Memory's Homeland: Agha Shahid Ali and the Hybrid Ghazal

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Memory is no longer confused, it has a homeland—
Says Shammas: Territorialize each confusion in a graceful Arabic.
Agha Shahid Ali, "Arabic," ***Ishmael***

Writes Shammas: Memory, no longer confused, now is a homeland—
his two languages a Hebrew caress in Arabic.
Agha Shahid Ali, "In Arabic," *Ishmael*

These couplets are exiles, émigrés from a pair of ghazals where the laws of refrain hold sway: the last words of each ("Arabic" and "in Arabic," respectively) end every one of their home-poem's couplets. There, those laws are related in turn to a characteristic postcolonial thematics of cultural trauma, loss, memory, return, and cultural identity. Or, to be more precise, they embody two *stances* toward that thematics: one dominated by nostalgia and the desire for return, and one dominated by an anti-nostalgic acknowledgement of cultural hybridity. The differences between these two stances are subtly marked in the couplets. Arabic, though not one of Ali's languages, is the "mother tongue" of the ghazal; the form, as Ali points out in the Introduction to his anthology, *Ravishing DisUnities:*

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Real Ghazals in English, "goes back to seventh-century Arabia, perhaps even earlier" (1). To look back to "a graceful Arabic" as Ali does in the first couplet is thus to look back through English, through the Urdu ghazals of Faiz and Ghalib that Ali knew and translated, through the Farsi of Rumi and Hafíz, and toward the origins of the ghazal. And the retrospective territorialization attributed here to the noted Arab-Israeli novelist, Anton Shammas, reduces a hybrid oeuvre and identity—Shammas is an Israeli-born Arab Christian who writes in Hebrew, Arabic, and English—to a single component. Of course, this first couplet is not a purely "nativist" artifact: it is written in English; it advocates "return" only in language and memory; and it promises not to eliminate "confusion" but to territorialize it in "a graceful Arabic." Yet it remains strongly marked by a thematics of nostalgia and return and does not explicitly acknowledge the gaps that divide its content, form, and language. The second passage is a revision of the first (*Ravishing* 8–10), and takes up an unmistakably hybrid position. Now, Shammas's search for a homeland leads only to the interstitial territory of two of his languages while being written in the third, thereby affirming a fundamental cultural and linguistic hybridity. In the revision, then, there is a more satisfying (if paradoxical) harmony between the content of the couplet and its dual cultural allegiances (Eastern form, Western language).

Since the second couplet is a revision of the first, one might think that Ali had shifted from a largely nostalgic to an anti-nostalgic stance by the time he wrote "In Arabic."[1] But Ali's reasons for revising "Arabic" complicate such a reading. Ali writes that he "made matters much too easy for [him]self" (*Ravishing* 8–9) by omitting, in "Arabic," the rhyme-words that should appear immediately before each couplet's terminal refrain. He describes his revision as a "more honest attempt" (10) at the form, and offers a playfully polemical explanation of such "honesty":

> For a seemingly conservative, but to me increasingly a radical, reason—form for form's sake—I turned politically correct some years ago and forced myself to take back the gift outright: Those claiming to write ghazals in English (usually American poets) had got it quite wrong, far from the letter and farther from the spirit. Of course, I was exercising a Muslim snobbery, of the Shiite elan, but the ghazal floating from so many monthlies to quarterlies was nothing of the kind. And wasn't

1 "Arabic" was first collected in Ali's *The Country Without a Post Office* (1997), where it was titled "Ghazal."

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> the time ripe for stringent, formally tight disunities, not just arbitrary ones? (1)

Some ghazalists still refuse to toe the line; Lorna Crozier, at least, after describing Ali's plea as "impassioned and cranky" (*Bones in Their Wings* 62), insists that the "real ghazals" of *Ravishing DisUnities* suffer from a "predictability" and "monotony" inherent, for her, in the form itself. But what matters most is the peculiar doubleness of Ali's revisionary impulse: he transforms his original couplet's more nostalgic stance into one that affirms Shammas's hybridity, but he aligns the couplet's "letter" and "spirit" with those of the ghazal tradition. Ali questions the return to cultural origins on one level but moves still closer to them on another. This kind of doubleness repeatedly marks the ghazals of *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*; throughout the volume, the complex interplay of form and meaning articulates ambivalent and shifting stances toward the hybridity of the postcolonial and diasporic subject.[2] This article will be largely concerned, then, with how the poetics of *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* embodies those stances; more particularly, it will deal with the role of refrain in this regard; and it will explore the problematical place of nostalgia in the hybrid text. This place is made problematical in part by the tension between different theoretical approaches to nostalgia and cultural hybridity—between theories that exile nostalgia from the hybrid text (Homi Bhabha) and those that grant it a closely monitored refuge within that text (Jahan Ramazani). I want to begin by exploring in more general terms the possible functions of refrain in nativist and hybridist texts; I will then relate this theoretical background to the personal and politico-cultural motivations and circumstances that inform Ali's adoption of the ghazal; and, finally, I will turn to Ali's ghazals themselves. There, I will begin with the more overtly political poems, ones that variously straddle pre- and postcolonial cultures, native and adopted homes. I will conclude with a group of poems that deal with temporal experience in more general terms and will ask how the politics of the first group of ghazals shape the abstract concerns of the second.

First, refrain. In his essay, "Breaking into Song: Some Notes on Refrain," John Hollander mentions, but does not elaborate, a hypothetical "referential scale" (77) of refrain. Hollander locates a "purely musical" refrain at one end of this scale; here, the refrain's meaning remains unaltered

2 I join these two terms not because I see them as synonyms but because each describes a different aspect of Ali's life and work: he grew up in the Indian province of Kashmir after India's independence from England, and he pursued graduate studies and an academic career in the United States until his death in 2001. Both of these biographical details figure significantly in his poetry.

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throughout the poem, so that "each occurrence of the danced-to burden increases its redundancy, and tends to collapse it into a univocal sign" (74–75). At the other end of the scale, he posits an "optimum density of reference, in which each return accrue[s] new meaning" (Hollander 77). Hollander limits "purely musical" refrain to already senseless phrases of the "fa-la-la" variety, and Marianne Shapiro, in her excellent study of the sestina, considers "total recurrence" (10)—that is, repetition without any change in meaning—an impossibility for refrains that make actual "sense." But even if such perfect repetition were impossible, a refrain might still be marked by a *desire* for "total recurrence." When Mark Strand writes, for example, that the villanelle, with its "elaborate system of retrievals … does most to suggest recovery" of some lost object (*Weather* 126) or offers a "repudiation of forward motion, of temporality, and, finally, of dissolution" (*Weather* 126), his words seem to betray such a desire, and this desire might persist even when its necessary frustration has been acknowledged. At any rate, the effect noted at the *other* end of Hollander's scale—"optimum density of reference"—is what one encounters in most serious refrain-poems. As my comments on Shapiro indicate, critical discussions of refrain usually insist on both the logical and aesthetic necessity of such density or accrual: in "The Revival of the Villanelle," for example, Ronald E. McFarland writes that "fresh energy or varied perspective should be supplied as [refrain lines] are repeated" (179), and Joseph Conte describes how, in the pantoum, "contextual shifts also prevent any line from having a single determinate meaning" (184). It should be possible, then, to situate any given instance of refrain on a "referential scale" according to the degree of "new meaning" generated or the amount of "original meaning" restored. And one could correlate minimal semantic variation with maximal *desire* for "total recurrence," and so on.

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It may already be clear how this treatment of refrain can be mapped onto some characteristic postcolonial and diasporic concerns. Refrain-poems that seek "total recurrence" could embody—given the appropriate content—what Jahan Ramazani describes as the "postcolonial longing for an original home" (85), the "nativist quest for a unitary source" (87), and the "[r]evivalist nostalgia for an origin uncontaminated by the logic of reproduction" (84); they would suit, to borrow the words of Bruce King, the "nostalgia for a lost unified culture [that] has been a feature of Indian Islamic writing since the mid-nineteenth century" (262). Thus, the return of appropriate words would articulate a desire to return to a particular time, place, and/or culture. Such desires, of course, are regularly critiqued

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in postcolonial literature, theory, and criticism.[3] But my purpose here is neither to validate nostalgia nor condemn refrain; it is merely to indicate how refrain might articulate a certain kind of nostalgia.

Refrain, in fact, has the potential to align itself with a radically different position: a refrain's capacity to continually "accrue new meaning" (Hollander 77), to provide "fresh energy or varied perspective" (McFarland 179) permits it to embody the condition of "hybridity" or "interculturality" so central to postcolonial and diasporic theory, literature, and experience. A subject's sense of her cultural identity or "meaning" alters irrevocably when a colonizing nation imposes its culture on her and her world, and the cultural recontextualizations attendant upon willed or enforced emigration generate similar transformations. In a refrain poem, then, words and phrases are transported across boundaries, from one line or stanza to another, from one context to another. The "meaning" of a refrain always involves a complex and multidirectional hybridization of numerous forces and elements—the refrain's meaning "on its own," its meaning in relation to its present "new" context, its meaning in relation to its previous occurrence(s) and context(s), its meaning in relation to *all* its occurrences within the poem, its meaning in relation to the poem as a whole, and, potentially, in relation to other texts. A refrain-poem thus continually renews and refigures its own past, making the whole poem an "in-between" space where a refrain's meaning is never fixed or final.

But there is disagreement about the place of nostalgia in hybrid texts. Ramazani insists that "[Edward Kamau] Brathwaite's and [Derek] Walcott's skepticism" about recovering a lost, original culture in its "pure" form "should not be confused with the postmodernist renunciation of all nostalgias" (10). But for Bhabha, who conceptualizes the postcolonial through a rigorous poststructural/postmodern logic—or vice versa—the hybrid text always moves "beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities" (Bhabha 1) to produce "an iteration [of the past] that is not belated, but

3 In *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English*, Jahan Ramazani offers the following version of this argument:

> Building on Said's critique of myths of beginnings, Rashmi Bhatnagar warns that "the search for … origins" may become "for the colonized people a longing for an impossible purity and a yearning for the fullness of meaning that is not only uncritical but also politically suspect in that it can unwittingly serve the reactionary forces of revivalism. Nowhere is this danger greater than in the Indian context, where the search for the source of Hindu identity in the Vedic times has almost invariably led to a loss of commitment to our contemporary plural/secular identity." (82)

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ironic and insurgent" (227) and thus questions the purity of *all* cultures; the desire to return is thus "part of the necessity, *not the nostalgia*, of living" (7, emphasis added). Bhabha seems to assume not merely that all nostalgic tendencies will be subsumed by the disruptiveness of the properly hybrid text, but that this disruptive and disintegrative intention will always be clearly legible as such within it. Ramazani, in contrast, leaves a place for nostalgia. Yet there are some significant slippages in his discussion. Ramazani presents R.K. Ramanujan not just as a "postcolonial quester after origins … [who] nevertheless represents the cultural past as irrecuperable and unknowable in and of itself" (79) but also as a poet who, "while mocking the revivalist desire to reach beyond drafts and copies … nevertheless foregrounds the inevitable participation of his own verse in the postcolonial longing for an original home" (85). Ramazani offers a third formulation for postcolonial poets in general: they are "at once ironic and nostalgic, skeptical like Western postmodernists and recuperative like postconfessionalists and multiculturalists" (13). The differences among these statements are subtle, but they generate some important questions. Is Ramanujan primarily a hybridizing ironizer of past and present who somehow retains a minor nostalgic impulse, as though by necessity and in spite of himself? Or is he primarily a nostalgic seeker whose search remains shadowed by a secondary self-doubt? Or is his work still more sharply and equally torn between nostalgia and innovation? Here, Ramazani offers assistance when he writes of different "degrees and modalities of hybridity" that can be organized along "a continuum" (182), degrees and modalities that vary according to the different cultures involved, the nature of their historical interactions, and so on. These different degrees and modalities might also co-exist within a single postcolonial nation and within a single postcolonial text. Such is the case in Ali's ghazals.

In fact, Ali's mere decision to write ghazals needs to be understood in relation to these different modalities. An Indian Muslim raised in the repeatedly colonized (by the Moghul and British empires, to name just two) and contested Vale of Kashmir, Ali was brought up in a home where "there were three languages, Urdu, Kashmiri and English, spoken … all the time" (Benvenuto 262); he received an "Irish Catholic" education" (Benvenuto 262) before attending a boarding school in the United States and then entering Indian and American universities; and he finally made his home in Amherst, Massachusetts (the dust jacket of *Rooms Are Never Finished* identifies him as a "Kashmiri-American poet"). As a self-described "bilingual, bicultural (but never rootless) being" (*Rebel's* 77), he epitomizes what Neerja Mattoo calls "the multi-cultural richness we knew as 'Kashmiriyat'"

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(176),[4] as well as many significant aspects of the South Asian diasporic experience—a common combination, though one whose distinct elements should not be conflated. For Ali, this background has "led not to confusion, but to a strange, arresting clarity" ("*Rebel's*" 77), and it has offered him "a chance to do certain things for the first time with the English language" (Benvenuto 267). It is thus significant that Ali's plea for orthodoxy in ghazal composition is written in English, and that it promotes the composition of "orthodox" *English* ghazals. Such poems would be hybrids, like Ali's own English ghazals, acts of cultural translation that could unsettle the most deeply embedded assumptions of Western aesthetics and culture, as well as those of the ghazal tradition. According to Ali, ghazals possess the former potential because their refrains create a purely formal or even merely verbal unity among couplets that are otherwise self-contained and discrete. This "blend of 'unity and autonomy'" ("Introduction" 12) can only seem "paradoxical to many Westerners" and may "bewilder, even irritate, those who swear by neo-Aristotelianism and New Criticism" (*Ravishing* 6); but the ghazalist who manages to "resist the Western insistence on unity" ("*Rebel's*" 76) will "find herself tantalizingly liberated, surprising herself with unusual discoveries" (*Ravishing* 12).[5] Ali's return to origins, then, stops at a strangely doubled half-way mark, a space where East is Westernized and West Easternized. One could situate the poems' allusiveness in relation to both these modes of hybridity. Many of Ali's ghazals end with a dedication to one or another of his fellow American poets and incorporate quotations (often as refrains) from that writer's works. The quietly luminous "Shines," for example, takes its refrain from a poem by Mark Strand and alludes to at least another half-dozen of Strand's poems. Such intertextual hybridization recontextualizes both the ghazal tradition and the poetry of Ali's American contemporaries.

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As a writer with a "dual loyalty" to "two cultures, both of which [he feels] in [his] bones" ("*Rebel's*" 85) Ali thus follows a particularly complex (and physically impossible) trajectory in his journey toward the English ghazal, approaching its hybrid, in-between territory simultaneously from "West" and "East." The opening salvo of *Ravishing DisUnities* might best

4 The overall tenor of Mattoo's discussion suggests that "multi-cultural" signifies for her something nearer to the complex mixedness of hybridity than to the nostalgic attempt to recapture pre-diasporic traditions usually associated with "multiculturalism."

5 Discussions of the ghazal regularly emphasize these aspects of the form. See, for example, Russell 287–90; Sadiq 18–19; Matthews and Shackle 8–10; Ahmed Ali 8–12. Agha Shahid Ali's emphasis comes closest to that of Ahmed Ali in allowing more room for a limited unity of tone in a ghazal.

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be read as an argument for an irreducibly mixed cultural and aesthetic practice. Yet I do not want this last statement to erase my reading of the nostalgia in my first epigraph. The idea of "return" still matters, since "return" is what refrains do and since the composition of ghazals involves so many other kinds of return for Ali. The *desire* to return still matters, even if it is not wholly fulfilled, even if the speaker knows from that start that it cannot be fulfilled. Ali's poetry is regularly marked by an intense *desire* to return, and in interviews Ali admits that he "ache[s] for Kashmir" (Benvenuto 266) and seeks in his poetry to recapture "the ecstatic mode in the traditions he grew up with" (Benvenuto 265). The doubleness of his poetry stems from a conflict between two equally real and equally powerful and independent forces.

Of course, the issues of "total recurrence" and "optimum density of reference" are greatly complicated by the autonomy of the ghazal's individual couplets. In a ghazal, "one couplet may be comic, another tragic, another romantic, another religious, another political" ("Introduction" 2); the form thus tends to maximize the production of "new meaning" in each occurrence of a refrain. One might even wonder whether or not it makes sense to measure the ghazal's effects on a scale proposed for Western refrain forms. If one of a ghazal's couplets "may be quoted by itself without in any way violating a context[, since] there is no context" (2), and if a ghazal would "suffer by [neither] a rearrangement" nor a "delet[ion of] some of its couplets" (Introduction 6), then it is difficult to know just *how* to talk about changes of context and meaning in this form, or even whether it is appropriate to do so. And yet Ali suggests that the kinds of patterns that interest me are already there in the ghazal tradition: part of the ghazal's "cultural unity" lies in its manipulation of "association and memory and expectation" (Introduction 2), which must rely to some extent on refrain, and he cites Ahmed Ali's claim, in *The Golden Tradition*, that "atmospheric and emotional cohesion and refinement of diction hold the poem together" (*Golden* 12). And, as I will shortly demonstrate, many of Ali's more politically charged refrains nudge the form ever so slightly toward a more "Western" kind of thematic unity. But it is a rather conventional simile for the ghazal that gives me most courage. Attempting to explain the autonomy of the ghazal's couplets, Ali insists that "one should at any time be able to pluck a couplet like a stone from a necklace, and it should continue to shine in that vivid isolation, though it would have a different lustre among and with the other stones" (Introduction 2–3). This statement seems to license an investigation of the "different lustre" that a ghazal's couplets acquire in context, and of how refrain contributes to that lustre.

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The "different lustre" that interests me may show itself more brightly and distinctly against a contrasting background. As background, then, here is an assortment of couplets, culled from six different ghazals:

> At an exhibition of Mughal miniatures, such delicate
> calligraphy:
> Kashmiri paisleys tied into the golden hair of Arabic.
> (*Ishmael* 24)

> By the Hudson lies Kashmir, brought from Palestine—
> It shawls the piano, Bach beguiled by exiles. (28)

> Dying to be cast in saffron plaster—the Brahmin's!—
> a soul (they mean the Untouchable's?) in transit shines?
> (38)

> Hagar, in shards, reflects her shattered Ishmael.
> Call her the desert Muslim—or Jew—of water. (46)

> Go all the way through *jungle* from *aleph* to *zenith*
> to see English, like monkeys, swung beyond English. (68)

> Must we always cook with heartless substitutes?
> Caraway for cumin *and* cloves? And lime for thyme? (73)

> They ask me to tell them what *Shahid* means: Listen, listen:
> It means "The Beloved" in Persian, "witness" in Arabic.
> (81)

Obviously, this is no random sampling: it is organized around some closely related thematic concerns (exile, diaspora, loss, nostalgia, and cultural hybridity), as well as some shared stylistic features. My ultimate purpose is to make a point about the function of refrain in ghazals, but I will first provide a quick account of the stylistic and especially the thematic elements that give a certain unity to my collage. Many of these couplets make their point through complex wordplay and literary and cultural allusion (a ghazal characteristic). In the fourth couplet ("Hagar"), for example, Ali refers to the Islamic tradition that gives "primacy" to Ishmael, rather than

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Isaac, among Abraham's children, since the former is "Father of the Arab nation" (*Rooms* 105). Yet the origin here is already a copy, a reflection, and it is double and divided, hybrid or impure, since the figures of Hagar and Ishmael are claimed by both Judaism *and* Islam (not to mention Christianity). This originary hybridity further divides the "shattered" reflection of Ishmael, who may function not just as a specific historical/scriptural figure but as a symbol of the contemporary Arab and Islamic worlds. If there is division and multiplicity today, it is because the origin itself was never pure. Similarly, "Dying" locates value in the space of transition, rather than either of the "states"—Brahmin or Untouchable—that lie at the two extremes of the Hindu caste system. The Muslim Ali's reliance on Hindu theology indicates, too, just how thoroughly these two religions are intertwined within the hybrid mix of "Kashmiriyat." In the fifth couplet ("Go all the way"), Ali's etymological wordplay reminds us that the jungle of English itself has been invaded and hybridized by foreign seeds—by words of Hindi derivation ("*jungle*"), as well as Hebrew/Phoenician ("*aleph*") and Arabic ("*zenith*"). And "By the Hudson," for all its concern with multiple displacements—the shawl in question has traveled from Kashmir to America by way of Palestine—emphasizes the capacity of the exilic artifact to unsettle the great monuments of European culture, if only slightly: when Eastern and Western arts meet, the former covers and "beguiles" the latter. Finally, the sixth couplet, which concludes "In Arabic," offers a particularly dense and witty instance of the intercultural play of form, meaning, and language. Ali remains faithful to the ghazal tradition by including his *takhallus*, or pen-name, in this poem's concluding couplet, thereby returning again to cultural origins, keeping things "pure." Yet in so doing, Ali reveals his own origin to be anything but pure: his name is divided, possessed of two different meanings in two different languages, neither of which Ali himself speaks (though they are two of the languages in which ghazals have most often been spoken). This doubleness is further complicated by the fact that Ali gives his name's "meaning"—a word he must mean ironically—only by translating it into English. Here, questions of cultural translation come into play, since "Belovéd" has a very particular significance within the ghazal tradition. In fact, Ali takes a certain liberty with that tradition in identifying *himself* as the "Belovéd": it is never the Belovéd, but only the lover who speaks in a ghazal. How much of this cultural context is captured by "Shahid"'s English "meaning"?

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The preceding paragraph, I hope, fulfills a threefold purpose. First, it identifies some of the stylistic characteristics of the ghazal couplet and of Ali's ghazals in particular—finesse, epigrammatic compression, ellipti-

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cal thinking, literary and cultural allusiveness, wordplay, wit, and so on. Second, it shows how Ali politicizes the content of the ghazal in relation to his own experiences with colonialism, postcolonialism, and emigration. Ali occupies and articulates the complex, historically determined, multiply hybridized, and always already impure "present" of the postcolonial subject and of the diasporic subject, a present in which "then" and "now," original and imposed (or adopted) cultures intersect in new and complex ways.

Third, and most significant, the preceding analysis helps me to make my long-delayed "point about refrain." As I shall demonstrate, each of Ali's complete ghazals is less consistent than the collation in theme, tone, and, above all, in "degree and modalit[y] of hybridity" (Ramazani 182), but the couplets within each ghazal *do* share a refrain. The contrast between thematic coherence *without* refrain and thematic variety *with* refrain may thus clarify the different effect generated by the refrains in their original contexts. Here at last, then, is a complete ghazal—"By Exiles," whose fifth couplet was included in the preceding sampling:

In Jerusalem a dead phone's dialed by exiles.
You learn your strange fate: you were exiled by exiles.

You open the heart to list unborn galaxies.
Don't shut that folder when Earth is filed by exiles.

Before Night passes over the wheat of Egypt,
let stones be leavened, the bread torn wild by exiles.

Crucified Mansoor was alone with the Alone:
God's loneliness—just His—compiled by exiles.

By the Hudson lies Kashmir, brought from Palestine—
It shawls the piano, Bach beguiled by exiles.

Tell me who's tonight the Physician of Sick Pearls?
Only you as you sit, Desert child, by exiles.

Match Majnoon (he kneels to pray on a wine-stained rug)
or prayer will be nothing, distempered mild by exiles.

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"Even things that are true can be proved." Even they?
Swear not by Art but, dear Oscar Wilde, by exiles.

Don't weep, we'll drown out the Calls to Prayer, O Saqi—
I'll raise my glass before wine is defiled by exiles.

Was—after the last sky—this the fashion of fire:
autumn's mist pressed to ashes styled by exiles?

If my enemy's alone and his arms are empty,
give him my heart silk-wrapped like a child by exiles.

Will you, Beloved Stranger, ever witness Shahid—
two destinies at last reconciled by exiles? (*Ishmael* 28–29)

Like all the ghazals in *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*, this poem bears a dedication—in this case, "For Edward Said," and, as David Caplan notes, it owes a significant verbal and thematic debt to the following passage from Said's essay, "The Mind of Winter: Reflections on Life in Exile": "The most poignant of exile's fates is to be exiled by exiles, and to be condemned, seemingly without respite, to continue to be exiled by exiles" (cited in Caplan, 55). Clearly, the only thing that returns in Ali's ghazal is the fact of exile, loss, and displacement. To define oneself as an "exile" is to situate oneself in relation to a home where one is *not* and a *not*-home where one is—one's location becomes the place of a double absence, a compound not-here-not-there. In this regard, the operation of refrain might tend to heighten the sense of loss and displacement, not simply because the repetitions can create a sort of cumulative intensification, but because the refrain itself seems to be continually displaced or "exiled" from one stanza to another; it has so many homes that it is never quite "at home."[6] But if one were to consider the disjunctions among the individual couplets in a more positive light—as the marks, say, of a desire for novelty, change, or variety—then the refrains might take on a quite different charge; they might seem to return like a traumatic memory of irrecoverable loss; they might exert a melancholic pull toward the past that disrupts the movement into new territories. The tense interweaving of technique and meaning created by Ali's choice of refrain, then, seems open to quite contradictory readings: a desire for return is compromised by the fact of loss and

6 David Caplan's chapter on the ghazal in *Questions of Possibility: Contemporary Poetry and Poetic Form*—a book that appeared after I completed my own essay—makes a similar point about this poem. Caplan notes that "Ali's handling of the ghazal form marks the wide dispersions that exile performs" (56). He observes,

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the necessity of change; a desire for novelty is haunted by the traumatic memory of loss and of what has been lost. Or perhaps two desires conflict here as forward-looking and retrospective impulses interact in a complex, multidirectional array.

A closer look at some of the poem's individual couplets may not resolve these problems, but it may reveal just how the refrains' different meanings work against unity; it may also provide a fuller sense of how the *form* of the ghazal signifies as a whole, how it articulates the interstitial or "in-between" space of cultural hybridity. In both these regards, what matters most about the first couplet is that its stance toward "exile" does *not* dominate the rest of the poem. A "dead telephone" and the inability to communicate with one's homeland drive home the pain of actual exile; as a result, the irony of the couplet's concluding line—opening, as it does, a possible infinite regress of displacement—still retains an unmistakably elegiac undertone. There is, in other words, a precarious balance between the couplet's mournful, nostalgic tone and its acknowledgement of displacement's ubiquity. There may be some sense, too, that those who do not acknowledge the history of enforced displacement and its effects on others may only prolong that history: in this couplet, at least, exiles do to others what has already been done to them. Can one claim one's home without usurping another's? Would a willingness to live in the in-between spaces of geographical and cultural displacement be a way of ending such a history? Jerusalem is a particularly loaded context in which to pose such questions. In contrast, couplets two to four appear to abandon such historically specific concerns and treat displacement and nostalgia as though they were metaphysical givens, ineluctable components of existence. In "Don't weep …" the speaker's overtly anti-nostalgic words are only partly undermined by his own reliance on traditional ghazal elements (the Saqi or wine bearer, and so on). In comparison with both of these sections, the fifth couplet ("By the Hudson …") engages more fully with the disruptive possibilities of the hybrid position; if the first couplet focuses on what is lost in exile, and does so to raise questions about cultural nostalgias, then the fifth makes a subtle but more positive claim for the small gains that come with recontextualization. The penultimate couplet offers maximal nostalgia, yet the poem's conclusion capitalizes again on the cultural mixedness of Ali's own name. What emerges here, to return to Ramazani's

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too, that a "counterforce" and a series of "contradictions" emerge in "By Exiles," though he locates these in the poem's creation of a "community of exiles," rather than in the tensions between nativist nostalgia and hybridist innovation.

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terms, are several different "degrees and modalities of hybridity," unified but also made distinctive by the repetition/recontextualization of a single phrase. In fact, the fifth couplet is an especially intriguing instance of the small gains of recontextualization: its particular force, its "different lustre" in context results from the way its refrain enters the couplet as an exile from elsewhere to find itself remade, resignified, revivified, so that the new force thus given to "by exiles" embodies the beguiling power of the exiled shawl. Some of this effect is due to the strange conjunction of contradictory forces or tendencies that make it so difficult to place the ghazal form in relation to Western refrain-forms—that is, the way the frequency of the refrains produces an effect of sameness (the "monotony" of which Crozier complains), while the autonomy of the couplets maximizes the generation of new meaning. Without an overarching narrative or logical/meditative framework, the ghazal presents a strange, non-accruing yet interconnected variety, a range of stances that do not add up to a single "meaning" or whose refusal to do so differs from the kind of refusals encountered in more conventional lyric poems. It is like a nonsensical mathematical equation involving incommensurable measures—one hour plus three quarts plus two pounds plus twenty kilometres equals, well, one hour plus three quarts plus two pounds plus twenty kilometres. Yet if no single couplet can be granted any thematic privilege, that absence of privilege itself provides a meaningful, governing ethos to the ghazal as a whole.

In fact, Ali seems determined to capitalize on all of these factors, and on that absence in particular, in composing a ghazal whose unifying element is the refrain "by exiles": it is not any one of the couplets that tells us the meaning of exile, but the whole poem as a system of differences and displacements, of shifts in significance and changes of context, of identity in difference and difference in identity. To be in exile is to be subject to such shifts in cultural identity, significance, and signifying capacity; it is to find that meaning is context and context always changing. Of course, one could look at the poem from a different perspective—not in terms of a refrain that keeps moving from context to context but in terms of a context or text that keeps returning to the same phrase, continually reoccupying the same point of displacement and loss only to find that these experiences themselves are continually displaced, always caught up in the instability of interstitial existence. Viewed in this light, the poem's refrains seem even more ambivalent: just how strong is the desire for return, for "total recurrence"? How strong is the desire for change and resignification? What is the precise balance or relationship between these contradictory forces, and how might that balance be determined? These questions need

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to be applied not just to the formal properties of the ghazal but to its always varying stances towards exile, displacement, cultural authenticity, and cultural hybridity, its different "degrees and modalities of hybridity." The ghazal asks that all these modalities be granted equal weight, with no one subsumed under another. If it were possible to define the ghazal's own overarching "degree or modalit[y] of hybridity," it would paradoxically be a mode of maximum hybridity that gives free and equal play to all such modes—including those that strain against hybridity itself. This situation suggests, too, the difficulties involved in establishing clear-cut boundaries between nostalgic nativism and critical or ironic hybridism.

The ghazal asks that all these modalities be granted equal weight, with no one subsumed under another.

I began this essay by discussing the significance of the refrain-word "Arabic" in a single couplet, but I did not consider the range of implications this word acquires from its repetition in that ghazal. "Arabic," it will be remembered, is not a "pure" ghazal, since it foregoes the rhyme that should precede each refrain. But given the historical significance of Arabic as the mother tongue of the ghazal and of the Islamic religion, "Arabic" seems capable of two related effects as a refrain: it could be in harmony with the desire for return inscribed in a ghazal's repetitions, and, in functioning thus, it could concomitantly strain against the continual recontextualization and resignification that are inseparable from refrain. Yet for Ali, Arabic remains a foreign language, a mark of the hybridity of his own heritage. The reader, then, faces a number of complex questions about a text that keeps returning to a cultural origin only to find that it cannot really return—or a text that keeps turning to new contexts only to find itself returning to its own past. Here are the first, second, eighth through eleventh, and thirteenth of "Arabic"'s thirteen couplets; they give some sense of the range of implications this word acquires over the course of the poem and of the different force acquired by my first epigraph in their company:

> The only language of loss left in the world is Arabic—
> These words were said to me in a language not Arabic.
>
> Ancestors, you've left me a plot in the family graveyard—
> Why must I look, in your eyes, for prayers in Arabic?
>
> The Koran prophesied a fire of men and stones.
> Well, it's all now come true, as it was said in the Arabic.
>
> When Lorca died, they left the balcony open and saw:
> his *qasidas* braided, on the horizon, into knots of Arabic.

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Memory is no longer confused, it has a homeland—
Says Shammas: Territorialize each confusion in a graceful Arabic.

Where there were homes in Deir Yassein, you'll see dense forests—
That village was raised. There's no sign of Arabic.

They ask me to tell them what Shahid means—
Listen: it means "The Belovéd" in Persian, "witness" in Arabic. (*Ishmael* 24–25)

In context, "Memory is no longer confused" becomes part of a fragmentary mini-sequence concerned in different ways with cultural memory, cultural erasure, and loss. Couplet eight ("The Koran") might refer to Iraq, Afghanistan, the Balkans, or Ali's own Kashmir; what matters most is that it reads contemporary history through a specifically Islamic interpretive framework—itself a profoundly traditional gesture, and one that offers a counterweight, on a purely cultural level, to the destruction and erasure being carried out in the actual world. The eleventh couplet ("Where there were homes") provides a more historically specific "subject rhyme" to the eighth (to borrow Pound's term); in referring to the controversial 1948 Israeli attack/massacre at Deir Yassein (opinions differ widely as to what actually happened there), Ali refuses to permit this act of physical erasure to be erased from the cultural sphere. The mere persistence of the refrain of "Arabic" thus operates here against violent erasure and enforced amnesia, and, in this context, the tenth couplet ("Memory") could seem to thematize the possibility of such reclamation on a limited, interiorized level, while again *enacting* that possibility through the mere formal fact of refrain. And the preceding couplet seems consistent with this perspective: it again offers a vision of return, with Lorca's Spanish adaptation of another ancient Arabic poetic form—the sequence of monorhyme couplets known as a *qasida*—somehow returning to the form's "native" language after the poet's death. These couplets, then, are strongly marked by an elegiac and nostalgic stance, turning thematically toward lost historical and cultural origins in order to name, remember, preserve. They would be graphed as a quite closely grouped set of points on a continuum scale of hybridities and could be conceived of as articulating a desire to return to the refrain of "Arabic" with the lowest degree of semantic variation attainable in a ghazal.

Yet Ali's fragmentary mini-sequence, or mini-sequence of fragments, is book-ended by couplets that remain far more skeptical about the idea

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of "return" and thus articulate a quite different relationship between the fact of refrain and the content of the refrain, as well as some different degrees and modalities of hybridity. I have already discussed the complexities of Ali's revised version of the poem's final couplet (the minor formal differences between the two have no real semantic force). But the second couplet ("Ancestors") takes up a much more combative stance toward the speaker's inherited cultural and religious traditions, and in the first the elegiac stance of the first line is immediately and ironically undercut by the second's acknowledgement of cultural-linguistic difference and distance—it follows a trajectory more or less the opposite of the one taken by Lorca's *qasidas*. And, of course, that irony doubles back on the couplet itself, since it is in English. The irony has the potential, too, to double back on all of the refrain's occurrences, even those in the most overtly nostalgic couplets—after all, these couplets only name "Arabic" in a language that is not Arabic. For all the apparent nostalgia inscribed in the returns of and to "Arabic," the poem contains a powerful counter-nostalgic force that reminds its readers that the significance of "Arabic" depends on its context. The refrain suggests how the language keeps taking on new significances according to its cultural context; it is always caught up in the restless movement of intercultural translation, always located in a strange interstitial territory *between* cultures, as is Ali's ghazal itself. Yet this is not quite the same territory as the one Ali occupies in "By Exiles." Due to "Arabic"'s cultural specificity, the ghazal's peculiar combination of difference and repetition takes on a quite different range of resonances, a different and perhaps more openly conflicted or dissonant counterpoint among modalities of hybridity.

This variety is characteristic of the couplets within each ghazal, and each ghazal taken as a whole differs strongly from its companions in the volume. Not all of the ghazals in the collection share the overarching concern with postcolonial and diasporic experience that marks "By Exiles" and "Arabic," and even the ghazals that take up this concern do so in quite different ways. The differences between my two epigraphs, for example, prove characteristic of the general differences between "Arabic" and "In Arabic." But as is indicated by my discussion of the more openly hybrid and anti-nativist of "Arabic"'s couplets, there is no stark or straightforward contrast between the two poems. While a sense of loss and nostalgic desire operates in some of "In Arabic"'s formally authentic couplets, many others articulate a tension between the poem's formal authenticity and its non-elegiac modality. This different balance of hybrid modalities means, too, that the nearly identical final couplets of these two poems (they differ

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only in the revised couplet's use of penultimate rhyme) have quite different forces in their individual contexts—that is, this couplet's anti-nostalgic stance differs from the majority of "Arabic"'s other couplets but has a more harmonious relationship to the more consistently (though not entirely) anti-nostalgic couplets of "In Arabic." These last considerations, I hope, will not seem to contradict my earlier claims about the ghazal's refusal to grant thematic privilege to any one of its couplets, nor clash with my sense that a ghazal's couplets do not "add up" in the way of conventional Western lyrics. My point here is that the differences among individual couplets may, as a system, generate different overall effects in various ghazals, according to the way each manipulates the play of form and content.

To return to "*jung*" and "*bhung*" is to say something that cannot be said in English, to recapture something of a home culture situated "beyond English" ...

"Beyond English," to offer another example, is consistently wittier and more ironic in its articulation of the hybrid position and approaches it from the other side of the East/West boundary (as its title/refrain suggests). What returns and dominates here is the former colonizer's language, yet that language is being shaped to fit the "foreign" form of the ghazal. Ironically enough, the laws of the ghazal dictate that the poem never move beyond "beyond English." Of course, it may not want to; it may accept and celebrate the innovative and sometimes critical play made possible by the hybrid position. I have already suggested how this ghazal's fifth couplet ("Go all the way through *jungle*") playfully articulates English's own hybridity, and the poem elsewhere incorporates italicized non-English words—"*jung*" ("war" [*Ishmael* 68, 69]), "*bhung*" ("hemp" or "hashish" [*Ishmael* 68])—to make points about linguistic and cultural incommensurability, to resituate English's own verbal and conceptual field in relationship to a wider interlinguistic and intercultural territory, thereby revealing the lacks and absences within English. To return to "*jung*" and "*bhung*" is to say something that cannot be said in English, to recapture something of a home culture situated "beyond English"; it is to foreground those elements of South Asian language, thought, and culture that resist translation or assimilation. These considerations help clarify the stance of that poem's opening couplet, which offers a frank questioning of either the nativist desire to move "beyond English" or the humanist desire for an ideal universal language (or both): "No language is old—or young—beyond English. / So what of a common tongue beyond English?" (*Ishmael* 68). Regardless of how one frames this couplet, it bespeaks a willingness to work with English's current place in the world, since all other languages possess the same kinds of historical limitations. The overall effect, however, still differs from that of "Arabic." To place a word like "Arabic" within the play of refrain is to situate a nostalgia for a distant origin in relation to

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a critique of origins; to contextualize "English" in this way is to critically unsettle the apparent unity and power of a colonizing culture.

I have argued throughout this article that Ali's ghazals articulate a radically divided stance toward nativist nostalgia and hybridist innovation, thereby leaving a real but problematical place for nostalgia in the hybrid text. But the less politically inclined ghazals in *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* introduce an additional complication, particularly when they are marked by a more general or even metaphysical sense of dislocation. Just as the couplets within "Arabic" keep recontextualizing "Arabic," the less political ghazals further recontextualize the ones I have discussed thus far, so that the basic principle of ghazal construction seems writ large in the relationships among ghazals. It thus seems necessary to move beyond the purely formal question of the relationships among autonomous couplets within a ghazal and to ask whether or not in Ali's poetry a more general and sometimes metaphysical sense of dislocation precedes and informs his treatment of more historically specific concerns or, conversely, whether or not the more metaphysical couplets represent extrapolations from or extensions of a more basic and immediate lived experience of cultural dislocation. There is, of course, a third possibility—namely, that this difference involves a non-hierarchical shift to a more abstract discursive space, one that exists alongside the more overtly politicized ghazals but can neither subsume them nor be subsumed by them.

"In Real Time" seems to support the first of these three readings. Here is the poem in its entirety:

> I'll do what I must if I'm bold in real time.
> A refugee, I'll be paroled in real time.
>
> Cool evidence clawed off like shirts of hellfire?
> A former existence untold in real time…
>
> The one you would choose: were you lead then by him?
> What longing, *O Yaar*, is controlled in real time?
>
> Each syllable sucked under waves of our earth—
> The funeral love comes to hold in real time!
>
> They left him alive so that he could be lonely—
> The god of small things is not consoled in real time.

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Please afterwards empty my pockets of keys—
It's hell in the city of gold in real time.

God's angels again are—for Satan!—forlorn.
Salvation was bought but sin sold in real time.

And who is the terrorist, who the victim?
We'll know if the country is polled in real time.

"Behind a door marked DANGER" are being unwound
the prayers my friend had enscrolled in real time.

The throat of the rearview and sliding down it
the Street of Farewell's now unrolled in real time.

I heard the incessant dissolving of silk—
I felt my heart growing so old in real time.

Her heart must be ash where her body lies burned.
What hope lets your hands rake the cold in real time?

Now Friend, the Beloved has stolen your words—
Read slowly: the plot will unfold in real time.
(*Ishmael* 32–33)

The majority of these couplets (the second through fifth, the seventh, and the ninth to eleventh) associate "real time" with change, loss, and imperfection. These concerns are compounded and complicated by the poem's form: it keeps returning to its own past, but it does so only to register new losses and to name the medium—real time—whose unfolding is implicated in all loss. Thus the poem constantly repeats a double turn toward relinquishment and recovery. This doubleness, perhaps, is what the poem as a whole articulates: to be in real time (and in "In Real Time") is to find repetition and recovery in the midst of difference and loss, and vice versa. It is also to adopt a wide range of often ambivalent stances toward this situation and toward the interpenetration of past, present, and future "in real time": some couplets speak of resistance to the past's resurgence (second couplet); some portray a melancholic fixation on loss (fifth and seventh couplets); another depicts a desperate attempt to recover the lost object (twelfth couplet); the final stanza playfully mixes old and new texts, source and tributary.[7] The mix of attitudes and affective registers seems

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similar to that of "By Exiles" and other more explicitly political poems. But the theological concerns of the second, fifth, and seventh couplets implicitly place everything on a metaphysical and ahistorical level, and the elegiac note struck by the fourth, tenth, and twelfth couplets—the latter, I assume, deals with Ali's deceased mother—reminds us of the inevitability of change and loss, as, in a different way, does the self-elegiac eleventh couplet. Thus these losses come to seem like ineluctable components of temporal existence. From this poem's perspective, the more explicitly political concerns of the first couplet's "refugee" and of such poems as "By Exiles" seem a mere subset of a larger issue—namely, the inevitable, all-altering and all-hybridizing effects of time.

Yet two other ghazals with temporally-themed refrains—"From the Start" and "Tonight"—might be interpreted to show that historico-cultural experience is primary for Ali. The following lines from the first of these poems indicates its general tenor: "The Beloved will leave you behind from the start" (*Ishmael* 42); "Only our sins must be enshrined from the start" (42); "the spirit, they say, is confined from the start" (42); "God longs for the lover [i.e., Satan] He undermined from the start" (43); "To what else should we be resigned from the start?" (43). This ghazal repeatedly affirms that all things begin in a state of imperfection, compromise, mixedness, error, and so on. That recognition informs the wittily antithetical position imposed on Ali's refrain—"from the start," that is, always comes at the end. In every sense, then, beginnings are never pure. More importantly, the deliberate cultural mixedness of these lines—they keep importing Islamic tradition and ghazal convention into English—suggests that it is the cultural and political specificity of Ali's postcolonial and diasporic experience that informs his more general, metaphysical sense of dislocation and hybridity. Similarly, in "Tonight," the present moment is almost always a moment of change, of loss, of hybrid self-dividedness and complexity, as the following two couplets (the first and seventh) indicate:

> Where are you now? Who lies beneath your spell tonight?
> Whom else from rapture's road will you expel tonight?
>
> He's freed some fire from ice in pity for Heaven.
> He's left open—for God—the doors of Hell tonight.
> (*Ishmael* 82)

7 Ali dedicated this poem to Daniel Hall; its refrain comes from Hall's "Mangosteen," whose speaker claims to have "been reading *The Spoils / of Poynton*, so slowly the plot seemed to unfold / in real time" (64).

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The first couplet seems a fairly straightforward example of the ghazal's traditional poetics of longing. The seventh is more ambivalent: Ali returns to Islamic tradition for his subject matter but suggests that power resides with the fallen, the exile, the hybrid, the impure, not with the "pure" or the native. Ali returns to tradition, faith, and metaphysics in order to undermine all three, or to remake them in his own hybrid image. And the power of the hybrid and of the particulars of intercultural existence constantly impinge upon the poem's refrain: "tonight" is the time when "*Only* [Hindu idols] *can convert the infidel*" (*Ishmael* 82), when a ghazal couplet (the second) fills up with quotations from Dickinson, and when one speaker becomes "a refugee from Belief" (82) and another decides to "bless Jezebel" (83). In fact, similar claims could be made about "In Real Time," which often articulates its concern with loss by returning to elements drawn from the Kashmiriyat mix. In these couplets, then, and in all of these last three ghazals, the constant recontextualization of an otherwise innocuous temporal marker within such culturally loaded surroundings emblematizes the shaping force with which Ali's politics acts upon his more metaphysical concerns.

Ali returns to Islamic tradition for his subject matter but suggests that power resides with the fallen, the exile, the hybrid, the impure, not with the "pure" or the native.

I am not sure, however, that the preceding paragraph should supplant my initial approach to this issue. The essay would at least be more consistent if it took a "third way" here, if it suggested that Ali's poetry adopts a divided stance toward all nostalgias and does so without privileging one *kind* over another. Such a reading might also be more faithful to the spirit of Ali's poetry. After all, the same elements interact throughout Ali's *The Country Without a Post Office*, a volume dominated by the political and religious violence that plagued Kashmir in the 1980s and 1990s, and these concerns are further intertwined with the work of personal mourning in *Rooms Are Never Finished*, whose poems deal largely with the illness and death of Ali's mother. There are a good many more of Ali's ghazals to discuss, too, ghazals that demonstrate the same overarching concerns analyzed above, even when the refrain/titles might not immediately suggest such an effect: "Angels," "Of Light," and "In Marble" spring immediately to mind. And I have deliberately not included Ali's experiments with the villanelle, sestina, and canzone in this study, since the ghazal's historical, cultural, and aesthetic specificity are all quite distinct from those of such European refrain forms and require considerable space for sufficient exposition. But one key difference between Ali's ghazals and his European refrain-poems is worth mentioning here: Ali permits himself far more lexical and semantic variation in the latter (changing, for example, the refrain word "road" to "rowed" and "erode" over the course of a sestina [*Country*

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52–53]). The overall impression is of a desire to maximize the effects of recontextualization, to make the refrain words generate the greatest possible degree of hybrid variability while obeying the laws of refrain. Such variations would seem unnecessary in the ghazal, since the autonomy of the individual couplets already maximizes the effects of recontextualization. They might even be undesirable, at least if Ali also wants us to feel fully the force of the refrain's *return* in such a constantly varying context. If, in Ali's hands, the ghazal becomes "memory's homeland," it remains a divided territory, a place where the forces of retrospection and innovation engage in an unsettled, unsettling, and strangely productive confrontation.

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