AWP 2024 EVENT OUTLINE

EVENT TITLE: Widening the Circle: Queer/Trans SWANA Writers on Navigating Space and Self

Event Description: Featuring Queer/Trans SWANA (Southwest Asian North African) writers, this multiple genre panel centers a discussion of how we build bridges, defying orientalist narratives by writing into the complexities of our hybrid identities. At a time when our communities continue to be marginalized in the US, we will focus on the tension between homeland and diaspora, the power and violence of myths, and our need to queer form to represent ourselves, breaking convention and narrative in the process.

EVENT CATEGORY: Multiple Literary Genres Craft & Criticism

Event Organizer & Moderator
Mahru Elahi:
Mahru Elahi is a VONA alum, a Hedgebrook Writer-in-Residence and a finalist for the Allegra Johnson Prize. Her poetry and nonfiction prose has appeared in journals including Fireweed and the museum of americana: a literary review, in MUTHA and Hyphen magazines, and has been anthologized in Let Me Tell You Where I've Been: New Writing by Women of the Iranian Diaspora and Days I Moved Through Ordinary Sounds: The Teachers of WritersCorps in Poetry and Prose. An MFA student at Antioch University Los Angeles, Mahru lives in Oakland, CA with her son.

Event Participants
Nancy Agabian:
Nancy Agabian is the author of three books including the novel The Fear of Large and Small Nations, a finalist for the PEN/Bellwether Prize for Socially Engaged Fiction. In 2021 she received Lambda Literary's Jeanne Cordova Prize for Lesbian/Queer Nonfiction. Nancy teaches creative writing at NYU.

Tracy Fuad:
Tracy Fuad is the author of PORTAL, which won the 2023 Phoenix Emerging Poets' Prize and will be published by the University of Chicago in February, 2024. Her first
book, *about:blank*, won the 2020 AWP Donald Hall Prize. She is a former NEA Fellow, and teaches poetry at the Berlin Writers' Workshop.

**Bobuq Sayed:**
Bobuq Sayed is a queer Afghan writer, editor, and performance artist. They have received support from Kundiman, Tin House, the Lambda Writers Retreat, and San Jose State University’s Steinbeck fellowship. Their writing is published in *Gulf Coast, The Rumpus*, and *The Drift*.

**Pınar Banu Yaşar:**
Pınar Banu Yaşar is a Kurdish poet whose work can be found in *Tinderbox Poetry Journal, HVTN, Odes to Our Undoing: Writers Reflecting on Crisis*. They are a Brett Elizabeth Jenkins Poetry Prize Finalist, a Poetry Online Launch Prize finalist, and in 2022 they founded the Kurdish Poets Collective.

**Agenda**
*Friday, February 9, 3:20-4:35pm*
3:20-3:30pm (10) Housekeeping and Opening Remarks
3:30-3:50 (20) Panel Discussion
3:50-4:25pm (35) Readings in Context
4:25-4:35pm (10) Q & A

**Opening Remarks and Housekeeping Announcements**
Good afternoon, and welcome to “Widening the Circle: Queer/Trans SWANA Writers on Navigating Space and Self” I’m Mahru Elahi, the moderator. I’m a VONA alum, and a Hedgebrook Writer-in-Residence. My poetry and nonfiction prose has appeared in journals including *Fireweed* and *the museum of americana: a literary review*, in *MUTHA* and *Hyphen* magazines, and has been anthologized, most notably for this panel, in *Let Me Tell You Where I’ve Been: New Writing by Women of the Iranian Diaspora*.

A few reminders before we begin:
• For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let me know, and a printed copy will be delivered to you.
• Please make sure that spaces marked for wheelchairs remain clear of chairs or other barriers.
• Treat service animals as working animals and do not attempt to distract or pet them.
• Be aware of those with chemical sensitivities and refrain from wearing scented products.
• Please be aware that your fellow attendees may have invisible disabilities. Do not question anyone’s use of an accommodation while at the conference, including for chairs reserved for those with disabilities.

Please take a moment to introduce yourself to the people around you. This panel is about widening the circle, after all.

Thank you so much for being here. This panel is a reunion for us. We first presented a version of this panel at the Mizna + RAWIfest conference in October 2023. Initially, our intention was to center an inclusive range of queer and trans SWANA identities on the panel, including Armenian, Iranian, Afghan and Kurdish. Considering the current transphobic political climate and the xenophobia directed at migrants and refugees in the United States and at the border, we saw our panel as a vital voice of resistance and resilience.

After the siege on Gaza, all of our intentions still held, but we were compelled to add another layer to our presentation, that of queer and trans SWANA solidarity with Palestine.

Because we had been planning our Mizna + RAWIfest panel before the siege on Gaza began, we felt compelled to come together, in the midst of our grief and rage, to revise our original notion of what the panel would hold. On Zoom calls, we spoke of our own particular stories of empire, and to the idea that “widening the circle” meant holding space for one another at this time of great loss, seeing each other’s humanity amidst the brutality and horror enfolding in Gaza, as well as Artsakh and Sudan and Afghanistan, amongst so many other sites of suffering.

The process of co-creating this panel became itself an act of inclusion and hospitality, of welcome. We hope that today can also hold a similar space. This panel represents activists and academics, writers and editors, in celebration of new, award-winning publications, and to collage a collective vision of ourselves as best we can at this time. We traveled here from Massachusetts, Oakland and Germany.
I know that we held out a hope that when we met in February, four months since the bombs began to fall, that there would be a ceasefire in place and an end to the genocide in Gaza. In lieu of that hope, we are attempting to hold a gentle space here, to make connections and to illuminate the light and truth within each other.

**Moderator Questions**

1) It’s hard to talk about the future: what do we need right now, as writers, as community members? What do we hold onto? What do we bring into the present?

2) What’s the point of having a SWANA panel (or magazine, caucus, etc)? What can we do as a community; what can't we do; what would this look like in a more ideal world?

3) Is writing a form of connection for you (to community, identity, spirituality, etc)? How so? How does writing relate to other areas in your life that provide you with connection?

4) How do you feel about visibility / invisibility as they relate to your identity and writing?

5) In what ways can we queer form when writing about identity, or when identity appears in our writing, in a way that evades the pressure of the contemporary literary world to package and market oneself for consumption?