Introduction

Since the events of September 11, 2001, the intensified concern with national security and the U.S.-led global War on Terror has led to a preoccupation with monitoring, policing, and regulating the political affiliations and engagement of Muslim American and Middle Eastern communities. Under the PATRIOT Act and with the expanded powers given to law enforcement and intelligence agencies to hunt down potential terrorists and “preempt” terrorism, Arab, South Asian (particularly Pakistani), Afghan, Iranian, and Muslim Americans in general have been subjected to surveillance as well as detention and deportation. Youth from these communities who are defined as objects of the domestic as well as global War on Terror have come of age in a moment when the question of political engagement for Muslim youth is extremely pressing but also incredibly fraught.

This book uses ethnographic research to explore the forms that politics takes for South Asian, Arab, and Afghan American youth in Silicon Valley, addressing the overarching question: how is “politics” defined and what forms of politics are viewed as important, effective, and desirable by this generation of youth, the so-called 9/11 generation? And what happens when we decouple “9/11” as a signifier of identification from this generational category to understand the range of political critiques and shifting identifications among South Asian, Arab, and Afghan American youth? The 9/11 generation, of course, includes not only Muslim and Middle Eastern Americans but also young people from other communities who have entered adolescence since 9/11 and have been deeply shaped by the aftermath of this historical event; but it is Muslim and Middle Eastern American youth who have been construed as objects of the War on Terror and so especially impacted by the shifts in national culture.

The U.S.-led War on Terror is now a globalized regime of biopolitics, or regulating and managing populations, from Lackawanna and Lodi to London and Lahore. Youth politics is a central target of this regime as the religious and political “radicalization” of youth variously defined as Muslim, Middle Eastern, Arab, Afghan, or South Asian has come to embody a threat to Western, secular, liberal democracy and U.S. military as well as economic interventions. But this regime also assumes that the politics of Muslim American
youth are knowable, within the framework of securitization that views this generational cohort as bedeviled by disaffection, cultural and political alienation, and psychological and social maladjustment (Grewal 2014, 7). Muslim and Arab American youth, especially young males, have become primary objects of the counterterrorism regime, which views them as susceptible to “radicalization” and violent extremism, that is, as ripe for becoming enemies of the state. This focus on “homegrown terrorism” has occurred in tandem with shifts in U.S. wars and counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, and other sites that are mapped onto a transnational jihadist network. The homeland War on Terror has become an increasingly central part of the planetary war and, in the decade since 9/11, increasingly focused on monitoring and prosecuting ideological and religious beliefs, not just terrorist activities. The strategy of preemptive prosecution thus mirrors the doctrine of “preemptive war.” In all these debates, the figure of the young Muslim or Arab American is central, given the notion that youth are vulnerable subjects particularly susceptible to indoctrination and radicalization.

While the crackdown on Muslim Americans and backlash against Muslims and “Muslim-looking” people was most intense and violent in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the scapegoating and repression of Muslim and Middle Eastern communities has persisted well beyond 9/11 and under the Obama administration, with Islamophobic and anti-Arab discourse continuing to appear in the U.S. mainstream, not just right-wing, media. Incidents such as the “Ground Zero” mosque controversy in New York that erupted in 2010, as well as less publicized incidents involving FBI entrapment of Muslim American youth from Lodi to Brooklyn, underscored that Muslims continue to be framed through the lens of the War on Terror, and that their politics, more than that of any other religious group, are viewed as necessary to surveil and contain. This constitutes what some call the “new order of War on Terror” that has been established under the Obama regime, which has relied on mass surveillance, clandestine cooperation between various arms of law enforcement and intelligence, and a counterterrorism discourse that uses the lexicon of counterradicalization to police political and social lives and monitor the “enemy within” (Kumar 2012, 158). Furthermore, the ongoing debate over the prolonged war in Afghanistan—the longest in U.S. history, which was revived by Obama—and the Muslim men incarcerated in Guantanamo without charge or trial in a prison that has endured beyond the Bush regime, not to mention the drone wars in “Af-Pak,” has meant that the figure of the (Muslim, Arab, or South/Southwest Asian) enemy continues to represent a flash point where anxieties about U.S. military violence, legal justice, and human rights collide.
Given that state repression has made collective mobilization fragile, what kinds of collectivities and political imaginaries do young people targeted by the state produce? This book interrogates the meaning of political subjecthood for Arab, South Asian, and Afghan American youth in Silicon Valley and new forms of mobilization, especially new cross-racial alliances, that have emerged in the decade since the attacks of 9/11. There has been a turn to civil rights and engagement with human rights activism as the 9/11 generation has created cross-ethnic coalitions and participated in transnational solidarity campaigns. I am interested in how young South Asian, Arab, and Afghan Americans in Silicon Valley engage with the notion of “rights,” domestically and globally, in the post-9/11 moment. The study focuses primarily on Muslim American youth, but it also includes non-Muslim youth, in an ethnically and racially diverse region where there are well-established South Asian, Arab, and Afghan American communities and Muslim American institutions and political organizations. While the San Francisco Bay Area is a hub of progressive politics and liberal multiculturalism, at least in the cultural imaginary, less attention has been paid to the post-9/11 political experiences of youth in Silicon Valley, an area that emblemsizes American entrepreneurial capitalism but is bedeviled by class inequality and racial tensions.

Young people from communities that have been targeted in the War on Terror, both within and beyond U.S. borders, have increasingly crossed racial and ethnic boundaries, and in some cases religious ones, to forge coalitions in opposing U.S. domestic and global policies. Some of these cross-ethnic and interfaith alliances are oppositional while others seem to shore up a politics of inclusion and recognition, and there is also an important politics of international solidarity that underlies movements linking Muslim and Middle Eastern immigrant communities to overseas homelands and war zones. The South Bay is a fascinating site to examine these cross-racial alliances given the ethnic and racial diversity of the local Muslim population as well as looming anxieties about class mobility and multicultural inclusion. The research explores the possibility of alternative forms of politics that can provide a critique of Islamophobia, racism, and imperial violence as well as of neoliberal multiculturalism, rights-based politics, and humanitarianism.

Since 9/11, political movements among South Asian, Arab, and Afghan American communities have visibly emerged on the terrain of rights—particularly civil rights or human rights—and Muslim American activists have increasingly resorted to rights to challenge racial and political exclusion and violence. The turn to rights takes place in a moment in which what is “civil” and who is “human” is increasingly defined through the language of rights (Eng 2012). This turn is also shadowed by debates about women's
rights and gay rights in Muslim and Middle Eastern societies that are deemed inherently patriarchal and homophobic and in need of humanitarian intervention in the War on Terror, so there is a deeply racialized logic underlying the liberation of “others” through the promise of liberal rights (Atanoski 2013, 5). Furthermore, while rights often provide a “normative legal framework,” one associated with Western governmentalities, I am also interested in exploring how the “practice of claim making is generative of new understandings and subjects of rights,” and also of politics, what Ajantha Subramaniam calls “structures of feeling” using a “historical, processual” approach to rights (cited in Allen 2013, 13). The book explores the engagement of South Asian, Arab, and Afghan American youth in transnational as well as U.S.-based politics, variously framed around questions of civil rights, human rights, women’s rights, and gay rights—the rights-based paradigms that have been invoked by the U.S. in its War on Terror and also infused mobilization against the U.S. state. In this sense, the book pivots on the question of how rights claims are deployed by youth, but it also speaks to broader questions of justice, accountability, belonging, and violence that these young people grapple with and that are animated, or suppressed, by the notion of rights.

The Long War on Terror

“Terrorism” has been conflated with the notion of Muslim “radicalism” or “extremism,” as well as the recent concept of “jihadism,” all deeply racialized code words for a broader set of assumptions about who is at war with the United States. As Talal Asad (2003) and other critics have argued, terrorism is a concept embedded in liberal modernity, an object that Western as well as non-Western modern states require to define their Other in what is constructed (and marketed) as an existential battle for the survival of Western civilization and secular, liberal democracy on a global, not just national, scale. The lexicon of counterterrorism has continued to evolve in conjunction with shifts in military strategy in overseas wars and surveillance strategies on the homefront, and as Arun Kundnani (2014) observes, “radicalization became the lens through which Western societies viewed Muslim populations by the first decade of the twenty-first century” (9–10). Within this national security framework and counterterrorism regime, those resisting U.S. policies of global hegemony, especially its wars in West and Southwest Asia, are demonized as “anti-American” militants and anti-Western fanatics defined primarily through the lens of Islam and national security. This imperial narrative of a war on Islam, or Islamists, ignores the complexities on the ground, of course, and its easy categorizations and convenient slippages must be disentangled,
yet as I argue in this book, in some cases targeted groups reproduce the dominant framework embedded in religious and cultural discourse even as they try to challenge it.

This book is based on the premise that racism and surveillance targeting Muslim and Arab American youth did not begin on September 11, 2001, and is not exceptional, but must be situated in the longer, global history of U.S. imperial policies in West and South Asia and in relation to other, domestic processes of criminalization, regulation, and elimination of racialized peoples by the U.S. state. This is a key issue that both mainstream discourse and liberal scholarly analysis ignore, conveniently choosing to situate Islamophobia only in relation to the contemporary War on Terror and debates about national security and civil liberties, thus evading the core imperial nature of the warfare state and the longer history of state regulation and repression of groups defined as “enemy aliens” or “anti-American.” Post-9/11 repression extends the imperial state’s policies of surveilling and containing radicals or leftist “subversives,” especially during wartime and through the Cold War, as well as a history of suppressing Arab American activism that precedes the current War on Terror—what Alain Badiou (2011) calls the “long war against terrorism” (20).

The focus on the “Muslim terrorist” as political enemy did not begin under the Bush regime but has evolved since at least the Iranian revolution of 1978–1979 and the Reagan administration’s and U.S. media’s focus on the threat of Islamist politics to U.S. power. This occurred even as the U.S. covertly supported the Afghan mujahideen in a proxy war against the USSR and celebrated them as “freedom fighters,” underscoring the deeply paradoxical history that is buried beneath the trope of the “jihadist” enemy today. It is important to note that the template for the War on Terror was manufactured in the 1980s to demonize those resisting U.S. hegemony and U.S. allies in the Middle East, particularly Israel, and led to the “suturing of Israel and the U.S. as defenders of ‘Western’ values against ‘Islamic fanaticism’” (Kundnani 2014, 45). So Zionist ideology and the Palestine question have long been a “shadow” in U.S. imperial culture and race matters even if they have not always been acknowledged as constitutive of debates about “liberal freedom and colonial violence” and key to U.S. domestic as well as foreign policies in relation to Arabs, Muslims, and anticolonial resistance, as argued by Keith Feldman (2015, 2). This book recenters the question of Palestine in theorizing the long War on Terror and the politics of solidarity with the Palestinians as a crucial site for the production of an anti-imperial politics.

Empire always works on two fronts, the domestic and the global; the War on Terror is an extension of earlier processes of disciplining and subjugating
marginalized and dissenting groups at home while consolidating hegemony overseas (Pease 1993; Rogin 1993). The national consensus for U.S. foreign policies is strengthened through historical processes of scapegoating “outsiders” and conflating internal and external enemies (Stoler 2006, 12), as is only too apparent with the domestic as well as global crackdown on and regulation of Muslim and Arab political movements, not to mention alliances with groups and regimes that serve U.S. strategic interests. The current “state of emergency” affecting Muslims and Arabs in the U.S., the suspension of civil rights and targeting of certain groups by sovereign violence, has also affected other immigrant and minority communities (Benjamin 1988). In other words, this exclusion of certain categories of people—defined according to race, religion, or citizenship—is not exceptional but the norm. This “state of exception” is constitutive of an imperial governmentality that rests on the exclusion of certain groups from citizenship and civil rights at different historical moments (Agamben 2005; Ganguly 2001). Exceptionalism is the rule of empire, and U.S. imperialism has also always established its hegemony by creating new, ambiguous, or “exceptional” categories and designations for territories, peoples, and political activities resisting its rule (Kaplan 2005). This everyday “state of exception” is particularly acute for groups of young people who are labeled as culturally antithetical to Western modernity and liberal democracy, given that youth are always already seen as potentially deviant and threatening to the social order. Thus, political activism among the 9/11 generation is a crucial site for understanding the workings of U.S. imperial statecraft as well as shape-shifting movements of political dissent.

Youth as Enemy

In the current moment, the image of immigrant or minority youth and the specter of “militant” or “fundamentalist” Muslims and Arabs threatening “the American way of life” or European and “Western values” reveals a particular global and racial imaginary about Muslim, Arab, Afghan, Iranian, and South Asian youth. This imaginary is embedded in technologies of nation and empire that use a colonialist logic of projection to invert the threat of imperial invasion and intervention that have destroyed other peoples’ ways of life and means of livelihood. This devastation of other societies is justified by a discourse of liberal democracy and individual freedom intertwined with neoliberalist notions of individual autonomy and “choice” embedded in free-market rationalities, a discourse that often targets youth (Ong 2006; Salime 2011). Young people, it is assumed, must choose between the “American way of life” (self-realization through capitalism/consumption) and “anti-Americanism” (self-annihilation
through militancy/resistance to “the West”). I argue that we must reframe the
debate about Muslim American youth to show that their subjectification is not
just in response to Islamophobia but also the battle over neoliberal capitalism,
racial violence, and imperial democracy.

The War on Terror is a technology of nation making that produces youth
as subjects that must be preserved and protected, as well as monitored, con-
tained, repressed, or removed, if necessary through violence. The specter
of Muslim or Arab youth who are inherently anti-American has been used
to legitimize policies of surveillance, detention, and deportation that have
swept unknown numbers of minors into the dragnet of counterterrorism op-
erations. A few years after 9/11, and particularly after the July 7, 2005, bomb-
ings by British Muslims in London, the focus of the domestic War on Terror
shifted to “homegrown” terrorism and to ferreting out this fifth column in the
U.S., with the deployment of undercover FBI informants recruited to infiltrate
mosqued communities and networks of Muslim American youth (see Kumar
2010; Maira 2007). These regimes of surveillance and the mass detentions and
departures of individuals after 9/11, involving the use of secret evidence and
predatory prosecution policies, as well as revelations of torture in Guanta-
namo, extraordinary rendition (transnational abduction), and secret prisons
overseas have had a chilling effect on political activism in Muslim and Middle
Eastern communities in the U.S., particularly in the early years after 9/11. But
the slowly growing outrage about the excesses of the security state, exposed
through investigative journalism and alternative media as well as leaks by
whistleblowers, was also accompanied by an expansion of political mobiliza-
tion and dissent, both by targeted communities as well as others challenging
the domestic and global regimes of repression and removal.

In the cultural imaginary of the War on Terror, which is an important
front for the military offensive waged by the U.S., Islam, gender, and human
rights are key tropes. This book discusses questions of women’s rights and gay
rights as part of the post-9/11 culture wars and the ways these are deployed by
dissenting movements. It is indeed the case that there are groups that are op-
pposed to the U.S. state and its policies who are misogynist and homophobic,
some of which (but not all) are Muslim or have a pan-Islamic ideology. But as
the “green menace” of Islamist movements replaced the Red Scare in justify-
ing U.S. warfare and the curtailment of civil rights in the U.S., the imperial
policies of the U.S. have been cast in cultural and racial terms as a war for
democracy, women’s rights, and social and economic freedoms—what Neda
Atanoski (2013) aptly calls “postsocialist imperialism” (3).

The post-9/11 culture wars have emerged from the blurring of the Cold
War into the global War on Terror and are embedded in U.S. interests in
dominating and remaking West Asia (otherwise known as the Middle East) and consolidating the status of the U.S. as the lone superpower since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989. The postsocialist imperial project replaced the “Communist” with the “terrorist,” as a state of permanent war is required to make the world safe for neoliberal capitalism and the penetration of free market rationalities—a state of “democratic peace/war” (Badiou 2011, 39). This is why Arab political activists who were leftist and militant, such as Palestinian Marxists, have always been targeted as the enemy of the U.S., as illustrated by the case of the L.A. Eight that extended from 1987 to 2007 and so bridged the Cold War and the War on Terror, as will be discussed later in the book.

What is different about the form of warfare waged by the U.S. today is that the fight against terrorism is a battle against an ambiguously defined enemy that is neither a nation-state nor a specific set of nonstate actors, and its (deliberate) ambiguity allows it to target a shape-shifting constellation of enemies, within and beyond the borders of the United States. The War on Terror, in a sense, must be a war on Islam, so that complex questions of national sovereignty and resistance to neoliberal capitalism disappear into the monolithic threat of the Islamist terrorist who “hates our freedom.” This is an ongoing war against a racialized enemy and against states or networks that are deemed to be outside the bounds of proper, Western national sovereignty—whether it is the ostensibly “failed” state of Afghanistan or the non-national Al Qaeda—thus legitimizing invasion and occupation by nation-states whose own sovereignty must be defended from terror attacks. Badiou (2011)—like others—has observed that “the very category of war has become considerably obscured . . . these wars are never declared. Ancient capitals are bombed (Baghdad, Kabul, Belgrade . . . ) without serving notice to anyone that war has been declared on them’ (39). New territorial designations are created in geographic spaces, such as “Af-Pak,” where the U.S. has used new kinds of warfare (such as unmanned drones) and proxy or secret forces in an ongoing war to defend “civilization” and “democracy” against the forces of barbarism, fundamentalism, and misogyny. The book takes up the question of these imperial cartographies, such as the mapping of “Af-Pak” or “Israel-Palestine,” as they produce transnational solidarities and “geographies of liberation” as well as evasions and silences about forgotten wars and repressed imperial histories (Lubin 2014).

Furthermore, in this planetary war, a primary target is the young Muslim, for it is the category of youth that is perceived as being vulnerable to indoctrination and recruitment by Islamist movements and terrorist networks, or to “self-radicalization,” as in the case of the Chechen youth charged with the Boston Marathon bombings in 2013. The counterradicalization regime that
has emerged in the U.S., as well as in the UK and across Europe, is increasingly preoccupied with Muslim youth culture and with cultural codes that presumably signify “radical dissent” and “youth alienation” from Western liberal democracy (Kundnani 2014, 120). South Asian, Arab, and Afghan American youth politics is thus an important node of the post-9/11 culture wars. At the same time, the Arab revolutions that overthrew U.S.-backed dictatorships and U.S.-friendly economic regimes shocked Western media and audiences with images of young Arab and Muslim activists, male and female, who took to the streets and utilized the cybersphere to struggle for democracy and against the ravages of neoliberal globalization, inspiring young Americans in the Occupy movement who struggled to claim their own public spaces. Yet these images were increasingly fraught with ambivalence as the so-called Arab Spring unfolded and U.S. politicians and pundits cast doubts on the political motivations and democratic possibilities of these popular, revolutionary struggles; the specter of Arab/Muslim youth as identifiable icons of popular democracy dissolved into the image of the fundamentalist and militant once again as new waves of protest, violence, and counterrevolution emerged in Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, Syria, and across the region. The Arab uprisings marked a new phase in the War on Terror, for the revolutionary potential of these mass movements (and later the Gezi Park protests in Turkey) fundamentally challenged the alibi of democracy and human and civil rights used in the U.S.-led War on Terror. They also altered the mainstream discourse about Arab and Muslim youth—if only for a second—by shifting from the paradigm of national security and counterterrorism to tropes of youthful activism and cyberprotest, which had ripple effects on movements here and for the youth described in this book.

“Radical” Politics, Rights-Talk, and New Coalitions

Post-9/11 political engagement for Arab, South Asian, and Afghan American youth, and Muslim American youth more broadly, has been shadowed by the trope of “radicalization” produced by the surveillance-security state. This makes it particularly important to understand what a genuinely radical politics might actually look like. Muslim American politics underwent a significant transformation after 9/11 with an increasing push by national Muslim organizations to engage in the “public square” and with U.S. politics. This was generally driven by a rationale for greater participation in liberal democratic citizenship and “civic integration,” but also the result of a decision by national Muslim American leaders and organizations that political participation in a non-Muslim state could be reconciled with adherence to Islam (Nimer
New coalitions emerged, as Muslim Americans became engaged in or led civil rights campaigns and antiwar organizing, in addition to forming interfaith coalitions and public affairs groups (Afzal 2015). National Muslim American organizations sprang into action after 9/11, launching campaigns based on civil rights and for mobilizing Muslim American voters, drawing many from the 9/11 generation into this activism.

A shift in leadership occurred after 9/11 from immigrant Muslims and Middle Easterners to second- or third-generation activists who became the public face of some of these organizations, as young Muslim Americans also entered new fields and became lawyers, advocates, and activists. A new generation of Muslim American activists became increasingly involved in mainstream or liberal political movements and in interfaith or multiracial coalitions, as well as in progressive/left alliances and human rights activism. “Muslim” youth in the U.S., however, are still defined as the site of potential political “radicalization,” defined as based on Islamist politics and thus extracted by counterterrorism discourse from any associations with left “radicalism” or a politics based on solidarity with other movements or other groups. At such a moment, is it possible for young people from these groups to rethink the meaning of “radical” politics?

Furthermore, it is important not to have a narrow definition of what it means to be “political,” which is conventionally tied to electoral politics or to organized political activity, but to explore how politics is expressed in a range of realms, especially for young people and in a climate of political repression where “politics” is viewed with anxiety or suspicion, especially for certain racial and religious groups. If politics is “a deviation from the normal order of things,” that has “no proper place nor any natural subjects,” as Rancière argues (2010, 35), but in fact, creates new political subjects and challenges the boundary of the “political,” then the political expression and mobilization of Arab, South Asian, and Afghan American youth in the post-9/11 era is crucial to consider as a site of doing politics. There is a danger in romanticizing the politics of this generation, or of looking to those who bear the brunt of the state’s policing as vanguardist subjects of a “return to politics” in a climate of political stagnation (Rancière 2010). In this book, I demonstrate the radical possibilities as well as the contradictions, absences, and cleavages in the politics of Arab, South Asian, and Afghan American youth. The political dissent of this generation has taken many forms, and has been staged on the terrain of rights—civil, political, economic, religious, cultural, immigrant, and human—as well as in alliance with other movements—antiwar, immigrant rights, anti-imperialist, civil rights, or prison abolition—both in domestic and global arenas. There are paradoxes and fissures within and among these sites...
of mobilization, and it is these tensions that are explored in the following chapters.

This generation of South Asian, Arab, and Afghan American youth participate in political activism based on rights and identities, as well as issue-based struggles, and that is framed by the nation-state as well as transnational in scope. I found in my research that there are two major axes of political mobilization for these youth that cross ethnic, racial, and national boundaries. One is pan-Islamic, and produced mostly in the context of Muslim student groups and Muslim civil rights organizing that involves ethnically and racially diverse groups of youth. The other form of coalition building is framed around issues of imperialism, war, and occupation spanning Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Palestine, and focused on issues of national sovereignty and human rights. The research demonstrated that the Palestine question serves as a unifying hub for various communities, including youth who are neither Arab, South Asian, Afghan, nor Muslim, and is a central node for both forms of mobilization. Some might differentiate between these two kinds of politics as being broadly located either in the realm of faith-based activism or secular left critique, a complex distinction that I discuss in Chapter Two. However, in reality there is a great deal of overlap that blurs the boundaries of what is sometimes easily glossed as “religious” and “secular” activism: many Muslim-identified student activists are deeply engaged in antiwar and anti-imperial politics and solidarity movements and civil rights campaigns often include Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Sikh, or other youth who are religiously identified as well as non-Muslims and atheists. These strands of activism cannot be easily divided between a focus on domestic and global issues, for pan-Islamic solidarity provides the basis for a global justice or “Muslim human rights” framework, particularly focused on Muslim societies, and antiwar and Palestine solidarity groups make linkages to domestic movements focused on racism, policing, incarceration, torture, immigration, or indigeneity. But what became evident in my research is that there are different if intertwined currents of political mobilization and forms of solidarity that have been intensified since 9/11: one that mobilizes the notion of Islam, and another that invokes notions of national self-determination and sovereignty, and that there are sometimes tensions between these axes of protest politics. Yet both of these political currents utilize a rights-based framework and often spill over into each other in interesting and sometimes conflicted ways, as I will demonstrate.

The post-9/11 backlash and the assault on the civil, immigrant, and human rights of Muslim, Arab, Iranian, South Asian, Afghan, and “Muslim-looking” people in the U.S. and elsewhere has led to the emergence of new, interra-
cial coalitions and shifting racial formations. The recodification of race, or the intensified codification of the racialization of Muslimness and Arabness, has compelled a turn to the language of antiracism and also generated new forms of solidarity that are cross-racial, interfaith, and transnational. As U.S. nationalism has become multicultural, if not “postracial,” and invested in a liberal religious pluralism, Islam has been inserted into the contemporary culture wars over race, religion, and national identity. Islamophobia continues to be manifested in virulent forms, a decade after the 9/11 attacks, and at the same time, there is a growing, and increasingly institutionalized, attempt to carve out a place for an “American Islam” and for the incorporation of Muslim Americans into the national citizenry (for example, see Abdullah 2013). My research reveals that this effort sometimes happens in ways that authorize a “Muslim American” identity that is compatible with liberal multiculturalism and neoliberal democracy, if performed by the “good” Muslim subject—who is virtuous, productive, and peace loving—as distinguished from the “bad” Muslim—who is anti-American and “radical” in opposition to the U.S. War on Terror, as I discuss in Chapter One.

Against the backdrop of this incorporability of “good” Muslim subjects and regulation of “proper” Muslim and Arab American politics, the book explores how the political imaginaries and mobilization of Arab, South Asian, and Afghan American youth in Silicon Valley cross ethnic, racial, national, and religious boundaries. I am interested here in examining the production by youth of what some might call counterpublic spheres, and the formation of identities that are intertwined with the consumption and production of religious, racial, and national difference but also of political dissent. The problem is that it has become increasingly difficult for young people targeted for surveillance, suspicion, and profiling to constitute what might look like a “public” in the post-9/11 era, let alone what could be called a “counterpublic,” which raises the question of how useful this terminology is for understanding political dissent. Studies of progressive political culture and organizing, such as Cynthia Young’s (2006, 146–147) work on Third Worldist, anti-imperialist formations, demonstrate how radical publics are constituted through “ideological and political work” that defines their object of activism, for example, “resistance to violence,” against the grain of dominant political thinking. My research explores the various objects of activism, such as civil rights and human rights, produced in and imagined by the political spheres in which South Asian, Arab, and Afghan American participate in Silicon Valley. In some cases, these counter what Antonio Gramsci (2000) called the “common sense” of the dominant ideology but there are also instances in which these movements end up drawing on commonsensical notions of inclusion
or recognition; there are active internal debates and conflicts about whether a truly radical politics that exceeds the terms set by the multicultural, liberal state is possible and effective (Reddy 2011). There is an urgency to the deployment of “rights” for these young people, whether civil rights or human rights, but there is also a cost to defining these as the object of their activism as they struggle to stake out a politics in the “public” sphere and in alliance with various counterpublics (Young 2006, 13). These are some of the key tensions that emerged in this ethnographic study of youth activism in Silicon Valley.

There are two major questions on which this book pivots and that provide a thread linking its chapters. The first is whether rights-based politics can constitute a genuinely subversive or oppositional politics when human rights, women’s rights, and gay rights have been used as an alibi for U.S. military interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, and U.S. support for the Israeli military occupation in Palestine. Do civil rights coalitions and human rights campaigns opposing the War on Terror and the assault on civil liberties constitute an alternative or arrested politics? The research explores the possibilities, pitfalls, and contradictions of using rights-talk at a moment when the vocabulary of rights, and of democracy, has been used to justify imperial interventions as humanitarian projects, such as the U.S. invasions and occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan and drone warfare in Pakistan.

Second, the research also examines the nature of political solidarity and cross-racial alliances, in a moment when U.S. nationalism is understood as not just multicultural but also postracial, particularly since the election of the first African American president. Is it possible for cross-racial solidarity to become anti-imperial when the liberal, multicultural state seems to have so successfully co-opted movements challenging the state through a framework of political recognition and cultural and legal inclusion? What kinds of political community are constituted by youth in these new coalitions, and what are the possibilities and also costs of particular alliances? How does the politics of gender shape the mobilization of these young men and women in a moment when Islam, gender, sexuality, and race are deeply conjoined in the contemporary culture wars? How does the class politics of Silicon Valley shape notions of activism and coalition building?

Questions of rights-based activism and cross-racial alliances, and the ways they are shaped by the politics of neoliberal democracy, national sovereignty, and imperial humanitarianism have not been fully addressed in the context of the regulation, classification, and surveillance of Muslim and Arab American youth. I am interested in thinking through the contradictions of neoliberal democracy and liberal rights as they contain resistance by the 9/11 generation. The tension between liberal multiculturalism and U.S. imperialism is one that
I explore in relation to Arab, South Asian, and Afghan American youth, in the context of the accommodation of “good” Muslim subjects and containment of “bad” Muslims in the U.S. and the use of humanitarian discourse to rationalize warfare to save lives considered worth rescuing overseas. These are questions that need much more exploration in discussions of Muslim and Arab American youth, or indeed Muslim and Arab Americans in general, and there is much that research in this area could contribute to theoretical debates about neoliberal multiculturalism and rights-talk. These debates, I would argue, are being staged most centrally in communities currently targeted by the politics of securitization and humanitarianism, yet they have not been fully explored.

Resistance to the post-9/11 backlash generated an important political as well as discursive question: how to define the population that was primarily targeted by the War on Terror? Given the range of groups that were targeted in the post-9/11 backlash, it was virtually impossible to name a single category for political mobilization that could encompass Muslims as well as non-Muslims, Arabs and non-Arabs, Middle Easterners and non-Middle Easterners. Coalitional categories such as Arab, Muslim, and South Asian (AMSA), Middle Eastern, Arab, Muslim, and South Asian (MASA), and other acronyms have been coined by activists in civil and immigrant rights and antiwar movements to index solidarity among communities who increasingly experienced similar processes of disciplining, exclusion, and violence in the aftermath of 9/11. These axes of identification have taken hold largely in the context of political activism and index a certain racial politics in the context of faith-based as well non-faith-based activism, but are not common in everyday parlance or even within these communities. For example, feminist and queer coalitions created the category SWANA (South West Asian and North African) (Naber 2008, 8). The rather unwieldy acronym AMEMSA, or Arab, Middle Eastern, Muslim, and South Asian, was introduced by community organizers in the Bay Area around 2003 and has since then been used by civil and immigrant rights groups across the U.S. as well as community foundations such as the Silicon Valley Community Foundation, which supports interfaith projects through its FAITHS program.1 These labels were an uneasy conjoining of both religious and ethnic/national categories and are also often problematic in their exclusionary inclusion: Iranians were generally subsumed under the category of Muslims or Middle Easterners; Central Asians and groups who are neither Arab nor Muslim but who are from the geographic region of West Asia fell between the cracks; Afghans disappeared between the boundaries of Central and South Asia; and the label “Muslim”
was generally used to encompass those of Muslim background but who may not identify as such.

Much discussion has focused on whether these new pan-ethnic labels represent a new racial categorization and how Muslimness itself has been re-racialized in the post-9/11 era (Rana 2011). Racial thinking is at work in the production, suppression, and suspicion of Muslim identity, which is associated with racialized markers (most obviously, “the Muslim terrorist” but also the “oppressed Muslim woman”); “the Muslim” is considered an exemplary Other in the American nation, defined as (Judeo-)Christian (Esposito 2011). The racialization of Muslim Americans, it must be noted, overlaps with that of Arabs, South Asians, and Central Asians, not to mention African Americans (who constitute one third of the Muslim American population), and so their othering is deeply intertwined with images of the immigrant, the militant, the uncivilized, and the Blackamerican, to use Sherman Jackson’s (2011) terminology, variously straddling the divide of American/un-American or “anti-American.” Racial thinking is at work in both the repression and resistance of Arab, South Asian, Iranian, and Afghan American communities and movements, and it is intertwined with a politics of gender, sexuality, and class in complex ways, as I will explore in the following chapters.

However, while liberal and progressive activists often focused on the question of post-9/11 racial and religious profiling, and faith-based activists challenged an intensified and virulent Islamophobia and the right-wing war on Islam, it was sometimes more difficult—at least in the first few years after 9/11—to acknowledge that it was political profiling that was also at work in the imperial surveillance state. One of the interventions this book makes is to critique the turn to a liberal, nation-based framework of civil rights that sidesteps more difficult questions of U.S. nationalism, sovereignty, and hegemony. This liberal nationalist variant of civil rights elides the role of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East and South Asia and counterterrorism policies that drive much of the suspicion and scrutiny directed against Muslim, Arab South Asian, and Afghan American youth in the post-9/11 homeland security regime. The book also reflects on the contradictions of utilizing the language of human rights and the difficulties of invoking a critical human rights discourse for segments of humanity in war zones such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, or Palestine.

Going beyond the existing liberal framework of Islamophobia, then, the book proceeds from the premise that there are various wars that are being fought since 9/11—a war against terrorism legitimized by Islamophobic discourse, and an increasingly liberal offensive under the Obama regime that
targets “Muslim extremists” but aims to incorporate other Muslim subjects; a war on migrant populations who are key to the neoliberal economy but remain in a state of precarity; a war on the poor and working poor who are the detritus of global capitalism; a war on racialized and insurgent movements, from Occupy to Palestine solidarity activists, who are surveilled, entrapped, and incarcerated; and a war on the planet itself whose resources are ravaged for the benefit of the 1%.

I come to this research as someone who is concerned about and personally and politically invested in challenging all of these wars, and troubled by the metaphor of “war” itself, and as someone who grew up and has lived in parts of the world targeted by the war machine and in militarized zones. My time in India, and later in Pakistan and Palestine, as well as my years in the U.S., have allowed me to engage with various movements that resist war, occupation, surveillance, and racialized annihilation and displacement. It is my own experiences as both “insider” and “outsider” to these issues that has in many ways led me to think seriously about the limits and potential of resistance by those whose bodies are marked as disposable or kept alive to embody an ever lurking threat.

Youth and Exceptionalisms

By now, there is a generation of youth for whom the events of September 11, 2001, were a formative experience and one that marked the beginning, rather than a rupture, of the development of their political subjectivity in adolescence. For the 9/11 generation who were in high school in 2001, the attacks of September 11 are not too distant to be recollected and represent a dramatic historical event that made a dent on their early political consciousness. The historical and political worldview of this generation has emerged in the post-9/11 landscape: the era of the Bush-Cheney neoconservative regime, the PATRIOT Act and its reauthorizations, the invasion of Afghanistan and the occupation of Iraq, the revelations of torture at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, the election of Barack Obama, the covert and drone warfare in Pakistan, the U.S.-backed wars on Gaza, the ongoing surveillance of Muslim Americans, and the repression of political dissent—not to mention the economic insecurities of the recession years. It should also be noted that the Muslim American population is a particularly youthful one, compared to other religious groups in the U.S.; it is estimated that more than a third of Muslim Americans are young adults between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine (the proportion of this cohort in the U.S. population at large is 18% and among Protestant Americans, only 9%) (Gallup 2009, 22.).
The label “9/11 generation” emerges from a periodization that links generational categories with historical events and also with a particular notion of social and political development. Adolescence and young adulthood is considered a critical time for the development of political commitments—in part because of the imagining of this period as a formative stage for identity, particularly in Western developmental psychology, and in part due to the empirical realities of cognitive and psychosocial development at a time when individuals are generally in transition to full-time employment, marriage, and establishing their own households. Political thinking is a process that begins early in life, but for youth who could be considered “college age,” between seventeen and twenty-three years old, this is a period that has traditionally been conceptualized as a crucial time for testing political commitments and exploring social identities. It is also a time when many youth are in college and have the opportunity to engage in political mobilization or with larger collectives beyond their families or communities. But thinking about the War on Terror through the lens of “youth” also allows for a critique of a deeper set of questions, such as, why is the category of youth so central to defining the threat to national security or Western imperial modernity?

The answer to this lies partly in the view that youth are viewed as key to movements for social change, not just in the U.S. but in many cultural contexts, and simultaneously viewed as incomplete subjects of nationhood or citizenship. The imagining of youth as a site that is simultaneously threatening and hopeful, or deviant and liberating, is fundamentally tied to the conceptualization of youth as a transition between “childhood” and “adulthood.” American and European notions of adolescence and psychological theories of stage-based development have produced an association of youth with liminality and identity crisis (Erikson 1968). This notion of in-betweenness and instability is at the heart of the ambivalence with which youth are often associated and the exceptionalism that sometimes overdetermines this category. Youth are assumed to fall between the cracks of “innocent” childhood and “stable” adulthood, dangerously outside of normative social structures and always teetering on the brink of revolt. The romanticization of young people as rebellious agents of social change is the other side of the fear of that very change—the association of youth with not just identity crisis but also social crisis (Lesko 2001; Maira and Soep 2004). This dialectic underlies what scholars of youth studies have critiqued as moral panics about youth, which express a deeper anxiety about threats to the status quo (Cohen 1997).

For Muslim, Arab, Afghan, or South Asian youth, there is another layer of social anxiety and ambivalence that they must confront: the fear that they potentially pose a threat to the U.S. state, Western civilization, and secular
liberal democracy, and so must be surveilled, contained, regulated, and also studied, analyzed, and documented by scholars and policy makers. Young people from immigrant communities are often suspected of harboring “divided” national allegiances or being “improper” national subjects. Muslim American and second-generation youth from immigrant communities thus experience a double, if not triple, layer of exceptionalism: as youth, as Muslim, and as diasporic. How, then, can one speak of the political concerns or aspirations of this particular group of young people outside of the framework of the security state? This book offers an account of the lived and diverse experiences of South Asian, Arab, and Afghan American youth in the post-9/11 era, and of their political struggles and nuanced critiques as well as of the repression, surveillance, and censorship they face on a daily basis. In addition, it is important to consider how Muslim youth engage in both formal as well as informal politics, participating in public activism as well as in everyday forms of “quiet encroachment” in their daily lives, in ways that may be dispersed and unorganized, but that nonetheless pose a challenge to repressive governmentalities, as argued by Asef Bayat (2013, 46). These ordinary and fluid practices by large numbers of people “establish new norms” and interrupt the dichotomies of “active/passive,” “individual/collective,” and “civil/political” resistance, an approach that is very relevant to young people for whom spectacular protest and easily identifiable collectives may be risky (Bayat 2013, 28); it is this broader perspective on youth politics that I use in my analysis.

This book discusses the politics of Muslim American youth through a critical lens that has not always been used in existing research, which has tended to focus largely on issues of religious identity and the impact of Islamophobia on Muslim American youth within a narrow framework. Sadia Abbas (2014, 2, 4, 5) offers a trenchant critique of the ways in which Muslims are “repeatedly figured as constituted by injury” and representations of “the injured Muslim, the militant, and the pious woman” dominate what she calls an “economy of collaboration and treachery” as well as research in the Western academy. The studies of Muslim American youth that have proliferated since 9/11 have emerged, in general, from a position of solidarity but not always from a position of critique, and in my view this approach has lacked a complex analysis, often reinscribing a liberal framework for analyzing Islamophobia that stops short of grappling with the politics of imperialism, neoliberal multiculturalism, faith-based inclusion, and national sovereignty. This gap in current frameworks in U.S. academic discourse arises, in part, from a reluctance to interrogate the production of the category of “the Muslim” itself. In some cases, it seems, studies are unable to move beyond the core paradigm of the “war on Islam” by expanding the focus to include categories other than
that of “Muslim” or “Muslim American,” on the one hand, and to consider the complex and painful contradictions of the U.S. state’s historical relationship to Muslim and Arab American communities and Islamist movements, on the other. The sensitivity to Islamophobia among liberal and progressive intellectuals has led to a conjuncture in which a postcolonial, left, feminist secular critique has also been arrested, recreating simplistic binaries of secularity and religion and reductively defining “the Muslim” as inherently and always antisecular, thus creating new lacunae in scholarship. The arrested politics on the ground is paralleled by an arrested critique, a condition that we need to confront as it has serious implications for our theorizing as well as resistance.

For one, the Arab American community includes Muslims as well as non-Muslims and those who identify as secular or atheist, as does the South Asian and Afghan American community, and so subsuming all of these groups under the label “Muslim” or “Muslim American” can be problematic. In fact, much of the research in the new field of Muslim American/American Muslim studies does not acknowledge or examine this complexity, generating the image of a community that has an internal diversity in sectarian affiliations and practices of Islam but that is always and already uniformly identified with Islam (with some exceptions, see Afzal 2015; Mir 2014). In this, furthermore, there is an odd mirroring of the very framework used by the state in the discourse of the War on Terror—if with a more liberal and progressive orientation—that relies solely on the lens of Islam to define Middle Eastern and Muslim communities and evades discussion of those whose lives and identities are not entirely or primarily defined by faith, or who represent a “dissensus” that troubles taken-for-granted assumptions about Muslim Americans (Rancière 2010). Who represents and who gets to speak on behalf of Muslim, Arab, South Asian, and Afghan Americans? These are complex and charged issues, surely, given the climate of Islamophobia and the state’s assaults on Muslim American communities, and the sense of siege within these communities can lead to a defensive or apologetic position as is the case with many other issues and groups. But a liberal approach that remains uncritical of ontological assumptions about the category “Muslim” or of actually existing politics is intellectually limiting and it simply does not go far enough to challenge the state’s policies as well as homogenizing identity politics and internal orthodoxies.

This book, I want to emphasize at the outset, is not a book about Islam nor just about “Muslim Americans”; neither is it about the Islamic practices or religious life of youth. Many other works have addressed these topics (for example, Afzal 2015; Garrod and Kilkenny 2014; Hammer and Safi 2013; Mir 2014; Muhammad-Arif 2002) but in my view, less attention has been paid to
political activism by young people from Muslim and Arab American communities, and they ways they move between spaces defined by religion, ethnicity, and nationalism, or between racial and class politics. I am interested here in the attempt by the 9/11 generation to craft alliances between religious and ethnic/racial communities, between different forms of mobilization against the imperial and racial violence of the U.S. state, and the implications this has for an anti-imperialist politics and the politics of liberal inclusion. The sections that follow provide some historical and social context for the ethnographic research on South Asian, Arab, and Afghan American youth in Silicon Valley.

South Asian, Arab, and Afghan American Communities in Silicon Valley

This research focuses on three groups of youth—Afghan, South Asian (in this case, Pakistani and Indian), and Arab (Iraqi, Lebanese, Egyptian, Libyan, and Palestinian, among other nationalities)—both Muslim and non-Muslim, in Silicon Valley. There are no published studies on Arab Americans in Silicon Valley and negligible research on Pakistani Americans and (even more so) Afghan Americans, both groups that tend to slip between the arbitrary geographic and cultural boundaries demarcating West, Central, and South Asia, and that are variously included in “the Middle East” and “the Muslim world” in U.S. mainstream and academic discourse. While I also interviewed some Indian Muslim American youth, my interviews with South Asians were largely focused on Pakistani American youth to fill this glaring gap in the research, and because of the massive media attention given to and state scrutiny of Pakistan, Pakistanis, and Pakistani Americans in the War on Terror. The politics of South Asian, Arab, and Afghan American communities in Silicon Valley are complex and intertwined with the particular immigrant and refugee histories of the diverse groups that make up each of these communities, which are not a monolithic block but highly differentiated.

The South Asian community in the South Bay, as the region where Silicon Valley is located is called, is largely comprised of Indian and Pakistani immigrants, with very few Bangladeshis, and even fewer Sri Lankans. Most of these immigrants came to California after the Immigration Act of 1965, which introduced visa categories promoting the influx of highly educated, technically skilled immigrants to work in technology as well as in other industries. But the migration of South Asian immigrants, particularly from what is now Pakistan and north India, to the larger region of northern California began much earlier, in the first decades of the twentieth century, when male migrants from the Punjab, in particular, came to work in agricultural labor in
the Sacramento Valley and to a lesser extent, to study at UC Berkeley and other universities (Prashad 2000; Shah 2012). These labor migrants (who were Sikh, Hindu, and Muslim) worked on farms and railroads and formed communities that later expanded in towns such as Fresno, Stockton, and Lodi and established religious institutions such as the Muslim Association of America, founded by Pakistani immigrants in Sacramento as early as 1920 (Khan 1981). These South Asian migrants were also engaged in radical political movements, such as the anti-imperialist, transnational Ghadar movement that mobilized against British colonialism and forged alliances with other leftists on the West Coast (Prashad 2000; Ramnath 2011). However, the communities formed by these early migrants remain largely distinct from the later migration streams to the Silicon Valley after 1965, although these newer waves included Punjabi (Pakistani and Indian) migrants who were similarly a mix of Muslim, Sikh, and Hindu. The post-1965 immigrants are heterogeneous in terms of class, as mentioned earlier, including both highly educated professionals and scientists as well as technical workers on H-1B visas and others employed in the taxi industry, small businesses, and factories.

The Arab American community in northern California is a historic and diverse one, consisting mainly of Egyptians, Lebanese, Palestinians, Iraqis, Syrians, Yemenis, and Jordanians. Some of these families have lived in the Bay Area for three generations, since the early 1900s, and migrated from what was known as Greater Syria (now Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Palestine) at the time (Naff 1985; Sifri 1984). Political upheaval in the Arab region in the 1950s and 1960s fueled much of the migration to the U.S. and early migrants and refugees were mainly peddlers, merchants, or agricultural and blue-collar workers (Sifri 1984, 81). Some Arab immigrants worked in fruit and vegetable farms with South Asian laborers, for example, in Stockton and Fresno; Yemeni migrants who left due to political turmoil in Yemen worked in the Delano area and became involved in organizing with Chicanos in the United Farm Workers (UFW) (Friedlander 1994; Sifri 1984, 83, 85). Eventually some of these Arab immigrants opened grocery and convenience stores in towns such as Bakersfield, Stockton, Merced, and Oakland; the legacy of their early labor activism lives on in a union hall in San Francisco named after Nagi Daifullah, a Yemeni worker active with the UFW who was killed by a California sheriff (Friedlander 1994, 431–433; Malek 2009, 69). Arab immigration to the Bay Area increased with the displacement of Palestinian refugees in 1948, when Israel was established, and after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war as well as the Immigration Act of 1965. In the 1960s and 1970s, Arab immigrants in the Bay Area were largely Christian (and had established Orthodox, Maronite, and Melkite churches), but there was an expansion of Muslim Arab immigration
beginning in the 1980s, including from North Africa and the Gulf states, leading
to the growth of Muslim community institutions and coinciding with the
“Islamic resurgence” in the Arab and Muslim region (Naber 2012, 114–116).

According to Vic Zikoor, an Iraqi American engineer who came to the U.S.
in the late 1970s and lives in the South Bay, where he was vice president of the
Arab American Cultural Center (AACC) at the time, most Arab immigrants
arrived in Silicon Valley in the 1960s and 1970s; many, particularly those who
were refugees such as Iraqis, had professional backgrounds but were relatively
lacking in economic or social capital and so some worked in gas stations or
opened small businesses, as is true of other Arab immigrants in the area.
Many Iraqi refugees who have been coming to San Francisco since the first
Gulf War, as well as Yemeni immigrants, live in the Tenderloin, a racially
mixed, working-class and working-poor neighborhood in San Francisco. As
Arab immigrants, some of whom had owned grocery or liquor stores in the
city, became more affluent they moved into what is known as “the peninsula”
south of San Francisco, settling in towns such as San Mateo, Redwood City,
Burlingame, Milbrae, and Daly City (Naber 2012, 44). More recently arrived
Arab and South Asian immigrants who work in low-wage jobs—as taxi driv-
ers, janitors, or restaurant workers—as well as small business owners and
their families generally live in San Francisco; there are also pockets of working-
to middle-class Arab, South Asian, and Afghan immigrants in towns in the
East Bay and South Bay such as Alameda, Emeryville, Sunnyvale, Union
City, and Newark. There is a great deal of crisscrossing between these towns
and cities in the larger Bay Area, with youth as well as adults commuting for
work, education, entertainment, and social life, so Silicon Valley is embedded
in the cultural geography of what is called “the Bay.”

The Afghan American community does not have much of a presence in
Silicon Valley but is centered in the adjacent towns of Fremont and Hayward
to the north—which are home to the largest Afghan community outside
Afghanistan (Omidian and Lipson 1996). The Afghan community consists
mainly of refugees, who constitute one of the largest refugee populations
in the world, and who are less affluent and less highly educated than South
Asian and Arab Americans in the Bay Area; Afghans came in two waves, one
after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the second after the rise
of the Taliban in the 1990s. The community includes “the formerly wealthy
and highly educated urban elite” as well as those described as “less educated”
and more socially conservative (Omidian and Lipson 1996, 355). Ali Mardan-
zai, the director of the Afghan and International Refugee Services center in
Hayward and a refugee from Kabul, said that the reason that many Afghans
initially flocked to Hayward in the 1980s and later to Fremont was because
the cost of living there was relatively low at the time, there were already two mosques established, and the Hayward Unified School District received a grant to teach Farsi and Pashto (as well as Hindi/Urdu and Arabic). All of these factors were appealing to the newly arrived refugees, many of whom lived in what came to be known as the “Afghan Village,” an apartment complex in Hayward, and formed a burgeoning community in nearby cities that drew other Afghans from all over the United States. The director of the Afghan Coalition—a community organization in Fremont—Rona Popal, also observed that since Afghan refugees came to the U.S. with “very little money or nothing at all,” they settled in towns where there was low-income housing and social services that offered some support, including Union City and Alameda.

Estimates of the Afghan population in Fremont and Hayward vary widely—the Census actually counted only 3,421 Afghans in Fremont in 2010, clearly an underestimate (and not unusual for immigrant or refugee communities, where many are undocumented or simply wary of data collection). Mardanzai estimated that there were 8,000–10,000 Afghans in Fremont and 1,500 families in Hayward in 2008, while Popal estimated that there were 15,000 Afghans in Fremont. As housing costs increased in Fremont and Hayward during the boom years of the 1990s, Afghans moved out to Alameda and Livermore in the East Bay, where Section 8 housing became available. Afghan Americans were also hit hard by the subprime mortgage crisis in the late 2000s, which affected both those employed in the real estate sector and homeowners, and some ended up moving out of Fremont and Hayward to towns in the Central Valley such as Tracy, Stockton, Modesto, and Antioch.

The growth of the Afghan enclave in Fremont/Hayward has not been without resistance in this presumably “liberal” area, according to Anu Natarajan, an Indian American city council member in Fremont. For example, she recalled the campaign to name a section of Fremont where there is a cluster of Afghan businesses, in the neighborhood of Centerville, as “Little Kabul” and commented that the proposal was met with a “push back” from white residents. This incident is linked to the racial tensions that have surfaced over the years between whites and the expanding Asian American population in the area. There has been controversy over the presumed “new white flight” from Fremont, centered in part on nationally recognized public high schools such as Mission San Jose, which in 2007 had an Asian American student population of 77% while the white student population apparently declined by 61% between 1995 and 2005 (Gokhale 2007). There appeared to be a dramatic rejection by white students and families of this predominantly Asian American high school, whose highly competitive image has been at
the center of a debate with racialized undertones fueled by concerns about model minority youth. However, this was situated by some local residents and school officials in the context of the real-estate boom in this period, when many white residents sold their homes and moved out as Asian immigrant communities, mainly Indian and Chinese, were moving in and expanding in size (Gokhale 2007). So interracial and cross-ethnic relations in this area are complex and layered with struggles over class, race, education, and immigration that emerge from the economic context of employment and housing.

These structural and historical contexts need to be considered in understanding local racial economies and interethnic affiliations. South Asian, Afghan, and Arab American youth from this area grow up interacting in a variety of ways with other youth of color, Latino/as, Asian Americans, and, to a much lesser extent, African Americans, who are a small minority—forging cross-racial alliances and negotiating tensions embedded in historical and material contexts. For example, in Fremont and Hayward, as well as Union City, Afghan American youth have grown up with Latinos, and as a few older Afghan Americans from Hayward told me, they often pass as or identify with Latino/as but also find themselves in engaged in turf battles with Latino/a youth. One Afghan American graduate of California State University East Bay (CSUEB) in Hayward, who was president of the Afghan Student Association while at Chabot College, commented that Afghan youth in Fremont created a “gang,” A.L.T.—whose full name translates as “Wild Afghan Tribe”—in response to Latino/a gangs. This also seemed to be an effort to mark themselves as distinct from Latino/a youth, their proximate ethnic/immigrant group. Young South Asian, Afghan, and Arab Americans attend the same high schools, or in some cases the same Islamic schools, and are involved in creating and developing Muslim and Middle Eastern groups and engaging in political mobilization together when they go to college. The relationships between various immigrant and racial groups in this area are complex and often fraught and the context for cross-ethnic solidarity and coalition building, either before or after 9/11, should not be idealized.

Furthermore, youth activism needs to be considered in the context of the increasingly visible and organized Muslim American community in Silicon Valley that has grown since the 1980s, when there was a spurt of Muslim immigration to the Bay Area. In 2013, 30% of Muslims were South Asian, 23% were Arab, 17% Afghans, and 9% African American in the Bay Area’s six counties, including Santa Clara County, where San Jose is located, and Alameda County, where Fremont and Hayward are located (Senzai and Bazian 2013). The Muslim immigrant professionals who came to work in Silicon Valley had the economic resources to establish Muslim community institutions,
including mosques. There was a “mosque movement” in the 1990s in the Bay Area, including in the San Jose area, led by South Asian, especially Pakistani, and Arab Muslim professionals who had migrated to the U.S. after 1965, and less so by Afghan Americans, who as noted earlier, were generally less affluent and established their own mosques in Hayward and Fremont. Silicon Valley is home to the Muslim Community Association (MCA) and Granada Islamic School in Santa Clara, which draws a large, ethnically diverse (Sunni) Muslim population from the region, in addition to the oldest mosque founded in the Bay Area by Muslim immigrants, the South Bay Islamic Association (SBIA), established in 1974 in San Jose, as well as a Shia mosque. MCA serves as a central meeting point for Arab Muslim families, in particular, and also Pakistani Americans, and many Arab and South Asian American youth I spoke to had attended Granada. In 1996, the Zaytuna Institute for Islamic Education was established in Hayward; it later moved to Berkeley, where it launched an Islamic college which is nationally renowned. Major Muslim civil rights and advocacy organizations were also established in the area, such as the first chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), and the Islamic Networks Group, which was established in 1993 in San Jose, in part to counter the intensified Islamophobia surrounding the first Gulf War. Silicon Valley is home to prominent Muslim religious and advocacy institutions that have provided a social and political context for the activism that has emerged in the 9/11 generation.

There are also many nonreligious national or pan-ethnic organizations such as the AACC in San Jose, the Afghan Coalition in Fremont, the multimillion-dollar India Community Center in Milpitas—the largest of its kind in North America—and the newer Pakistani American Culture Center, also in Milpitas, that organize cultural and social events or provide community services, in addition to many other social and professional organizations in the South Bay (Vaidhyanathan 2007). San Jose is also home to a Sikh gurudwara (temple), which has organized community outreach events, particularly after 9/11. Sikhs were brutally and lethally targeted in racial violence because they were mistaken for Arabs and Muslims but also due to a rising tide of xenophobia; Sikhs continue to be targeted in northern California and across the U.S., so interfaith and civil rights coalitions have sometimes included Sikhs as well as Muslims, as I will discuss later.

This book is an attempt to look at one slice of the story of these communities in the post-9/11 era, at a moment when notions of “success” or “arrival” collided with a much more fraught narrative of exclusion and experiences of racial and Islamophobic discrimination and violence that troubled the notion of model minorityhood. In a region where a liberal discourse of multicultur-
alism and “diversity” has often attempted to mask or contain struggles over race and class, this research sheds light on the experiences of immigrant and refugee communities that are both affluent and established, and also struggling and precarious, through the lens of youth.

The Study

This ethnographic study is based on field work in 2007–2011 in Silicon Valley and Fremont/Hayward in northern California. It focuses on college-age Arab, South Asian, and Afghan American youth, between eighteen and twenty-three years old, who came of age in the post-9/11 era and who live in the greater San Jose area and in Fremont/Hayward. The study uses interviews and participant-observation to offer insights into how a “political” community was mobilized by specific groups of youth in the post-9/11 moment in response to various aspects of the War on Terror. It examines how the micropolitics of specific regional and social contexts can illuminate larger structural processes in order to shed light on questions of state power in a particular historical moment, and as such it is a local case study, not a generalizable report about Muslim American youth or South Asian, Arab, and Afghan American communities at large. In my previous work on the impact of 9/11 on Muslim American youth (Maira 2009), I focused on a group of immigrant high school students in New England, who belonged to a very small, working- to middle-class, recently arrived South Asian immigrant community in a predominantly white city. That ethnographic study explored how they expressed their political subjectivity outside of organized politics, in ways that were shaped by their sense of vulnerability and of being relatively new to the U.S.

This research in California was an opportunity to think about post-9/11 politics not just in a different regional context, but also among a group of young people who were slightly older and mostly in college (and thus could be considered young adults), were U.S. citizens and were born or had lived for several years in the country, and were largely middle to upper-middle class. Nearly all participated in some kind of ethnic or religious group on or off campus, and many were involved in organized activism; I discuss how they engage in “ordinary” politics, as well. I focused primarily on Muslim American youth in this research, given the intensified scrutiny of Muslims in the post-9/11 era, but I also interviewed non-Muslim Arab Americans and Indian Americans as well as older activists from these communities of various religious and national backgrounds, including with secular orientations, in order to understand a range of political views and experiences. I should note that in
the book I use “Muslim American” in instances when I am referring specifically to Muslim American youth and communities and ethnic/national labels when I am denoting a larger category not specifically restricted to Muslims or Muslim Americans; this may seem obvious, but given the common conflation of Muslim with Arab, and the invisibility of Arab Christians, I think this is important to acknowledge.

This ethnography is also to some extent a comparative study, as it explores the experiences of three different groups with unique class and immigration trajectories and distinct historical experiences. I do not do justice to these particularities within the scope of this book, as each group’s experiences merits a detailed study of its own. However, it is apparent that young people brought to political debates and organizing their specific histories and cultural and political connections to other places as well as overlapping concerns, idioms, and imaginaries. I draw on the stories of these youth as important interlocutors in producing this political analysis, although their critiques may be expressed in a different idiom, and put them into conversation with the debates in the scholarly literature.

For this research, I interviewed thirty-nine college-age youth (twenty-three females, sixteen males) who were South Asian (Pakistani and Indian), Arab, and Afghan American. I also did interviews with about twenty community activists, religious leaders, and youth organizers from these communities, of various ages, in addition to numerous informal conversations with people from or engaged in work with South Asian, Arab, Afghan, and Muslim American communities. I attended several community and political events and visited different community and religious organizations in Silicon Valley and Fremont/Hayward. During this period as well as for some years before and after, I myself have been involved in civil, human rights, and antiwar campaigns related to these communities, particularly between 2003, when I first moved to the East Bay, and 2005; this was a period when the anti-war movement in the Bay Area was still energized and cross-racial coalitions focused on post-9/11 civil and immigrant rights issues, not to mention the Palestine solidarity movement, were very active. The major questions in the research were thus propelled by my own observations of the challenges, contradictions, and possibilities of the movements in which I was involved, both peripherally and in a sustained way. I also came to realize that Silicon Valley was a very different political and cultural terrain for organizing than that of the metropolitan Bay Area (particularly San Francisco/Berkeley/Oakland). This research is very much a politically committed project, one that I hope will be part of an ongoing conversation between scholars and those outside of the academy, between young activists and students and an older generation,
and between people who find themselves on the same side of the barricade, so to speak, in opposition to perpetual war, ongoing racism, and economic evisceration.

In fact, this study emerged from the many conversations that I had since 2003 with South Asian, Arab, and Afghan American students at UC Davis, many of whom took my courses on Asian and Arab American youth or who came to my office hours to consult with me about student activism or simply share their experiences of growing up in the post-9/11 era. I soon realized that many of these youth were from the South Bay and hung out together, organized together, and had grown up together in Silicon Valley or Fremont/Hayward. It was apparent that their sense of cross-ethnic affinity was embedded in a sense of cultural and religious affiliation and also, in some cases, in feelings of political solidarity across national and ethnic boundaries. When I embarked on this research, I worked with several undergraduate students from UC Davis who were enthusiastic and able research assistants, and I found myself in the enviable position of being approached by students on a regular basis who wanted to help with the project. Some of them were deeply involved in the social networks of youth from the areas I was studying, while others felt they were on the margins of these circles and hoped the research would help them better understand their own liminal relationship to their “community.” It was clear that these youth had deep investments in this research, and felt it was meaningful to them, which only underscored for me the significance of questions of political identification and cross-ethnic solidarity for this generation.

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of the research process was a pattern where I or one of my research assistants would interview someone for the study, and she (it was always young women who responded in this way) would then contact me to say that the research seemed fascinating and important and she would like to work with me. It was unexpected and gratifying to see how much this study seemed to resonate with some of these young people, and to know that they were driven by some of the same curiosity as well as urgency that I was in trying to understand the politics produced by youth in this moment. It was also striking that there was clearly a gendered investment in the project and that young Muslim American women, who themselves had been subjected to such intense scrutiny since 9/11, perhaps wanted to reverse the gaze, whether hostile or benign, for once (perhaps this was also why there was also a preponderance of female interviewees, given that women contacted their friends to participate, who tended to be other women, in a snowball effect). This process of moving from research subject to researcher in the project was also very much indicative, I realized, of a self-
reflexive awareness among some youth and a belief that in interviewing their peers they would understand their own experiences in a deeper or different way—something they explicitly acknowledged to me time and again.

In this sense, the project turned out to be collaborative and dialogic in ways I had not really anticipated—and it forced me to think deeply about how these youth, who were the object of so much scrutiny, debate, and data collection since 9/11, were perhaps interested in being on the other side of the researcher’s lens, and possibly in deciding how to use that lens themselves and to represent and translate their own narratives. As this pattern of researched turning into researcher persisted, I started asking my research assistants to write reflections about their own experiences after 9/11 and in relation to the study, to share what they thought was important for me to know. Letting my research assistants do open-ended interviews with youth on their own meant, of course, letting go of some control over what ensued in these conversations, and I would sometimes be amused—and on occasion, frankly, slightly frustrated—that a research assistant would ask questions in an interview about marriage, national stereotypes, or other issues which I did not think at the time were key to the study or proffer generalizations about ethnic groups and their behaviors. In other words, this collaborative process was not without its challenges. Yet obviously, as ethnographers know, these instances of conflicting agendas offered another moment of self-reflexivity where I was being educated about what were, indeed, the issues that these young adults or late adolescents were themselves interested in discussing with their peers or the views they had about different communities; clearly many of these conversations unpeeled different layers of the questions that I should have been asking too. So this is very much a co-produced research project, one that would simply not have happened, let alone developed the way it did, without the help of various generations of research assistants, and which is why this discussion cannot simply be relegated to the acknowledgments.

“Learning to Stand Up”

I want to offer here a brief snapshot of a meeting of young activists I attended in Fremont in July 2011 that raised some of the key questions that ripple through this book. The discussion among these youth illustrated to me how cross-ethnic campaigns emerging after 9/11 attempt to grapple with issues of civil rights, warfare, Islamophobia, and political solidarities. The meeting was organized by a young Afghan American activist who belonged to Afghans for Peace, an antiwar group that was trying to organize a leadership training summit, “Learning to Stand Up,” in the East Bay to be held that September.
I drove to the meeting in Fremont from my home in Oakland, a route now familiar to me after numerous trips down the freeway to Silicon Valley from the East Bay, often amid snarled traffic on arteries packed with commuters. This time, Highway 880 South was thankfully relatively unclogged and, turning into Fremont on Decoto Boulevard, I was struck by the beauty of the brown hills rising up in front of me to the sky. Fremont is nestled at the foot of the Sierra Hills, and there is a dramatic juxtaposition of the rugged natural landscape with the monotony of shopping malls, fast food restaurants, and tract homes common in East and South Bay towns. The major streets in Fremont are wide and lined with trees, with Asian and Mexican restaurants interspersed between beauty salons, auto body shops, and gas stations. A sign for a Christian fellowship center, proclaiming “The Joy of Life,” is followed by one for a trendy-looking South Asian restaurant, “Chutney: Indian and Pakistani Cuisine.” Small houses give way to gated communities and low-rise condominiums, rows and rows of identical brown and beige two- and three-story buildings. I was always struck while driving through Fremont by the number of brown faces and particularly by the many South Asians of various ages walking and driving around the streets. Where were all these people from? When did they get here? What were they doing?

The meeting that day was at Suju’s Café in a small strip mall, next to an Ayurveda center and across from a Japanese restaurant. The café was packed that afternoon with young people, all of whom were working on laptops and many of whom seemed to be students. There were a lot of youth who looked East Asian, as well as South and West Asian, youth, in their twenties or so. It almost seemed like a library; most people were quiet and intently focused on their computer screens. The young woman who had organized the meeting, Marjan, came in, followed by a young man wearing a baseball cap turned backward and sporting sunglasses. Marjan had long black hair and was wearing a long sleeved black T-shirt, with her eyes lined in black kohl. She swept us all outside for the meeting amid a flurry of arranging chairs and tables for the group in front of the café.

There were about a dozen people in attendance, four young women in hijab, including Sana, a Palestinian American activist; Feryal, a Pakistani American and former UC Davis student; and two young Afghan American women. Aisha, a Palestinian American woman activist who also graduated from UC Davis, was there, as was Sharat Lin, a well-known, older Indian-Chinese American community and antiwar activist in San Jose. There were three youngish white men, one of whom, Hussein, seemed to be a Muslim convert with a small beard, and who greeted us with “A salaam aleikum!” Hussein was wearing a T-shirt in solidarity with Gaza displaying the iconic
image of a girl flying with a cluster of balloons in her hand, originally painted on the Israeli Wall by the graffiti artist Banksy. One of the other young white men was with the International Socialist Organization (ISO), and the third seemed to be a student activist from San Jose State University. There was also a young East Asian American woman wearing glasses and a knitted beanie in red, green, and black with a star and crescent, who it turned out was also with the ISO.

Marjan began the meeting, after introductions, by reading out the mission statement of the Muslims for Peace Coalition (MPC), the organization that was sponsoring the leadership training workshop, which stated: “No to war, no to terrorism, no to Islamophobia.” The aim of MPC, she said, was to mobilize Muslim Americans to stand up for justice, given their suffering from U.S. wars and Islamophobia, and observed that it had been successful in bringing out hundreds of people in New York. She announced that the organization’s framework would be used for the September training summit in the East Bay, following a similar program to be held on the East Coast. Afghans for Peace (AFP), who worked with Afghan Youth Volunteers, a group active in northern Afghanistan, was one of the organizations in the coalition represented by MPC and it wanted to organize a rally on October 7 in the Bay Area, on the tenth anniversary of the invasion of Afghanistan. Marjan noted that AFP’s mission was similar to MPC’s, but that instead of saying “no to terrorism,” since AFP also wanted to challenge state terror, its core principles were “No to violence and extremism, and no to Islamophobia.” Hussein pressed her on this point, asking why the organizers couldn’t take this approach at the fall workshop as well, if they believed in this critique of the concept of terrorism, as he emphatically did. Marjan said it was important to follow MPC’s principles for the conference, even if she herself was an “anarchist,” that is, more radical politically. She commented that the Muslim American community was not yet ready to publicly support anything “political,” in her view, let alone to challenge the state, and MPC did actually want to work with the state. She also pointed out that MPC’s mission statement mentioned that the group wanted to work for “our country,” even though she herself did not even identify as American.

Marjan’s friend in the baseball cap interrupted, saying he wanted to know what exactly MPC meant by working for “civic duties” in its mission statement—did that mean “helping old ladies to cross the street?” There was some laughter around the table, but it was apparent that the discussion of political principles and strategic compromises was getting a bit tense. I commented that perhaps if these issues about challenging state policies or U.S. wars did come up during the workshop, it might be possible to allow airing
of these critiques, with which many of the Muslim American youth in attendance might concur, so that the workshop could offer some space to reflect on these issues and so we could work in the cracks and crevices we find in institutionalized spaces. The young Asian American woman nodded. Marjan remarked that, in her view, MPC was the only national Muslim American organization that was even willing to take a critical political stand on these issues. It was apparent that Marjan’s own politics were quite different from those of MPC, but she felt she had to stick to its guidelines for the event.

Marjan added that Zahra Billoo, a young Muslim American activist with CAIR in the Bay Area, would be doing a Know Your Rights workshop on the second day of the event. Someone else wanted to know to whom in particular the workshop was targeted, and if it was mainly for students. Marjan responded that it was for anyone who wanted to attend, for the event was based on a “broad notion” of activism; that is, it was not just for “college students,” it could be “children, old people.” Another person at the meeting wanted to know what the larger objectives of the workshop were. Hussein said, quietly, “I think it’s trying to engage the average Muslim around socially conscious issues.” Marjan added that the focus was on civil rights, based on the agenda set by MPC. There was some debate about this approach around the table, as well.

A back-and-forth discussion then ensued about whether to invite “big name” speakers to attract people to the event, since some, like Aisha, were concerned that it might be difficult to get a good turnout and pull it off successfully in a couple of months. One young Afghan woman in a silver-gray hijab, who was wearing sparkling rhinestone jewelry, said that it would help to get Muslim “stars,” such as the cleric Sheikh Hamza Yusuf, if they wanted youth to come out, because MPC was not yet known in the Bay Area. Feryal seemed to disagree with her, saying that there were many “local gems” who were not as well-known and who should be given a chance to speak, given that the purpose of the event was to develop community leadership. Sana finally offered to try to contact Imam Zaid Shakir and Dr. Hatem Bazian, two well-respected Muslim community leaders from the Bay Area who are popular on the lecture circuit and among Muslim American youth. Lin gently commented that it would be important to try to build the organization “organically” and to create a grassroots base embedded in the local community. Marjan, who seemed tired by this point from fielding critiques and anxious to figure out the logistics of the event, observed that she was not the leader of the program, and wanted everyone to take leadership and help make the event happen.
This discussion gave me much food for thought as it encapsulated some of the major debates about strategic and radical approaches to political organizing after 9/11 and hinted at the tensions related to questions of rights-based activism and political inclusion in communities that felt vulnerable due to state scrutiny of their politics. Could one publicly challenge “state terror” if one was defined as an object of the War on Terror and community members were anxious about surveillance and backlash? What were the limits of Muslim American activism and who got to decide this? Should young activists look for guidance from established institutions and invite celebrated Muslim American figures or create an alternative leadership structure? What did it mean to be a radical Afghan Muslim American anarchist trying to do transnational solidarity work with Afghanistan if state terrorism could not be challenged? These questions about political mobilization and efforts to politicize a community for whom politics is equated with “radicalization,” and thus criminalized by the state, were especially acute for youth at the meeting because some of the young activists present would indeed be considered politically radical, within a progressive-left lexicon, including Marjan. But there was also the question of how to draw people to an event in an area saturated with political conferences and talks, as well as faith-focused events and NGO-sponsored workshops, and whether and how to draw on established Muslim American community leaders who have a huge following among the younger generation and have risen to national and international prominence since 9/11.

Primarily, however, the debate that erupted around the table in the Fremont café was about the limits of possible and “proper” politics by Muslim American youth, and how to define “terror” in a context in which the U.S. state was also inflicting violence on civilians from Iraq to Afghanistan. Was this an issue that could be addressed openly in a leadership workshop for Muslim Americans, in a climate of heightened surveillance of Muslim American youth organizing? Could the problems facing the Muslim American community after 9/11 be addressed through a framework of civic integration or civil rights? Clearly, some in that multiethnic group of activists wanted to push for a more critical approach that challenged the leadership of an older generation and the liberal discourse of “civic duties” and inclusion for Muslim Americans. Marjan herself spoke at an October 2011 rally in Fremont on the anniversary of the invasion of Afghanistan, fiercely criticizing the liberal discourse of antiterrorism, peace, and dialogue.

The chapters that follow delve more deeply into the questions that young Afghan, South Asian, and Arab American activists continue to grapple with
as they build and participate in cross-racial coalitions in the post-9/11 era, trying to use the existing paradigms of civil rights, human rights, women’s rights, and gay rights while working against the grain of a dominant discourse of rights, liberal democracy, and proper political subjecthood.

The Book
The young people I spoke to in Silicon Valley were engaged in various forms of political activism and coalition building focusing on different, overlapping axes of mobilization in post-9/11 politics that pose thorny dilemmas, as the vignette above suggests. I found that their political mobilization generally pivoted on three nodes: civil rights, human rights, and women’s rights and gay rights in the context of the post-9/11 culture wars. The main arc of the book focuses on these three major sites of post-9/11 youth activism and discusses the attempts by South Asian, Arab, and Afghan American youth to engage with, or rethink, these frameworks at a moment when rights-talk has become an alibi for war and imperialism and a core element of political activism.

Chapter One provides an overview of the particular racial and economic landscape of Silicon Valley, interrogating the narrative of Silicon Valley and the Bay Area as a liberal multicultural oasis buffered from Islamophobic backlash as well as the contradictions of this exceptionalism. It discusses the notion of 9/11 as a crucible for politicization for South Asian, Arab, and Afghan American youth and the line between “good” and “bad” Muslim Americans that regulates political subjecthood. Chapter Two explores the politics of the new Muslim American counterpublic that has been formed on the terrain of “Muslim civil rights” since 9/11 and also produced through interfaith alliances, and how a politics of recognition and religious multiculturalism shapes cross-ethnic and cross-class coalitions. It demonstrates that civil liberties is a powerful framework in U.S. politics that young Muslim American activists have adopted but which has confined their resistance, in many instances, to a domestic discourse of inclusion that excludes a critique of the global War on Terror and U.S. imperialism, undermining the possibility of other kinds of solidarities.

Chapters Three and Four both focus on the deployment of “human rights” by youth in political engagement with issues of imperial warfare, national sovereignty, and democracy, and the ways this produces cross-ethnic alliances and transnational solidarities but also encounters with repression and censorship. Human rights activism has emerged as a dominant paradigm for global politics, including in the context of U.S. wars and U.S.-backed occupations...
from Iraq and Afghanistan to Pakistan and Palestine. In Chapter Three, I discuss how many of the youth I spoke to found that the resort to human rights failed in their solidarity activism focused on Palestine, in particular, a contradiction that reveals the deeper limitations and exceptions of human rights politics in the global war on terrorism. Chapter Four then explores how an institutionalized paradigm of human rights and humanitarianism has been used to legitimize the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan as well as Obama’s “Af-Pak” doctrine, obscuring the long history of U.S. and Western imperial interventions. I discuss how the narratives of Afghan and Pakistani American youth shed light on Af-Pak as an imperial geography and zone of degraded sovereignty and exceed a liberal human rights discourse.

Chapters Five and Six together explore the post-9/11 culture wars focused on women’s rights, gay rights, and Islam, and the ways in which Muslim American youth wrestle with imperial feminism and homonationalism in a climate of permanent surveillance. Chapter Five examines how cultural debates often mask the work of neoliberalism and a politics of class that underlies notions of success and achievement for college students and trajectories of professionalized activism or risky politics in the post-9/11 moment. In Chapter Six, I discuss what it means for Arab, South Asian, and Afghan American youth to come of age in the surveillance state and in the context of the regulation of Islam in the culture wars. Their surveillance stories reveal the scrutiny, policing, and disciplining of their politics, and the self-regulation of “moderate” and “radical” politics as defined by the counterterrorism regime, but I found that young people also attempt to engage in forms of countersurveillance, contributing to what I call “surveillance effects.”

Finally, in the Conclusion, I explore what the concept of democracy might mean for young people in a post-9/11 era when liberal democracy has become an alibi for imperial intervention and when uprisings for democracy in the Arab world, in which youth were prominently involved, have challenged U.S.-backed regimes. Democracy has been a key trope in the post-9/11 culture wars and a core component of Western modernity, legitimizing a late imperial project in conjunction with the framework of human and civil rights, women’s rights, and gay rights. Reflecting on expressions of solidarity with Egyptians and Arab youth in Tahrir Square at public events in Silicon Valley, I discuss whether there is indeed a notion of democracy that can be excavated from or redefined in struggles against imperial racism, violence, and annihilation.

All these chapters explore how to define the object of struggles for “justice,” in a moment when the vocabulary of progressive and left movements seems to be either co-opted or depleted. What we can learn from the political
imaginaries of those whose politics are viewed as the most suspect and so are the most fragile, and who also must be the most resistant? The politics of youth who are targets of the War on Terror are, in the words of an Afghan proverb recounted for me by a young Afghan American woman, “more delicate than a flower, yet harder than a rock.” These are the political paradoxes and struggles of youth whose stories I wish to tell.