

## When an Interpreter Could Not Be Found

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The Visible Collective was a coalition of artists, educators, and legal activists exploring contested migrant identities, including religion as an externally imposed, imperfect proxy for ethnicity, within the context of post-2001 security panic. The collective's first projects (*Casual Fresh American Style* and *Nahnu Wahaad, but really are we one?*) were part of the group show *Fatal Love: South Asian American Art Now* (2005) at the Queens Museum of Art in New York. Curated by Jaishri Abhichandani and Prerana Reddy, *Fatal Love* was a response (and perhaps rebuke) to the narrow framing of the India-centric, "blockbuster" show *Edge of Desire*, premiering that same year at the Queens Museum and the Asia Society. *Fatal Love* was also a platform for a generation of South Asian artists in the diaspora, including Asma Ahmed Shikoh (*Vanwyck Blvd*, featured elsewhere in this anthology), Anna Bhushan, Iftikhar and

Elizabeth Dadi, Chitra Ganesh, Vandana Jain, Swati Khurana, Nitin Mukul, Prema Murthy, Yamini Nayar, Sa'dia Rehman, Jaret Vadera, Visible Collective, and many others.

Between 1994 and 2001, members of Visible had participated in various platforms, including Youth Solidarity Summer, Coalition Against Anti-Asian Violence (CAA AV), 3rd I South Asian Film, the Mutiny club night, and *South Asian Magazine for Action and Reflection* (SAMAR). After reaching a natural conclusion with some of these organizations, Visible Collective coalesced in 2004 with an intention to directly intervene into art spaces. After the Queens Museum *Fatal Love* show, Visible continued to build projects in numerous venues, including the 2006 Whitney Biennial of American Art (within the *Wrong Gallery's* "Down by Law"), evolving into a platform for members to work in museums, galleries, universities, and public spaces, through installations, film screenings, and workshops.

Given the autobiographical turn in image production, some audiences wanted to think of Visible as "representing" post-2001 vulnerable groups—namely, immigrants and/or Muslims. Contrary to this enforced homogeneity, collective members' individual experiences were actually mediated by class privilege, citizenship, and access. To underscore these enabling conditions, the collective would present a "Privilege Matrix" slide at lectures, which showed, via bar charts, the birthplace and U.S. citizenship status of each member. A quick glance would show that although birthplaces ranged from Kolkata to Los Angeles, each collective member was either a birthright citizen, a naturalized citizen, or a legal permanent resident (green card holder) of the United States. These citizenship statuses allowed collective members to be vocal, while vulnerable immigrants are those in varying legal states ("processing papers," "out of status," or "undocumented") and therefore less likely to access public spaces.

Meanwhile, in popular culture, members of a new South Asian elite were being highlighted, as if to draw a distinction between "good" and "bad" immigrants. *Newsweek International* editor Fareed Zakaria, when asked about his status by Jon Stewart on *The Daily Show*, replied "I am 100 percent legal."<sup>1</sup> In the finance industry, Fareed's brother Arshad Zakaria became the youngest copresident of Merrill Lynch.<sup>2</sup> The Zakarias' institutional privilege made it possible for them to work in accelerated careers

even at a time of intensified scapegoating of Muslim immigrants. While Fareed Zakaria's cachet rose with his ability to explain "what do *they* think," his successor at *Newsweek*, Tunku Varadarajan, went a step further when he wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* that he was willing to go through racial profiling.<sup>3</sup> Working-class migrants, lacking class privilege, experienced racial profiling very differently from all this. When border security looks at "Muslim" identity, it is of course a mirage of a category (defined usually, and often incorrectly, by visual appearance, surname, place of origin, and passport), but to the extent such screening measures are deployed, those most likely to be racially profiled are low-income migrants, not high-skill financiers, journalists, and technocrats.

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Right-wing anti-immigrant groups were able, after 2001, to rebrand themselves as superpatriots. The rise of the Minutemen militia came about in this context. At the same time, American nativism was tempered, even after 2001, by a pro-immigrant sentiment that seemingly (perhaps temporarily) had sturdier roots here than it does in Europe. Consider in this context the Reagan era, when a 1986 law<sup>4</sup> gave amnesty and a path to legalization for undocumented migrants who had been in the United States since 1982, or had worked on a farm as seasonal labor. The political process, in this instance, rewarded those immigrants who were willing to give labor, especially on the farm—a landscape of labor deficit and symbolism, as well as a source for subsidised agribusiness. But in more recent times, such laws seem less likely (although the DREAM Act is an exception) because undocumented migrants are now paired with the idea of a "security threat," in spite of counterexamples such as the Timothy McVeigh, Theodore Kaczinsky, Aryan Nation, and Earth Liberation Front cases.

In Europe, anti-immigrant groups had trajectory and resonance as far back as the 1970s. In Germany, church and antiracist groups had tried to popularize the slogan "Kein Mensch ist illegal" (no human is illegal) with mixed success. They also joined forces with other European coalitions pressing for the rights of "sans papiers" (those without papers). But these concepts became much harder to argue in the last decade. After the 2005 London bombings, antimigrant sentiment

intensified as the right-wing British National Party released flyers proclaiming “maybe now it’s time to start listening to the BNP” and Tony Blair reminded the British people that immigration was no longer a right but rather a privilege.

Many of the new debates revolved around concepts of legality. “Loyalty” and “belonging” were being framed through instruments such as a proposed “Britishness” test and a specialized German citizenship test in the province of Baden-Württemberg.<sup>5</sup> Back in 1990, British politician Norman Tebbit had said that the true test of the “Britishness” of British Asians was whether they cheered for India/Pakistan or England in a cricket match. Tebbit’s views became popular again after the London bombing. But there were also attempts to problematize this simplistic concept of patriotism, as shown in BBC viewers’ responses to the “Britishness” test in the form of suggested alternative questions:<sup>6</sup> “Is binge drinking a good idea?”; “If the plural of ‘mouse’ is ‘mice,’ what is the plural of ‘house’?”; “If someone bumped into you in the corridor and it was not your fault, would you still say sorry?”; “What side should the port be passed on?”; “Which breed of dog does the Queen favour?” and, of course, “Shepherd’s Pie with ale or Lamb Bhuna with Cobra?”

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In the Visible Collective’s projects, a throughline was the idea of hypervisibility (as undesirables) twinned with continued invisibility (as marginal, working-class populations). In cities such as New York, low-income South Asian migrants drive taxis, sell newspapers and coffee, clean restaurant tables, and work in the kitchens. In the Middle East and elsewhere with similar fragile labor conditions, they work in cleaning, child care, construction, and everything in between. Migrants are therefore intimately present in our physical space (the “our” also includes the city’s South Asian middle class and elite), but absent from the broader consciousness. Only when migrants become suspects do they acquire hypervisibility as “your mysterious neighbors.” From this impulse come a *New Yorker* cover with an Osama bin Laden lookalike studying the subway map over the heads of dozing passengers,<sup>7</sup> and a *Village Voice* cover with another bin Laden clone looking back from a taxi driver’s seat.<sup>8</sup>

These processes of hypervisibility and “othering” are not unique to South Asian, Arab, or other (presumed “Muslim”) migrant groups, nor are they new developments after 2001. An ongoing history of demonization of immigrant groups might include racial epithets (“wop,” “dago,” “spic”); signage (“No Niggers, No Irish, No Dogs”); popular culture (corrosive anti-Semitism, especially up to World War II); the pseudo-science of racial physiognomy (a magazine feature during World War II that identified “differences” between a “Jap” as enemy and “Chink” as ally); whispering campaigns (targeting German Americans during both world wars); incarceration (Japanese American internment); public hearings (the Second Red Scare and House Un-American Activities Committee); and profiling (“driving while black”).

While there has been a continued evolution of “suspect” groups within the body politic, it is to be noted that as one minority group becomes the target population, some members of other minority groups can become cheerleaders for this new policing. Juan Williams and Michelle Malkin are two examples of people of color who are public advocates for profiling tactics. This is a familiar strain within race-divisive politics, revealed also in the fractures over affirmative action battles in California, where Asian American, Latino/a, and African American communities at times diverged, based on a calculus of what did or did not directly harm or benefit each community. At the same time, this has to be juxtaposed with the many examples of solidarity across the lines, for example, with independent black hip-hop artists, one of the voices of solidarity for scapegoated migrants.

Taking blockbuster multiplex cinema as another weathervane, we can look at the stoner-humor *Harold & Kumar* franchise for some hints of the shifting positions of Asian American identities. This is both in terms of how Asians are self-identifying (via the actors, as well as a portion of the audience), and how majority culture (i.e., the creators of the series) is repositioning ideas of racialized behavior. This is both at the level of the explicit intentions of the filmmakers and in the postscreening close reading given by cultural critics. Like Slavoj Žižek<sup>9</sup> and Camille Paglia’s<sup>10</sup> rereading of Hitchcock, much of what we excavate is not necessarily what was originally intended, but what can be projected to be other meanings at a distance of several years and intervening cultural milestones.

The *H&K* franchise started in 2004, and the third installment came out in 2011, by now within a very different political context (but not necessarily a better one). In 2004, Kumar (played by Kal Penn, who said in an interview he received 50 percent more “callbacks” after he shortened his name from Kalpen Suresh Modi) taunts the white racists who torment Asian 7-Eleven clerks. But by 2008, Kumar clashes with a black security guard, accusing him of racial profiling. Finally, by 2011, there are miscegnation quips, underlining a simplistic rendering of “Muslim(/brown) is the new black.”

*Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle* (2004)

KUMAR [MOCKING WHITE RACISTS IN HIS MOCK ASIAN “ACCENT”]:  
“Thank you, come again!”

*Harold & Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay* (2008)

LIGHT-SKINNED BLACK SECURITY GUARD: Just a random security check.  
If you can just step aside, please.  
KUMAR: Random, huh? . . . So this has nothing to do with my ethnicity?  
SECURITY: Sir, it’s our job as airport security to search for all possible weapons or illegal drugs.  
KUMAR: So just because of the color of my skin you assume that I have drugs on me? Are you a racist?  
SECURITY: Racist? Dude, I’m black!  
KUMAR: Please, dude. You’re barely even brown. Compared to me, you look like Matthew Perry.

*A Very Harold & Kumar Christmas* (2011)

BLONDE WOMAN: Do you want to see my room?  
HAROLD: Uhh . . . married. He’s single though [points at Kumar].  
KUMAR: Hi! Kumar.  
WOMAN: Sorry . . . I don’t date black guys!

We note here that Harold Lee remains mostly constant, and it is Kumar Patel whose position shifts (in the second installment, he is the reason for

the arrest, and Harold is collateral damage). This underscores the fluctuating and unstable racialization of South Asian American identities, shaped sharply by the crisis politics of the last decade. Even the passage of a few years has changed how the audience rereads these films. In 2004, the South Asian Womens Creative Collective (SAWCC) hosted a heated debate about whether to boycott the first *H&K* film. At that time, it was considered groundbreaking to have the two main leads be Asian men, within the frame of raunch, men-behaving-badly comedy (historically the province of white males, from *Porky's* to *The Hangover*) as a dramatic contrast to the usual orientalist or “peril” roles. But even so, the specter of Asian American men engaging in misogynist humor made many in the community uncomfortable. But, by the time the second installment came out, culture wars over the “dangerous immigrant” had heated up and the *Guantanamo* installment was embraced as a shot across the bow of racial profiling. The film inspired many other riffs, including, most famously, Das Racist’s song “Rainbow in the Dark,” which included the lyric: “Tried to go to Amsterdam they threw us in Guantanamo.”

By 2011, the latest installment shows some visible consternation at their easy acceptance into the mainstream. Harold is a successful banker, and the film opens with anticapitalist demonstrations in which Harold’s assistant takes the bullet (or rather the egg), going down in a hail of fire like the last urban warrior in a John Woo film. Kumar too knowingly twigs his establishment status as an official in the Obama administration (on leave of absence to finish this film), when the party crasher says, “Told them you work in the White House,” and he replies, “Yeah, like anyone is going to believe that.”

Indeed, who would imagine that pot-smoking, bong-reengineering, trash-talking Kal Penn would make it through the media screenings required for this particularly friction-averse White House administration? Perhaps he is the future Manchurian candidate. . . .

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Parsing through hypervisibility in news media, election year discourse, and TV entertainment (24, *Sleeper Cell*, and *Homeland*), Visible Collective was interested in subverting media spaces, especially advertising forms that burrow their way into public consciousness. One of the

first projects at the Queens Museum was a satire of the giant billboards for a Gap clothing campaign, featuring *Sex and the City*'s Sarah Jessica Parker. The sheer size of these billboards contrasted with everyday representations of immigrant populations: blurred micro-images seen through weathered vendor IDs, or taxi licenses lodged between scratched glass partitions. Visible's first outing in Queens inserted studio shots of migrants who had been targets of racial profiling into a larger-than-life billboard format. A slogan underneath repeated the Gap tagline: "Casual Fresh American Style."

Later, the *Really Steven?* project reappropriated Steven Meisel's unintentionally sublime 2006 fashion shoot for *Vogue Italia*. In that magazine spread, Meisel set up a tableau of waifish white models being patted down, strip-searched, pinned to the floor, and arrested by security guards at airports and riot police on the street. Our response was primarily to imagine and speculate how we would have fared going through those same checkpoints. But, again, who is that "we"? That remains the position in flux.

Finally, *When an Interpreter Could Not Be Found*, the larger piece that is excerpted in this anthology and that provides the title for this chapter, was a monthly calendar of case studies, in the form of cinema posters. The title is a variation of what is offered to immigration asylum applicants, but the motif of text on image borrowed from contemporary advertising campaigns and the 1980s cult sci-fi film *They Live* (subliminal messages revealed only when wearing "special" sunglasses, later inspiring Shephard Fairey's "Obey" graffiti). This was also the period when the collective consciously moved outside North American borders and started documenting cases in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. When the project traveled outside the United States (e.g., *Homeworks* in Beirut, *FACT* in Liverpool, *Kiasma* in Helsinki), there was subtle resistance to exploring the shared global conditions of migrants. Audiences seemed more at ease when the examples were from the American context (seen as exceptional when, in fact, increasingly, they were not). But since migrant lives and conditions are global, for us it was essential to expand conversations about hyphenated and fractured spaces of living beyond a mono-critique. There is a need to evolve our future pedagogy and organizing beyond a singular focus on conditions in one country or continent (though the United States, as



the largest recipient and host of new immigrants, will remain a global signifier). Future stages of work about migrant lives have to draw linkages between shared struggles of immigrants, especially working-class labor, across the globe.

Within the Visible Collective, there were debates about what we should work on and where to focus limited energies. These questions became channels for concerns about the impact of museum projects: What was the ripple effect? What were we accomplishing? Friction and concerns about use-value came up repeatedly in our discussions. By 2011, some members are working in spaces that are more removed from the context of cultural production. Aimara Lin, Visible member and antiwar organizer, is now in law school. Aziz Huq is a law professor at the University of Chicago. Others have also shifted energy and efforts. Conversations in visual spaces were valued by Visible for the possibility of a “butterfly wing effect”—the possibility of influencing public thought in slow, unpredictable ways and generating more open-ended conversations. But we also became increasingly aware that, in the decade after 2001, many of the positive changes in migrant lives came because of legal cases and legislative victories. Therefore, a more results-based path (law, teaching, electoral politics) has become a focus for some of our energies—taking priority, at least for now, over more ephemeral museum projects.

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*Visible Collective's members included Naeem Mohaiemen, Anandaroop Roy, Jee-Yun Ha, Donna Golden, Aimara Lin, Vivek Bald, Kristofer Dan-Bergman, J. T. Nimoy, Sehban Zaidi, Anjali Malhotra, Aziz Huq, Sarah Olson, and Ibrahim Quraishi. The collective's projects are archived at [disappearedinamerica.org](http://disappearedinamerica.org).*



DECEMBER 2002

Hundreds of Iranian men arrested in California when they come forward to comply with 'Special Registration' program which requires fingerprinting of men from Muslim countries. Three more rounds of Registration happen over next year, covering all Muslim countries, and North Korea. After national protests, the program is finally shut down.

This and all other images taken from the series *When an Interpreter Could Not Be Found* (© 2006 Visible Collective).



**APRIL 2003**

On season two of Emmy-award winning hit TV show “24”, Middle Eastern intelligence agent Yusuf Auda is beaten to death by a group of white racists. During the same season, Arab terrorist Syed Ali is shot dead. The show is criticized for its good Arab vs. bad Arab dichotomies, attracting the attention of Slavoj Zizek. “24” runs for eight seasons.



**AUGUST 2004**

**ACLU of Northern California files Freedom Of Information requests with the FBI and local Joint Terrorism Task Forces seeking documents related to the questioning of American Muslims, as well as any surveillance of political and religious activity. This follows newspaper reports of an aggressive surveillance plan focused on Muslims and mosques.**



## APRIL 2005

Death of Fred Korematsu, who sued US to challenge internment during WW II. Korematsu was arrested for refusing to go to a center where 100,000 Japanese-Americans were detained. In 1983, the US admitted wrongdoing and began reparation payments to Japanese-Americans. In 2004, Korematsu made statements condemning detention of Muslims.

**MAY 2005**

**FBI drops case against two 16-year old girls held as “suicide bombers.” Adema Bah, from Guinea, is released. Tashnuba Hyder, from Bangladesh, is deported to her native country with her parents. Part of the alleged evidence against Tashnuba was an essay she wrote in school, in which she discussed the Islamic view of suicide bombing.**



## AUGUST 2005

London police data shows 600% rise in anti-Muslim hate crimes since bombing. Police say minorities now more likely to be searched, but Home Office 2004 statistics already show Asians 1.9 times more likely to be searched. In New York, two politicians say police are “wasting time” with random checks, and Middle Easterners should be targeted.



**NOVEMBER 2005**

**Nobel laureate and University of Chicago Economics professor Gary Becker advocates racial profiling to prevent admission into US of students and skilled workers from countries like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. In an editorial for *The Wall Street Journal*, he writes, “terrorists come from a relatively small number of countries and backgrounds, unfortunately mainly of the Islamic faith.”**





DECEMBER 2005

Showtime's new series *Sleeper Cell* has four faces on posters with the tagline: "Friends. Neighbors. Husbands. Terrorists." The hero is Darwyn, a Black Muslim FBI agent infiltrating a terrorist cell. The cell members are Arabs, Bosnians and other Muslims, all with "normal" jobs, "blending into" America. Producers insist they're not "defaming" Muslims.



**APRIL 2006**

**Latino DJs join forces with activists, bringing out 500,000 protestors against HR 4437, which would criminalize illegal migrants. One protestor says, “It was my grandfather’s sweat that built the city of LA!” As freeways choke up and schools empty out, Lou Dobbs takes the other side on CNN and Minutemen vigilantes guard borders. The Senate is debating the bill and the final outcome is unclear.**



**JULY 2006**

Rumors fly that Zinedine Zidane's head-butt was in response to a racist comment by Materazzi. Although Alain Finkielkraut called the French team "black-black-black", others celebrated the "black, blanc, beur" combination as a model of integration. But by 2010, that same diversity (including Muslim convert Ribery) was being blamed for World Cup defeat.

## NOTES

1. *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart, March 28, 2006.
2. "Arshad Zakaria Appointed Merrill Lynch Co-president," *Rediff*, October 8, 2001; Fran Hawthorne, "40 under Forty," *Crain's New York*, 2002. Later Zakaria was ousted during palace intrigues against Stanley O'Neal (coincidentally the first African American CEO of a major bank at this level). The firing is detailed in Bethany McLean and Joe Nocera, *All the Devils Are Here: The Hidden History of the Financial Crisis* (reprint; New York: Penguin USA, 2011).
3. Tunku Varadarajan, "That Feeling of Being under Suspicion," *Wall Street Journal*, July 29, 2005.
4. Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), Pub. L. No. 99-603, 100 Stat. 3359, enacted November 6, 1986, also known as the Simpson-Mazzoli Act.
5. David Sells, "German Citizenship Test Causes Uproar," BBC, February 17, 2006.
6. "Q&A: The Road to UK Citizenship," BBC, February 25, 2004. Viewer comments at [news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/3078690.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/3078690.stm).
7. Edward Sorel, cover illustration for the *New Yorker*, March 3, 2002.
8. Sarah Goodyear, "I Thought My Cabbie Was a Terrorist... So I Called the FBI," *Village Voice*, September 24, 2002.
9. Slavoj Zizek, ed., *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan: But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock* (London: Verso, 1992).
10. Camille Paglia, *The Birds* (London: British Film Institute, 1998).