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VISUAL ESSAY

# AN INFIDEL'S INTERPRETATION OF THE ISLAMIC STATE MOTHER AND CHILD CASE

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## Abstract

An Infidel's Interpretation of the Islamic State Mother and Child Case reframes images of Islamic State wives and children as Madonna and child artworks to trouble ideologies that represent such women and children as enemies, as dangerous minds, as detritus, unworthy of statehood. The overlaying of news photographs of Islamic State mothers and children atop artworks referencing the Madonna and child also serves to decolonize traditional, art historical, visual analyses of artworks employing the Madonna and child motif. The additional redrawing of each overlay in the style of a court sketch satirically comments upon the violence of law as well as the violence of its denial.

Keywords: **Motherhood, Statehood, Photography**

I set out to trouble the ideology surrounding images made of Islamic State mothers and children by overlaying news images atop relatively well-known Madonna-and-child-themed artworks in attempt not only to shift how we look at Islamic State mothers and children but also to decolonize visual analyses of the Madonna and child motif. After photoshopping these news-art overlays, I then drew each overlay by hand in the satirical style of the court sketch and stamped each sketch with a tongue-in-cheek signature of a court security officer to gesture both to the violence of law *and* to the violence of its denial. Truths cannot be stuffed into one-size-fits-all legislations. Truths, at least in my eyes, are largely perspectival.

One of the artworks I reference is Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* (1936), a documentary photograph of Florence Thompson, a Cherokee mother born in Indian Territory, Oklahoma, who, at the time Lange photographed her, was a widow and single mother of six, a migrant worker who pulled her children behind her on the picking sack as she labored. (Occasionally homeless, Thompson and her children sought shelter under bridges.) Ariella Azoulay employs this photograph of contested copyright in *The Civil Contract of Photography* to convey her thoughts on our moral duty to such photographs in the public sphere. Such duty, Azoulay insists, requires we seek "to rehabilitate [our]...citizenship or that of someone else who has been stripped of it" as we must assume "that any harm to the principle of citizenship is a harm to [our]...own citizenship" as it is "only by actually practicing... citizenship" that we become citizens.<sup>1</sup> This is an important step in reversing power dynamics associated with image taking and consumption, but in light of the fact that many Indigenous persons in the United States did not become U.S. citizens until June 2, 1924, (Thompson was born in 1903), and in light of the fact that Indigenous persons have tremendous difficulty as largely nomadic people winning land claims cases, not to mention the fact that 36% of the world's births are currently unregistered, what if we citizens of photography refused our status as subjects of nation-states, refused notions of Earth as property, refused all forms of citizenry (legal or practiced) altogether?<sup>2</sup> I suggest this not to make light of the fact that stateless persons are the product of the modern state and are most often in camps, prisons, and detention centers on land outside normal judicial order and "so completely deprived of their rights and prerogatives that no act committed against them [can]... appear any longer as a crime."<sup>3</sup> I make the case *despite* this horrifying reality to counter the national gaze and because I believe that giving up citizenship or even practicing giving it up might beget not only an understanding that inherently rejects settler-colonialist notions of community but also another way of looking.

I cull in this work from news photographs of Hoda Muthana and Shamina Begum in particular, to reference Islamic State mothers and children. Muthana and Begum left their Western homes as teens after being propositioned online to join an Islamic State that promised them escape from their second-generation immigrant identities and from the endemic racism they faced in the West. They

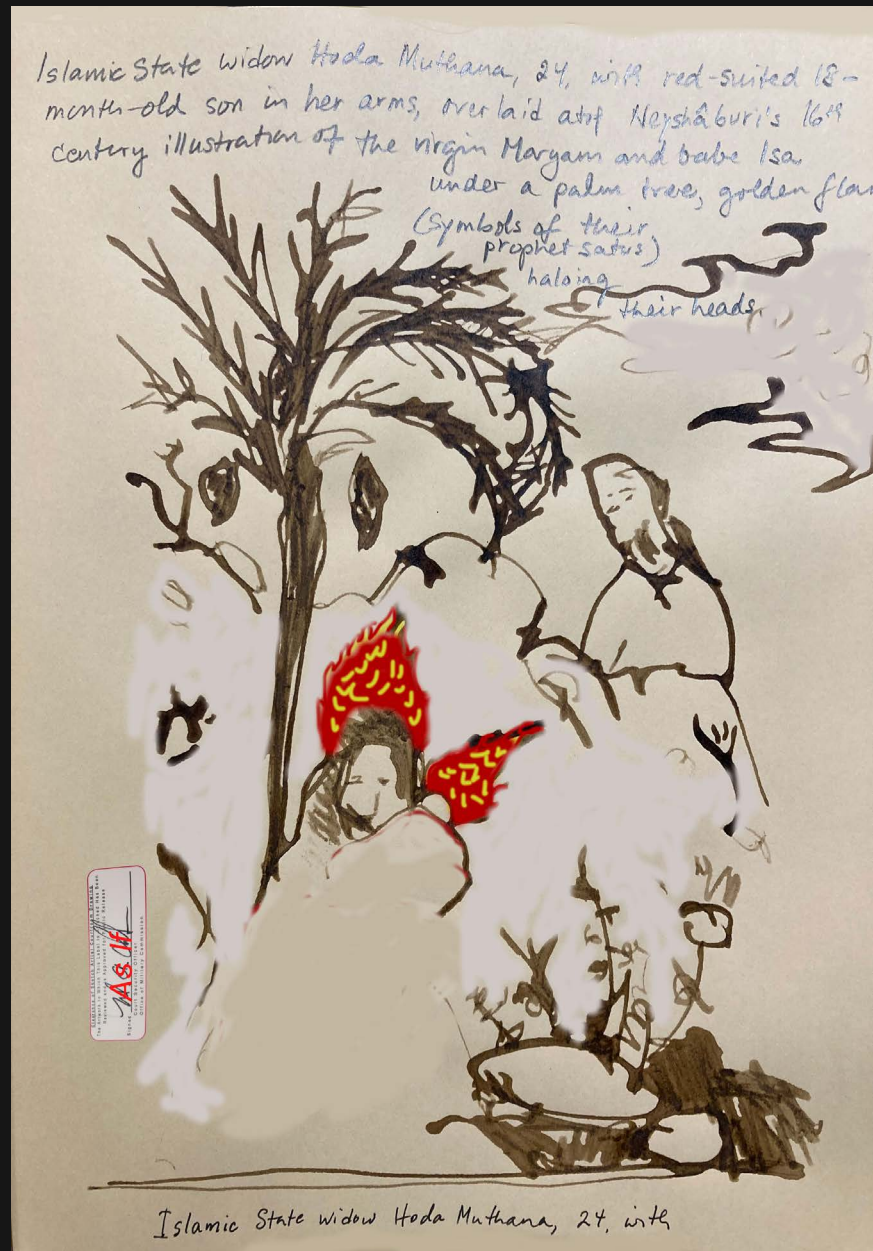
most likely at least witnessed, if not participated in, the ethnic cleansing of the Yazidi, Shia, and others. In fact, Begum is said to have sewn suicide vests onto the bodies of bombers. Muthana and Begum have since articulated their regret for joining the Caliphate. Stripped of their citizenship in pure denial of International Law by their respective Western countries of origin (the U.S. and Britain), both Muthana and Begum pleaded to return home, and accepted prison, even death, as their fates, if only to shelter their children. Their pleas fell on deaf ears. Begum's son, Jarrah, subsequently succumbed to pneumonia.

To be pushed to confront the world and self through the child is, in my experience, the requirement of parenting; being a mother has taught me (more than anything else has) to see *beyond* the sovereign. And seeing beyond the sovereign citizen is necessary when looking at mother and child images, as traditional art interpretations of the Madonna and child refer to marriage and conventional motherhood (in which the mother stays home and cares for her infant), whereas seeing beyond the sovereign allows for a more truthful interpretation of motherhood — at least in this case of the Madonna and child, as we know that Madonna was betrothed (according to the Bible) or single (according to the Qur'an), unable to find sanctuary, and forced to flee with her child—in other words, a migrant mother.

How might we who are not migrant mothers learn to see through migrant mothers' eyes? We might initially practice Simone Browne's decolonial ways of looking by replacing the white gaze with "dark sousveillance," which Browne defines as "a site of critique...where the tools of social control...[are]...appropriated, co-opted, repurposed, and challenged in order to facilitate survival." To counter the West's national gaze we might also "unhold" whiteness, to borrow a term from Layli Long Soldier, who defines "unholding" as: "Whereas, I have learned to exist and exist without your formality, salt-shakers, plates, cloth. Without the slightest conjunctions to connect me. Without an exchange of questions, without the courtesy of answers. It is mine, this unholding, so that with or without the set up, I can see the dish being served."<sup>5</sup> Learning to see thusly might help us see *through* lies begat by globalization, racial capitalism, racial criminalization, and settler colonialism, allowing us to begin to overlay, to see new pictures in the old, and to piece together all that has been broken, reconfiguring what is beheld into a practice of unholding. Such a practice cannot be interpreted to mean not carrying one's child; rather, such a practice implies, given what we know of, say, Begum's selfless attempt to save the life of her infant, "being ready to kill" ourselves "instead of [our]...children."<sup>6</sup>





















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- 1 Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, 97-110.
  - 2 McMillen, *Making Indian Law*, ix.
  - 3 Agamben, *Homo Sacar*, 97.
  - 4 Browne, *Dark Matters*, 21.
  - 5 Soldier, *Whereas*, 79.
  - 6 Lorde, "Power", 108-109.