

# Kashmiri Futures

## A Beginning

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*Abstract* This special issue inaugurates a scholarly and creative conversation that seeks to detach the future of Kashmir from the narrative, aesthetic, and political frames of powerful nation-states that have sought to keep Kashmiris confined to a long and seemingly enduring colonial present. It seeks, moreover, to inspire radical imaginations of possible futures in danger of foreclosure by occupying states, and asks us to think about occupation as a temporal as well as spatial regime.

*Keywords* Kashmiri futures, settler colonialism, decolonization, sovereignty

What does it mean to pose a question about Kashmiri futures at a moment when the future—understood not as a mere passage of time but a site of unfolding possibility—seems to be disappearing into thin air under conditions of extreme repression, silencing, and surveillance? In the months that we worked on this issue, disappearance was very much on our minds. Kashmiri journalists disappeared into prison cells. Newspaper archives and online websites vanished. Articles that were in preparation for this issue disappeared as Kashmiri scholars, particularly those located in Kashmir, came under increased surveillance. Already on online venues, Kashmiri fiction, nonfiction, and poetry had begun to disappear.<sup>1</sup> It would not be going too far to say that this issue has taken shape around an absence. At its heart lie the silences, hesitations, and self-censorship that authoritarian regimes are known for imposing. The blank pages at the center of this issue are meant to mark this absent presence. Yet, despite the intensifying despair brought on by the conditions of the settler-colonial present, the contributors in this issue have chosen to write, and write, moreover, around visions of liberatory futures.

“Kashmiri Futures” comes together at a critical time for the people of Kashmir. Under settler-colonial assault from the Indian state that, led by the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), brooks no space for Kashmiri voices, dissent, or dreams, Kashmir is in a moment when imagining alternative futures looks difficult, even absurd. Yet it is precisely at this moment that continuing to imagine such futures becomes a radical act. “Kashmiri Futures” inaugurates a scholarly and creative conversation that seeks to detach the political and imaginative future of Kashmir from

the narrative, aesthetic, and political frames of powerful nation-states that have sought to keep Kashmiris confined to a long and seemingly enduring colonial present.<sup>2</sup> It seeks, moreover, to inspire radical imaginations of possible futures in danger of foreclosure by occupying states and asks us to think about occupation as a temporal as well as spatial regime.

For Kashmiris to gather in the form of this special issue and to write and think with each other is to challenge the sense of despair that India's settler-colonial project has sought to create among Kashmiris. Ever since India occupied Kashmir in 1947, Kashmiris have fought for and refused to give up their UN-sanctioned right to self-determination.<sup>3</sup> The Indian state, on its part, has refused to negotiate with Kashmiris over the question of sovereignty. Instead of resolving the problem, it has persistently sought to change the reality on the ground to foreclose any possibility of a fair political solution.<sup>4</sup> To the international community, India often claims that Kashmiris are with India, yet it does not allow Kashmiris to freely express their will or their opinions. For seventy-five years the occupier state has enforced this politically deflationary condition, which has caught the entire South Asian region in a seemingly endless spiral of zero-sum nationalist hatred and has subjected Kashmiris to relentless campaigns of state violence. From the Kashmiri perspective, this enforced state of being constitutes what we call settler-colonial realism, a state that—while mystifying and obscuring its own condition of production<sup>5</sup>—creates a sense of existence for the colonized that is denuded of any sense of popular agency. Kashmiris are suspended in a space of fear and foreboding, forced to watch the destruction of their society, history, and future. India's settler-colonial realism has declared not only that any hope for or dream of Kashmiri freedom is a dangerous illusion but also that it is impossible even to imagine a Kashmiri future outside the framework of Indian settler colonialism—which indeed, for Kashmiris, is no future at all.

Arguably, the question of Kashmiri futures has already been at the heart of all activism and scholarship to date in this vein—after all, the long-standing Kashmiri demand for self-determination necessarily looks to a decolonized future. Yet, while an imagination of the future has implicitly shaped the larger field known as critical Kashmir studies (CKS),<sup>6</sup> the latter has rarely explicitly examined the future itself; it is arguably the past and the present that has been much more pressing in our analyses. This is no surprise, for one way in which settler-colonial powers function is arguably by confining colonized populations in the present, partly through a continual manufacture of crisis.<sup>7</sup> This issue rejects such temporal entrapment in the crisis-ridden present, projecting a scholarly, political, and creative vision into a future defined on the terms envisioned by Kashmiris rather than the powerful states that seek to determine Kashmiri aspirations and futures. We take inspiration from and join ongoing conversations around Black futures; Indigenous futures; Palestinian futures; environmental futures; and feminist, queer, and trans futures, offering this issue as merely a beginning in a longer conversation about liberatory futures for Kashmir in the hope of unfolding vibrant conversations across these fields.<sup>8</sup> We also take inspiration from imaginations of the future that are already underway in Kashmiri visual art, protest cultures, and literary and cultural representations.<sup>9</sup> Building on this work, we draw attention to the Indian occupation of Kashmir as a *temporal* regime

that secures India's territorial control by way of a profound reorganization not only of space but also of time.

### **Kashmir's Settler-Colonial Present**

This special issue comes four years after the drastic events of August 5, 2019, when the Indian government unilaterally abrogated Kashmir's "semiautonomous" status, split the historical state into two directly controlled "union territories," and opened the "territories" to Indian settlers. Indian authorities have since opened the region to Indian mining contractors and industrialists, given full domicile status to people from the Indian mainland, and redistricted the voting constituencies to ensure victory of Hindu right-wing parties in a region that remains more than two-thirds Muslim. For Kashmiris, especially Kashmiri Muslims, the state has been turned into a totalitarian space. Popular political figures and human rights activists have been in jail since 2019, while journalists and students have been arrested or are regularly harassed. Kashmiri government employees have been fired from their jobs for expressing views even mildly critical of the government. Schools are regularly forced to organize events to salute the Indian flag, sing the Indian national anthem, and organize "yoga days"—which has become Indian prime minister Narendra Modi's regular mass spectacle.

India's ruling right-wing regime has signaled to its Hindu voters that, by unilaterally abrogating Kashmir's autonomy and turning Kashmir into a union territory, it has magically ended the "Kashmir problem." India's compliant nationalist media lauds Modi as a "strategic genius" for finally showing Kashmiris their place by taking away their "special status" and throwing Kashmir open for Indians who wish to permanently settle there, thus ending the "injustice" against Indians. Furthermore, the abrogation was carried out on supposedly feminist grounds, whereby the Indian government presented itself as a savior of Kashmiri women and LGBTQ people.<sup>10</sup> From the perspective of Indian nationalists, Kashmiris have been rightly and at long last "integrated" as Indians, even if it has meant their political disempowerment and dispossession.

For Kashmiris, the reality of political disempowerment and the threats of forcible demographic change and material dispossession are not new but part of a historical experience that took shape almost right after the Indian annexation in 1947. India has *always* ruled Kashmir as a colony, sometimes with the support of a tiny comprador Kashmiri elite.<sup>11</sup> The irony of the term *special status* had never been lost on Kashmiris. It did not signify an exalted or privileged status for Kashmiris. *Special* meant that Kashmir was a zone of exception and emergency, where human rights and democracy were suspended and the Indian military had special powers of impunity.<sup>12</sup>

If anything, the events of August 5, 2019, were meant to give Hindu Indians a feeling of a Hindu conquest over predominantly Muslim Kashmiris. To maintain this sense, the Indian state doubled down on its repression of Kashmiris. Any dissident Kashmiri public voice was to be expunged. The only Kashmiris allowed to speak would be those who used their speaking "privilege" to perform obeisance to Indian nationalism and confirm Indian conquest. If before August 2019 Kashmiris were treated as "anti-national" threats and as proxy enemies backed by Pakistan, now their

entire existence as a people was to be called into question. India's nationalist politicians began to speak of Kashmiris and the "Kashmir problem" in the past tense.

Settler-colonial realism works by imposing its own ontology on the world. It deflates emancipatory politics by demobilizing and demoralizing the Indigenous while giving the settlers a self-righteous sense of being actors in a new stage of history. The Hindutva regime in India has announced a "new India" that countenances no opposition and that will solve all problems with an iron fist. The champions of this new state demand war.<sup>13</sup> To Kashmiris, it tells them that they have no other way than to accept their present condition as the final reality, a *fait accompli*. It is in this context that imagining decolonial futures becomes more urgent than ever.

### Settler-Colonial Realism, Decolonial Futures

Emancipatory politics must begin with destroying the appearance of a "natural order," and decolonial politics in particular must decenter settler perspectives, rather than "reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity."<sup>14</sup> As editors located in American academe but with roots in Kashmir, we asked ourselves what decolonial futures might mean for Kashmir and Kashmiris. In the face of the ever-intensifying attempts by the settler-colonial state to prefigure Kashmiri futures, materially and imaginatively, are there Kashmiri imaginations of the future that break from dominant states' figurations? If so, what are the narrative and aesthetic forms that have lent and continue to lend themselves to the narration of decolonial Kashmiri futures? How do Kashmir's diverse communities envision convergent or divergent futures around Kashmir, and what might it take for these futures ever to be reconciled within a decolonial frame? What Kashmiri pasts are implicit in decolonial visions of Kashmiri futures? What does a decolonized future mean in a context like Kashmir, forged through multiple and layered histories of colonialism? Do decolonial visions of Kashmiri futures open up alternate geographies of belonging within and beyond South Asia?

The actual process of decolonization of Kashmir is coterminous with the decolonization of knowledge production about Kashmir.<sup>15</sup> At the outset, this involves understanding Kashmir as having its own history, parallel to that of the regions around it, simultaneously independent and interconnected, rather than as subsumable under the post-1947 Indian and Pakistani states. From this point of departure, Kashmir also needs to be excavated from the post-partition histories of these two big nation-states, and understood as sharing a common condition with many peoples and nations left colonized in the aftermath of the earlier waves of decolonization, which did not lead to the liberation of all the formerly colonized peoples. Decolonization will mean a future in which Kashmiris are not fated to be controlled by one or the other states but can articulate and create their own modes of freedom, which may include modes of imagining freedom outside the bounds of the nation-state altogether. Such a decolonization will need to recognize the authenticity of Kashmiri resistance and decenter the dominant counterinsurgency frame that uses global Islamophobic formulations to preclude Kashmiri resistance as a legitimate political movement.

Imagining alternative futures for Kashmir, especially in the overwhelming context of an emergent settler-colonial state, will also require plotting them in defiant opposition to the material needs of extractive capital, the ideological hatreds of

nationalist politics, and the violent logics of state control. Such a decolonial future will need to be imagined and built outside the languages of domination, in a language that breaks apart the dictates of the present despair. Such futures come from the desire to live, thrive, and imagine against the settler-colonial realism that pronounces the settler future an unalterable order of nature and a “done deal.”<sup>16</sup> They involve not simply systematically dismantling the structures of domination and control but also making something new in their place, something that people would have freely made themselves, based on the principle of mutual thriving instead of the zero-sum logic of settler colonialism. It would even involve both stepping into the new yet familiar and returning to the old but forgotten, a future that experiments yet draws on the strength of the tradition. For Kashmiris and all other peoples colonized in the present, this would require renewing the commitment, resuturing the ties among those held down by oppression, and reinvigorating the struggles—struggles that will end only when the soldiers return home to their own country and restore sovereignty and dignity to the people.

Decolonial futures also entail the work of resistance and reinvention at once. Envisioning such futures for Kashmir requires interrupting the epistemic control of the state over the narration of Kashmiri aspirations and desires by insistently foregrounding Kashmiris’ own imaginations of political future. It calls for new formations of selves and identities, alternate geographies of belonging, and new modes of relating that open out to self-determining futures that may not be fully known in advance.<sup>17</sup> It would call all communities invested in the future of Kashmir, including multiple Kashmiri diasporas, to reject the figuration of their homeland as mere territory and to forge other ways of belonging routed through mutual and consensual relations with each other and with the land, wind, and air, rather than with nation-states engaged in an extractive relation to land prefigured as mere territory. Such futures must also be capacious enough to guard against the reproduction of internal hierarchies of caste and gender, and must be driven by values of mutuality and respect.

### Writing, Art, and the Imagination

This issue is a repudiation of the enforced disappearance of Kashmiri writing. It is a protest against the imprisonment of the student Aala Fazili for writing against the occupation, of the editor Fahad Shah for creating *Kashmir Wallah* as a place where young Kashmiri writers expressed themselves, of the human rights activist Khurram Parvez for diligently documenting the violence against the people of Kashmir, of the journalist Aasif Sultan for his reporting, of the photojournalist Sajad Gul for visually documenting Kashmiri protests, and of the journalist Irfan Mehraj for helping document rights violations. It is a protest against police and judicial harassment of other Kashmiri writers and poets, confiscation of years of their writings, and their forced censorship. It is also a protest against the deliberate erasure of newspaper archives and other historical records.<sup>18</sup>

In a recent news story about Kashmir’s disappearing newspaper archives, a young journalist decries the deletion of all her news stories that had appeared in a local newspaper. Significantly, she frames this attack on journalistic writing as an attack on literature. “Journalism is literature in a hurry but it’s literature,” she notes.<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, a young Kashmiri poet, speaking to a newsmagazine about the muzzling of Kashmiri poets, noted that, although his poems also took on other themes, “the majority of [his] work focuses on conflict, its impact and resistance.”<sup>20</sup> These remarks bespeak a key awareness among Kashmiri writers that the task of witnessing is shared across genres, with poets, journalists, and human rights workers bearing a joint charge in their writing: to give witness to the conditions enmeshing Kashmiris and to record their sense of both the present and the future.<sup>21</sup> In an era of erasure, censure, and repression, the expectations and responsibility placed on poets and writers by Kashmiri literary and civil society fundamentally shape a public understanding of who is a “real writer” and what a writer’s primary charge should be.

Poetry in Kashmir has been a form of “*ehtijaj* [protest or dissent], a situated act, a deeply political gesture; written, embodied, commemorative . . . a form of ‘placemaking’ in face of erasure and occupation.”<sup>22</sup> This is true also of other genres such as fiction, memoirs, creative nonfiction, and even academic writing. Increasingly, Kashmiri writers are inhibited from engaging with their political life due to fear of censure. It is no exaggeration to say that writers of resistance literature are fading from the scene, owing either to self-censorship or to denial of space for such writing. Many writers and journalists prefer to remain silent rather than compromise their true expression, and many are changing professions.<sup>23</sup> Academic writing is no exception to these norms, and while editing this issue, we each encountered more than one author who felt compelled to withhold or withdraw his or her submission for fear of punishment by the state. This moment in history is essentially a push to kill true literature in Kashmir, despite the impossibility of such an outcome.

While Kashmiri modes of expression are muzzled, on the other hand, a dizzying proliferation of state-crafted literary festivals has emerged.<sup>24</sup> Such festivals are introduced with the expressed state intent of boosting tourism in the Kashmir Valley and projecting “normalcy.” For example, the following tweet advertised a panel baldly subtitled “The Influence of Literary Stories in Promoting Tourism” at the Kumaon Literary Festival, held in Srinagar in 2022 and inaugurated by Jammu and Kashmir lieutenant governor Manoj Sinha:

This session seeks to advocate that the State should encourage and invest in literary stories from Kashmir to be published widely so that the imagination of the reader is enthused, and compelled to travel to Kashmir to experience the places and culture in which the stories are weaved, similar to the role that cinema plays by its visuals. This will also help in building a new narrative for Kashmir of its rich heritage of literature, music, folk songs and culture.<sup>25</sup>

This instrumentalization of writing to stir the tourist’s desire for the Kashmiri landscape implicitly dismisses the pain borne by Kashmiri bodies.

While promoting literary festivals to subsume the culture of resistance literature that has been part of Kashmir for decades, the government of India allows writing only if it reproduces bureaucratic dictums without question. As one Kashmiri poet, Zabirah (who uses a single name), phrased it, “We are not allowed to breathe

until and unless we breathe as per the rules and the wishes of the government.”<sup>26</sup> A great danger is unfolding as a whole era of writing is being annihilated, leaving the archival and literary space emptied of the suffering, desires, joys, and hopes of Kashmiri people. Will writers in the future find any credible record of the present? Will they hear Kashmiri voices of resistance in the archive?

The blank pages at the center of this issue are intended to hold space for writings that have been made *absent* by state censure, because the authors either retracted them or declined to write. These empty pages are laden with hope—they do not mark a compliant silence, which would be uncharacteristic of Kashmiris, but are there to make note of a *forced* silencing. In posterity, our hope is that these blank pages will point back toward an excavation of words that were censored and censored in this contemporary moment.<sup>27</sup>

### Creative Visions

As we began to assemble this issue, we considered the narrative and aesthetic forms that have lent themselves to the narration of decolonial Kashmiri futures. Is there a Kashmiri futurism in Kashmiri art and literature, we asked in our call for papers? Do Kashmiri writers and artists, like Palestinian, African, and Black and Native American artists, engage futuristic genres to envision a decolonized future? While we could not think of any such fiction, at least in the Anglophone writing and visual work that has flourished over the past decade or so, we received two submissions of short fiction set in a dystopian future. These fictions constitute possibly the first works of Kashmiri speculative fiction on the landscape of Kashmiri writing.

Set in a distant future, both fictions take on the Indian state’s dictate to Kashmiris that they must not only forget the question of their sovereignty but also actively display loyalty to India to live in their historical homeland. In both stories, settler colonialism has annihilated the local culture, tradition, memories, religion, economy, and even ecology. Nothing is the same. In Ather Zia’s story “the land of dreams,” apples and Kashmir’s famed saffron are banned, long enough ago that they have been forgotten. The famous Dal Lake has dried up, and people do not even know what a lotus flower looks like. Kashmiris are not allowed to read or write. Unfortunately, the second of these fictional pieces was withdrawn just as we were finalizing this issue. The author explained: “Thank you for understanding that my circumstances are not ideal for any sort of writing, even if it is fiction set in the future.” This missing short story is one of the disappearing submissions that we have marked with the blank pages in this issue.

Beyond the limitations of speculative fictive futures, we can also see the real terrain of feminist aspirations. In the section for creative visions, we are proud to carry the Kashmiri Feminist Manifesto, written by Zanaan Wanaan, an independent feminist collective including trailblazing young women. Zanaan Wanaan means “women speak,” and the collective first became famous for singing the Italian protest song “Bella Ciao” in Kashmiri. In their manifesto they trace their evolution, their inspirations, and their hopes for a feminist Kashmiri future despite ravages wreaked by the Indian military occupation. They note that their collective is part of a local Kashmiri feminism that has been evolving for years and survives Indian occupation every day. The manifesto reminds us that Kashmir is a political issue and cannot be

understood in any other context. It also alerts us to how social patriarchy is evolving around the dynamics between different genders, exacerbated by the acute militarization. The manifesto calls for a feminist future for Kashmir through a concerted praxis of solidarity with transnational feminist, decolonial, socialist, and antiracist movements.<sup>28</sup>

### Interventions

In the academic essays included in this issue, engaging futures involves tracing unregimented temporalities and their implications through different registers that range from poetic and visual to ecological to queer and trans. In his article “Future’s Moving Terrains,” Abdul Manan Bhat “turn[s] to poetry, as literary form and as form of knowledge,” to reflect on what he describes as “the grammar of futures under occupation in the modern world.” Drawing on the twentieth-century Kashmiri poet Ghulam Ahmed Mahjur and his use of the Islamic Persianate ghazal tradition, Bhat sees this tradition as a critical conceptual resource for imagining futures and, within it, poetry as “a technology through which futures are postulated, negotiated, and lived.” Bhat shows how in Mahjur’s ghazals the metaphor of “garden” intertwines “the *zamīn* [land] of Kashmir with the *zamīn* of poetry,” creating a productive ambiguity and therefore making land and language one terrain. Bhat imagines the poem as a space of congregation, calling on “sounds, bodies, and objects” to come and gather yet again in the garden. What comes after is still to be imagined. Instead of a closure, Mahjur wishes to keep the future’s “door” interminably open. Future for the poet, then, is the act of persistent becoming, an act of persistent congregation.

In her essay, “Weathering the Occupation,” Mona Bhan asks “what it might mean to reclaim weather and climate in Kashmir as geopolitical agents whose effects, force, and vitality, regardless of the Indian state’s pretense to contain them, challenge and unsettle state-sanctioned boundaries.” Writing in the aftermath of the drastic 2019 political changes enacted by India’s BJP government, Bhan shows how the Indian state sought to use weather forecasts over parts of the historical state that have been under Pakistan’s control since 1947 as a way to satisfy the Indian national ambition of “expand[ing] into portions of Kashmiri territory” even farther. Though banal, such forecasts became displays of India’s imperial stamina and colonial prowess. In contrast to the hegemonic state’s geopolitical uses of meteorology and weather forecasts, Bhan describes how in Kashmir weather forecasts are in fact critical for everyday life, and discourses about it animate the public sphere. Understanding the role of weather in Kashmir’s political life, argues Bhan, requires that we center the future because weather’s real political agency lies in destabilizing presumptions about the *longue durée*; it carries the force to “unsettle national geographies” and “transform local, regional, or global politics.” Recognizing the agency of weather, Bhan writes, means restoring “Kashmiri histories of ‘preexisting’ relationships and future ‘co-becomings’ with land, mountains, snow, and glaciers, in order to envision futures that exceed the vision (or lack thereof) and temporalities of carceral settler states.” Dismantling weather as a settler-colonial technopower would involve seeing weather as a form of placemaking and thus as an anticolonial political praxis.



Ifsha Zehra's article, "Notes on Kashmiri Visualities," turns to art and creative visual cultures as a way to counter "circumstances of visual fatigue and visual stagnancy" after 2019. Whereas documentary and photojournalistic modes of visual representation were a key aspect of the visual cultures of Kashmiri resistance before this, after 2019, with the heightened criminalization of Kashmiri journalists and human rights activists, visual and photographic archives associated with human rights documentation have begun to disappear. With the stagnation of such documentary modes of visual archiving, Zehra calls for a turn to visual art as a way to "push beyond a pessimistic future of dispossession, uncertainty, and hopelessness." Meanwhile, despite the intensive surveillance of the digital visual sphere, Kashmiris continue to circulate ways of seeing in the digital sphere that bespeak their future aspirations. For instance, Zehra points to Sadaf Wani's observation that when Kashmiris leave out signs of military occupation in their photographs of the landscape, it is not simply a naive turn away from reality but also an attempt to create a "virtual reality . . . [whereby] people [Kashmiris] *can see* . . . [or] *create the aspiration of a different Kashmir* than the one they live in." Finally, Zehra takes up the digital collage art of a young Kashmiri woman visual artist, Kashmir Pop Art, unpacking the ironic dimensions of her digital collages, which draw on archival photographs from Kashmir in order to project creative visions of Kashmiri futures.

"When the present itself is marked by violence or is perpetually deferred," Uzma Falak argues, "what does imagining the future entail, and whose privilege is it?" In her article "Resisting the Clockwork of Occupation," Falak reminds us that imagining futures itself needs time, a luxury not available to Kashmiris. It is not that people's time is rich with actions or agency but that the state has systematically kept people from imagining different futures "by coercing them into a modality of survival and a forever-exhausting present." Under such circumstances of violence and other forms of state coercion, Falak writes that the experience of lived time in Kashmir is marked by "a nonlinear, nonunidirectional temporal imaginary in which what we call past, present, and future and the spectrums in between and beyond transmute into each other." Drawing on her ethnographic research, Falak shows how women's sonic practices, through an interplay of "ruptures" and "radical in-betweenness," enact new Kashmiri modalities of liberation praxis, "reclaiming and taking control of their own time."

Diana J. Fox and Shazia Malik, in their article "'I Am Very Sexy, Sexy, Sexy': Expressions of Freedom in Kashmiri Transgender Wedding Songs," explore the performances of Shabu, a "transgen" wedding singer who rose to popularity after YouTube videos of her performances became popular.<sup>29</sup> Considering a few of Shabu's performances, they observe the minute ways in which these performances prepare women for marriage "while provoking the patriarchal order, teasing its rigidity." Fox and Malik also detail how Shabu's entry into this scene was a result of shifting norms around wedding celebrations in the 1990s, when the conflict forced Kashmiris to downsize the grand wedding feasts (*wazwaans*) of the past. Malik's interview with Shabu traces how the livelihood possibilities for transgender performers in the wedding economy were heavily impacted as the scale and shape of Kashmiri weddings began to transform—Shabu turns to the wedding economy after her family, traditionally papier-mâché artists, leave that line of work following

the decimation of the handicrafts industry in the 1990s.<sup>30</sup> Finally, Fox and Malik offer a detailed analysis of three of Shabu's wedding songs that have circulated on YouTube, closely studying the lyrics, gestures, and audience responses to reveal how her performances trouble conventional norms of gender, opening up alternative possibilities for gender expression for women.

### Conversations

Included in this issue are three sets of converging conversations that evoke multiple scales of engagement with the futures. In the roundtable "Researching Kashmir: Power, Position, and Ethics," Mona Bhan, Mohamad Junaid, and Hafsa Kanjwal discuss the future of research in critical Kashmir studies through a close consideration of questions of power, ethics, and positionality that have come to the fore lately. Beginning with a discussion of their own complex positionalities, Bhan, Junaid, and Kanjwal detail how their own locations have shaped their scholarly approach to studying Kashmir and reflect on how researchers might implement self-reflexivity and disclosure to carry out Kashmir research in the future, with attention to both intersectional vulnerabilities of Kashmiris living under occupation and careful attention to differences of access that may exist between Kashmiri (resident or diasporic, Muslim or Pandit) and Indian researchers. They also reflect on the awkward disjoint between CKS and South Asia studies, echoing an impetus within the field to draw out alternate geographies of belonging that compel us to trace relationships to other fields such as Palestine studies, Middle East studies, Africana studies, or Indigenous studies.<sup>31</sup>

A second roundtable, "Decolonial Futures: Diasporas, Occupied Homelands, and Struggles for Sovereignty," features Natalie Avalos, Kealohi Minami, Meta Sarmiento, Reema Wahdan, and Ather Zia in conversation with Faye Caronan (co-organizer Nishant Upadhyay). This roundtable brought together Indigenous, Tibetan, Kānaka Maoli, Chamorro, Palestinian, and Kashmiri scholars, activists, and artists who are engaged in fighting for sovereignty of their homelands. The questions traced how the settler-colonial and imperial nation-states, like the United States, India, Israel, and China, erase struggles for self-determination, sovereignty, and democracy. Neocolonialism and extractive capitalism was a common thread linking all the struggles from Turtle Island to Kashmir. Contributors noted how imperial settler states conveniently stereotype resistance to colonial rule as violence or terrorism, while commodifying land in places like Hawaii and Kashmir, where tourism is deployed by imperial states to obscure colonial conditions. Panelists insisted on centering self-determination, and they defined the pivotal issue of sovereignty through the Indigenous perspective in which people's material and spiritual relation to land is the basis of sovereignty as well as solidarity among occupied peoples working toward an emancipatory global future.

### Cover Art

Finally, our cover image by the Kashmiri artist Khytul Abyad captures a tension at the heart of this issue. In Abyad's sketch, an army jackboot hovers over a profusion of flowers that recall a long poetic tradition of figuring Kashmir as a garden, as Abdul Manan Bhat reminds us in his article in this issue. Rendering the boot in

midair, just before it comes down, Abyad's image conveys both the beauty of the garden and a foreboding sense that it stands to be obliterated entirely by the jackboot. Yet straining out of the reach of the boot is organic life bound by nature to return, endure, persist. In this ambivalent moment when Kashmiris feel alternately enervated by a fresh wave of violence, and energized by the knowledge that resistance has never died, we submit this special issue as an offering toward futures for Kashmir yet to come, futures that can be tended through the slow and fecund work of the imagination. In that hope we conclude with the call of the poet Mahjur:

Come now, O gardener, bring forth the grandeur of a new  
spring,  
bring forth means for flowers to blossom and nightingales  
to dance.<sup>32</sup>

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DEEPTI MISRI is associate professor of women and gender studies at the University of Colorado Boulder. She is author of *Beyond Partition: Gender, Violence, and Representation in Postcolonial India* (2014). She is also editor, with Elena L. Cohen and Melissa M. Forbis, of a special issue on protest in *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* (2018) as well as editor, with Mona Bhan and Haley Duschinski, of the *Routledge Handbook of Critical Kashmir Studies* (2022). Her scholarship on visual culture, gender, disability, and militarization in Kashmir appears in *Biography*, *Cultural Studies*, *Feminist Studies*, and *Public Culture*.

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ATHER ZIA is a political anthropologist, poet, short-fiction writer, and columnist. She is associate professor in the Department of Anthropology and Gender Studies at the University of Northern Colorado. Ather is author of *Resisting Disappearances: Military Occupation and Women's Activism in Kashmir* (2019). She has edited, with Haley Duschinski, Mona Bhan, and Cynthia Mahmood, *Resisting Occupation in Kashmir* (2018). She is founder-editor of *Kashmir Lit* and cofounder of the Critical Kashmir Studies Collective. She is also an editorial collective member of the journal *Cultural Anthropology*.

## Notes

1 Zia, "Enforced Disappearance of Kashmiri Writing." Ironically, this article itself seems to have disappeared from the internet, along with several other select articles published on the literary blog *Kashmir Lit*.

2 Misri, "Dark Ages and Bright Futures."

3 Like much scholarship in critical Kashmir studies, this special issue focuses mainly on the Indian-controlled Kashmir Valley. For a larger set of essays that places Kashmir in a transregional frame, including Azad Jammu

- and Kashmir and Gilgit Baltistan and Ladakh, see Duschinski, Bhan, and Robinson, *Palgrave Handbook of New Directions*.
- 4 Mushtaq and Amin, “We Will Memorise Our Home.”
- 5 Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*, 13–14. We draw here on Mark Fisher’s concept of “capitalist realism,” which Fisher defines as “the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it” (*Capitalist Realism*, 2). Indeed, this sense is continuously reproduced by the capitalist cultural industry, which immobilizes imagination. Settler-colonial “realism” seeks to create a similar sense, insisting that the colonized must accept the condition of their own powerlessness as an unalterable reality.
- 6 Bhan, Duschinski, and Misri, *Routledge Handbook of Critical Kashmir Studies*.
- 7 Hawari, “Radical Futures.” Hawari makes a similar observation in the context of Palestine: “[Palestinians] are locked in a continuous present in which the settler-colonial power, Israel, determines temporal and spatial boundaries.”
- 8 Joronen et al., “Palestinian Futures”; Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures*; Medak-Saltzman, “Coming to You from the Indigenous Future”; Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*.
- 9 For an overview of the many artistic representations of the “Kashmir calendar” by artists like Mir Suhail and Maria Shahmiri, or by groups like Aalaw, see Misri, “Dark Ages and Bright Futures.” Nitasha Kaul’s novel *Future Tense* (2020) also offers an important fictional elaboration of the question of Kashmiri futures.
- 10 Mushtaq, “Militarisation, Misogyny, and Gendered Violence”; Bhat, “Kashmir’s LGBTQ Community.”
- 11 Kanjwal, *Colonizing Kashmir*.
- 12 Junaid, “Death and Life under Occupation.”
- 13 Chandrashekhar, “Indian Media Is War Crazy.”
- 14 Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 17; Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,” 3.
- 15 Junaid and Kanjwal, “Contesting Settler Colonial Logics.”
- 16 Kauanui, “A Structure, Not an Event.”
- 17 Bhan, Misri, and Zia, “Relating Otherwise.”
- 18 Kashmiri media have essentially been gagged, with a law passed in 2020 that not only endorses but has also institutionalized censorship in Kashmir. Even a small social media post that hints at criticism of India leads to arrest and censure by the state. Many Kashmiris have been jailed for as little as responding with an emoticon.
- 19 *Al Jazeera*, “Kashmir Journalists Say Local Newspapers Erasing Their Work.”
- 20 Zargar, “In the Disconnected Land.”
- 21 Sinha, “Everyone’s a Poet of Loss, Memory, and Madness in Kashmir.”
- 22 Zia, “Poetry as Dissent,” 417.
- 23 Adnan, “Journalists Switch Professions.”
- 24 These include the Gulmarg Literary Festival, the Kumaon Literary Festival, and the Kashmir Literary Festival.
- 25 Kumaon Lit Fest, “This session seeks to advocate that the State should encourage and invest in literary stories from Kashmir.”
- 26 Yasir, “As Kashmir Crackdown Endures, Poets Stifle Their Verses.”
- 27 Kashmir Lit Team, “DELETED: Forcibly Disappeared Kashmiri Writing.”
- 28 *The Ladies Finger*, “Decolonial Feminist Statement on #MeToo in Kashmir.”
- 29 As Fox and Malik explain in their article, *transgen* is local parlance in Kashmir for “transgender.”
- 30 Shafi, “We Want Dignity.”
- 31 Ali et al., “Geographies of Occupation.”
- 32 This translation of Mahjur’s famous ghazal is taken from Abdul Manan Bhat’s article in this issue.

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