem but the colonial, political, and economic imposition of English is what is at play.

That is naming her frustration with her while showing their intimate understanding of what she is experiencing. These shared community relations become a form of resistance not in the western sense but in the sense of understanding the oppressions that dictates one's lives and deciding how to forge forward despite the violence.

Micro level: Ulfa of care, hope joy, healing, transformation

Even as the women analyzed violence and enacted resistance, they tended to each other. When Bahyya expressed exhaustion, the researcher laughed, Noura joined with her own declaration, and Zain protectively interjected "Do not say that!" The laughter—punctuating heavy conversation about imperial power—did not dismiss pain but held both heaviness and lightness together. This capacity to move between critical analysis, humor, and care demonstrates Ulfa's cyclical nature: violence, resistance, and hope breathing together in the same gathering.

The phrase "*ماعاد فيني أتعلم*" (there is nothing left in me to learn) expresses depletion—capacity drained by endless linguistic demands. Noura joined:

نورا: أنا عندي استعداد أعيش بدون أنجليزي، بدون صيني، وبدون أي شي ثاين (تضحك)

Noura: *"I am willing to live without English or Chinese and anything else" [laughs]*

The laughter punctuating Noura's declaration does not erase the violence but makes it bearable. The hyperbole " I want to die," "I am willing to live without" names what might otherwise remain unspoken: linguistic imperialism extracts exhausting labor from multilingual scholars while positioning their fatigue as individual deficit rather than structural violence.

Arabic Script as Embodied Healing and Self Authoring: "You Bring Me light" as Ulfa of Hope, Care, Joy and Healing (ألفة الأمل والرعاية والفرح والشفاء والتحول

Figure 9. One of the many handwritten welcoming signs at Zain's apartmen

Figure 10. Welcome in the house of (Zain's family name)

Note: Author's personal collection – photo taken in Zain's living room.

Figure 2. *"You Brought Your Light" or "You bring me your light"*

Zain's apartment had been intentionally transformed into home-space. Handwritten Arabic signs greeted visitors at the entrance:

نورتوني (You brought light into my home/You bring me light)

أهلاً بكم في بيتنا (You are family in our home)

Each letter (see **Figure 2**) was formed by Zain's hand—*ن، و، ر، ت، و، ن، ي*. The phrase *نورتوني* carries metaphor unavailable in English: visitors are positioned as *light* that transforms darkness through presence, not mere guests. Similarly, *أهلاً بكم في بيتنا* extends kinship rather than hospitality—*أهلا* means "you are among your people," and *بيتنا* uses plural possessive ("our home" not "my home").

The signs greet visitors before verbal exchange occurs, signaling belonging prior to interaction. The handwriting shows embodied care: some letters slightly uneven, ink darker where pen paused, human imperfection distinguishing this from printed text. Time and labor invested in making welcome visible.

Beyond the gathering space, one participant wore a necklace featuring square Kufic script—geometric Arabic calligraphy that transforms letters into interlocking patterns. At first glance, the pendant resembles abstract design; only upon closer reading does Arabic text emerge. In a sociopolitical environment where Arabic is racialized and surveilled, wearing Arabic script close to the body becomes gentle defiance. The geometric abstraction shields the text while still claiming space, asserting I exist in my fullness against pressures to assimilate. The necklace invites recognition from those who share cultural literacies—a silent signal of solidarity in English-dominant spaces.

Healing, Joy, Storytelling Or finding Pockets of those through Sensory Homemaking: Bakhour, Coffee, Tea

The gatherings themselves enacted hope and care through sensory practices.

> From fieldnotes: *The familiar smell of bakhour greeted me before I even knocked. Inside, Bahyya was already curled on the couch, Bedour adjusting cushions on the floor. Saudi coffee in small cups. A plate of dates on the table. Noura arrived a few minutes after me, laughing about parking. We settled into our spots—the same spots we always choose, without discussing it—and Zain brought more tea even though everyone already had some. "Just in case," she said.*

Bakhour smoke is olfactory home—scent activating cultural memory before conversation begins. Saudi coffee enacts hospitality rituals through taste and gesture. Dates provide sustenance and cultural continuity. Tea refilled without asking demonstrates anticipatory care. Bodies knowing where they belong "the same spots we always choose, without discussing it" creates physical ease enabling vulnerability.

These sensory practices create conditions for intellectual and emotional work. Bakhour, coffee, dates, cushions, tea "just in case" material practices of care generate intimacy that allows violence to be spoken, resistance to be built, and hope to breathe.

The necklace in **Figure 3** features a pendant inscribed in square Kufic, a geometric Arabic script that transforms letters into an interlocking pattern of straight lines and sharp angles. At first glance, the design resembles an abstract tile or architectural motif. Only upon closer reading does the Arabic text emerge—carefully fitted into a compact grid that makes the script both intimate and discreet.

Figure 3. *Bedour's Necklace with Arabic Script*

This piece of jewelry becomes a linguistic artifact worn on the body, a quiet declaration of belonging carried into everyday spaces in the United States. Its form encapsulates what it means to inhabit the middle estrangement, the translation, moving between cultural worlds while being read through racialized, linguistic, and geopolitical gazes that attempt to fix who one is. The pendant uses language not as overt proclamation but as embodied subtlety, something recognized most easily by those who share or understand the cultural script.

DISCUSSION

This multilingual intimate ethnography—grounded in the Ulfa Framework—examined the experiences of four Saudi women scholars studying in the United States through Tectonic Ulfa, which understands intimacy as a site where violence, resistance, and hope coexist rather than unfold in sequence. Findings show that participants' educational journeys were shaped by layered forms of intimacy: their intimacy with Arabic as a language of healing and critical thought; their intimacy with cultural practices that transformed small apartments into home-spaces;

their intimacy with one another through solidarity, critique, and care; and their intimate negotiations with their multilingual selves while navigating structurally hostile institutions. These results extend existing scholarship on Saudi women in U.S. higher education (Al-Krenawi et al., 2021; Arafeh, 2020; Davis, 2014; Hersi, 2021; Sendi, 2019) by demonstrating that educational violence, resistance, and hope operate cyclically and simultaneously, demanding frameworks that can hold contradiction, coexistence, and complexity rather than linear "adjustment" narratives.

Within this framework, even the smallest gestures became pedagogical. One participant wore a necklace engraved in square Kufic—a geometric form of Arabic script that initially reads as abstract architecture before revealing itself to a knowing eye. Resting against her skin, the pendant carried a piece of home, an intimate reminder that closeness to oneself can be nurtured even within environments that demand assimilation. Yet the necklace also operated relationally: only those who shared cultural literacies could recognize the script, creating a moment of Ulfa, a flicker of *"you understand me; you see me."* In a sociopolitical context where Arabic is racialized and surveilled, wearing this script in public became a soft but unmistakable refusal of erasure—an embodied assertion of dignity, lineage, and presence.

Across gatherings, knowledge-making emerged collectively rather than individually. Bedour's political analysis folded into Bahyya's media observations, Noura's economic reflections, their humor, their protective care—producing a shared critical consciousness born from relational Ulfa. This collective epistemology resists Western academic traditions that privilege individual expertise and competition (Gaudry, 2015; Chávez-Moreno, 2020), while refusing Orientalist narratives that position Arabic as incapable of carrying intellectual rigor. Here, Arabic was not a "native language" to be left behind as English proficiency increased; it was the ground from which analysis, critique, solidarity, and healing emerged.

Humor functioned as another mode of resistance. When Bahyya joked that she wanted to die before learning Chinese, and Noura replied that she could live without English or Chinese altogether, the women used exaggeration to make exhaustion livable. Their humor did not dismiss the violence; it named it. It said: *we see the absurdity of these demands, and together we refuse to be crushed by them.* This humor worked alongside relational care—like Zain's immediate interjection, "كده ما تقولي" ("Don't say that"), when Bahyya voiced despair. Such interruptions were acts of micro-resistance, refusing the internalization of linguistic violence and insisting that exhaustion not be confused with inadequacy or failure. Resistance also lived in persistence: showing up to graduate school, to writing, to shared meals, to conversation—despite "ماعاد فيني أتعلم" ("there is nothing left in me"). Their continued presence in hostile academic environments was itself a refusal to be displaced by structures designed to exclude them. Even beyond the living room, resistance moved with them: the square Kufic necklace carried linguistic defiance into public space, asserting existence without performance. Together, these findings reveal that the women's educational experiences were shaped not by institutional support but by the intimate, relational, and multilingual practices they created for themselves. Intimacy, in the form of Ulfa, became the ground through which they named violence, enacted resistance, and built hope—all at once, in the same breath, in the same room filled with tea, dates, and bakhour. This cyclical navigation of violence, resistance, and hope challenges institutional narratives that frame multilingual international students as "adjusting" or "deficient." Instead, the findings illustrate how the women carved out epistemic, emotional, and cultural spaces that made learning possible despite the institution, not because of it.

Linguistic Coercion as Educational Violence: Ulfa Entanglements Between Linguistic Coercion and Resistance Through الأُلفة

These findings challenge deficit-oriented readings of international students by reframing linguistic demands as colonial violence rather than neutral educational requirements. When Bedour stated, **"مضطرّين نتعلّمها"** (we are required/forced to learn it), she identified the coercive function of linguistic imperialism embedded in English-only university policies, ESL structures organized around compliance, and sociopolitical environments in which Arabic is racialized and surveilled (Salaita, 2006; Anderson, 2020). The issue is not resistance to learning English; it is the exclusion from the ability to think, write, and engage through one's full linguistic repertoire, a removal that fractures الألفة مع اللغة—the relational, affective intimacy with language itself (Language as Ulfa). This erasure persists alongside a paradox: monolingual subjects rarely interrogate their own limited repertoires while demanding expansive, asymmetrical linguistic labor from multilingual students. Bedour's insight echoes scholarship on how language ideologies structure access unequally (Bonfiglio, 2010; Flores, 2016), while extending it by foregrounding multilingual students' geopolitical consciousness—their lived, embodied awareness of how language power operates across borders, institutions, and the intimacies of everyday life.

Sensory and Relational Practices as Pedagogies: Meso-Ulfa

The results show how sensory and relational practices, bakhour drifting through the room, Saudi coffee, dates, tea, and handwritten Arabic welcome signs—worked as pedagogical spaces marked by hope, care, and cultural affirmation. These were not accessories to learning but forms of learning themselves: *Bakhour,* البخور دخان activating cultural memory, كاسة الشاي – Tea and then dates, signaling anticipatory care, and Arabic welcome signs placing visitors into a state of خِفّة rather than burden. Knowing exactly where they belonged "the same spots we always settle into without speaking it", created the physical ease that made intellectual and emotional vulnerability possible, allowing difficult conversations about violence and resistance to unfold.

This finding extends culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2017) by showing that transnational students often build their own sustaining spaces when institutions fail to offer them. The hand-scribbled «نوَّرتوني» (you brought light/you bring me light) enacted what Tectonic Ulfa names as hope—insisting on presence in a world shaped by violence. The sign revealed the unwelcome visual terrains students encounter elsewhere (violence), refused English-only visual regimes (resistance), and generated belonging through Arabic's poetic metaphors (hope/care). All three layers of Ulfa breathed through Zain's embodied labor in shaping each letter—ن، و، ر، ت، و، ن، ي—care made visible through time, intention, and relational presence. This relational pedagogy resists neoliberal academic expectations of isolated, self-sufficient scholars and instead frames collective care as a counterforce to institutional violence (Abdi et al., 2024; Mendoza et al., 2024).

The Cyclical Nature of Violence, Resistance, and Hope: Affectives and Artifacts of *Ulfa*

One of the clearest patterns in the data is that violence, resistance, and hope did not unfold separately; they circulated together. In the same gathering—over tea and dates, with دخان البخور settling into the room and creating a sensory landscape of Ulfa—participants moved fluidly between naming violence (epistemic erasure, linguistic coercion, exhaustion), enacting resistance through Arabic critical analysis, protective care, and humor, and generating hope through laughter, home-making rituals, and anticipatory care. The bakhour mattered: its scent held the space, softening the edges of painful conversations and anchoring the women in familiarity, belonging, and shared emotional memory. Even when discussions were heavy, the sensory and relational textures of Ulfa made the room feel livable, creating the conditions for honesty, critique, and tenderness to coexist.

This cyclical movement has implications for how we understand transnational students' experiences. Violence did not disappear when resistance surfaced; hope did not cancel harm. The women lived all three at once—feeling depleted and brilliant, wounded and defiant, exhausted and hopeful in the same moment. Their capacity to hold these contradictions was not a personal trait but an affective labor shaped by multilingual lives, racialized surveillance, and the emotional weight of moving through U.S. academic spaces. Institutions often overlook this emotional terrain, focusing on language "support" or policy compliance while ignoring the intimate, affective conditions that make learning possible at all. The findings show that what sustains students is not institutional programming but the sensory, cultural, and relational practices they create together practices that allow them to breathe, think, feel, and survive within structures not built for them.

IMPLICATIONS

There are multiple layers of implications dawn pedagogically, methodologically, across various academic scales and social contexts.

English-Only Policies as Structural Violence Against Multilingualism

There is a need for academic institutions to embrace critical consciousness and build awareness of the structural violence enacted through English-only policies. Institutions must move away from posturing modes of advocacy toward genuine, actionable steps, whether through public actions or quieter forms of resistance, since not all advocacies must be loud or amplified through social media and microphones. Both forms are legitimate, and together they create seismic shifts that reshape the grounds on which multilingualism can be upheld as the norm. Institutions can come to terms with the fact that English-only classrooms are coercive and promote the linguistic erasure of multilingualism and multiliteracy. It is baffling that M.A. and doctoral students in many institutions are discouraged or outright asked to abandon their languages rather than invited to bring their full selves, not by sprinkling a few translated words into a paper, but by engaging deeply in their languages on their own terms. This should be a common practice, especially given that multilingualism is the linguistic norm for most of the world. Such change requires epistemic, axiological, ontological, and methodological expansion—centering multilingualism and multiliteracy not only in language education but across disciplines: mathematics, sciences, engineering, and beyond. The purpose is not to erase English but to ensure the active participation of languages

that allow students, scholars, and researchers to bring their full selves into academic spaces. Building such awareness requires abandoning the coercive assumption that people can only be supported by learning English through subtractive, or even merely additive, bi/multilingualism. Instead, institutions must fully incorporate the dynamism, complexity, and fluidity of multilingualism by centering how language serves the voices, literature, music, dreams, and lived worlds of multilingual communities as legitimate forms of knowledge production. This work is for everyone, monolingual and multilingual alike, so that all have the opportunity to develop healthier relationships with multilingualism at the macro, meso, and micro levels. Academic institutions can enact meaningful linguistic justice by creating multilingual pedagogical and relational spaces—through multilingual assignments, faculty training, student-led language gatherings, nondominant-language publications, and culturally grounded communal practices, that honor and sustain the effective, political, and epistemic dimensions of Ulfa across macro, meso, and micro levels. All of this requires researchers, teachers, and institutions to anchor themselves in multilingualism and engage with it, rather than anchoring against it and resisting it.

Creating and Expanding Institutional Sites of Multilingual Knowledge Production.

In this study, among the participants included here, both Zain and Bedour completed their graduate degrees successfully and on time, whereas Noura chose to finish her degree in Saudi Arabia and stepped back from further academic engagement. Bahyya, for her part, had to navigate the constraints of English-language expectations and the pace required for graduate admissions, ultimately returning to Saudi Arabia to continue her graduate education and pursue her career there. These trajectories underscore that Arabic operated as a language of healing, critical analysis, and knowledge-making—not simply a language spoken by Indigenous Arabic speakers. Ulfa was not only created with and between the participants; the language itself engenders feelings of الألفة as well as moments of rupture and repulsion. As Eqeiq (2025) theorizes in relation to Mayan and Palestinian communities—and as my co-author and I theorized through Ulfa/cariño/intimacies across la frontera, Peru, and Syria (Caldas & Deiri, Forthcoming) epistemologies of Ulfa emerge among communities who share structural violence and the intimacy forged through navigating that violence.

Knowledge is produced not only within formal institutions but through relationships and social contexts: at dinner tables; while learning about a new city together; through sharing resources, networks, and care; in café conversations; during hospital visits; or while calling immigration offices to navigate mixed-status family concerns. These are legitimate epistemic sites. The participants' practices with me reflect this: knowledge created in ordinary life, in friendship, in survival, in trust. Rather than positioning multilingualism as an outlier, or dismissing transdialecting, multilingual dissertations, and border-crossing intellectual work as "beyond" the apparatus of the academic empire, there is value in recognizing the economic and epistemic entanglements of empire and in building connective, intimacy-based knowledge systems that exceed it. Institutions often expect students to abandon their languages as they "master" English, instead of supporting multilingual student organizations; offering physical spaces where Arabic and other languages can be lived, theorized, and held with dignity; supporting multilingual publications and conferences; and recognizing nondominant-language research as advanced epistemic practice rather than evidence of failed assimilation. Engaging in humanizing approaches that foreground relational, affective, and communal ways of knowing offer a different direction, one where multilingualism functions as a site of knowledge creation and as a practice that generates deeper forms of الألفة. This shift moves us beyond additive models ("learn English and keep your language") and toward frameworks that take multilingualism seriously as an epistemic force. The question is no longer whether multilingualism is a challenge but why so many regions across the world succeed in sustaining multilingual life while the United States, through linguistic dictatorship, continues to undermine it. The existing support paradigms place international students as requiring assistance in getting accustomed to the U.S. academic culture, implicitly defining cultural practices, languages and epistemologies of the students as issues that need to be fixed. Conclusion implies alternative solution: the institutions need to adapt to the international students by changing monocultural and English-dominant academic standards. This would involve the focus of international students in curriculum development, pedagogy, and institutional policies instead of having students adapt to the same structures.

This raises further questions that academic institutions rarely confront:

1. How can dissertations, research designs, and teaching practices center multilingualism without reducing it to ornamentation?
2. What theoretical frameworks emerge when multilingualism, especially for Indigenous languages and languages of communities actively targeted by empire through land theft, displacement, and demographic erasure, is placed at the heart of scholarship rather than pushed to its margins?
3. How can intimacies/ Ulfa across communities—engage in both public and quiet actions of knowledge production to sustain, endure, survive, and thrive when the communities who carry these knowledges are under assault? How might Ulfa itself become a method of survival, a way of holding one another's languages, memories, and epistemologies so they do not disappear?

4. What multilingual frameworks are compatible with one another, such as those emerging from transnational and Indigenous traditions?

Racialized Surveillance of Muslim and Arab Students

The conversations with the Saudi Women were collected during the first term of the Trump administration, under the active Muslim Ban, yet they remain fully relevant today as anti-Muslim discrimination, Islamophobia, anti-Arab racism, and the heightened monitoring of Muslim international students continue (Awad, 2025; Colgan et al., 2024; Mesouani, 2025). For Arabic-speaking students, whose identities are racialized simultaneously through language, religion, nationality, and geopolitics, the university becomes a site where their linguistic and embodied presence is continuously interpreted through suspicion. This atmosphere shapes not only how they move and speak but how they inhabit themselves in academic spaces. Institutions can take proactive stances that disrupt these patterns rather than comply with them by refusing voluntary cooperation with surveillance, expanding legal and structural support for students facing immigration precarity, ensuring access to religious accommodations, and cultivating broader awareness of Islamophobia and anti-Arab racism. Yet structural support must move beyond procedural protection. For Arab and Muslim students, healing and endurance emerge through *Ulfa*, the relational, affective, and ethical ties that counter the isolating effects of racialized surveillance.

Within this context, transdialecting (Deiri & Bashri, 2024) becomes a meaningful linguistic and epistemic practice. By moving fluidly across Arabic dialects—and across languages more broadly—students enact relational forms of knowledge that interrupt colonial language hierarchies and resist the demand for linguistic "appropriateness" (Rosa & Flores, 2015). These movements across dialects and languages participate in the work of Ulfa: forging connection, generating shared understanding, and sustaining communities living under structural constraint. These dynamics matter for language education and institutional policy. They position Arabic not merely as a spoken language but as a site of memory, critique, and epistemic continuity for communities navigating racialized state and institutional violence. They highlight that multilingualism—through practices such as translanguaging and transdialecting—is not an obstacle to academic participation but a method of relational survival that carries intellectual, affective, and political force.

Implications for Transnational Students from Saudi Arabia and Beyond

For transnational students, especially those navigating U.S. academic spaces as Arabic speakers and Muslim women, several insights emerge from these findings: (a) your languages, cultures, and ways of knowing are intellectually powerful and politically legitimate—Arabic enabled geopolitical analysis, communal knowledge-making, healing practices, and forms of joy that English-dominant academic spaces often cannot hold; your linguistic and cultural repertoires are not deficits but sites of sophisticated scholarship, and your continued use of them is not resistance out of stubbornness but a political performance of survival, dignity, and الألفة; (b) building intimate solidarities is a necessary survival strategy, not self-segregation, as the participants' gatherings—bakhour drifting through the room, tea being poured, Arabic spoken without translation, bodies tending to one another—created learning, healing, and critical consciousness that no English-only classroom could provide; these were pedagogical spaces forged through relational care, not institutional design; and (c) your exhaustion is valid, structural, and shared what Bahyya named "ماعاد فيني أتعلم" (there is nothing left in me to learn) exposes the violence of forced linguistic assimilation and the asymmetrical labor placed on multilingual students, reminding you that fatigue is not personal failure but a consequence of linguistic imperialism. Understanding these realities affirms that demanding institutional change rather than continually reshaping yourself for monolingual expectations is both justified and necessary for sustaining your languages, your communities, and your futures.

Implications for Multilingual Language Education

Language education can be reframed as an intimate, relational, and political practice that honors the affective and epistemic weight students carry. This involves: (a) moving beyond skills-based approaches to recognize language as memory, emotion, and cultural affiliation attending to the emotional labor multilingual students perform, the linguistic violence many have endured, and the development of spaces where students can discover and reclaim their linguistic identities; (b) centering students' critical language awareness by treating language classrooms as sites where the geopolitics of linguistic imperialism, accent discrimination, colonial histories, and racialized language ideologies are actively named and analyzed rather than ignored under the myth of English as a neutral global medium; and (c) recognizing multilingualism as a legitimate epistemological resource by promoting the use of Arabic and other nondominant languages in academic work, supporting translanguaging in writing and discussion, valuing code-switching as an advanced communicative tool, and challenging monolingual ideologies that treat linguistic plurality as confusion rather than competence. Together, these shifts position multilingualism

not as a barrier but as a site of meaning-making, critical inquiry, and الألفة—intimacy—with one's languages, histories, and communities.

CONCLUSION

This research has explored the experiences of four Saudi women scholars in their U.S. higher education by Tectonic Ulfa, a theory of intimacy as a source of violence, resistance and hope. The results indicate that the participants were subjected to intimate educational violence by linguistic coercion, epistemic erasure, and racialized surveillance that was aggravated during the Trump administration of the Muslim Ban. At the same time, they did it with advanced opposition in terms of collective knowledge production in Arabic, humor as survival strategy, and protective relational care. And they developed optimistic substitutes with sensual homemaking (bakhour, Saudi coffee, tea), handwritten Arabic welcome signs, and represented care that attended to each other before encountering hostile academic spaces.

More importantly, these experiences were not linear but circular; violence, resistance, and hope inhaled one another in the same meetings, the same discussions, the same bodies through transnational educational paths. This cyclicality defies linear accounts of international student adjustment, and instead demonstrates continuous bargaining of harm and agency, violence and happiness, struggle and world-making, which define the educational experiences of transnational students.

The paper brings in Tectonic Ulfa as theoretical framework and Multilingual Intimate Ethnography as a methodological approach towards research that is sensitive to complexity, contradiction and coexistence in transnational educational experiences. The framework sheds light on the working of educational violence by examining the various aspects of intimacy, linguistic, spatial, relational, embodied, epistemological, and shows how intimacy produces resistance and hope. This framework may be useful in broader contexts and could be explored further in future research addressing not just Saudi women scholars but also Asian-Pacific international students, Arabic-speaking students in various contexts, Muslim students, and multilingual students of color who must deal with racialization and linguistic marginalization in higher education.

To teachers and schools, the results indicate that English-only policies are structural violence; that multilingual students have advanced critical consciousness that should be engaged instead of suppressed; and that support should involve changing institutional organization instead of trying to make students fit English-monolingual patterns. To researchers, it has been shown that there is a need to adopt methodologies that respect the entire humanity of students, their linguistic resources, and epistemologies and reject deficit narratives. And in the case of transnational students, the results confirm that heritage languages and cultural practices are knowledge production; that the formation of intimate solidarities is survival tactic; and that exhaustion in the face of linguistic imperialism is rightful reaction to structural violence.

This study is born of and goes back to intimacy, the friendships, the trust, the care that enabled hard topics to be discussed and knowledge that could not be obtained in other ways to be created. With the Zain handwritten نورتوني (you brought light/you bring me light) as a reminder, intimacy makes us light, changing darkness when we are present. Hopefully, this research will be a tribute to the Saudi women scholars who shared so much of their stories with me and hopefully this research will shed light on the ways of bringing about educational futures where multilingual brilliance is cherished, where intimacy has created knowledge and where violence, resistance and hope are known to breathe together in the daily life of transnational students making homes in languages and spaces that institutions of higher learning so often fail to embrace.

Author's Note

This paper focuses exclusively on Saudi women's experiences in the United States. This focus does not negate or overlook Saudi labor policies, Saudi Arabia's broader political impact on the Middle East, questions of freedom, the lives of participants in Saudi Arabia, Saudi Arabia's involvement in Syrian politics, or the close political relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia. Nor does the paper fully address my positionality as a Syrian from Aleppo who was born in Saudi Arabia, or the ways Saudi women created space for me to witness how *Ulfa* was enacted. Some of these issues are addressed in related work that discusses the methodology—Multilingual Radical Intimate Ethnography, or Multilingual *Ulfa*-Based Ethnography. Rather than attempting to account for all of these contexts, this paper centers on the *Ulfa* that emerged among participants and the experiences they encountered within that relational space. t also does not address the politics of *ajnabi*—foreigner or stranger—a label often applied to Syrians in Saudi Arabia.

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This project was IRB-approved. Participants' privacy was protected via the use of pseudonyms and omission of identifying information.

Competing Interests

No competing interests were identified.

Author Contributions

This manuscript was authored by Youmna Deiri, who conceived, designed, conducted, analyzed, and wrote the study in its entirety. AI tools were used in a limited capacity for grammar, clarity checks, and visual design support, as described below in the (AI) Disclosure statement.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Disclosure

AI tools were used for grammar, spelling, and punctuation checks, and checking for paraphrasing issues using Grammarly, and ChatGPT. Claude was also used to revise the initial outline and, along with ChatGPT, to assess textual clarity by simulating a reader's interpretation. Canva was also used to support the design of the *Ulfa* Theoretical Framework figure, including the use of AI-assisted design tools available within the platform.

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