

Sohail Inayatullah

CITIZENSHIP ON THE EDGES OF HUMANITY

"Soda," she said.

"Is anyone called Soda, here?" she said a bit louder.

I looked around at the handful of us in the naturalization room of the Honolulu, Hawaii Immigration and Naturalization Service. No one looked like they could be called Soda but me. In any case, I suspected she was yelling out my name as I was used to its numerous pronunciations. Finally, I stood up and said: "Do you mean Sohail Inayatullah?" She smiled and nodded. We walked over to her office. I expected the examiner to be an intimidating tall white Texan male whose nose could ferret out illegal aliens; instead, she was a heavily tanned local Hawaiian/Japanese woman. As the interview began, she asked me to raise my hands—perhaps to ensure that I had no concealed weapon—and repeat after her. I swore to tell the truth, all the while pondering the nature of truth and identity. I just hoped she wouldn't ask me if I believed in the overthrow of the American government.

Fortunately, the citizenship questions she asked were about the three branches of government, the Bill of Rights, and the Constitution. I answered them correctly, even giving her the Latin term for the law of the land, *Lex Legis*. I had studied the hundred questions passed out by the Honolulu Kalahi-Palama immigration center over and over. In that many-times xeroxed copy, there were questions like: What is the color of the flag, who said "give me liberty or give me death," who helped the settlers when they came to the new land? I had wanted her to ask the question: What were the benefits of gaining citizenship? In my crib-notes, the answer was the very honest: to get a federal job, to bring my relatives over to the US. But I was looking forward to saying, "to vote." By voting I could finally participate in representative government. I could make the difference between democracy and despotism, between freedom and tyranny, I could save the United States from another four years of

Born in Pakistan, I had never had the chance to vote, largely because we were always out of the country, and when I had lived there, I was too young to vote. In any case, there was usually a dictatorship running the show. In Indiana, as an elementary school student, I was too young to vote. Later in Hawaii, I was a foreign student and then, as a permanent resident, I could not vote either. I remember once in Hawaii, on election day, a man walked by me smiling and told me how good it felt to vote. The power of participation in his face overflowed. I should have said nothing but I told him that I hadn't voted. He walked away dejected, perhaps feeling that the republic had lost its legitimacy now that one of its citizens had not voted. I should have told him that I was not a citizen. But I guessed that he would know anyway by my color or look.

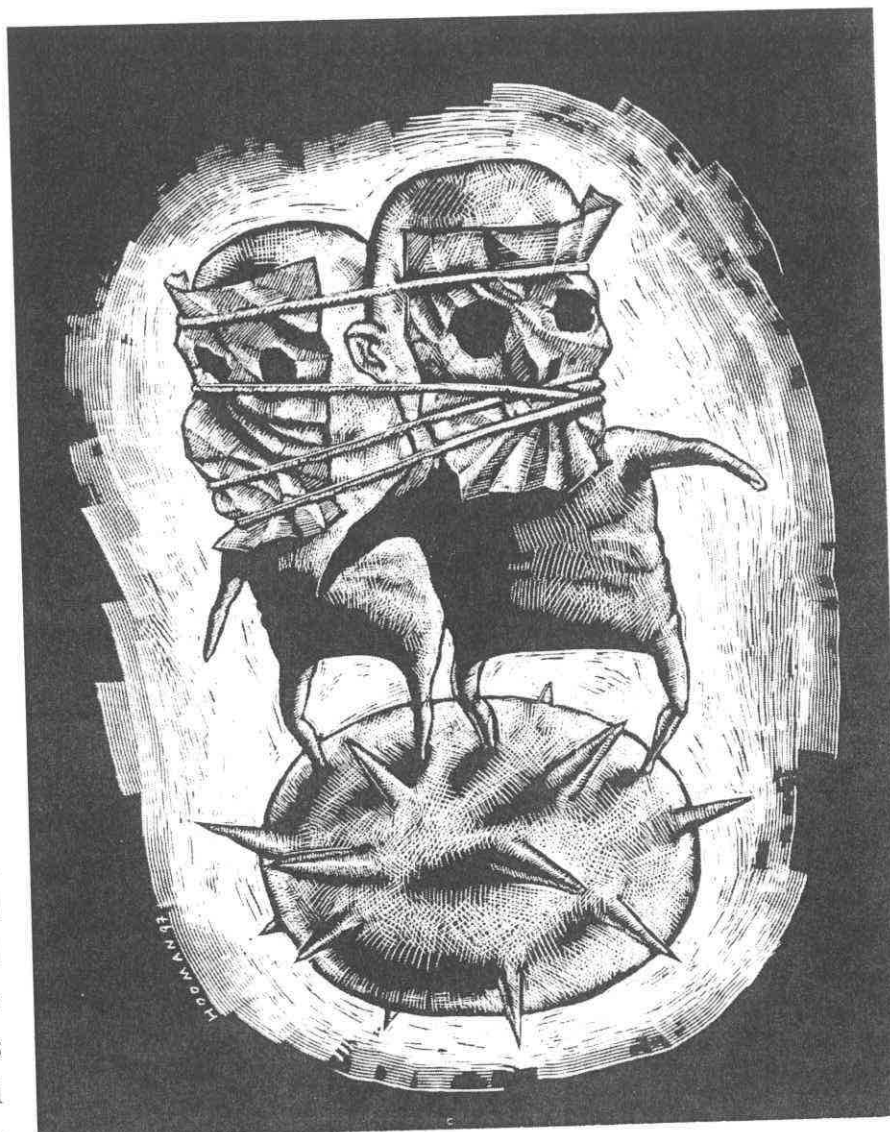
It was this look that the examiner asked me about next. She asked me what type of skin complexion I had. "Brown," I had written in the citizenship form.

"No. The only categories we have are fair, medium, and dark."

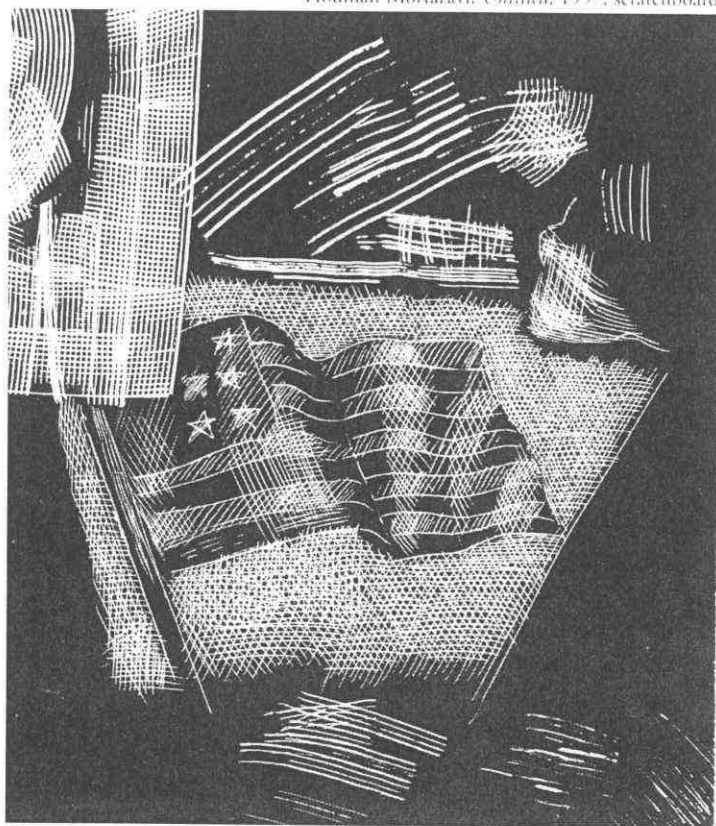
"Well, I am not dark and I am not fair."

She wanted to argue that I was dark. Me being medium made her color problematic, since she was not fair and she was clearly not as dark as me. We both fought for the middle spot, with her finally relenting.

Next, we could not find the category for my profession. Immigration had not heard of political scientists, planners, or policy analysts. I did not try to have her look up "futurist,"



Homayoun Mortazavi, *United*, 1998, scratchboard

Houman Mortazavi, *Untitled*, 1997, scratchboard

the profession with which I am most often identified. She asked me if she should look under biology or physics. I thought of the new approaches of quantum politics and biopolitics but asked her to try social scientist. She found it, and after a few signatures—which had to be legible instead of the scribbles which I normally used to represent myself—the exam was over. I walked out to the corridor among the other Asians and Europeans.

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This exam had been easier than the earlier one, five years ago, for permanent residency. Then my attorney had argued that I was a world expert in forecast-

ing for court bureaucracies. The US Immigration and Naturalization Service believed him, forgetting to ask why anyone would want to forecast in state judiciaries since budgetary decisions are often based on local politics and not on expert foresight. Earlier, a doctor had cleared me of all types of venereal disease, and I promised the naturalization officer that I would not get any political diseases, like communism.

But at least at the green card hearing there was no questioning of my name. I did not mind the “soda” incident, but now, before I signed the final paper, the naturalization examiner asked me if I wanted to change my name. I took it personally. For years, my name had been a source of trouble. I still remember the time in Manila when the immigration officer surveyed my passport and my body and finally asked me if I was any relation to the Ayatollah Khomeini. I laughed nervously and said he was my uncle. The officer smiled and then suggested appropriate bath houses where I could enjoy my stay in the Philippines.

I now made the same joke to the American naturalization officer and then commented that I was glad that my first name was Sohail, from the Arabic Al-Suhail, the southern night star, and not Saddam. She did not smile. She asked me one more time if I wanted to change my name. Sodaullah did not sound right, I thought. “How about Saddam Ayatollah,” I said. She cringed in her seat. I tried to save the day by softly telling her that Inayatullah meant “the beneficence of God.”

In the questionnaire prior to being granted an interview, one is allowed to request exemption from military service if one believes in a Supreme Being who deems such actions inappropriate. But this request cannot be based on a political, sociological, philosophical, or personal moral code. That is, it must stem from one of the recognized religions. God as guru, as a tree, or as the eternal zen nothingness of Mu would not qualify. God must be objective but based on belief. Like voting.

I wonder if my Pakistani-born Muslim cousin, Aslam, knew of this when he became a US citizen. After Queens College, he joined the Navy. Unfortunately, his first assignment was in Beirut, possibly shooting at other Muslims. He began to wonder whether he was American or Muslim first. His career in the Navy did not last long.

In any case, the naturalization officer was not impressed with my humor.

True, citizenship would mean changing my identity and becoming Americanized. But I did not want to be called "Sam," like my friend Saleem. I merely wanted to make it easier to travel, and to enjoy the fruits of Pax Americana (after all, first as a worker on a professional H-1 visa and later as a permanent resident, I had been diligently paying American taxes for many years).

My Pakistani passport invited all sorts of intrusions. In the summer of 1990 when I traveled to Yugoslavia, where I was to lecture at a conference on "Third World Visions of the Future," the immigration officer, suspecting I desired to use Yugoslavia as a point of entry to Italy and Europe, questioned me extensively as to my intentions. Finally he was convinced I had a job somewhere and let me in. In Hawaii, when I worked for the justice system in the 1980s, I was frequently tested by custom officers to see whether I really did work for the Hawaii courts or if I was using the judiciary as a front for an international heroin smuggling operation. Indeed, once the FBI stalked me, thinking I was part of an operation selling passports or drugs to and from Indonesians. They later apologized.

Even entering Pakistan I was once pulled to the side when the officer did not think I was Pakistani. He believed that I was an Afghani or Soviet spy. "Where and how did you get the Pakistan passport?" he demanded. I did not say I forged it so that I could enter Pakistan's dynamic and high-paying job market.

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Years later, when I desired to travel to Yugoslavia to visit my pregnant wife while we waited for a job in Australia, the Serbian authorities denied me a visa. They argued that I was a quasi-intellectual using marriage as a ruse so as to write negative portrayals of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. That we had traveled through Macedonia in the previous year made my getting a visa nearly impossible. I tried to tell the officer that the

Macedonian guards had served me delicious chocolate cake at the border (why couldn't he be that kind?) and that we were merely tourists on our way to Athens, but he suspected otherwise. Fortunately, my wife, Ivana, phoned from Yugoslavia and managed to take a few minutes of the officer's valuable time (earlier, he claimed he was too busy—obviously from the deluge of tourists desiring visas to visit the Balkans), and convinced him that I was no Pakistani or Bosnian or American spy.

But India is far worse for Pakistanis than either Yugoslavia or America. Constant threats, suspicion, and visits by the secret police are common. I well remember the chilling words spoken by the Central Intelligence man: "We know you are here, Dr. Inayatullah, and we would like to speak to you." It is this coercive power that makes traveling difficult. It is this utter sense of powerlessness that makes me afraid every time I land. I fear I might be arrested for being different. I have no legal rights, and the power of the visa officer is arbitrary. And then there is that computer at every entry point in the world. What are they looking up? What do they need to know? Is there a master file for every infraction we have committed against god or against the nation-state and the global interstate system?

When applying for a Pakistan identity card many years ago, I had to proclaim that a sect of Islam, the Ahmedis, who were excommunicated from the Faith by then Prime Minister Zulfikar Bhutto, were no longer Muslim. Believing in the plurality of tradition, I doubted the legitimacy of excommunication as a religious practice, but to travel in Pakistan I needed the card. I signed. Somehow, my agreement gave legitimacy to the State. The social contract was sealed, the boundaries of Islam as defined by the modern nation were clarified, the polity was strengthened, and again I could travel.

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To avoid the draft and the war plans of any nation, we want Saim Dusan—our baby born in Australia, our current home—to have as many passports and be part of as many traditions as possible. The Americans have given him one but only after he raised his right hand and swore allegiance to the Constitution. Pakistan and Yugoslavia also offered citizenship. The Yugoslavian passport will take a while, however, as the Parliament cannot decide what map to draw on the passport cover—the number of provinces that will join or leave the federation of Yugoslavia remains uncertain. But Australia has refused. More than refuse him a passport, the Australians placed numerous conditions on his possible return to the country should he leave on a family vacation to Pakistan. Without a reentry visa, he would be deported on arrival. After filling out many forms—including some which asked him to state his occupation (baby, I never tired of writing)—he was required to have a health

examination. When I told the health department that he was born here and regularly went to Australia's finest doctors and nurses, their faces remained unyielding. In the exam, the doctor, an immigrant from India, checked to see if he had a heart. I told him that he smiles at everyone. He then asked if we could remove his diapers. The doctor wanted to check whether Saim had two testicles. Fortunately, Saim did, and, even more fortuitously, he managed to poo, leaving a gift for the Australian immigration system. The Australians preferred the eighty-eight dollars I had to give them so they could ensure that Saim could breathe and excrete. When our daughter Mariyam Lena was born in Australia, we went through the same process. This time, the immigration doctor, from Hong Kong, merely checked her heartbeat and assumed everything else was fine. Mariyam, in turn, left no gift.

But Australia is famous for its colonial immigration system. After having waited six months for my academic visa, I was granted a mining visa. I said that, while certainly deconstruction was part of the job, mining might be difficult, but I would do my best. Only after numerous pleas from the Australian University did they manage to switch my visa category. But few wars are fought in Australia, and thus we are saddened that Saim will not get an Australian passport.

Our problem is that we exist in many spaces; our children are a mixture of Punjabi, Serbian, Russian, and Slovenian. My wife only recently discovered she was a Serb, always believing she was a Yugoslav. She was equally stunned to find out that, now that she is the Other, obtaining visas to OECD nations is nearly impossible, and when they are finally gained, she must go through the line for those from the former colonies: Africa and Asia.

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I hope my children's journeys outside of national boundaries will be less difficult than my trespassing. Growing up both in Peshawar, Pakistan, and Bloomington, Indiana, was confusing. Before we left for the US, when I thought about that country I mostly imagined snow. I had heard it was cold. Cold, indeed. We were not allowed to stay in the classroom during the break. We had to go out and walk around. It was at MaCalla primary school that I learned the national anthem and "America the Beautiful." I never liked having to stand up and sing, even though the words were lovely.

After many years of traveling with my parents—my father is one of the lucky ones of the modern era, having traveled with a United Nations "Laissez Passé" passport—we returned to Pakistan where once again I had to swear allegiance and sing a national anthem I did not believe in. We stood in perfect lines, oblivious that our school was an old British private school called St. Mary's. These memories became more concrete when, at a Pakistan

Day ceremony in Hawaii, we all had to stand up and sing. I dreaded that my organizer friend Lubna would ask all the Pakistanis to stand up and walk to the stage. I do not know if I would have made it there. Luckily, only the official Pakistanis who were already at the front of the room sang. I could slink back and think about my identity.

Another Pakistani friend, Asma, knows this and always introduces me awkwardly: "This is Sohail, he is Pakistani, I think, sort of...." I would prefer she skip the "sort of" introduction and either stay away from the nation identification theme or say that I am Pakistani. I think it is because she is really saying: "He looks like us but he is not really one of us. But he is not one of you either." However, she does not then give me official cultureless status either; rather, I am left to stand in the middle of some large landscape of cultures, colors, and nations when a middle may no longer exist.

The Pakistan Day ceremony made me realize that I disliked all anthems and that it was fear of reprisal that kept me in line. At baseball games and other expressions of patriotic strength, the temptation to stay seated is strong, but the fear of being attacked by bonafide Americans is even stronger. Recently, I've justified my standing by saying that I am being culturally sensitive. Wouldn't I want all of them to stand at the flag of the planet Earth whenever that day comes about?

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At the final US citizen swearing-in ceremony, we were each given flags as we entered the courthouse. The US Immigration attorney warned all of us potential voters that we had to recite an oath of allegiance. She would be watching our lips and listening to our voices. If we did not renounce all fidelity and allegiance to any "foreign prince, potentate, state or sovereignty," our application would be denied. Along with the others, I said the sacred words.

Afterwards, the judge gave us a citizenship speech in which he focused on the right to religion and the right of free speech. He commented that we can believe in any god, even no god. Atheism and the Zen Mu or nothingness were allowed. We could also say anything we wanted. He then told us to welcome the new citizens around us, thus sealing the social contract and cementing civil society.

I looked around at the room full of immigrants and was touched by the many colors. But the diversity was quickly replaced by uniformity as we all turned towards the flag and recited the mantra that would make freedom so. And even though we had all earlier said that we were ready to bear arms, few in the room looked prepared—many were elderly men and women, and others were here because of processes created by global economic currency

structures; in the US we could triple our economic level. A rupee is not a dollar.

After the pledge, the bailiff called out our names to get our "naturalization" forms. She mispronounced mine and there was laughter as the new citizens knew that their names would be mispronounced next. Along with my naturalization certificate, I was given a letter from the president and a book on citizenship. George Bush does care about immigrants. I quickly went to the federal building to apply for my passport.

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My friend Tom of the US State Department, with whom I went to high school in Malaysia, was initially disturbed by my desire to gain citizenship only so that I could travel more easily to India and Europe as well as

other places where a Pakistani passport is tantamount to an indictment. He lectured me on my civic duty (but I work with numerous volunteer agencies, I responded. I do contribute), on voting (but does Congress represent our interests?), and on democratic government (don't all legislators get reelected anyway?). But what left him most perturbed, I believe, was my rejection of the nation-state. My motives were not patriotism but ease of travel. I was not ready to submit to the melting pot. I had no intention of ceasing to write pieces critical of US (or any national) policy, domestic and international. It is not that I am devoid of meaning, decency, and faith, it is just that I no longer believe in the modern world system,



Houman Mortazavi, *Untitled*, 1997, scratchboard



I would argue with Tom. Finally, he gave up and we went back to discussing the problems Malaysia faces in forging a unified identity with its many ethnic, religious, and temporal divisions (postmodern, modern, and traditional).

But I should not fault Tom. We want humans to have allegiances. We do not want humans to become like capital, going to the highest bidder. After I told my Indian professor friend Manomita Rao that I was applying for citizenship (my euphemism is that I am switching passports), she jokingly said I was a traitor. She and her husband have applied for a green card,

the right to work, but to retain identity—intellectuals like to believe that they are merging their minds with the poor and the marginalized even as they lead privileged lives.

But it is not just my Indian friend who felt I had gone too far. I called the Pakistan embassy to find out about visa requirements for US citizens. I told him that I was switching passports and asked if dual citizenship was possible? He paused. "Why are you so afraid of a Pakistani passport?" he asked. Feeling guilty, I could only respond that I had lived in Hawaii most of my life and thus could no longer be counted on as an official Pakistani.

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Fortunately, Pakistan now allows dual citizenship, and thus when I fly in and out of Pakistan, I can show either passport. In a recent departure, I asked which passport I should show when I leave Pakistan. The Pakistani immigration official smiled and said: "It does not matter, either one is fine." Coming from a colonial outpost where nationalism is

revered but where Pakistan's place in the world division of labor is quite clear, he understood. His message was: Whatever is most convenient to you—passports are commodities—loyalties should be toward humanity. While this airport official was quite relaxed, government officials in the Ministry of Interior remain in Raj days. It took us five days of sitting in offices to gain a four-day visa extension for my wife and our children. After endless questions and long waits in line, she received the visa. It took so long because bureaucrats with salaries low and egos large have little power but to make others wait. With bribery more and more problematic in the Ministry, the only joy is to make others wait (and, of course, to offer tea while they wait).

But while having dual nationality in Pakistan is no longer seen as loss of self, I do understand the charges of treason. In a Pan Am hijacking in Karachi many years back, an Indian, who was on his way back home, had just switched to American citizenship. After the plane was hijacked, he told the hijackers that as he was now a US citizen, he should not be harmed. While this might have been appropriate in the US or in an embassy where sovereignty extends through borders, in front of hijackers, outside of the city walls of sovereignty, it was a mistake. They shot him.

I hope my movements in and out of sovereign spaces of identity do not lead to the same fate. And if they do, I am not sure who will claim me. If not my various countries, I can only hope that future generations—my children's children—will. I also hope that one day I will want to vote.

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SOHAIL INAYATULLAH is senior research fellow at the Communication Centre at the Queensland University of Technology. He is currently working on a book entitled *Theorizing Futures for Grey Seal Publications*.