The Last Sky, Above Ground Zero: Introducing *Ethnography #9*[1]

Tanzeen Rashed Doha

> The brand-new-flat-screen here in this Northern Thai house plays over and over the images from exactly halfway around the world of two planes crashing into New York City, of explosions, of two tall white buildings tumbling down and lashing out with giant paws of dust. (2)

Ethnography #9 is not about Islam, but the book, the ethnography, the ethnographer, the possessed writer, and the haunted reader are all confronted by Islam in the very first instance, by its potential, its catastrophe, its capacities, and its ghosts. Not Hegel's speculative ghosts—"the Mahometans"—who advance in world-history only to fall behind Christianity (later, secularity). Not Derrida's specters, where ghosts work as metaphors. But actual spirits of/from another realm who physically, literally force the secular world to halt and look itself in the mirror.

The world stops, when what is larger than the world makes it stop.

Alan Klima knows this. He could have started his meditations differently. Why does he begin with 9/11? Why wouldn't he? It is what is immediately in front of us, what jolted us, what orchestrated a new history, a new world-spirit. In a way, it is—for lack of a better word—the truth that demands that we look into—again, for lack of a better word—the essence of what it is that makes history, history's possibility to become itself. Such a demand requires a different kind of motion, where one has to look back in the rearview while staring into the future.

In these catastrophic times, it is impossible to not think of ghosts without also thinking of the virus. They are inflected and infected by each other. But they are not to be collapsed into each other. They are separate things. In terms of positioning, ghosts are either a step behind the virus, or they are a step ahead. Because the idea of stepping ahead or falling behind may imply a linear teleology, it is important to note that within the unfolding of the world—in which there is a directional structure—there are also breaks, ruptures, freefalls, a small room for maneuvering or playing, and as a result, a step forward or a fall backwards can reverse because of temporality's uncertainty in itself within the pulse of history. Klima makes this counter-intuitive gesture of reversal when he exclaims that humans are stalking ghosts. It is not that ghosts are specters for humans (remainders from the past that exist as shadows) or a form of inheritance (a gift into the present) but quite the opposite: they displace humans, they challenge the very architecture of our metaphysical assumptions about ourselves, assumptions about what it is that make us human in the first place. In "Ghosts Count," his contribution to this book forum, Gil Anidjar observes that Klima "brings us back to the future of *contagion*." Anidjar's reflections on the history of plagues, their interwoven temporalities, their ghostly manifestations all point to not only the reach of Klima's experimental ethnography—in which he writes from the future—but also capital itself ushering in a history of the future through the movement of the virus. In this sense, it *is* the "Asian contagion," the "China virus,"[2] because China is the future; it acts in history as history. But such a history, such a future, collapses as fast as the present itself, because what is becoming is always already receding.

Anidjar relates different histories of the contagion (e.g., Asian contagion, smallpox for Native Americas, cholera and influenza, etc.) and how different enemies are identified as the "plague exporter" at different points in time. Anidjar does not forget to mention how prior to the contemporary orientalist account of the "China virus," the Ottoman Empire was blamed for bringing plagues to Europe. Beyond the problem of racism or the history of the enemy, what draws my attention here is not only the relation between infections and ghosts, but also how infections themselves are ghostly in their presence and absence. Contagions have within them multiple histories of other times, other ages, other contingencies. Like ghosts, infections too are mediated through the unseen. In this formal sense, there is a striking similarity between the two.

I would like to think about Muslims in relation to this question of mediation. In the prologue to his poststructuralist text *A Fundamental Fear*, Salman Sayyid writes: "It is argued that ghosts do not really exist; they are but fictions, perhaps just like Muslims who also do not seem really to exist."[3] Sayyid then elaborates on this metaphorical similarity between ghosts and Muslims. Sayyid, of course, is giving us an account of the fear the West has about Islam as a political identity. But I want to think about metaphysics and essence (how crass, I know!). Like infections and ghosts, Muslims too are mediated by the unseen. This is foundational to being Muslim. Muslims relate to each other and to others through the facticity of the unseen as the mediator for all earthly and heavenly relations. In fact, it is categorically impossible for Muslims to emerge *as themselves* if they are mediated by the seen or the representable (i.e., Jesus, the monarch, the Enlightenment, race, or the market). Muslims are not secular social constructs, nor are they created by a God whose image is available to us. In this sense, the unseen is the (pre)condition that allows for the corporeal existence of Muslims.[4]

In his evocative essay, Anidjar also wonders about the reality of numbers themselves. Are they rational? Are they natural? Are they supernatural? And, then he asks—via philosopher Alain Badiou—about the encounter between numbers and the impossible.

Before moving towards this encounter, I want to slow down and inquire about the curious relationship between numbers and trade centers. What is the particular relationship between numbers, their objects, and the consciousness of the object's dynamic with numbers? How do these sets of relationships produce a plane of immanence that the trade center represents? The autumn of 2001 cements an awkward relationship between numbers, centers of trade, and Islam. The world of the unseen interrupts the global economy through a new mediation.[5] Interestingly, Lewis Mumford had declared the architecture of the Twin Towers to be an "example of the purposeless giantism and technological exhibitionism that are now eviscerating the living tissue of every great city."[6] He also pointed at their ugliness and thought they looked like "glass-and-metal filing cabinets."[7] Those are curious tidbits, given Mumford's fascination with religion and the spirit world. Perhaps he already sensed the danger of the Towers' anti-political-spirituality. Perhaps the ground, the architecture, Man's aim to reach for the sky through sheer technological innovation, and the very audacity of thought itself in overvaluing its ability to reach the heavens, all come together to make for a terrible formula, a formula that interrupts numbers' encounter with the impossible, an arithmetic responsible for creating a global *fasād*.[8]

Let me return to the spectrality of specters. Klima is suspicious of thinking that understands ghosts as metaphors, a kind of practice that to him probably appears rudimentary in its dealings with ghosts. He writes: "To be sure, it is an almost perfectly valid reading to see the specter in Derrida as merely a metaphorical extraction from the spirit world, and I still do not know whether I do not think this as well: the force of secular materialist commonsense feels strong in him." For Klima then, what is at stake as an ethnographer is elaborating on the unfolding of the journey through which ghosts become ghosts in which they are not the mere outcomes of the social or the historical in the secular sense. But Klima is not a philosopher. He is not trying to tell us about the ontology of ghosts. Nor is he substituting the ontological with the ontic—thus imagining an exit from Western phenomenology—to add to the archive of "the ontological turn." There is instead an ethnographic delirium at play here—an encounter—a condition that affects him, displaces him, and which takes over. In this sense, Klima does not violate the spirit world to make sense of *his* world or what is absent in *this* world. Klima writes:

> A mere tropological spectral writing takes metaphors from the spirit world to, as it were, complete its thoughts about what exceeds its grasp. Or it sees haunting as standing for something else that is actually real: ghosts are merely signs, emblems of social anxiety or some such, which are more real than ghosts and which emanate out of structural historical processes that are even more real than that… We write about ghosts, but, of course, *they are not*, and *we are*. (26)

In his contribution to this forum, Rajbir Singh Judge—much like Klima himself—calls into question the social and the real, the ground we assume necessary for the construction of the world as such. His essay makes an (anti-)foundational move: it works through mediations and employs a set of psychoanalytic operations through "discursive traditions" (Asad's phrase) in which the ground turns out to be the abyss. Consider this observation: "The halting and hesitant nature of my mom's voice as she remembered is lost, but also loosened here and then too as detours repeated themselves. What is of note is not the everyday life of my mom and her recounting, her own rewriting, but the spirits themselves which emanate from and give way to each other." Judge's lyrical story-telling shifts through histories and temporalities, and they only make sense—without necessarily becoming all too coherent—when encountered by their spirits. Judge is suspicious of "inclusivity." So are spirits! The anxiety in the social sciences itself is one that emerges from a need to make legible what is unknown. This is precisely why "inclusivity" is foundational to secularity's regime of force. It includes you, to dominate you, to make sense of you.

The manner in which "inclusivity" forces itself upon us, is through an expansion of the landscapes of the known and the knowable. This is not only a question of political geography or mapping. Those are extracting tactics. What is at stake in the expansionary mechanism of "inclusivity" is the subject's sense of comprehension of the known as sovereign. We do not know what we do not know. This sentence has two clauses which differ grammatically. The first is declarative. We do not know (something). The second part is descriptive. It is not a description of the actual thing that we do not know. It simply describes the factness of the unknown as unknowable. "Inclusivity" is a lie. It breaks with the facticity in the second sentence. It employs strange techniques: it totalizes its borders, it engulfs knowable entities, it corrupts the names of the unknown and makes new names, it integrates to assimilate. But then there is resistance, there is terror, there is infection, there is possession. There is a strike back. There is a haunting. There is a fissure, a fracture, a confrontation with the impossible, an attempt by those who originate from fire to play with, take over, or simply horrify those who originate from clay.

In "Girl No Thing but Screens," her contribution to this book forum, Erica Robles-Anderson reviews Klima's text and pays attention to not only Janpen's interiority, but interiority itself. Robles-Anderson states: "Janpen is an interiority, an inside to look out from." In describing this interiority, she identifies a libidinal economy, and what she calls "the psychogeography of a pain located both 'inside of the inside of' and simultaneously beyond the body." It is this dynamic between the corporeal and not-quite-corporeal that generates the conditions of possibility of the screen. Robles-Anderson reads Klima as a media theorist and raises important questions about the relation between screens and gender—what it means to tend to children and what it is to be childlike. Robles-Anderson inquires about Janpen. I too want to know more about Janpen. What is she? Where does she come from? Where is she taking us? How are mothers, godmothers, children—as number experts and ghosts—economic circuits, realms even outside of the register of the commodity-fetish, colliding into each other so that an anthropologist in an unbearable state jokes to himself and says: "Let it happen: just lie back and think about multi-sited ethnography." Janpen never leaves. She is not always named. Names leave signatures, and signatures bring about a terrible inheritance, like inherited property with traces across lands, oceans, and skies. That kind of inheritance enters bodies to evacuate flesh, to diminish the bones almost to the point of total collapse, disassociate the connective tissues, and turn the exterior pale, as the bodies nearly evaporate from the inside. Without being burdened with such inheritance, Janpen is everywhere. In my reading of *Ethnography #9*, the architecture of screens and the metaphysics of media themselves are interrupted in inversions and repetitions by a girl-ghost and a maternal-materiality. Because these interruptions are not stated too directly and because they unfold in shadows—a play between darkness and light—Janpen *appears* to merely perform a ghost-function in a larger encounter of Man. Robles-Anderson is right; this is the first instance. But ghosts that are not metaphors are always already well-traveled. They move between appearances and essence, between the concrete and the abstract, without creating a set of mappable coordinates, having already exceeded their earlier corpse.

This kind of movement of ghosts troubles secularity and its categories, identities, and names. It *breaks with* materiality, shows that secular materialism is in fact not capacious enough in dealing with ghosts. Anthropologist Talal Asad reminds us that secularism is best approached indirectly.[9] He tells us we should trace its shadows. By shadows, Asad means pain, agency, and myth. For Klima, however, the point of contact and exploration are the shadows themselves. My own ethnographic encounters tell me that there is something about secularity that acts as a borderline. As a ghost, she is borderline, because she is also human. She is always a double and a paradox. She betrays, to settle. She settles, to force herself to not betray. She engulfs, so she can escape. She escapes, when she is intimate. The other—the "I" that is external as an image to the self—remembers her as real, corporeal. But she is a no, the unconscious' hatred of itself. In a winter country, she takes a stroll only to accidentally fall below into the water as the ice closes in and freezes above her.[10] You run towards her, and by the time you reach her location you cannot hear her anymore. You see her disappearing. You find a hammer, and try to break the ice to get her out, only to realize that it is you who is drowning. You have been drowning this entire time.

Let me stop writing from a dream for a second. My fieldsite is Bangladesh. There is no snow there. My recent sense of wonder in the Upper Midwest interrupted my reflection. Something about the infinitely snowy horizon makes me think about the afterness of the secular world. This afterness comes with a sensation of a draft, or a particular chill when the snow hits your skin for the first time as you decide to walk against it. An afterness, which results from an internal opposition. But this is the condition of the subject herself, not an experience of a particular shift in the environment. The subject is in a state of doubt. Identifications ascribed to her socially are inadequate in addressing her. There is an againstness inside her—always already present. The afterness of secularity is indebted to secularity itself, and therefore, it is an "unsettled relation, a haunting."[11] There is no full crossing of secularity through a direct movement. But rather, an engagement that exceeds itself, always moving towards something, while something else lingers on—and that something else is not an ideal origin, nor does the movement away from it aim for a reconciliation with the past. In other words, the worlds collide with each other, emerge from and return into each other. Klima, in a different context, writes: "The issue that I want to bring forward here concerns the idea of *two worlds*, a *this world* and a *world beyond*, existing sometimes in parallel and sometimes in crossing." I am interested in observing this problem of the "two worlds" playing out within the subject, a subject that is originally secular—self-declaredly so—and attempts to transition to the political spirituality of Islam, has interruptive self-doubt, fails to sustain herself, and ends up disappearing into nothingness. Janpen, like my interlocutors, also disappears into nothingness.[12] But she never goes away.

We know that subjects are not necessarily constructed through a metaphysics of presence. It is not that such subjects are always already unstable—of course they are—rather, the subject may be quite literally targeted and possessed by ghosts, or, in my fieldsite, by *jinn*, and as a result are fractured, or have within them multiple voices. Let me press this further. If we think of the subject to be already lacking in coherence or self-unity, then the notion of a subject having multiple voices disintegrates as well (because the latter claim entails an assumption of unity/ipseity). In this case, the term does not refer to a subject with depth or flesh, but rather, an outline with a name, a kind of constitution that from the beginning appears to be ethereal, without material or content as such. This outline is like a surface. Perhaps, then, the ghost—or, the world of the unseen—prefigures the subject and is ontologically prior to subjectivity itself. On the surface of that outline there is a contestation of forces that result in the intermingling of voices, screams, silences, and utterances.

The story of one of my interlocutors is relevant to Janpen—her disappearance while simultaneously existing in other names—as well as the question of contestations along the surface of the outline. Rushdiya is a tormented spirit. She comes from a family of spiritual guides ("pirs"). She is not very good at orthodox practice. But she is deeply invested in the other realms outside of what can be perceived by the senses. She often has vivid dreams. Her friend Saif—whom I have known for many years in the context of my volunteer work with a drug counseling group that engages with texts in narrative therapy, psychoanalysis, and sufism— often counsels Rushdiya and finds her to be "emotionally volatile." Saif also tells me that although Rushdiya remains undiagnosed, she appears to have behaviors similar to borderline patients. Saif, a reader of Lacan, is formally trained in the field of philosophy and worked as a translator of canonical texts in psychoanalysis and phenomenology, and most recently in (anti)modern Islamism. He informs me that Rushdiya's internal crisis seems to have its origins in dreams and she often interacts with the jinn. Saif also thinks that the evil eye may have had a harmful impact on Rushdiya's emotional capacities. The evil eye usually derives from vindictive jealousy from others, but in Rushdiya's case, she gives herself the evil eye by carelessly staring in the mirror, leaving her heart vulnerable. She torments herself. The other in herself troubles her. She forgets to recite the prophetic prayer of looking into the mirror. Rushdiya has a sensuous body. She is readily affected by the presence of others, both of humans and the jinn. She had tried to take her own life several times. Each time she was persuaded to do so by voices that came from shadows. Rushdiya's suicide attempts have a specific aesthetic texture. She would wear a white sari, spread rose petals in bathtub water, light candles, and take multiple prescription pills. Rushdiya is not suicidal anymore, and after her last procedure of gastric suction, her father—a deeply religious man—convinced her to go to Mecca with him on pilgrimage (*umrah*). Afterward, she had several dreams. In one of those dreams, after the dawn prayer (*fajr*), as she walked side by side with other believers to give *salam* to the Prophet and make *dhikr* near the Noble Garden (*rawda sharifa*, the area in the Prophet's mosque in Medina between his house and pulpit), she felt a bright white light come out of the grave. As she walked towards the exit door, she could sense the light in her body, and she received an instruction from a voice behind her to walk in a straight path until she saw a small stone beneath which there would be a white feather.

Rushdiya, in her dream, did discover the white feather at the precise moment her sleep was interrupted. She woke up with a sense of spiritual panic. With Saif, she would locate a traditional dream interpreter. But her restless mind, lacking in the practice of *sabr*, started interpreting the dream on its own. She did not get to meet the interpreter. Rushdiya believed that the dream was guiding her to "find a spiritual man." In the next few years, Rushdiya got married and divorced several times, one after the other. Now, she is alone again. She was always alone—even during her marriages. Something about encountering the quiet while having to explain it to her ex-husbands felt more unbearable than being completely alone by herself. Rushdiya says that the jinn are always present. They visit her and speak to her; sometimes, she dreams new dreams in which she travels through time and the jinn introduces her to the Companions of the Prophet (*sahaba*). Her interactions with the jinn continue to this day. Saif says that in a conversation Rushdiya blamed the jinn for her restless decisions in life—the quickness with which she begins and ends interactions and relationships. She swears she tries. But this is not simply a story of heartbreak, loss, and disintegration. It is also a story of being-with, struggling-with, and living-with. In a way, because the jinn appear and reappear in different forms and interrogate the flesh of her heart's condition, and make her doubt the foundations of her physical experience of the world as such, Rushdiya finds solace in her internal devastation. It is impossible to measure the distance of difference between what we name Rushdiya and the jinn. Klima's comments on "no-thing-ness" are significant here. Like Janpen, Rushdiya is not a thing. Rushdiya's appearance in her body as a woman tormented by the spirit world, or—by Saif's assessment of her—vacillating between psychosis and neurosis,[13] makes her into that surface upon which many voices struggle with each other to create specific utterances, sometimes sentences. This precise condition is what makes it difficult to assert her identity, or to think of her subjectivity as a given.

Klima's description of the increasing appearance of faces on the surface of the water as one paddles through it shows the haunting experience of not having a stable frame of reference, a ground upon which to stand:

> But now my eyes darted to the eddy of the paddle. As I flicked past it, I turned my head, and in the expanding ripple on the surface was the reflection of a face. A boy's face, white as boiled rice, big black eyes desperately glaring at me. Again, the next stroke, another face, another boy, crying and angry, as if it were my fault. A girl, then a baby, everywhere I stuck the paddle in the water was another figure. I could not stop from looking, but the faster I paddled, the faster I passed them by. The faster I wanted to go, the faster I paddled, and the more faces appeared. Until the whole creek behind me was a wake of the lost faces of children, and now my heart was beating so fast, and my breath heaved in my chest. (34)

As distressing as groundlessness can be, Rushdiya, as I mentioned above, finds a small degree of comfort now that she agrees with Saif that the other realm or the spirit world are responsible for her condition. Prior to this, Rushdiya was unsure. She did not commit exclusively to the discourse of Islamic sciences for answers. Rushdiya was influenced by other traditions, bhakti practices, and tantric rituals. Her engagement with those cultures emerges from her embeddedness in the literary, philosophical, and spiritual practices of the region. The influences of Hindu, Buddhist, Jainist, and other South Asian traditions upon the Muslim subject has become part of the ideological narrative of contemporary secularism in Bangladesh. Often under the name of indigeneity, secularists suggest that strict Islamic traditions are not only exclusionary of other influences but also a form of Arabization that is not from the region itself. This form of indigeneity works through not simply an otherization and representation of Islam as foreign substance added later to the corpus of subcontinental cultural discourse, but also through making assumptions about what it constitutes to be "the authentic" and "the real." It is important to note, however, that while the conventional secular interpretations of the complex interweaving within the cultural practices of the region can often be simplistic, there are some contemporary practitioners, critics, and commentators who have interpreted the multiple religious influences in a way that moves beyond a new-age syncretism.[14] But such complexity is not necessarily a proper safeguard against cultural and regional claims to authenticity. Orthodox discursive traditions that are exclusively Islamist are treated with suspicion by not only the nationalists but also those who provide de-theologized descriptions of Islam.[15] After her shift towards the discourse of Islam, Rushdiya, regardless of her failures in obligatory and recommended practices, began to commit to processes of spiritual healing within the tradition itself, conditioning her being to be subjected by its regulative and disciplinary mechanisms. Her suffering realized itself within the dreamlife of Islam. And, her disappearance into no-thing-ness and reappearance in other voices became coherent within the narratives of a contemporary memory of Islam.

In "Phantomography," his contribution to this book forum, political anthropologist Allen Feldman describes not only disappearance itself but the "disappearance of disappearance." He also writes about "traumatic reappearance[s]." The fading out of the subject from herself, and her disappearance from the political totality at play—within the structure of the War on Terror—is, as Feldman shows, a case of accidentalizing enforced disappearance into "being randomized, silenced and rendered unmotivated and acausal by the disappearance of disappearance." While Feldman's emphasis here is on political disappearance at specific sites of confrontation (e.g., Northern Ireland), I want to think about theological disappearance and the spirit's frantic return. Bodies that get evacuated out of themselves, and spirits that are choked out of Islamist (read: terrorist par excellence) bodies—turning them into dead meat[16]—re-organize themselves for a reentry into spheres declared secular. These entries are sudden, extraordinary, sometimes violent, and often traumatic. As important as the critique of the political doctrine of secularism is, I want to think more internally here. How are subjects in their internal national-historical experience within the regimes of everyday secularization haunted by their own memories of Islam? Rushdiya, for instance, experiences "traumatic reappearances"[17] of Islam within herself. Sometimes it is visitations from the jinn. Sometimes it is a good dream. Sometimes it is a simple feeling of being embraced by angels when she recites specific Quranic verses before sleep. Good dreams or angels do not cause trauma in the conventional sense. But Rebecca Comay, in a different context, implies that trauma within its emergence from itself releases itself, and therefore as a term has more significance than its "sentimentality and pathos."[18] In this broader sense, then, even good dreams are "traumatic" in how they force conjuring and interpreting retroactively, resulting in an encounter between dream and wake life, blurring their difference, never quite collapsing them into each other, leaving an unexplainable excess.

It is not an easy adjustment for the heart. Rushdiya has to discipline herself to create the conditions necessary so that she can treat her guests from the other realm with kindness and hospitality. These interactions are never direct. They are mediated by another: the unseen.

In my description of what I call "internal" to Rushdiya, I may have given the impression that there is an actual bounded Rushdiya who is clearly separated from the outside. But remember, I was careful to suggest that I can only speak of outlines upon whose surface there are contestations of voices. The idea that Rushdiya is there, and a jinn comes and haunts her, is only part of the story. It may be the other way around, by which it is not that the spirit haunts, arrives, and leaves; Rushdiya herself may have left (since when and where to, I do not know). While listening to Saif relay some of these events, I had a sense that prior to her fairly recent feeling of comfort with the spirit world—let us call it "cohabitation", following Stefania Pandolfo[19]—there were some brutal transactions. Those could possibly have been kidnappings of the spirit. Klima asks: "Where did I go, when she came?" (145). Similarly, I wonder: Where did Rushdiya go when the other voices came? As an ethnographer, I see and hear stories. I have to start somewhere. Even though it is habitual to begin with the subject, in the narratives here I have often begun from elsewhere. Whether in reversal Rushdiya herself torments the spirit world or kidnaps the jinn, as opposed to her being a victim of their possession, what is immediately curious is the necessity of disappearance in the emergence of a relationality (which is also a non-relationality). It is like love. In order to love one has to take risks, wander away and disappear into the other, become ether, and return later.

The enfleshment of death becomes manifest when the body de-souls. Feldman writes about the War on Terror, and he specifically mentions "[the] staged sexual tableau at Abu Ghraib" to consider how dead flesh becomes political flesh, exhibiting the "dramaturgical reanimation of sovereign power." I used the term "dead meat" earlier, following the Congolese novelist Sony Labou Tansi. When Man declares himself sovereign, he attributes to himself a domain that he cannot fathom in his finitude. Such a declaration, therefore, is a declaration of ambition, an ambition to consume what he is able to see and perceive in the horizon of this life. This act of consumption requires the turning of flesh into meat.[20] Such racial cannibalism is impossible without the flesh's de-theologization. The flesh is fungible when de-spiritualized. As a site, then, Abu Ghraib is not only an example of pornographic imaging of anti-Islamist brutality, but also a space of secular recalibration of Man himself. Man refounds, exceeds, and re-actualizes himself in a new history as "the real"—against divinity. The theologian and mystic al-Ghazali writes in *The Niche of Lights* (an exploration on the metaphysics of divine light):

> Know also that the visible world in relation to the world of dominion is like the shell in relation to the kernel, the form and mold in relation to the spirit, darkness in relation to light, and the low in relation to the high. That is why the world of dominion is called the "high world," the "spiritual world," and the "luminous world," while standing opposite to it is the low, the corporeal, and the dark world.[21]

Al-Ghazali's text is about a singular verse in the Quran, 24:35, better known as the "Verse of Light." This short excerpt, however, shows the limits of corporeality and the world as such. The secular ambition I mentioned earlier, then, is not only an example of an exaggerated self-conception of Man and his capacities, but also a demonstration of mystification and ignorance of Man in confusing the visible world, or visibility itself, with "the world of dominion."

Klima brings up Islam a second time in *Ethnography #9*. His inclination is to not overthink or force an interpretation of events but rather to see what shows itself to him. In this sense, Klima's approach is meditative, soulful. There is no reaching into the world. He is dwelling in it, and he is seeing that the name that shapes the horizon—the sky—of that world is Islam. There is a war against what this name discloses, resulting in the production of spirits; "far too many" as Klima observes, resulting in a radical vanishing of "the barrier between the living and the dead."[22] I don't think Klima is using the War on Islam as a contextual framework for his conceptual engagements with deterritoriality. Islam as a point of reference—both at the beginning of the book and again in "Betting On the Real"—does something for a gothic ethnography. There is a mode of apprehension, and how one positions oneself in relation to an object determines how much of that object one can perceive.[23] This is easy to understand with physical objects. I am sitting at the table, and I see one side of the cup right in front of me. I can only see a certain portion of the cup. I cannot see the whole cup. How much of the cup I can perceive depends on my position in relation to the cup. The way the coordinates of perception work for non-physical objects is surprisingly similar. I have to position myself in a particular way as well, in order to experience something in relation to a non-physical object. I have to orient myself within a lived tradition in a specific way: I have to be able to recite specific prayers of protection, discipline my desires, train my ears to ignore whispers from the devil, protect myself from the evil eye, and open myself to new modes of communication. Before I even try to decipher dreams, I have to first learn how to dream. How can we dream better dreams? Sometimes we can dream the precise dream that takes us away. Now, in reversal: How do we make ourselves adequate as objects for the spirit world? How do we become open to disappearance so that we can leave here and journey somewhere else? Then, there is the problem of facticity,[24] a kind of limitation that can never be overcome. In fact, we can never make ourselves adequate to the task of having apprehension of a totality. In this sense, the subject is always already displaced. It is precisely this realization that opens the door for specters. In one sense, then, if anthropology of "the real" is an anthropology of subjects, a gothic ethnography begins from the opposite position, with the impossibility of the subject, with no-thing.

If Islam as a name discloses for us the sky of the world, and if the world shows itself to be in a state of catastrophe, then the name of Islam is also a form of closure—a declaration of the end of repetitions and the chimera of perpetual openings in the present. The anthropology of "the real" is the science of a crumbling world. Gothic ethnography, on the other hand, suspends seriousness[25] and displaces "the real." It is a new style and form of writing and encounter. There is a fundamental relation between Islam and gothic ethnography because both de-signify our assumptions about what it is that makes us subjects in the first place. In fact, they both unsettle our assumption that it is us who are making assumptions, that it is us who are living our lives. In Klima, conventions of a secular materialism are called into question, but value-extraction and abstraction are present throughout. The question of economy and its crisis are linked to predicting numbers and encountering ghosts. In this sense, the book aims for an ethnography of catastrophe—the terminal crisis of "the real" being its constituent element. In a gothic ethnography, where the value-form in its dynamic within a world-historical crisis pushes relations against their immanent conditions, ghosts provide a glimpse—not only into the spirit world, but into what is to come.

---

[1] I want to thank Alan Klima, Rich Wood, Basit Iqbal, Carlos Alberto Sánchez, Nathan Brown, Shams Zakiuddin, Inertia, and Jamil Kochai for their support and encouragement. Thanks to Rajbir Judge for co-organizing this book symposium. The phrase in the title "the last sky" did not come from Mahmoud Darwish. Recitations of Surah Al-Jinn, Surah Al-Nur, Surah Haqqah, and Surah Rahman by Abdur Rashid Sufi and Mohamed Tablawi were often played during the various writing sessions of this essay. Ethnographic techniques were used to respect and protect the identities of interlocutors. No identification with actual persons (living, deceased, or disappeared) is intended.

[2] Donald Trump is insistent on using this term. Beneath his administration's "economic nationalism" and xenophobia there is a fear of the rise of an Asian economy spearheaded by China.

[3] Salman Sayyid, *A Fundamental Fear: Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism*, 3rd ed. (Zed Books, 2015).

[4] Admittedly, this is a compressed paragraph. The unseen (*ghayb*) in Islam performs a specific ontological function. In this sense, it is quite different from the abstraction associated with Jesus, whose image as God/Father/Son in Christianity is vehemently called into question by the Islamic tradition. In the case of race and class, the mediation happens through abstractions of capital and antiblackness. Granted, in both cases the commodity-fetish and the libidinal economy are not necessary things we directly "see"—but there is a sense in which both operate through practical materialisms of this world. In Islam, God's presence, which maintains

---

non-representation (a presence-absence outside of the senses), makes its notion of the unseen a unique discourse and experience.

[5] Naive readers may think I am speaking of terrorists. That would be an instrumental and incorrect reading.

[6] Lewis Mumford, *The Pentagon of Power: The Myth of The Machine, Vol. II* (Harcourt, 1974).

[7] Alden Whitman, "Mumford Finds City Strangled By Excess of Cars and People," *The New York Times* (1967).

[8] There are various meanings of *fasād* in different contexts in the Islamic discourse, on which see variously the Qur'anic commentaries of Muhammad Asad (*The Message of the Quran*) and Sayyid Qutb (*In the Shade of the Quran*).

[9] Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford University Press, 2003).

[10] I realized a few days after writing this part that this story is strikingly similar to a psychotherapist's description of borderline personality disorder. I have watched a video of a psychotherapist using a similar kind of scene, which she had mentioned was from a film. In my interpretation however, there is no distinction between the borderline and the co-dependent. As you will note that in my reading, the scene initially has two persons, but it ends up being two dimensions of a single person. In my ethnographic work I have discovered a curious similarity in the struggle between Islam and secularity in subjects to the struggle between neurosis and psychosis in borderlines. Sometimes they were the same interlocutors.

[11] Gerhard Richter, *Afterness: Figures of Following in Modern Thought and Aesthetics* (Columbia University Press, 2011), 6.

[12] Alan Klima in an email said the following about Janpen's disappearance into nothingness: "Janpen the person could be said to disappear and her appearance as the narrator is not exactly the re-appearance of Janpen the person, the girl. Also nothingness is a good word. But most often without further elucidation or context a reader, I think, would take nothingness to mean some kind of vacuum, void, or pure nothing, in other words the mind's version of nothingness which is that it is something. Nothing is something. Nothing is something the mind can comprehend. When nothingness means the opposite of some-thing, no thing, its meaning is in a sense beyond the mind's understanding, beyond a void, a void which is something, beyond the mind's comprehension yet perhaps somewhat approachable as no-thing-ness, not a thing. Janpen is not a thing, and realizes that by the end of the story she tells, a story she tells from the start from the perspective of not being a thing and knowing it."

[13] Peter Fonagy, "Dreams of Borderline Patients," in *Dreaming and Thinking*, ed. Rosine Josef Perelberg (Karnac, 2000), 91-108; Slavoj Žižek, *Disparities* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 193. Žižek writes: "The borderline subject is thus a hysteric without a Master, a hysteric who is not oppressed by the Master but solicited by some expert-advisor figure to realize all his/her potential and 'have it all,' leading a full life. Such a solicitation, of course, immediately acquires the superego-dimension of an inexorable pressure to which the subject can only respond by withdrawing from desire. Is this 'desire on strike' not a perfect formula for 'borderline' as the contemporary form of hysteria?"

[14] Farhad Mazhar, *Bhabandolon* (Dhaka: Mowla Brothers, 2008), 47. Mazhar explains that the mode of life, political-spirit, and ethical groundwork in the Nadia region—from which the bhakti practices emerge—do not select materials from the different world religions in an instrumental and utilitarian way as the "bourgeois historians" imply. My translation of a passage from the aforementioned text is as follows: "Bhabandolon of Bengal mobilizes different religious concepts, religious histories and symbols for the practice of its thought […] They [bourgeois historians] read this phenomenon as a depoliticized cultural phenomenon. They particularly fail to see how it emerged from political struggle, specifically, by oppressed, ruled, and marginalized communities against the elite ruling class. As a result, they do not see that the diverse influences of religious thought in Bhabandolon is not a simple operation whose aim is to syncretize itself for its own sake."

---

[15] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Translating into English," in *Nation, Language, and the Ethics of Translation*, ed. Sandra Bermann and Michael Wood (Princeton University Press, 2005), 104. Spivak writes: "As writers like Mazhar attempt to enter the detheologized "religious," they question the premises of a superficial secularism. They are, in turn, incorrectly perceived as providing fuel for fundamentalists."

[16] Achille Mbembe and Sony Labou Tansi discuss the turning of bodies into meat in their respective texts. See Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (University of California Press, 2001); Sony Lab'ou Tansi, *The Seven Solitudes of Lorsa Lopez* (Heinemann, 1995).

[17] Saif recalls Rushdiya suffering from anxiety attacks: a rapid acceleration in nervous symptoms and panic attacks accompanied by a feeling of a lump in the throat and an inability to breathe well. She would have to use her inhaler. There is a feeling of a "lump" but no signs of actual physical swelling. "I can't breathe, please stop," she would say, desperately ending conversations. What exactly is the source of this lump, and this feeling that there is something there? Something is there. The sensation is there. But it is not a thing. It is no-thing.

[18] Rebecca Comay, "Hegel: Non-Metaphysical, Post-Metaphysical, Post-Traumatic (Response to Lumsden, Redding, Sinnerbrink)," *Parrhesia* 17 (2013): 50-61.

[19] Stefania Pandolfo, *Knot of the Soul: Madness, Psychoanalysis, Islam* (University of Chicago Press, 2018), 96.

[20] Achille Mbembe, influenced by Sony Labou Tansi, theorizes: "Above all, there is the relationship between death, body, and meat. Let us return to the animal killed in the hunt. Once killed, the animal is no more than a mass of flesh that has to be cut up. For the flesh to become meat, it must undergo a series of procedures. First, it must be cut into pieces or quarters. These may be cleaned; they may also be salted, dried, or smoked before being cooked. Above all, they must be eaten […] Where power has a carnivorous aspect, killing a human being and killing an animal proceed from the same logic" (Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 200).

[21] Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *The Niche of Lights* (Brigham Young University Press, 1998), 11.

[22] Klima writes: "By December 2004 severe treatment of Muslim minorities in the South of Thailand had been ramping up, and small local networks of Muslim utopianists in the southern region of Thailand had been growing more violent, fueling the desire on all sides to make a clear and violent statement […] Economic, natural, and political disasters follow one after another, not fast enough that each failed to leave its own unique imprint but fast enough for the dead to crowd in, to press in on the living with increasingly urgency, and backed up by an inability of the cognito-cultural infrastructure to process so many spirits so fast. Unlike in social science, in real life there is no patrol to enforce the barrier between the living and the dead, no way to keep all of them out, and there are far too many around to expel" (65-66).

[23] Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. by Dorion Cairns (Martinus Nijhoff, 1977).

[24] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (Basil Blackwell, 1962 [1927]).

[25] The phrase comes from Mexican-American philosopher Carlos Alberto Sánchez's book *The Suspension of Seriousness* (SUNY Press, 2012).