

# Eye to I: Panoptic Muslim Surveillance and Warsan Shire's Poetics of Liberation

Sarah Fathima Mohammed  
Harvard College '27

In 1786, French architect Jeremy Bentham envisioned the panopticon, a structure in which prison cells surround an opaque tower where guards surveil the prisoners. In the panopticon, prisoners could be observed by guards without knowing when they were being watched, making them trained for constant vigilance.

My research places this centuries-old theoretical model against contemporary Muslim surveillance, arguing that the panopticon is a way to more deeply and thoroughly understand the omnipresent surveillance weaponized against Muslim communities after 9/11. More broadly, I refuse to dilute the impact of internalized and externalized policing on marginalized communities. I investigate how post-9/11 surveillance in Nairobi places Muslim communities into a prison-like structure in which they are repeatedly watched, affecting their internal psyche—the art form of poetry written by these marginalized groups allows for a deeper viewing and dissection of this surveillance. Invoking French philosopher Michel Foucault, who drew from the panopticon in his literary theories on discipline, with first-hand ethnographic research on Muslim surveillance from contemporary scholars living in Nairobi, Kenya, I pose a literary-ethnographic stance regarding how we can view the lasting impacts of Muslim surveillance.

In analyzing the detrimental conditions of surveillance in postcolonial Kenya, I also investigate how a key contemporary poet, Warsan Shire, breaks free from these boundaries through her artistic work, which focuses on the generational and haunting implications of surveillance in her own Muslim community. Shire herself was born in Kenya and migrated to the United Kingdom with her family when she was a young child. Her poetry, both spoken and written, has now reached global audiences in North America, Germany, and South Africa and has influenced the contemporary literary canon. Catechizing Muslim surveillance through meshing literary and anthropological research, I hope to dismantle the post 9-/11 prison-panopticon of inspection, emphasizing the role of artistry in liberation and resistance.

*"Assimilation" by Warsan Shire*

*We never unpacked,  
dreaming in the wrong language,  
carrying out mother's fears in our feet—  
if he raises his voice we will flee  
if he looks bored we will pack our bags  
unable to excise the refugee from our hearts,  
unable to sleep through the night.*

*The refugee's heart has six chambers.  
In the first is your mother's unpacked suitcase.  
In the second, your father cries into his hands.  
The third room is an immigration office,  
your severed legs in the fourth,  
in the fifth, a uterus—yours?  
The sixth opens with the right papers.*

*I can't get the refugee out of my body,  
I bolt my body whenever I get the chance.*

In her first full-length published poetry collection, *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth*, the refugee poet Warsan Shire frames her experience moving from Nairobi to London, feeling isolated in her identity and her body:

*No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark. I've  
been carrying the old anthem in my mouth for so long that  
there's no space for another song, another tongue or another*

*language. I know a shame that shrouds, totally engulfs. I tore  
up and ate my own passport in an airport hotel. I'm bloated  
with language I can't afford to forget. I don't know where I'm  
going. Where I came from is disappearing. I am unwelcome. My  
beauty is not beauty here. My body is burning with the shame  
of not belonging, my body is longing. I am the sin of memory  
and the absence of memory (Shire, 2011).*

In these lines, Shire explores the gravitational pull between memories of her Kenyan homeland and her current condition of unease and longing. Shire's words illuminate the paradox of her poetic identity, a creative process that hinges on melding a sinuous influx of words to create a deeper narrative and truth. As a daughter of refugees, her poetic expression navigates the feeling of being "bloated with language" and how it can fully encapsulate her diasporic experiences. Poetry cannot fully articulate the depth of the stories in her bones, yet perhaps it remains the only medium that can come close; its ability to create a cohesive story using fragmented narratives, line breaks, and separated stanzas mirror experiences of migration and loss. Her words, the tools she uses for her craft, catalyze a swollen, overwhelming, and unwieldy sort of weight, lurking with danger. Her poetry's current of language suffuses with precarity and the challenge of encapsulating memory and experience, continuity and change. Shire's poetry of ancestral memory, rooted in the generational experiences of Muslim women surveilled in Nairobi, exposes the deleterious effects of the internalized gaze of policing.

Shire's poems trace her matrilineal experiences with Muslim surveillance, foregrounding how this watchful gaze lingers in her body and continues to shape her psyche across time and space. Strangely,

Shire titles her poem, “Home,” demonstrating the elusive comfort this word evokes as an asymptote of unconditional ease that cannot be reached. In Shire’s poems, the familiar and the dangerous share the same space, conversing with one another. When Shire speaks of “know[ing] a shame that shrouds, totally engulfs,” a gaze of surveillance takes over, making her feel perpetually uneasy as though she is committing wrongdoing. This sentiment—the power of language both as a tool of beauty and of possible harm—echoes through Shire’s work, resounding off her poetic practice. As the daughter of Somali Muslim refugees born in Nairobi, who later moved to London, Shire grew up under conditions of social precarity that her poems reflect (Okeowo, 2022). Ultimately, the surveillance Shire internalizes emerges from a generational tradition of surveillance that her ancestors carry down to her (Shire and Mehri, 2022).

The societal authorities of Kenya pushed Muslim people to the margins, creating Christian-dominant political conditions rooted in policing and warfare. The late nineteenth-century colonial regime in Kenya, rife with undemocratic power structures, lacked representation of Muslims in the colonial government. Under such corrupt conditions, Muslim immigrants struggled to receive an education and citizenship (Prestholdt, 2011). The bone-deep history of the Muslim minority communities in Kenya resonates through the present, resulting in the socio-political targeting of these groups. In postcolonial Kenya, the history of marginalization for Muslim communities persists. Muslim political officials exist in the minority and continue to advocate for their rights in a staunchly religious nation (Prestholdt, 2011). In the 1990s, Kenyan government officials banned the Islamic Party of Kenya from participation in the national election, and this exclusion evinces how the ruling party instituted oppressive measures to exclude representation of Muslims (Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission, 2008). The endemic exclusion of Muslims in Kenya magnified the systemic struggle for Muslims to obtain representation that takes place both in sociocultural contexts, like education, and political ones, like elections. Shire’s work illuminates the lasting effects of this policing across countries and geographies—she demonstrates how its impact stretches far beyond institutional discrimination. In the post-9/11 world, Shire reveals how the policing of Muslims creates a generational loss through surveillance and the internalized gaze surveillance imposes.

Shire’s poetry explores her experiences living with her mother, aunts and cousins in Kenya’s capital city, Nairobi. In her creative work, Shire describes acutely feeling the gaze that alienates her. Shire features Nairobi as one of the only locations named explicitly in her poems, while many unnamed others carry porous, more flexible geographic boundaries that mimic Shire’s complex personal relationship to a sense of place (Shire, 2011). Through her migratory, haunting poems, Shire narrates the stories of her people and her own experiences navigating conditions of surveillance, violence, and shame (Okeowo, 2022). Shire’s poems traverse both time and space, and they echo the language of her grandmother and her mother, steeped in generational warnings that a daughter hears from the older women around her. Through incorporating the shared voices of women close to her, Shire builds a body of work that is matrilineal in nature. Fellow British-Somali author Momtaza Mehri names this economy of language that relies on warning, calling on Shire’s work as embodying a “surveillance network of aunts” (Shire and Mehri, 2022). Shire’s work begs the question: What does a daughter of the Kenyan diaspora, living in the wake of systemic oppression, carry down? Her poetry examines this question, residing within and

reckoning with a surveillance network akin to that envisioned by one architect centuries ago.

In the 1800s, architect Jeremy Bentham conceived a model of prison surveillance that bears the intense, embodied weight of warning that lingers through Shire’s poetry. He called that architectural structure the panopticon (Fig. 1). Bentham’s panopticon economizes the gaze of surveillance. In the panopticon, guards occupy an opaque watchtower in the center of the prison. Prisoners surround the watchtower, and due to the watchtower’s opacity, they do not know when the guards watch them. Therefore, the prisoners remain vigilant in their actions, performing them as if the guards constantly surveil them. The panopticon limits the physical work guards would need to carry out to surveil the prisoners while increasing the efficacy of a prison by pushing prisoners to adopt an internalized gaze (Bentham, 2017).

In its nature, the panopticon mimics a hermetic system, a house in that its structure represents permanence, physicality, and centrality, encompassing an eternal space for both the prisoners and the guards. Shire evokes this structure in her poem, “Home”: “No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark” (Shire, 2022). Shire introduces the question: what does it mean to discover home in a structure akin to a prison, made to be a place of shackling?

The model of the panopticon encapsulates what scholar Danielle Haque calls the “fraught futures” that Shire’s poems inhabit (Haque, 2002). Surveillance creates watchfulness that literally inhabits the space beside a shared conceptual future in this phrase. French theorist Michel Foucault deems this extension of surveillance “central in the history of repression: the transition from the inflicting of penalties to the imposition of surveillance” (Foucault, 2015). Shire echoes Foucault’s rendering of the panopticon’s immensity as the power of surveillance becomes invisible in the outside environment and hypervisible in the bodies of all surveilled people.

In Shire’s first home and her birthplace, the gaze of Muslim surveillance resonated through Nairobi, and it colored both her landscape and experience. Decades later this internalized gaze lingers in her creative work. Yet, Shire’s poetry confronts, interrogates, and investigates this panoptic surveillance that pulses throughout her generations, passed down matrilineally, a sort of

The post 9/11 world aggravated surveillance of Muslims in Kenya. The United States pushed Kenya to adopt stronger and more forceful antiterrorist measures in its home state, rooting out the threat of attack (Al-Bulushi, 2021). United States’s involvement in Muslim surveillance extended beyond its borders. Because of the allyship of

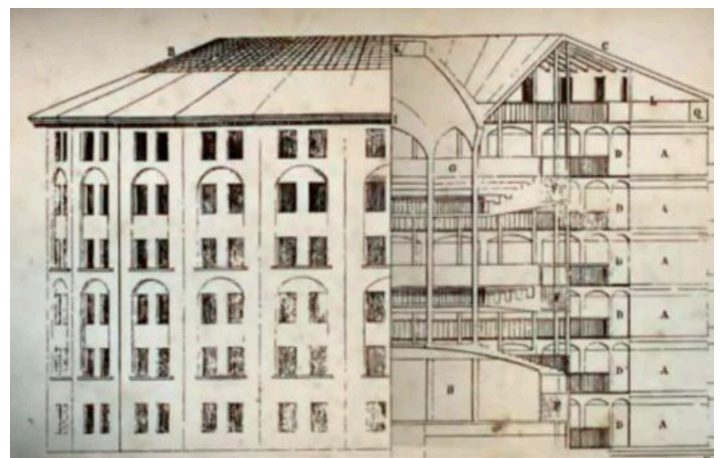


Fig. 1. Bentham, Jeremy. Panopticon: Or the Inspection House



the two countries, Kenya adopted some of the United States's surveillance measures to combat terrorism, including the stationing of additional troops targeted in specific communities. The United Kingdom government's 2019 travel advisory warning for Kenya, based on the violent terrorist attacks that the al-Shaabab terrorist group executed in the country the same year, demonstrates an international positioning on Kenya's national security: "you should be vigilant at this time" (United States Department of State Bureau of Counterterrorism, 2019). This call for vigilance, both for foreigners and Kenyan citizens, echoes Foucault's panopticon. The mirroring of both the citizen and the foreign outsider needing to be vigilant in the country illustrates the weaponization of social visibility. The beginning of a panopticon structure in Nairobi took root through increased surveillance of Muslims.

## I. Invisible Cities: Surveillance Beyond its Physical Borders

### "Ugly"

*Your daughter is ugly.  
She knows loss intimately,  
carries whole cities in her belly.  
As a child, relatives wouldn't hold her.  
She was splintered wood and sea water (Shire, 2022).*

Bentham envisioned the panopticon as a circular model covering an entire city, creating layers upon layers of surveillance surrounding a particular area (Furlong, 2015). This structure of the paragraph aligns with Nairobi, the largest city in Kenya, an all-encompassing space that functions as a microcosm replicated in other areas of the country. Cities generally represent a communal togetherness as the network of communities of the countryside coalesces into the comforting solidarity of a central body or territory. In Nairobi, Muslims lived in close communities that allowed them to practice their cultural traditions and bond over shared values. However, Nairobi's tightened security created a feeling of alienation in its Muslim population. Sociopolitical surveillance means residents never feel at ease in their geography. Their movements, interactions, or speech constricted them because of an external force. The alienation that surveillance induces mimics a key structure in the panopticon: the individual prison cell. The individual cells present in the panopticon, as depicted in Bentham's architectural sketch (Fig. 2), restrict the ability for community togetherness, heighten the feeling of aloneness in the surveilled population, and create estrangement from a greater world outside of the prison network.

In *Discipline and Punishment*, Foucault chronicles the nature of punishment in the modern sociocultural psyche, and he compares the prison cells in the panopticon to "so many cages, so many small theaters, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible" (Foucault, 2008). This node of hypervisibility means that this location, designed as a permanent lodging for the surveilled, can never truly embody the name home since it strips its inhabitants of comfort. Rather, it occupies a defensive network in which both the country and its citizens learn to be defensive by nature (Furlong, 2015).

In the panopticon of Kenya, the impact of Muslim surveillance resonates outwards—beyond its immediate community—in the same way the literal force of surveillance extends outwards—removing terrorist threats beyond its borders. The broadened scope of Kenyan

surveillance extends past its capital Nairobi into other cities of the county, such as the Coast Province and North East Province (International Crisis Group, 2012). Shire's hereditary Somalia possesses a high Muslim population which faced similar measures of surveillance and a similar history of discrimination long before the twenty-first century terrorist attacks (Lind, Mutahi, and Oosterom, 2015).

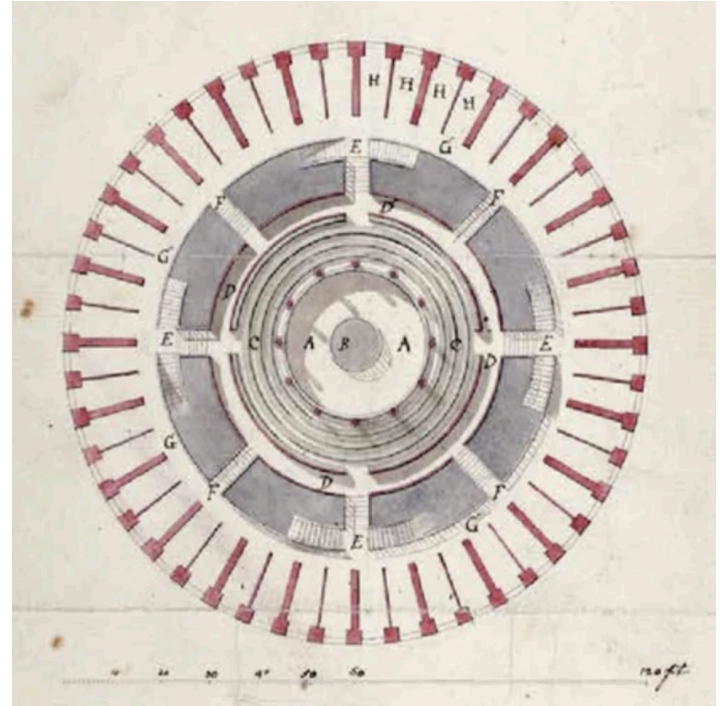


Fig.2. Furlong, Gillian. "Designs for a Panopticon Prison by Jeremy Bentham."

Jeremy Lind, a researcher investigating violence in livelihoods, discusses how this suppression "other[s]" an entire population as somehow threatening, providing the rationale for collective punishment measures" (Lind, Mutahi, and Oosterom, 2015). In Lind's interviews with generations of Muslim families, individuals consistently described the weaponized gaze of surveillance—a "blanket of suspicion"—as akin to the violent military expeditions during the colonial regime that rooted out entire populations of their people (Lind, Mutahi, and Oosterom, 2015). The statements of the interviewees evoke the idea that the only difference between colonial and postcolonial violence against Muslims feature the visibility of the violence struck among the people: the colonial government relied on external force while the postcolonial government relies on invisible surveillance (Lind, Mutahi, and Oosterom, 2015). As a result, generations of Muslim populations, like Shire's family, experienced and must reckon with the haunting effects of historic marginalization.

The feeling of historic marginalization lingers in Shire's creative work. In her poem, "Refugee," Shire reflects on the inheritance of loss:

*a daughter carries whole cities in her belly  
her hands are a civil war,  
a refugee camp behind each ear (Haque, 2002).*

Through the image of a city's violence and ruins, finding home in the body of a refugee like Shire, Shire illustrates how the aftermath of war remains a gestation of memory in the body, weighing her down with the aftershocks of conflict. Entrenched surveillance becomes a

generational trauma, passed down, a feeling that holds gravity and a feeling that the body remembers acutely. According to English professor and scholar Danielle Haque, navigating surveillance openly on the page allows Shire to build a space for herself and homeliness (Haque, 2002). Writing about the externalized gaze transforms surveillance from being opaque to being transparent, rendering this concept visible and dismantling its evasive power so it can finally be engaged with fully. In this space of engagement, Shire can both expose the lasting impacts of surveillance to a broader audience and find comfort in writing poetry that chronicles possible futures—what sort of homes might emerge after such a generational experience.

Shire's first full-length collection, *Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head*, remains preoccupied with honoring internalized surveillance and the remnants of ancestral stories. The collection invokes an explicit tie between the weaponized attention of surveillance, which turns surveillance into a violent yet invisible weapon used against the affected communities, and how it becomes internalized in the bodies of her people. (Shire and Mehri, 2022). Returning to the language in the title of her collection, Shire addresses her mother in a poem:

*Mama, I made it  
out of your home  
alive, raised by  
the voices  
in my head (Shire, 2022).*

The voices Shire evokes in the verses contain the gravity of ancestral warnings, and the urgency to act properly in case of an external gaze appearing. These voices mother her, shaping her and the way she walks in the world. The frequent line breaks create terse snippets of text, how Shire's generational teachings linger in her mind in fragmented form. Paradoxically, despite their fragmentary narrative, they together create a cohesive whole of how she must view the world and survive within it. Shire, in bringing in the image of internalized surveillance as a way in which her experiences of the panopticon reach beyond geographic barriers, evoking that, no matter where she travels, the feeling of being watched lingers.

## II. Guards in the Watchtower: The Tightening of Surveillance Measures in Nairobi and Surveillance Through Policing

*"Conversations about Home (at the Deportation Center)"*  
*"God, do you know how difficult it is to talk about the day your  
own city dragged you by the hair, past the old prison, past the  
school gates, past the burning torsos erected on poles like flags?  
When I meet others like me, I recognize the longing, the missing,  
the memory of ash on their faces" (Shire, 2014).*

The surveillance practices that took place in Kenya's capital Nairobi paradoxically represent the lack of openness even in a location with the greatest centrality. Anthropologist Zoltán Glück coined the term "security urbanism" to explain this presence in Nairobi. Even in prominent capital locations where city safety ought to be transparent, the state deployed an undercurrent of hidden national security practices unbeknownst to the citizens (Glück, 2017). These types of spatial practices relied on creating panopticon-style surveillance networks through the geography of the capital city, making surveillance into a cloaked routine (Glück, 2017).

One year after the 1988 Al-Qaeda attacks in Nairobi, Muslim communities reported how the Kenyan government banned their organizations and how they treated Muslims as threats in Kenyan national media that repeatedly broadcasted the presence of potential terrorist threats in Muslim-dominated areas (Al-Bulushi, 2018). Further, they discussed how suspicions cast over them on both the governmental scale and among their fellow citizens harmed Muslims. Samar Al-Bulushi, a professor in Anthropology, visited Nairobi in 2004 to investigate the effects of surveillance upon Muslim communities, coined the term "citizen-suspect" to discuss the nature of the treatment of Kenya's Muslim population. The social implications of the phrase indicate vigilance as inherently intertwined with what it means to be a Muslim citizen in the area of Kenya and that Kenya's Christian citizens alienated these citizens (Al-Bulushi, 2018).

Kenya's Anti-Terror Police Unit (ATPU), formed in 2003 in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and funded by the United States and United Kingdom governments, demonstrates the international positioning and pressure on Kenyan surveillance. Muslim communities in Nairobi suspected the ATPU carried out the abduction of a Muslim man, Hamisi, in 2010 (Al-Bulushi, 2018). Hamisi's abductors wore plain clothes and carried him into an unarmed vehicle outside of Nairobi's shopping center. They suspected that he colluded in the Kampala Bombings at the World Cup in Uganda. The officials who kidnapped Hamisi sent him to be questioned in Uganda, where he was detained and questioned regarding his involvement in the bombings. Hamisi's abduction followed a trend of Muslim citizens in Kenya being taken and questioned for crimes they did not commit.

Before Hamisi's kidnapping, he was among a group of Muslim activists studying and tracking these abductions, trying to find out more information about where they were held and by whom. According to Al-Bulushi, this could be a reason the government removed Hamisi from his community. When Hamisi's wife investigated what had happened to her husband, she came across similar cases of Muslim men disappearing from Nairobi, taken from their communities without their current whereabouts being shared, released years after their capture (Al-Bulushi, 2018). Hamisi's abduction represents a continuation of the undercover surveillance and repression that took place in Nairobi's Muslim community.

The sudden government intervention in a shopping mall without any previous knowledge of the surveillance tactics of this area demonstrates the all-encompassing, surrounding force of the panoptic gaze that the Muslim community in Nairobi became conditioned to (Al-Bulushi, 2018). Through events like Hamisi's abduction, Kenya blurs the distance between the guard who surveilled the community, the police forces, and the target who was surveilled, the Muslim community. Similar to the ATPU, the Kenya Defense Force worked with the international community to counter terrorism. Their mission of tamping down on external threats begs the question of what the Kenyan government considers as an internal threat versus an external one (Al-Bulushi, 2018). The positioning demonstrates a physical manifestation of Al-Bulushi's "citizen-suspect," creating an environment in which fear of surveillance alters the psyche of the community (Al-Bulushi, 2018).



### III. Conversation Tubes: Surveillance in Social Communities

#### *"Souvenir"*

*"You brought the war with you  
unknowingly, perhaps, on your skin  
in hurried suitcases  
in photographs  
plumes of it in your hair  
under your nails  
maybe it was in your blood"* (Shire, 2022).

Shire's poem "Souvenir" emphasizes the lasting effects of war upon the body, something that follows her and stays with her long after she has left the place of conquest. The poem emphasizes how these acts of warfare exhibit themselves beyond the political scope and into the social realm, permeating day-to-day acts like looking through suitcases and photographs—these activities become a vehicle for remembering pain. The prison-panopticon in Nairobi similarly exhibits itself not only through literal force but also through media, creating a sort of social repression that is difficult to escape. For example, the billboards in Nairobi that advocate for community security influences the social psyche of the community who consumes it. A digital mode of panoptic surveillance capitalizes upon what Foucault calls the "economy of power," choosing to surveil communities rather than outwardly punish them, creating an internal system of loss (Foucault, 2015). According to Foucault, the incorporation of surveillance as a running undercurrent affecting a community extends notions of power and control, increasing the different ways in which the state can both subjugate and subdue (Foucault, 2015). Specifically, surveillance technology in the digital era means that the citizen cannot separate themselves from the suspect, even when outside of a specific geographic territory.

Dr. Josh A. Hendrix, whose academic work specifically focuses on contemporary policing and its effects on modern communities, asserts that surveillance technology serves as a "physical embodiment of citizen distrust," reminding community members that they remain tracked like a threat (Hendrix et al., 2018). This sentiment reflects the targeting of Somali Muslims in Nairobi, a magnification of systems of oppression that mirrors Hendrix's analysis of surveillance for populations deemed high risk by the government. Consequently, implementation of surveillance targets specific communities, inherently rooted in an unequal distribution of policing resources (Hendrix et al., 2018). In Nairobi, this form of surveillance manifests itself through messages on billboards, displayed to the entire community. During Al-Bulushi's 2004 visit for her anthropological academic research on Muslim surveillance, Al-Bulushi highlights a billboard she saw emblazoned with the Swahili words: "Security begins with me; Security begins with you." These words urge citizens to turn in and watch over the Kenyans around them, creating a social policing effect that transcends the more detached, clinical structure of surveillance that a government holds the autonomy to enforce. The phrase emphasizes surveillance within intimate relationships through the pronouns me and you, highlighting hidden dangers in the closest networks among communities that can no longer be designated safe.

Through social surveillance, the government weaponized the citizens against one another and restricted the potential for community solidarity (Al-Bulushi, 2018). Ironically, these practices of pitting citizen populations against one another maximized the extremism they were created to prevent, causing populations to be increasingly

divisive and distrustful of one another. Additionally, they reduce the possibility for human kinship and resilience in a shared physical region (Metre, 2016). For example, Foucault, in his analysis of the panopticon effect, predicts this presence of surveillance dangerously flowing from governmental networks into social ones, breaking bonds among communities and regions. The panopticon's economy of power, according to Foucault, makes it "destined to spread throughout the social body," touching everything in its reach (Foucault, 2008).

The negative impact of surveillance Foucault alludes to reveals itself in Shire's work that chronicles the way in which the violence of the city permeates the body of a daughter of the diaspora. In her poem, "Assimilation," Shire describes this feeling of internalized violence, how she carries its threat with her wherever she goes. Growing up in London with her family, she recalls a family dynamic of watchfulness, in which she and her family members are "unable to excise the refugee from our hearts / unable to sleep through the night." Always anticipating danger, Shire describes needing to "bolt my body whenever I get the chance," protecting it from the possibility of harm. In her heart lies the remnants of surveillance, pulsing through her body's anatomy like an organ of its own. In the poem, her severed legs occupy the fourth chamber of her heart, as though transforming into a warning, reminding her to remain careful because danger looms. Even after leaving Nairobi, its social conditions and undercurrent of hidden danger remain entrenched in her mind and heart.

The manifestation of social surveillance in Nairobi radically contours the idea of the "citizen-suspect," introducing the idea of being a Muslim citizen in Nairobi as acutely tied to feeling suspected in both political and social contexts (Al-Bulushi, 2018). For coastal Muslim communities living on the outskirts of large urban areas like Nairobi, physical estrangement magnifies this othering of their citizenship. The citizens occupied what Al-Bulushi calls the "gray zone," a zone that straddles the line between peace and war (Al-Bulushi, 2018). As such, surveillance becomes a way in which a war against terrorism perpetuates itself. In Nairobi, communities remain unable to fully settle into a state of peace, yet the psychological war they endure hinges on internal surveillance rather than external aggression. According to a 2008 report from Kenyan Muslim populations representing the Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission, citizens have difficulty pinpointing when and by whom they are being watched, facing various layers of surveillance and their own internalization of this gaze, which is why cases of surveillance are not brought up to the courts (Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission, 2008). Al-Bulushi demonstrates how the experiences of Muslimhood become inherently shaped by the danger of surveillance forces in their homes, acting upon their identity and causing them to behave more cautiously (Al-Bulushi, 2018).

In ethnographic interviews conducted by Al-Bulushi, one such coastal community discussed the haunting disappearance of a Muslim man, Ahmed, removed from his Nairobi community in 2009 and taken to an unknown location. Others in the community were acutely affected by Ahmed's kidnapping, moving locations for safety. One woman, Maryam, found herself stuck between her hometown, Mombasa, and the more prominent city of Nairobi where she ended up choosing to stay because of its centrality, and relative transparency regarding policing. Her decision to reside in Nairobi made her "internalize and anticipate the unpredictability of state terror," becoming hyper aware of the locations in which the force of policing hurts members of her community (Al-Bulushi, 2018). For other Muslim people deemed suspects and later released by the police, custody

included questioning about their cultural dress, emphasizing their social and religious ties (Ndzovu 2014). Muslim citizens become a sort of watchtower themselves, forced to report on the actions of their community members. (Bredlid, 2021). These Muslim communities absorb the rhetoric of some Kenyan Christian citizens, who question their loyalty in Nairobi and even argue that they are “taking over the country” (International Crisis Group, 2012). This rhetoric renders Muslim communities hypervisible in Nairobi, deemed suspects by both the government and their fellow citizens.

Even after these communities migrate away from Kenya, surveillance lingers. F.B.I. agent Terry Albury remembered questioning Muslim citizens flying into the United States from Nairobi as a “standard drill,” asking them about their experiences in Kenya with extremism and radicalization (Reitman, 2021). These forms of pop-up surveillance permeate geographic boundaries, not restricting the feeling of being watched to Kenya’s clean-cut borders. The alienation of Muslim communities deemed citizen-suspects from the nexus of Kenya mimics the physical placement of the panopticon in which the cells of prisoners surround the center of the structure, which holds the guards and the watchtower (Fig. 2). Muslim communities inhabit the outskirts of Nairobi, attempting to create contemporary spaces of safety for themselves in the wake of the Christian-dominated regimes of the colonial period. At the center of the city lies police forces actively patrolling the area, inhabiting a watchful state over the surrounding Muslims. The site of the panopticon is the entire city of Nairobi, the territory encompassing a prison structurally (Furlong, 2015).

In a poem, “Midnight in the Foreign Food Aisle,” exploring midnights spent in the foreign food aisle of a convenience store, Warsan Shire explores the finding of shelter:

*You find yourself totally alone alone, in the foreign  
food aisle, beside the turmeric and saffron,  
Remembering your mother’s warm, dark hands,  
Prostrating in front of the halal meat, praying in a  
Language you haven’t used in years (Shire, 2022).*

In the aisle of the convenience store, Shire attempts to avert the gaze of surveillance, situating the poem hidden between the aisles of a commercial place, away from any external gaze watching her prayers. The foreign food aisle in which Shire sets the poem represents Shire’s alienation from a community who understands her as familiar rather than foreign, creating a tension between intimacy and isolation. However, through utilizing a second person point of view, Shire reaches towards an audience who understands and can intimately arrive at her diasporic experience without her needing to explain its deep-rooted intricacies. Choosing to pray among spices, including turmeric and saffron, reminiscent of her childhood in Nairobi, allows her to access her past, remembering her mother’s teachings and letting these teachings fill her with her first language. Her poem extends the yearning for home and safety, chronicling the presence of prayer as a measure of feeling comfort. Despite Shire’s adopted home of London, far from Kenya, Shire still feels the palpable threat of surveillance and the loneliness evoked by not having her female family members, who share her experience, close to her. The watchful presence of the guard transcends geographic boundaries, making her feel surveilled even in another country. However, in unveiling the depth of this gaze in her poem, Shire illustrates the way she finds cloistered, unseen and unsuspecting spaces to worship and engage

in ancestral memory. Through her poems, Shire can carve a safe space for herself, a node of familiarity and warmth. She immortalizes this small moment where she returns to her language and her mother’s teachings without shame or fear.

#### IV. Individual Prison Cells: Surveillance Creates Reification, “Othering”

##### “Tea With Our Grandmothers”

*I thought of my ayeeyo, the woman  
I was named after, Warsan Baraka,  
skin dark like tamarind flesh,  
who died grinding cardamom  
waiting for her sons to come home and  
raise the loneliness they’d left behind (Shire, 2011).*

From the War on Terror, the name given to the United States fight against terrorism starting in 2001 with the September 11 attacks, to the present, these orders of Muslim surveillance in Nairobi create a reification of the other, separating Muslim communities from a nationalist ideology. Through social surveillance, Nairobi compresses the distance between the citizen and guard figures first represented in the panopticon, linking the surveilled with the arbiters of surveillance and creating the foundation for citizen distrust and unease. When the government employs surveillance technology, layering on-the-ground police surveillance over social surveillance, they create the psychological feelings associated with war within the territory (Al-Bulushi, 2018). As Al-Bulushi describes in her analysis of her term, “gray zone,” carrying out military goals without physical military force still results in conditions of quasi-war (Al-Bulushi, 2018). In Nairobi, the state and its power are at the center of surveillance, targeting Muslim communities as a group in the name of security in a manner akin to “killing a mosquito with a hammer” (Lind, Mutahi, and Oosterom, 2015). The city becomes “not just the site, but the very medium of warfare,” manipulating geographic boundaries to restrict community freedoms and treat Muslims as threats (Al-Bulushi, 2018).

On Jan 15, 2019, the al-Shabaab terrorism group attacked the Dusit D2 hotel complex in Nairobi, aiming to incite violence against the wealthy Kenyans and visitors who stayed there and killing 21 people (United States Department of State Bureau of Counterterrorism, 2019). The worst attack in four years, the event sparked increased surveillance, and it foreshadowed the future of the panoptic gaze in Nairobi: only increasing as the violence and unrest increased in the area. Through attacks like al-Shaabaab’s violence, the intensity of surveillance heightens, making it urgent to act upon. The state continues to adopt surveillance as a “dominant weapon of warfare,” concealing its force to the Muslim communities acutely affected by its presence (Renton, 2018). Surveillance affects the political system so deeply that it becomes classified as its own political order, and its expansion resembles the imperialist desire of the colonial system, fighting for control of the psyche of a certain territory’s citizens. Al-Bulushi’s gray zone of surveillance-based war reflects a “permanent state of emergency,” a panopticon that neither the people nor the territory of the city can extricate itself from (Renton, 2018).

## V. Breaking Free from the Invisible City: Poetry as a Form of Liberation

### “Backwards”

*I'll rewrite this whole life and this time there'll be so much love,  
you won't be able to see beyond it (Shire, 2017).*

Surveillance remains an ongoing system of war between the government in Nairobi and Muslim communities, an extension of the war on terror that reaches globally and concentrates in Nairobi. In the same way that Bentham's architectural plan aimed to encompass an entire city, surveillance transcends boundaries and occupies immense space, becoming rooted even in the psyche of those whom the panopticon surveils. In Warsan Shire's poetry, she incorporates the voices of her people and family members into her book through interviews with them, creating a communal chorus through the body of her work (Okeowo, 2022). Her poem, “Backwards” meditates on the power of poetry to resist loss and invoke the care of her close family members, learning towards a life of abundance.

*The poem can start with him walking backwards into a room.  
He takes off his jacket and sits down for the rest of his life;  
that's how we bring Dad back.  
I can make the blood run back up my nose, ants rushing into a hole.  
We grow into smaller bodies, my breasts disappear,  
your cheeks soften, teeth sink back into gums.  
I can make us loved, just say the word.*

*I can make us loved, just say the word.  
Your cheeks soften, teeth sink back into gums  
we grow into smaller bodies, my breasts disappear.  
I can make the blood run back up my nose, ants rushing into  
a hole,  
that's how we bring Dad back.  
He takes off his jacket and sits down for the rest of his life.  
The poem can start with him walking backwards into a room  
(Shire, 2017).*

By invoking her father who passed away, the poem counters loss through bringing alive Shire's generational origins on the page. In addition, Shire resists other forms of deprivation, including growing older and being hurt. She investigates intensely intimate relationships to recast a world in which they are still soft, unhardened by the world and by cynicism. In this universe the poem imagines, Shire bridges together her own experience with that of those close to her, envisioning a world in which they all exist in the same space.

To do this, Shire adopts an extended palindromic structure where the second stanza mirrors the first, starting and ending with the father walking backwards into the room of the poem. In the room that the poem builds, the father can “sit down for the rest of his life,” no longer needing to remain upright, to remain acutely watchful of his surroundings in case a threat appears. Through this mirroring that begins and ends with a legacy of restfulness, Shire highlights the power of reciprocal care and reaches toward a state of comfort where her bloodline no longer needs to occupy a vigilant state of internalized surveillance. Her work creates the project of seeing the panoptic gaze more clearly.

## References

- Al-Bulushi, Samar (2021). Citizen-Suspect: Navigating Surveillance and Policing in Urban Kenya. *American Anthropologist* 123, no. 4, 819-32.
- (2018). Twenty Years On: The War on Terror in East Africa. *Items*.
- Bentham, Jeremy (2017). *Panopticon: Or the Inspection House*. Anodos Books. 1-7.
- Breidlid, Torhild (2021). Countering or Contributing to Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in Kenya? A Critical Case Study. *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 14, no. 2, 225-46.
- Foucault, Michel (2008). ‘Panopticism’ from Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison. *Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts* 2, no. 1, 1-12.
- (2015). *Power/knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. Edited by Colin Gordon. Vintage Books. 33-71.
- Furlong, Gillian (2015). Designs for a Panopticon Prison by Jeremy Bentham. *Treasures from UCL*, 136-39.
- Glück, Zoltán (2017). Security Urbanism and the Counterterror State in Kenya. *Anthropological Theory* 17, no. 3, 297-321.
- Government Digital Service. Foreign Travel Advice: Kenya. GOV.UK.
- Haque, Danielle (2002). Blessed and Banned: Surveillance and Refusal in Somali Diasporic Art & Literature. *Mashriq & Mahjar: Journal of Middle East and North African Migration Studies* 9, no. 1: 41-65.
- Hendrix, Josh A., Travis A. Taniguchi, Kevin J. Strom, Kelle Barrick, and Nicole J. Johnson (2018). The Eyes of Law Enforcement in the New Panopticon: Police-Community Racial Asymmetry and the Use of Surveillance Technology. *Surveillance and Society* 16, no. 1: 53-68.
- Hess, Amanda (2016). Warsan Shire, the Woman Who Gave Poetry to Beyoncé's Lemonade. *New York Times*.
- Kenya Somali Islamist Radicalisation (2012). Nairobi, Kenya: International Crisis Group. 15.
- Lind, Jeremy, Patrick Mutahi, and Marjoke Oosterom (2015). Tangled Ties: Al-Shabaab and Political Volatility in Kenya. UK Department for International Development. 33.
- Maitland, Hayley (2022). Poet Warsan Shire on Her Debut Collection, Working with Beyoncé, and Why She's Done with Shame. *Vogue*.
- Ndzovu, Hassan J (2014). Muslim Politics in the Legislative, Judicial, and Constitutional Arenas. *Muslims in Kenyan Politics: Political Involvement, Marginalization, and Minority Status*, 107-38.
- Okeowo, Alexis (2022). Warsan Shire's Portraits of Somalis in Exile. *The New Yorker*.
- Patterson, William R. (2015). Islamic Radicalization in Kenya. *Joint Force Quarterly* 78, 16-23.
- Prestholdt, Jeremy (2011). Kenya, the United States, and Counterterrorism. *Africa Today* 57, no. 4: 3-27.
- Reitman, Janet (2021). ‘I Helped Destroy People.’ *New York Times*.
- Renton, James (2018). “The Global Order of Muslim Surveillance and its Thought Architecture. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 1, no. 12: 2125-43.
- Shire, Warsan (2017). *Backwards*. Poetry Foundation.
- (2022). *Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head: Poems*. Random House. 1-27.
- (2022). In Conversation: Momtaza Mehri & Warsan Shire. Interview by Momtaza Mehri. *Granta*.
- (2014). *Our Men Do Not Belong to Us*. Slapering Hol Press. 20.
- (2011). *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth*. Flipped Eye Publishing. 27.
- Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission (2008). *Commissions of Inquiry - Report on Concerns of Muslim Community (Sharawe Report)*. Report no. 9. Government Documents and Regulations.
- United States Department of State Bureau of Counterterrorism (2019). *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019: Kenya*. 1-9.
- Van Metre, Lauren (2016). Community Resilience to Violent Extremism in Kenya. *Peaceworks* 122. United States Institute of Peace.