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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Secular Islam and the Rhetoric of Humanity

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Literature

by

Nadeen Sh B Kharputly

Committee in charge:

Professor Oumelbanine Zhiri, Chair
Professor Page duBois
Professor Fatima El-Tayeb
Professor David FitzGerald
Professor Babak Rahimi

2017

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2017

EPIGRAPH

The inability to see the fullness of humanity in each and every single one of us is a spiritual shortcoming.

Omid Safi

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PREFACE

This dissertation began in bleak times and ended in even worse conditions for Muslims in the United States and abroad. I began researching and writing in 2014, when mainstream narratives seemed desperate to humanize Islam during a period of severe Islamophobia, aided no doubt by fear of ISIS and by opportunists stoking fear of the influx of refugees. I end this project at a moment when we have had not one but two executive orders banning the entry or otherwise compromising the status of individuals from Muslim-majority countries, leaving nearly one hundred thousand individuals and families in the lurch as they attempt to enter this country to receive healthcare, flee debilitating war zones, and seek education in a country that is threatening to slash funding on education, the arts, and science research while ramping up funds for military defense. I am, to say the least, pleased that this dissertation was written and completed according to schedule.

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I am grateful for far more than I can ever name. This a very small gesture of gratitude to everyone who was part of my life over the course of this PhD.

First and foremost, my deepest thanks go to my committee. Babak Rahimi, whose endless support and equally bottomless humor ensured that no meeting passed without laughter. David FitzGerald, whose expertise, rigor and good humor helped me maintain a keen eye on my work; I am grateful to have met and worked with him early in my career here. Fatima El-Tayeb, who kindly took on a seat at the committee table with little more than vague promises from me about what this project would entail. Page duBois, whose luminous presence brought my heart rate down every time we met. One day, I hope to bring that kind of peace and joy to people around me. And Nina Zhiri, my chair and source of endless support and calm throughout these six years. She always found a way to organize the truly baffling thoughts in my mind and help me get them in line. Academia would be a kinder and more sensible place if everyone had someone like Nina in charge. I will never be able to find the right words to show my gratitude and appreciation for her.

I would like to thank the staff at the UCSD Literature department, particularly Nancy Ho-Wu and Alyssa Simons, for their time and patience, and the UC Center for New Racial Studies for funding the research that produced the first chapter of this dissertation.

I am deeply grateful to Antony Lyon, Stephen Cox, Pam Clark, Sarah Beauchemin, Jessica Guttenberg, and William Arctander O'Brien, who provided a merry community at Revelle Humanities. I am certain that I would be far more curmudgeonly

without them.

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I am deeply indebted to the Humanists@Work family; anyone with a PhD in the humanities knows how difficult it is to make it out of here with any sense left. The Hum@Work folks—particularly Kelly Anne Brown and Annie Maxfield—showed me and countless others how to recognize the value of our labor in academia.

I don't know where I'd be without Stephen Hong Sohn. He has made it my lifelong mission to extend grace and compassion to anyone who wants to learn alongside me, as he has done for me.

It is impossible to name all the friends and families who have enriched my life in San Diego, and I fear leaving anyone out, so I will instead declare my gratitude in the form of experiences they shared with me. Thank you to those who swam, surfed, climbed, hiked, and walked with me, keeping me in excellent health despite the best efforts of those who brought all kinds of food into my life. Those who baked bread, cookies, scones, and panda cakes; made marmalade, samosas, sourdough starters, and perfect, smoky ribs; ate pizza, sushi, dosas, burritos, fried green beans; drank chai lattes, whiskey, beer, rosés, and sunset mules. Friends who fed me on days when I couldn't bear to eat anything. Friends who fueled me with coffee and laughter, who volunteered with me to help abandoned dogs find new homes, who helped me with my own dog when I first brought him into my home. Friends who offered me places to stay during my drives

across the state, and whose kindness I relied on when I showed up to new places to do my dissertation research. Friends far away who Skyped with me, sometimes every day during the most difficult days. Friends who sent me motivational stickers from Oxford and care packages from the Bay Area and quirky animal cards from Los Angeles. Friends who listened with recognition in my classrooms and felt that there was a place for their minds in this world. Friends who visited me during every single year for the duration of this PhD.

In addition to love for these fine folks, I am grateful for the ocean, the mountains, the pool, the coffee cart, Balboa Park, and many other places that brought me so much joy in San Diego. This was a good place to spend six years complaining about graduate school; I regret nothing.

Sorry, I am going to be that person who thanks her dog, who arrived with instant love and endless joy in the most unpredictable time of my life.

And most of all, thank you to my family, particularly my mother, who taught me everything I know about faithfulness, compassion, goodness, and more patience than is expected of any human being (I’m still working on that). I owe everything that I am—save the horrible parts—to her.

VITA

2009 Bachelor of Arts, Stanford University

2010 Master of Arts, Stanford University

2017 Doctor of Philosophy, University of California, San Diego

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Secular Islam and the Rhetoric of Humanity

by

Nadeen Sh B Kharputly

Doctor of Philosophy in Literature

University of California, San Diego, 2017

Professor Oumelbanine Zhiri, Chair

"Secular Islam and the Rhetoric of Humanity" examines competing notions of humanity in representations of Islam in the United States from the Civil Rights period to the present. In post-9/11 representations, Islam is rhetorically "humanized" by the dominant culture in attempts to determine Islam's role in the United States. This humanizing framework not only presumes an inherent lack of humanity in Islam; it establishes the ideal of the human as white, rational, and secular. To critique this Enlightenment-based notion of humanity in representations of Islam, I look to the pre-9/11 period, where mid-twentieth century manifestations of Islam, exemplified by Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam, consisted primarily of domestic and secular practices

that empowered Black communities who found the Civil Rights Movement insufficient. I use James Baldwin to illustrate Islam's capacity in this sense, arguing that Baldwin had an especially keen understanding of the work of Malcolm and the Nation of Islam as a secular practice of racializing Islam. Conceiving of Islam as a set of racial and secular practices advances the notion of an Islam that resists the dehumanizing narratives of the dominant culture; Islam in this context was humanizing rather than in need of being humanized. Rather than proceeding chronologically, I begin with the post-9/11 landscape and then turn to the twentieth century in order to unpack the ways in which Islam has shaped American culture. A retrospective narrative illuminates the ties between Muslim and American cultures and resists the rhetorical humanization of Islam that has become widespread after 9/11. Theorizing Islam as a radical force in its empowerment of communities of color in the U.S. resists the humanizing framework's attempts to include Islam into an established purview of humanity. Instead, I situate conceptions of Islam in the culture and history of American civil and human rights, examining the work of intellectuals who saw opportunities in Islam to establish their own standards for humanity. The various sites of cultural representation that I examine, ranging from literature, museum practices, and hip hop culture, chart Islam's role in the development of modern American culture.

Introduction

Being a Muslim in the United States today is an act of resistance. As Muslim American identity becomes increasingly criminalized—consider one of Donald Trump's first executive orders, the ban on immigrants and refugees from Muslim-majority countries, and his threats to implement a Muslim registry—the mere act of existing in this country entails an opposition to the dominant culture of Islamophobia, which sees American and Muslim values as antithetical to one another. Muslim American resistance is not particular to our current period of Islamophobia—we witnessed previously unveiled Muslim American women taking up the headscarf in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 in order to proudly mark themselves as Muslim (Haddad 2007). On the day after the 2017 inauguration, at the Women's March in Washington, D.C., Linda Sarsour, who is one of the most recognized Muslim American activists today, proclaimed, "I stand here before you unapologetically Muslim American, unapologetically Palestinian American, unapologetically from Brooklyn, NY." Ibtihaj Muhammad, the first Muslim American fencer to compete in the Olympics in a hijab, famously stated in a video campaign by Mini USA about defying stereotypes and labels that she has "been very unapologetic about who I am and my beliefs."[1] More than ever, the notion of having to apologize for one's Muslim identity is problematic in its suggestion that Muslim identity is shameful.

[1] Sarah Harvard, "Ibtihaj Muhammad Powerfully Explains How It Feels to Be First Hijabi Muslim US Olympian," *Mic*, July 29, 2016.

The unapologetic Muslim narrative firmly entails, first of all, a rejection of the apologist narrative. The apologist narrative, usually performed by Muslims themselves, attempts to separate Muslims from Islam, claiming that the religion is innocent of the deeds that have been committed in its name.[2] This separation usually comprises of statements such as "Islam is an inherently peaceful religion," and "The problem isn't with Islam, it's with Muslims," and so on. Divorcing a religion from its practitioners is flawed in many ways (Safi 21, Abou El Fadl 34), but the flaw that I am most interested in tackling is rooted in the necessity of the apology: that Muslims must apologize on behalf of other Muslims in order to be accepted as "good." The apologetic narrative assumes that only by denying their identity and by conforming to another can Muslims ever be characterized as good. This establishes a standard for goodness that is determined externally. Similarly, standards for humanity are also imposed externally, as the humanizing framework illustrates.

The humanizing narrative

In addition to rejecting the apologist narrative, the notion of an unapologetic Muslim also comprises a resistance to the humanizing narrative, which I endeavor to take apart and examine in this dissertation. The humanizing narrative consists of

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[2] Discussing the weakness of this argument, Khaled Abou El Fadl writes, "This saga of ugliness has forced Muslims who are embarrassed and offended by this legacy to adopt apologetic rhetoric arguments that do not necessarily carry much persuasive weight. One of the most common arguments repeated by Muslim apologists is that it is unfair to confuse the religion of Islam with the deeds of its followers. The fact that the followers commit egregious behavior in the name of the religion does not in itself mean that the religious commands or sanctions such behavior. A similar, often repeated argument is that one must distinguish Islamic religious doctrines from the cultural practices of Muslims, the implication being that it is culture and not religion that is the culprit responsible for immoral behavior." (Abou el Fadl 34).

universalizing gestures of common humanity that benevolently attempt to illustrate the humanity of Muslims in the post-9/11 world. These narratives usually involve statements such as "Muslims are human beings too" and "such and such humanizes Muslims for us." These gestures are inherently Islamophobic by virtue of the fact that Muslims are not construed as human until otherwise noted. One relies on an external force to "humanize" Islam for the sake of a public that is unfamiliar with Islam. Unlike the apologist narrative, humanizing narratives more often come from non-Muslims wishing to illuminate aspects about Islam for unfamiliar audiences. Rejecting the humanizing narrative entails a rejection of this implication that Muslims are by default non-human without a gentle reminder of their humanity.

The humanizing narrative functions by way of inclusion. By "humanizing" Muslims, the narrative suggests that Muslims gain a sense of humanity when they are included into the purview of humanity as determined by pre-existing standards. These standards are rooted in Enlightenment-era notions of the human as a secular, rational and, of course, white individual. Situating this narrative in a contemporary context, I argue that the humanizing narrative also happens to presume that Muslims are un-American. U.S.-based humanizing projects that attempt to show how Muslims are "human too" suggest that Muslims are so wholly unfamiliar to Americans, despite the fact the Muslims have existed in this country since the Middle Passage, and that humanizing them offers a friendly reminder of the fact that they, like Americans, are also human. The impetus to humanize Muslims for the sake of the American public establishes a strict opposition between Muslim and American lives and cultures. It suggests that Muslim and American identities are irreconcilable.

The humanizing narrative works to counter the Muslim-as-monster trope, which a number of scholars, including Sophia Rose Arjana (2015), Jasbir Puar, and Amit Rai (2002), have examined. These scholars point to the terrorist as a new manifestation in which Muslims have come to be demonized—I use this word both in the sense of the demon as a human threat (to society) and as non-human threat (to humanity). But in reality, the humanizing narrative also confirms the Muslim-as-monster trope by assuming that the default state of Muslims is non-human unless otherwise humanized.

By critiquing the humanizing narrative, this dissertation examines exactly that confluence: that Muslim and American cultures are not only compatible but mutually constitutive. The first chapter begins with an illustration of the humanizing narrative in the space of the museum, and the following chapters either directly resist that narrative or examine pre-9/11 narratives that illustrate the role of Islam in the development of modern American culture. Even when direct critiques are not present, such as in the first chapter, the post-9/11 humanizing efforts illuminate some of the influences that Islam has had on the American art and literary world. For museums and literary circles to be devoted to formulating particular narratives on Islam points to the preoccupation in determining how exactly Islam fits into the fabric of American cultural and national identity.

Climate of Islamophobia

These preoccupations with the role of Islam in the United States have become more acute than ever in our current time. This project emerged at a time when Islamophobia was on the rise again long after 9/11. Specifically, in 2014, with the rise of ISIS, and in 2015 and 2016, with the prevalence of Islamophobic rhetoric in the U.S.

presidential election season. Remarks by Republican presidential candidates ranged broadly from calls for the surveillance of "Muslim neighborhoods" to claims that a Muslim would not be fit to become president and to promises (and later actual orders) to impose a ban on immigrants from Muslim-majority countries.[3] These remarks were often timed in accordance with terrorist attacks that occurred in Western nations (Paris, San Bernardino, Brussels, Orlando), but never with attacks against Muslims in the Middle East (Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Lebanon).

Although no attack on the scale of 9/11 has occurred in the U.S. since 2001, alarmists have looked to the recent surge in refugees from Syria in order to stoke nationwide fear of Muslims in the United States and in Europe. Refugees have been painted by certain politicians as potential carriers of terrorist attacks, despite evidence to the contrary.[4] These fears routinely function as fodder for Islamophobic legislation, particularly by the current administration. We have, as a result, entered a new era of Islamophobia since 9/11.

Focusing on the post-9/11 and post-post-9/11 climate of Islamophobia, however, neglects the experiences of African American Muslims, who, unlike their Arab and South Asian peers, have suffered the effects of Islamophobia long before 9/11. African American Muslims have decried the lack of attention to the practices aimed against Black Muslims during the twentieth century, with programs like the FBI's COINTELPRO,

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[3] The surveillance of "Muslim neighborhoods" was suggested by candidate Ted Cruz, and the comment on Muslims being unfit to become president of this country was made by candidate Ben Carson.

[4] Donald Trump described Syrian refugees as a "Trojan Horse" in September 2016. https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/100000004648650/trump-likens-refugees-to-trojan-horse.html For evidence to the contrary, see *The Atlantic,* "Where America's Terrorists Actually Come From: Syrian refugees have committed zero attacks in the United States." (January 30, 2017).

which closely targeted radical Black activists, including some from the Black Muslim community.[5] Some of these reactions appeared in response to Linda Sarsour's speech at the Women's March in DC, which occurred the day after the inauguration in January 2017. Sarsour stated,

> Many of our communities, including my community, the Muslim American community, have been suffering in silence for the past fifteen years under the Bush administration and under the Obama administration. The very things you are outraged by during this election season—the Muslim registry program, the banning of the Muslims, the dehumanization of the community that I come from—that has been our reality for the past fifteen years.

Black Muslims were quick to point out that Sarsour's timeline for Islamophobia—the past fifteen years—privileges the Muslim Americans who have suffered as a result of the post-9/11 climate; that is, Arab and South Asian American Muslims (and non-Muslims, particularly Sikhs), the majority of whom are immigrants or children of immigrants to the United States. Focusing on 9/11 as the founding moment for Islamophobia elides the history and conjunction of anti-Black and anti-Muslim sentiment. Similarly, the cult of the post-9/11 moment privileges hate crimes against non-Muslim and non-Black citizens that occurred after the event but ignores the ones that have occurred prior to 9/11. Erik Love writes that the history of discrimination against Arab and South Asians long before 9/11 is elided when the post-9/11 landscape is invoked upon the emergence of hate crimes (such as the attack on the Sikh Temple of Wisconsin) (Love 2013, 70). Love's

[5] For more, see Nessa's "The (Anti) Black Ass Roots of America's Islamophobia" (January 27, 2017).

point is important in considering the effect that a "post-9/11" designation has in falsely attributing such acts of discrimination to a "limited, temporary" backlash.

This project, then, presents a study of cultural productions on Islam in the pre-9/11 and the post-post-9/11 climate in order to problematize the notion of who counts—and has long counted— as an American Muslim.

Scholarship on Islamophobia after 9/11 is plentiful, and includes works by Evelyn Alsultany, Andrew Shryock, Sally Howell, Louise Cainkar, Junaid Rana, Deepa Kumar, Erik Love, and Lori Peek, among a great many others. The most common way of defining Islamophobia is as the fear of Islam, and this certainly aligns with post-9/11 perceptions of Muslims in the United States. For the scope of this project, I see Islamophobia as the inability to conceive of Muslim and American cultures as compatible, let alone co-constitutive. This inability stems from the universalizing power of Islamophobia—that is, casting an "Islam" in opposition to a "West"—which Andrew Shryock notes is one of its most problematic aspects.[6] The neat categorization of the United States as a beacon of freedom and democracy and Islam as repressive and tyrannical sounds absurd when put in this way, but in fact this binary encompasses the rhetoric of our current reality, and has done so since 9/11. This project works to counter that binary configuration of Islamophobia by interrogating certain sites of cultural production that seek to universalize Islam as a force of good, which of course is attuned to the forces that cast Islam as universally bad. These kinds of narratives also reckon with

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[6] Shryock (2010) writes, "What is most problematic about Islamophobia is its essentializing and universalizing quality, which casts both Islam itself and all Muslims as real or potential enemies in a way that, if similarly applied to Jews or Christians, would seem delusional at best, vile at worst" (9)

an Islamophobia that is defined by fear: the fear of understanding that something as seemingly foreign as Islam could be integral to the development of American culture. Hence, my examination of twentieth century cultural sites imagines Islam as an integral part of American culture.

This project examines competing notions of humanity in representations of Islam in the United States from the Civil Rights period to the present. In post-9/11 representations, Islam is rhetorically "humanized" by the dominant culture in order to accord with so-called mainstream American values. This humanizing framework not only presumes an inherent lack of humanity in Islam; it establishes the human as white, rational, and secular. To critique this Enlightenment-based notion of humanity in representations of Islam, I look to the pre-9/11 period, where mid-twentieth century manifestations of Islam, exemplified by Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam, consisted primarily of domestic and secular practices that empowered Black communities when the Civil Rights Movement felt insufficient to those communities. I use James Baldwin to illustrate Islam's capacity in this sense, arguing that Baldwin is perhaps the only person who conceived of the work of Malcolm and the Nation of Islam as a racialization of Islam. As such, Islam in this context was humanizing rather than in need of being humanized. Conceiving of Islam as a set of racial and secular practices advances the notion of a "radical" Islam that resists the dehumanizing narratives of the dominant culture. Rather than proceeding chronologically, I begin with the post-9/11 landscape and then turn to the twentieth century in order to unpack the ways in which Islam has shaped American culture. A retrospective narrative illuminates and strengthens the ties between

Muslim and American cultures and avoids the rhetorical humanization of Islam that has become widespread after 9/11.

Another reason to establish a retrospective rather than a chronological narrative is to challenge some the influence of 9/11 on scholarship and conversations on Islam. Su'ad Abdul Khabeer (2016) emphasizes that the work that focuses on challenging post-911 representations ends up "othering Muslims" by focusing on Muslims outside the United States (Abdul Khabeer 8). A retrospective narrative, which begins with the present post-9/11 situation and shifts to the affirmative role of Islam in the past, aims for a hopeful evaluation of Islam's place in America. It also advances the notion of Islam as an American cultural and racial phenomenon by revisiting the history of Islam's roots as an American cultural force. It rejects mainstream narratives of Islam, which tend to characterize Islamic and American cultures as opposites, by privileging the perspective of marginalized communities. In this sense, Islam is not antithetical to American values since the values highlighted in this project are construed as radically affirmative of human and civil rights. Indeed, Islam was central to achieving that affirmation of humanity for Black subjects in the middle of the twentieth century and onwards. The diverse sites of cultural representation that I examine, ranging from literature, museum practices, and hip hop culture, chart Islam's role in the development of modern American culture. By examining these cultural sites from a humanities perspective, my project establishes a study of the constitutive relationship between Islamic and American cultures.

Primary intervention

This dissertation's primary intervention is in offering a humanistic study of Islam in the United States. Such studies are few and far between—Edward Said, Melani McAlister, Evelyn Alsultany, Sohail Daulatzai, Sylvia Chan-Malik are among the obvious forbears of this project, but the bulk of scholarship on Islam in the United States comes from a social sciences perspective.[7] I present a study of Islam, secularism, and race that is rooted in the humanities. Why is a humanistic study of representations of Islam in the United States important? For one, students do not often take a literature or humanities class to learn about "other cultures" in the way that is more common in the disciplines of anthropology or political science, for example.[8] As such, the humanities offer an arguably more fitting home for the study of Islam as an element of American culture rather than a feature of foreign cultures. I attend to Melani McAlister's work in my discussion of Islam as a part of American culture. Commenting on Amy Kaplan's observation of three major absences in U.S. scholarship,[9] McAlister (2005) argues: "to give culture a central place in an analysis of the production and reproduction of U.S. power . . . is to resist many of the categories that have separated the 'domestic' from the 'international.'" (4). To this I add that foregrounding the role of culture in discussing the

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[7] This scholarship tends to be rooted in anthropology (Andrew Shryock, Sally Howell, Zareena Grewal, Su'ad Abdul Khabeer), religious studies (Sherman Jackson, Omid Safi, Kambiz GhaneaBassiri), political science (Mahmood Mamdani, Hisham Aidi), and history (Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad), to skim the surface.

[8] Fuerst and Ayubi write, "Where Islamic Studies fits in American liberal arts has shifted over time, indicating that the framing of Islamic religio-cultural data in the academy has been closely tied to global geopolitics involving Muslims."

[9] These include "the absence of culture from the history of U.S. imperialism; the absence of empire from the study of American culture; and the absence of the United States from the postcolonial study of imperialism" (McAlister 2005, 4).

role of Islam in the United States in this humanistic endeavor is to interrogate the discipline of the humanities itself.

Why are so few projects on Islam situated in the humanities? The main exception to this rule is the discipline of Religious Studies, which is certainly a humanistic discipline but with highly interdisciplinary connections to the social sciences (political science and anthropology among them). I ask why Islam as a topic is not taken upon by more scholars in literature and cultural studies. The Muslim American literary genre is not new nor limited to the post-9/11 landscape, though it has certainly been attended to with post-9/11 works at the forefront. This question of Islam's role in the humanities is another reason that Baldwin figures as central to this project—his work of envisioning Islam in the United States is neither part of the post-9/11 landscape nor to the corpus of works produced by Muslim American writers. Baldwin offers a meaningful study of how Islam appears in humanistic writing from a secular and racial standpoint.

Furthermore, I situate this project in the field of American Studies, which parallels and complements the turn in American Studies towards scholarship on the U.S.'s involvement in the Middle East. Melani McAlister, Alex Lubin, Evelyn Alsultany, and Amy Kaplan lead the scholarship that examines the cultural confluences of Islam, the Middle East, and the United States, and this project attends to their work. The work of these scholars illuminates the effects of U.S. imperialist activities in the Middle East on the development of American culture, particularly in the realm of film and television. My own work looks at Islam's influence on American culture from a domestic standpoint. How did African American Islam in the 1950s promote an awareness for civil and human rights? How do American fears about Islam lead to shifts in U.S. museological practices

and in the post-9/11 literary landscape? This project is entirely concerned with productions of Islam that come from within the United States.

What exactly do I mean when I refer to "Islam"? Taking a critical approach to conceptualizations of Islam in the United States, this project conceives of and problematizes Islam primarily as a set of cultural, racial, and secular practices by communities of color in acts of resistance to the dominant culture. These acts range from resisting the impetus to humanize Islam for the American public to resisting white supremacy from the Civil Rights period onwards. Understanding Islam in this way achieves two purposes: it highlights the domestic and cultural manifestations of Islam in this country, thus minimizing predominant understandings of Islam as a foreign religion. And more importantly, it foregrounds the intellectual interventions of Muslims and non-Muslims alike in conceiving of Islam as a set of empowering practices. This is where my extended discussion of James Baldwin, who was an atheist, comes in.

My discussion of secular Islam revolves around the set of practices in which Islam was influential in non-religious avenues. This includes the myriad ways in which manifestations of Islam, such as the Nation of Islam and the Five-Percent Nation, were embraced by African Americans in the latter half of the twentieth century. It also includes museological presentations of secular Islamic art in response to political and religious Islam outside the space of the museum. In the context of these museums, secularism is deployed in opposition to religiosity, whereas I see secularism and religiosity, as Saba

Mahmood and Shahab Ahmed do, as co-constitutive forces rather than as discrete entities.[10]

Because the predominant understanding of the secular in the U.S. is rooted in "an imagined opposite in Islam," illuminating the notion of a secular Islam is important to undermining such binary oppositions (Asad et al 2009, 4). As such, resisting the religious/secular binary, as Shahab Ahmed explains in his posthumous tome *What Is Islam?* (2005), is critical to conceptualizing Islam as a civil, political, *and* religious project. I appreciate Ahmet Karamustafa's definition of Islam as a "supra-cultural package of values, practices, and resources that Muslims adopt to navigate the stormy waters of human life on earth," which aligns closely with the aims of this project (Safi 2003, 101). His definition suggests that Islam does not merely involve practices and beliefs that lead towards a Muslim way of life, whatever that would entail. Instead, Islam has more to do with practices that allow one to journey through human life; a life of "stormy waters" at that. The sites that I examine in this dissertation all deal with representations of Islam in troubled times, whether the post-9/11 landscape or the twentieth century when Black Muslims fought for the most basic human and civil rights. For many communities in this country, Islam offered a site of affirmation, a coping mechanism, and an opportunity to be an activist.

One of the more recent and exciting projects that attempts to conceptualize Islam comes to us in the form of the late Shahab Ahmed's posthumous book, *What Is Islam?*

[10] In "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire," Mahmood writes, "They concede too much in accepting at face value the claim that secularism is about the banishment of religiosity from the public domain, and they concede too little by failing to interrogate secularism's contention that it is the most effective political solution to warding off religious strife" (2006, 326).

(2015), an enormous tome dedicated to complicating our understanding of Islam. In all of its definitions, meanings, and capacities, Islam is above all coherent *and* contradictory:

> A meaningful conceptualization of "Islam" as *theoretical object* and *analytical category* must come to terms with—indeed, be *coherent* with—the capaciousness, complexity, and, often, *outright contradiction* that obtains within the historical phenomenon that has proceeded from the human engagement with the idea and reality of Divine Communication to Muhammad the Messenger of God. It is precisely this correspondence and coherence between *Islam as theoretical object or analytical category* and *Islam as real historical phenomenon* that is considerably and crucially lacking in the prevalent conceptualizations of the term "Islam/Islamic." It is just such a *coherent* conceptualization of Islam that I aim to put forward in this book. (6)

Ahmed's vision is important precisely because complicating our understanding of Islam is necessary to dismantling the way Islam is understood in the United States. Islam is understood as Other precisely because it is conceptualized in one particular way (violent, regressive, and misogynist) rather than a multiplicity of ways. A humanistic approach to Islam helps magnify the conceptualizations of ways in which Islam was approached, practiced, and understood by different communities in the United States.

How is the humanizing narrative different from the apologetics narrative?

This project's second major intervention is its theorization of the humanizing project, which I introduced at the beginning of this chapter. The humanizing narrative draws from the Enlightenment project of humanism, which categorizes the ideal human as a free, secular, and rational individual. Critics of humanism include Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Sylvia Wynter, and Lisa Lowe, who have shown that the projects of humanism and liberalism simultaneously granted the liberties of free white men in

Europe at the expense of colonized subjects whose labor and subjugation made those liberties possible.[11] The legacies of this exclusion, in the form of the subjugation of non-white others from the category of humanity, are clear in the words and actions of the War on Terror. Human life in Iraq and Afghanistan comes at the expense of the freedoms granted for (predominantly white) U.S. lives. The projects of ensuring American freedom and bringing democracy to the Middle East both entail mass destruction of human life abroad.

I am interested in exploring the new forms that humanism and its legacies take in our current period. It appears that the period of heightened American Exceptionalism after 9/11 (Sturken 2015, Butler 2006), and perhaps as far back as after the Gulf War (McAlister 2005), has given rise to new understandings of humanity in the American context. Both Sturken and Butler have pointed to the tremendous loss of lives in Iraq and Afghanistan, among others, in retaliation against the three thousand or so that were lost in the Twin Towers. Speaking of 9/11 exceptionalism, which comes out of American Exceptionalism, Marita Sturken writes, “This exceptionalism enables, among other things, the valuing of the almost three thousand deaths that took place on September 11 more than the hundreds of thousands who have died in the wars that followed in its wake” (478). Judith Butler (2006) also discusses the contrast between the lives lost on

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[11] In the *Intimacies of Four Continents* (2015), Lowe writes, “I observe that the uses of universalizing concepts of reason, civilization, and freedom effect colonial divisions of humanity, affirming liberty for modern man while subordinating the variously colonized and dispossessed peoples who material labor and resources were the conditions of possibility for that liberty” (6). Sylvia Wynter, in “The Re-Enchantment of Humanism” “For this Renaissance moment of the birth of humanism . . . is simultaneously the moment of initiation of Europe’s colonial project. Humanism and colonialism inhabit the same cognitive-political universe inasmuch as Europe’s discovery of its Self is simultaneous with its discovery of its Others” (119-20).

9/11 versus those lost as a result of the War on Terror, a contrast that privileges what Butler calls First World lives over Muslim lives:

> What effect did the killing of an estimated 200,000 Iraqi citizens, including tens of thousands of children, and the subsequent starvation of Muslim populations, predicted by Concern, a hunger relief organization, to reach six million by the year's end, have on Muslim views of the United States? Is a Muslim life as valuable as a legibly First World lives? Are Palestinians yet accorded the status of 'human' in US policy and press coverage? Will those hundreds of thousands of Muslim lives lost in the last decades of strife ever receive the equivalent to paragraph-long obituaries in the New York Times that seek to humanize, often through nationalist and familial framing devices—those Americans who have been violently killed? Is our capacity to mourn in global dimensions foreclosed precisely by the failure to conceive of Muslim and Arab lives as *lives*? (12)

This privileging of lives attests to the universalizing rhetoric of the Enlightenment, which claims to offer life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness to all with the implicit exclusion of anyone who isn't a property-owning white man. Similarly, the post-9/11 U.S. Exceptionalism claims to offer freedom and democracy to all while decimating brown lives abroad and Black lives at home.

The privileging of some lives over others is most evident in enhanced mechanisms, such as the PATRIOT Act, that are ostensibly designed to protect the freedom and democracy of Americans, but that infringe on the liberties of those who are excluded from that category. There are also parallels between these mechanisms' marginalization of Muslim lives and the excessive use of force by police officers who are purported to "protect and serve" but instead offer protection to some communities (white, wealthy) at the expense of others (non-white, poor). The exemption of Muslim and Black lives from conceptions of humanity for the purpose of procuring heightened security for

the protection of a fraction of this country's citizens speaks meaningfully to the reliance of the American democratic project on the subjugation of Black and brown lives, U.S. citizens included. Where the law and the status quo fail to affirm the humanity of Black lives, Islam is seen as a viable affirmation of humanity.

Whereas Samera Esmeir (2012) has examined legal constructions of humanity—the notion that "humanity began to emerge as a juridical category; the human became the effect of the work of the law, that which was to be animated by this work" (12)—my own work focuses on cultural constructions of humanity. How do cultural productions attempt to include Muslims into a so-called universal category of humanity? And how do counter-cultural productions resist those attempts at inclusion?

Why is the humanizing framework so problematic?

The humanizing framework is most problematic in its inherent power structure. To humanize someone implies that the person being humanized is in a lesser position than the doer of the deed. This power structure is evident in Evelyn Alsultany's discussion of sympathy. In *Race and Representation After 9/11: Arabs and Muslims in the Media* (2012), Alsultany discusses the roles of pity, sympathy, and empathy in representations of Arabs and Muslims after 9/11. While empathy encompasses an equality between both subjects, pity does not—and it is dangerous because "the person who has the emotion is more powerful than the person who is the object of the emotions." Sympathy, on the other hand, "signals a capacity to have nuanced emotions toward the designated enemy. Rather than demonize all Arabs and Muslims, having sympathy for some of them illuminates an enlightened culture that can distinguish between the 'good'

and ‘bad’ ones, the perpetrators and victims” (Alsultany 2005, 72). Alsultany’s characterization of sympathy aligns closely with my examination of the humanizing framework. Narratives that attempt to humanize Islam carry this sympathetic intent: there is a benevolent bent to the presumption that some cultures need to be humanized in order to align with the dominant culture. This also coheres with Melani McAlister’s notion of benevolent supremacy, which specifically deals with the post-Cold War era of establishing the moral superiority of the United States on the world stage, particularly in its promotion of freedom and justice (McAlister 2005, 45-7). This form of benevolence is keenly present in museum practices that claim to offer a peaceful and secular representation of Islam in response to the political, violent versions that exist outside the space of the museum. The humanizing framework is therefore problematic in its uneven distribution of power and humanity.

Dissertation overview

This project presents two competing ideas of humanity. In the first part, which comprises chapter one, I examine post-9/11 efforts to humanize Islam in the space of the museum, efforts that suggest that Islam outside of those spaces is in need of humanization. The first chapter lays the groundwork for positive representations of Islam that have been shaped by the post-9/11 climate of Islamophobia. The next three chapters offer alternative representations of Islam, both direct rejections of the humanizing efforts and representations that find Islam empowering rather than in need of being humanized. If Islam in the first part is only afforded a sense of humanity in the secular space of the museum and according to Enlightenment-based ideals, it is a source of social, political,

and cultural empowerment and affirmation for communities of color in the later parts. The humanistic drive for self-knowledge is challenged and appropriated by the voices I examine in this section of the dissertation, and a self-reliant standard for humanity—rather than one based in Euro-American ideals—is established.

These competing visions of humanity reveal a number of things: first among these is the significant shift in attitudes about Islam in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, not only by the events of 9/11 but also due to social and political changes in which Islam went from being a domestic (African American) source of power to a primarily Arab and South Asian immigrant religion. This shift can be attributed to several reasons: the changes that the Nation of Islam underwent after Malcolm X's departure and death, and the post-1965 immigration waves from South Asia and the Middle East, bringing more immigrant Muslims to the country. For Islam to be perceived as a foreign entity radically alters the perception of Muslim humanity; Muslims are perceived as outside threats to the status quo rather than as constituents who have inhabited this country since its early years. And the inability to see the secular components of Islam results in fears of religious intrusion into a Christian-dominant society.

I begin with the specific problem of museological attempts to humanize Islam in the U.S. and move towards representations of Islam as a humanizing force on the world stage. The shift illustrates the discrepancy in perceptions of Islam between white liberal elites and communities of color. This in turn illustrates understandings of Islam as a problem in American society versus a global and transnational understanding of Islam as a tool of resistance against the dehumanizing practices of the American nation-state. The turn from metropolitan museum spaces to literature and then hip hop exemplifies the shift

in attitudes about Islam as a threat versus a practice of resistance depending on the kinds of spaces that are representing Islam. In sum, I demonstrate the various ways in which Islam is understood from mainstream and marginal perspectives.

Chapter one, “What Is Islam? Towards a Humanizing Framework” interrogates the issues of defining Islamic art in the space of the museum. The question of Islamic art, beyond its interest to art historians and museologists, serves as a gateway to determining what “Islam” represents to the American public today. Major art museums have taken it upon themselves to use the universal appeal of art to change the hearts and minds of an Islamophobic nation. I examine four initiatives—in New York, Detroit, Ann Arbor, and Los Angeles—that curate a secular, peaceful image of Islam in the space of the museum, which enforces a binary that pits Islamic art against Islamic politics. At the same time, this reveals the self-serving need for the museum to possess an Islamic art collection, which elevates its prestige even while Islamic politics outside that space are seen as a threat to the values of the dominant culture. I argue that, in addition to enforcing a good Islamic art/bad Islamic politics binary, the museums use Islamic art to present themselves as enlightened and cosmopolitan spaces, thereby implying that Islamic culture is necessary to the museum’s reputation but otherwise problematic outside the space of the museum. The confusion surrounding the inclusion of Islamic art and culture meaningfully speaks to the bridge that continues to divide American and Muslim cultures. I conclude that the presentation of Islamic art in these museums reveals more about the state of American national anxiety than it does about Islam itself. Hence, the museums offer a fruitful space to determine how post-9/11 anxieties about Islam constitute the driving force of these initiatives in the American art world.

There are numerous problems with these initiatives. In many American museums today, Islam is presented from a predominantly white, elite perspective. The question of access is of course relevant here: who is going to benefit from an informative visit to the Met, and are those the same people who understand Islam negatively?[12] Second, how effective is the information being disseminated in the museums? The majority of Islamic art galleries in the United States feature material objects that were crafted in Muslim-majority communities worldwide in the seventh to the nineteenth centuries. What do these objects teach us about Islam in the United States today? At most, these museum initiatives suggest that the material objects of these past societies offer proof of humanity of an Islam that has since been dehumanized in the public eye. This sets up an unrealistic and uncomfortable dichotomy: that a peaceful and secular version of Islam from the past can be presented in a museum in order to abate the negative effects of a political and religious Islam in the world today. These practices are both apologetic and humanizing rather than particularly constructive and informative at a time when national understanding of Islam needs to be nuanced. Nevertheless, it is important to study these spaces in order to determine how "Islam" is understood as a force that is intended to counter problematic interpretations of Islam in geopolitical contexts. What does it mean to offer a tame, secular, and peaceful version of Islam in the museum in direct contrast to an Islam that is perceived to be hostile outside of the museum? What can we learn from the binaries created in these museological practices?

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[12] For more on this, see Jonathan Jones, "The beauty of art can counter Islamophobia—but it won't be easy," *The Guardian*, March 8, 2017.

Chapter two, “Ayad Akhtar and the Burden of Muslim American Responsibility,” examines the case of Ayad Akhtar, a Muslim American playwright who has been accused of confirming Islamophobic stereotypes with his problematic portrayals of Muslims on the stage. Akhtar, a Pulitzer Prize winner, plays a peculiar role: while his work is celebrated by institutional forces that presumably engage in the presentation of Islam for unfamiliar American audiences, Akhtar himself is vocal about his refusal to be a spokesperson for Islam, which in turn has invited accusations of his work as Islamophobic. This sets up a paradox: Akhtar is institutionally vetted as a spokesperson for Islam, a role that he vehemently rejects in his works. I analyze his plays in the context of a larger discussion of the burden faced by Muslim American writers and artists in the post-9/11 era to portray Muslim culture positively. While theoretically Akhtar should have as much freedom as any other artist, it is equally impossible to ignore the real effects that his representations of Muslims have on the public. His most famous play, *Disgraced* (2012) is the most produced play in American theatre in 2015-2016, and the majority of its performances were shadowed by events—the San Bernardino, Paris, and Orlando terror attacks— that contributed to hate crimes and rhetoric against Muslims and Muslim Americans. The play’s reception complicates the artist’s freedom, and his rejection of attempts at inclusion even while he is institutionally vetted as a Pulitzer Prize winner makes him a fascinating subject of study.

Chapter three, “James Baldwin, Islam, and the Route to Self-Knowledge,” honors the perspective of James Baldwin, a contemporary of Malcolm X’s. I find that James Baldwin uniquely illustrates Islam’s capacity as an empowering force for Black subjects in the mid-twentieth century, and argue that Baldwin had an especially keen and secular

understanding of the work of Malcolm and the Nation of Islam as a practice of racializing Islam. Baldwin understood perhaps better than anyone else how Malcolm forcefully articulated the conditions that plagued African Americans of their time. Both men saw that dehumanization was ultimately rooted in a lack of self-knowledge, which Islam in its many forms was able to provide as an alternative to the site of the Western-liberal nation, which sometimes included the Civil Rights Movement. This chapter presents Islam as an alternative site of empowerment for citizens that the Civil Rights Movements failed to serve.

This chapter also grounds Islam firmly as a secular practice in the African American experience. Asserting the primacy of Baldwin in this project affirms the importance of studying the secular aspects of Islam. Baldwin wrote prolifically about his experiences with and understanding of the Black Muslims. More importantly, his discussion of the "American problem" seems timelier than ever in our contemporary moment of understanding Muslim belonging in the United States. In an interview with Dr. Kenneth Clark on the PBS special, "The Negro and the American Promise," in which Clark interviewed Baldwin, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr., Baldwin claimed,

> What white people have to do is try to find out in their hearts why it was necessary for them to have a nigger in the first place. Because I am not a nigger. I'm a man. If I'm not the nigger here, and if you invented him, you the white people invented him, then you have to find out why. And the future of the country depends on that. Whether or not it is able to ask that question.

There are parallels between the invention of the "nigger" and the way Muslims have come to be perceived in the United States. Muslims appear to have come out of the

woodwork as a sudden threat since 9/11. Prior to 9/11, Muslims were primarily perceived as an external threat, far away in Iran or Iraq or Kuwait.[13] After 9/11, Muslims emerged quite suddenly in the American imaginary as the greatest threat to American freedom and democracy, and since then, they have figured as the impetus for American Exceptionalism to shape itself in opposition to the Muslim Other. The invention of the Muslim as a category of threat to freedom and democracy resonates with Baldwin's discussion of white supremacy's need to categorize and subjugate lives of color. The issues entailed in categorizing human life constituted one of Baldwin's lifelong demons. In his dialogue with the poet Nikki Giovanni, Baldwin states,

> You have somehow to begin to break out of all of that and try to become yourself. It's hard for anybody, but it's very hard if you're born black in a white society. Hard, because you've got to divorce yourself from the standards of that society. The danger of your generation, if I may say so … is to substitute one romanticism for another. Because these categories — to put it simply but with a certain brutal truth — these categories are commercial categories.[14] (Baldwin and Giovanni 1973)

It is this issue that plagues Muslims today—the invention of categories and monsters to fear— that makes Baldwin's vision relevant, if not critical, to the examination of representations of Islam in the United States.

It feels problematic to "use" Baldwin to talk about Islam in America. Baldwin was no advocate for any religion, but it is safe to say that he saw in Islam opportunities that did not exist for Black people in the dominant culture. It is not Islam itself but the

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[13] Said's *Covering Islam* and McAlister's *Epic Encounters* are both relevant texts here.
[14] James Baldwin and Nikki Giovanni, *A Dialogue* (1973)

alternative that it offered to the dominant culture that Baldwin admired. Moreover, how does Baldwin's sexuality come to terms with his positions, his works, and his meditations?[15] This chapter doesn't consider the oft-marginalized role of his sexuality, though the next development of this project, which will feature a significant expansion on this chapter, will certainly do so.

The writings and conversations of James Baldwin share a critical element with scholarship on Islam; both are routinely discussed as "timely" and "necessary" in light of our "present situation," especially with the recent release of Raoul Peck's *I Am Not Your Negro* (2017). What part of the present are we talking about here? The post-9/11 age? The more recent rise in Islamophobia from 2014 to the present? The Syrian refugee crises? The Trump presidency? I had read Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* during a critical moment of heightened police brutality and increasing numbers of Syrian arrivals to the United States, and thought fit to include him as part of this project. I had also originally intended this chapter to be a balanced comparison between Malcolm and Baldwin's perspectives, but it was impossible to achieve that balance; I kept gravitating towards Baldwin's perspective far more. This isn't to say that such a comparison is impossible; indeed, I hope to make one in the future. Baldwin's perspective simply spoke more to me than I had anticipated.

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[15] "Which is why this essay exists: I'm tired, frankly, of hearing people I respect saying that it doesn't matter who James Baldwin slept with, that wasn't the point. And in their insistence that Baldwin's "gayness" is only a matter of his sexual experiences, meaning something to be footnoted, kept in the dark and private, they refuse to acknowledge that a black American gay aesthetic exists, that James's homosexuality is also to be found in the inflections, the mannerisms, the approach, the humor, the sarcasm, the sass, the theatricality, the heroism. And it's not just to be found in the "gay" books, either: *The Fire Next Time* was written by the same queer man who gave us *Giovanni's Room*. "

Chapter four, "Malcolm X, Radical Islam, and the Arts of Hip Hop," which is set in the aftermath of Malcolm X's death and the Civil Rights Movement, examines Islam's integral role in the birth of American hip hop culture. Early hip hop artists in the U.S looked to various manifestations of Islam, particularly through the figure of Malcolm X, to affirm themselves in a society that otherwise disenfranchised them. Nas, Mos Def, and Public Enemy are among the scores of artists whose craft has been influenced by encounters with Islam. This chapter also looks at the State Department's Rhythm Road initiative, which recruited hip hop artists in an effort to promote U.S. diplomatic interests in Muslim-majority countries after 9/11, an initiative that clashes with the anti-authoritarian spirit of hip hop culture. More specifically, this initiative looked to "de-radicalize" Muslims abroad, which pits two notions of the "radical" against one another: the anti-establishment attitudes of hip hop against the fundamentalist violence feared by the State Department.

While there is a fast growing body of scholarship on hip hop, and including on Islam and hip hop, this chapter presents the connections between Islam and hip hop from an outsider's perspective. I have encountered the ties between Islam and hip hop having *not* spent my childhood in the U.S. listening to hip hop. I am conscious of my position here, particularly in contrast to those scholars who have always had hip hop as part of their upbringing: most scholarship on hip hop and Islam is produced by hip hop heads (Abdul Khabeer 2016, Daulatzai 2012, Aidi 2014b). I cannot make that claim about myself, having come to hip hop (and to the U.S., for that matter) later in life. Additionally, hip hop is one of the areas in which Black Islam is given its opportunity to shine given the dominance of Arab and South Asian Islam. I am aware of my position as

a Muslim Arab in my exploration of hip hop, and the perspective I offer in this chapter is that of an outside Muslim Arab encountering the links between Islam, hip hop, and African American culture in the post-9/11 world. Acknowledging this position is important to the work of preserving hip hop's work in honoring the connections between Muslim and African American culture.

Conclusion

The importance of interrogating the confluences of self-understanding and Islam cannot be overstated**.** For Muslims who came of age in the post-9/11 age, much of their self-understanding is constituted by the U.S. War on Terror—quite different from Muslims in the twentieth century who sought a means to define themselves contrary to the dehumanizing status quo. Highlighting the work of individuals and communities who constitute their own understanding of what it means to be Muslim, before and separate from 9/11, places that understanding into the hands of individuals rather than institutions, and the unapologetic Muslim narrative certainly helps achieve that. It is my hope that this work challenges the ways in which we, our systems, and our societies constitute our understanding of one another.

Chapter One: What Is Islam? Towards a Humanizing Framework

What is Islam supposed to mean today? This question has become one of the prime concerns of museums that have taken up the task of representing Islamic culture in the years after 9/11. Since then, art institutions have taken it upon themselves to address the perceived chasms between so-called Islamic and Western cultures (Flood 2012, 38). This task is not without its controversies, prime among them the notion that there *is* a chasm between Islamic and Western cultures. There is also the issue of speaking of an "Islamic culture" or a "Western culture" as though they were coherent, universal entities. The biggest issue of all is that the "Islam" showcased in the space of the museum in order to educate the contemporary public is a version curated particularly in response to the post-9/11 Islam. The museums' efforts thus entail a humanizing effort intended to challenge one problematic representation of Islam with another.

Discourses on Islam that come from the United States and Europe have always comprised attempts at self-identification by Western forces.[16] The idea of "Europe" is thus relative to that of "Islam" and vice versa. I argue that this legacy of constructing

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[16] Edward Said's *Orientalism*, Barbara Fuchs' *Mimesis and Empire*, Tomaz Mastnak's *Crusading Peace* and more recently Joseph Massad's *Islam in Liberalism*, examine the legacy of European self-constitution and its figuration of Islam as the antithesis to European identity. For instance, Massad writes, "The emergence of the Eastern Question in eighteenth-century Western Europe is part and parcel of the attempt, ongoing since the Renaissance, to create 'Europe' as a transcendental idea, composed of a set of Enlightened ideals differentiated from "dark" lands and continents lying outside it. . . . This geographic demarcation would become essential for the European project that would in the nineteenth century be called 'civilization' and 'culture'" (Massad 15).

Islam appears in a new form today with the post-9/11 American art initiatives. These initiatives, which are well-meaning attempts to educate the public about Islam, also constitute a self-serving representation of the American museum as a pedagogical, cosmopolitan, and humanizing space. Thus, the museums envision themselves as benevolent representational forces of Islamic culture. While American museums today are committed to constructing a discourse on Islam that counters the current political discourses, they lose sight of the fact that their own discourses are also problematic—not just because these discourses simplify a complex and variable entity, but also because they reinforce binaries between art and politics, Islam and the West, the human and the non-human. The space of the American art museum offers a ripe site for analyzing the rhetorical attempts to humanize Islam in the post-9/11 age.

In the years after 9/11 there emerged widespread efforts to open or renovate Islamic art galleries worldwide, especially in North America and Europe.[17] I focus on the U.S. efforts.[18] In this chapter I add to Jessica Winegar's argument—that the discourses surrounding these initiatives are formulated in response to War on Terror discourses—

[17] Describing these trends, Sarah H. Bayliss (2008) writes, "Museum officials say that in an era when many people know little about Islam beyond the struggle against the Taliban and Islamic extremism, there is a pressing need to present the full richness of Islamic culture. Institutions in the West, from the Detroit Institute of Arts to the David Collection in Copenhagen, home to the largest Islamic collection in Scandinavia, are in the midst of refurbishing their Islamic galleries and updating their educational components."

[18] While the widespread efforts to open and renovate galleries are new, some Islamic art collections were put on display long before 9/11. The Met's galleries were first opened in 1975, its collections taking shape in the nineteenth century. And while the Detroit Institute of Arts galleries opened in 2010, the museum began collecting Islamic art in the 1890s, as they state in their website (www.dia.org).

and suggest that the discourses on Islam are formulated in response to post-9/11 American values.[19] Hence, the Islamic art initiatives are not only attuned to current geopolitical discourses (Flood 2007, Winegar 2008); they are also attuned to a particular understanding of American identity. My own work illustrates that a very specific idea of humanity emerges from these museological discourses on Islam. The rhetoric of humanization, as I have defined it in the introduction to this project, consists of universalizing gestures of common humanity that benevolently attempt to prove that Muslims are just as human as anyone else. This rhetoric thus presumes an understanding of the human that is rooted in European Enlightenment ideals of rationality and freedom. Enlightenment philosophy, particularly the works of Immanuel Kant, linked human advancement to the production of art (Winegar 2008, 657).

There are several issues with these initiatives that immediately come to mind. First of all, for museums to showcase Islamic art in response to negative attitudes towards Islam after 9/11 suggests that the impetus to produce art illustrates the humanity of Muslims in spite of the geopolitical conditions beyond the walls of the museum. But what kind of art, and by what kind of Muslims? Most of the museums' Islamic art collections

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[19] Attuning museum discourses to geopolitical events is certainly not limited to the post-9/11 context. Melani McAlister (2005) describes the opening of the King Tut exhibit at the Met against the backdrop of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. She writes, "the King Tut exhibit participated in the mapping of the United States in relation to the Middle East by incorporating the ancient Egyptians into the construction of a contemporary region, whose borders were marked as permeable to American 'interests.' Within this logic, Tut was part of a reformulation of American nationalism in the late 1970s, at a time when national identities had been severely challenged by social movements at home and declining power abroad. At that particular historical moment, the Tut exhibit became an extraordinary nexus, where the aestheticization and canonization of art, the postmodern communication of culture, the construction of American relations to the Middle East, and the politics of masculinity and racial identity within the United States were combined, contested, and revised" (126-7).

feature work from the so-called Muslim world that were produced between the seventh and nineteenth centuries CE.[20] This summons two problems: that this art has been curated from foreign countries (suggesting that Muslims who produce art are necessarily foreign), and that the art being used to talk about Islam today is from a distant past, which in turn suggests that Muslims were only productive and human in the past. Second, to use the space of the museum, which has historically privileged Euro-American culture, to formulate discourses on Islamic art suggests that understandings of humanity are best defined by Western standards through the medium of art. Structuring Islamic art by Western standards inevitably promotes a discourse on Islam that reinforces the Islam-West binary rather than bridging that gap. If the secular space of the museum is responsible for housing secular Islamic art in an effort to counter the effects of religious and political Islam, this suggests that Islam is otherwise necessarily religious and violent unless located in the space of the museum.

The various issues entailed in representing Islam in the space of the museum are exemplified in four different American museums: the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the University of

[20] Not that the Islamic world itself is a coherent entity: Zareena Grewal (2013) writes, “Of course, cultures, peoples, ideas, and beliefs do not actually map themselves onto the terrain of the earth in this simple way. There is, in other words, no place we can call the ‘Muslim World.’ If the ‘Muslim World’ is the modern equivalent of Islamdom (lands ruled by Muslims), it would refer only to Muslim-majority countries with significant minorities of Muslims, such as China, will be left out. If the ‘Muslim World’ is a euphemism for the Middle East (sometimes including Afghanistan and Pakistan), it fails to account for the indigenous populations of Christians and Jews and other religious minorities throughout the region as well as the fact that 1.9 billion Muslims live outside the Middle East. Ultimately, the term ‘Muslim World’ implies both that Muslims live in a world of their own and that Islam is an eastern religion and there is a foreign place—a distant, contiguous part of the world —where Islam properly belongs” (6).

Michigan's Kelsey Museum of Archaeology.[21] These institutions, of varying size and stature, have each taken up the challenge of presenting Islamic art to counter negative perceptions about Islam in the post-9/11 world. However, they each operate uniquely in this undertaking. While the Met wields the most institutional and cultural power, its Islamic art galleries are perhaps the most problematic of the four museums; indeed, its problems are perhaps a consequence of its institutional power. The Kelsey, which is part of the University of Michigan, is a significantly smaller university museum that specializes in collecting ancient and medieval objects from the Mediterranean and the Near East. A 2014 exhibit at the Kelsey, "Pearls of Wisdom," was designed in respond to some of the problems involved in presenting Islamic culture. By examining how each museum carries a unique set of powers and burdens, I show what the task of representing Islamic culture can look like from a range of institutional perspectives, including permanent galleries and temporary exhibits. The museums featured in this chapter vary in their size, influence, mission, and locale, among other factors, but they are all committed to presenting Islamic culture to unfamiliar audiences. Though each museum constructs its own discourse on Islamic art, it is worth examining these different discourses jointly in order to illustrate how the legacy of representing Islam persists to this day in these different ways.

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[21] It would not be possible in the scope of this dissertation to name all the different institutions that have taken up the initiative of presenting Islamic art to their audiences. Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom offer a survey of such museums around the world (Bloom and Blair, "A Global Guide to Islamic Art" 2009), and the volume *Islamic Art and the Museum* (2012) examines the trends evident in displays of Islamic art since 2001. For the purpose of this dissertation, I focus on a few institutions where I was able to conduct research.

The discourses examined in this chapter are collected from the museums themselves, their accompanying publications, and news articles on the galleries and exhibits. I visited each museum and gathered information from wall panels and brochures, and then followed up by reading the museum catalogues, their websites, and various other publications issued by the museums. I also looked at newspaper articles to determine how the galleries and exhibits were portrayed in the press, as these were more likely to discuss the implications of the art outside the context of the museums. In sum, I focus specifically on language that frames the museums' Islamic art collections in light of American perceptions of Islam today.

Studying the language of the institutions yields an understanding of the museums' unique narratives. For instance, frequent references to 9/11 in press coverage of the Met firmly situate the Met's collections in a post-9/11 New York landscape; similarly, discussions of the DIA and Detroit highlight the museum's close ties to the city and its Arab and Muslim American populations. For LACMA, the inclusion of modern and contemporary art distinguishes its purpose in combatting perceptions of Islamic and Middle Eastern art as being "stuck in the past."[22] And finally, the Kelsey's temporary exhibit was designed from a critical and scholarly perspective to point out the problems of traditional organizational methods—typically chronological and geographical organization—that govern Islamic art galleries at the larger institutions. Each of these

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[22] To illustrate this, Catherine Wagley (2015) of the L.A. Weekly writes in her review of LACMA's relatively new contemporary Islamic art gallery: "We tend to see Islamic art as ending around 1900. . . The reasons for this, as usual, have to do with the unwieldy ways in which institutions work, the way history is written and the fact that much of the Middle East has been embroiled in conflict, keeping its art under-exposed. Plus, many people in the West see Middle Eastern culture as stuck in the past."

case studies highlights a distinct aspect of post-9/11 discourses on Islamic art. Therefore, I explore different modes of representation in each institution: the narrative of 9/11 with the Met; the peculiarities of Detroit and the tying of its fate to the DIA; the introduction of contemporary art with LACMA; and the appeal of local culture with the Kelsey.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

The most substantial collection of Islamic art in the United States is housed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (hereafter "the Met") in New York. The original galleries opened in 1975, but bequests by individual collectors started arriving in the nineteenth century.[23] In 2003, the Islamic wing was closed for renovation and did not reopen until November 1, 2011, a timing decision that distinctly corresponds to 9/11.[24] Upon its reopening, the Islamic wing was renamed the "Galleries for the Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia," thus eliminating the word Islam from the title entirely. Of all the museums I examine in this chapter, the Met is the most famous, the most extensive, probably the most visited,[25] and hence the most influential in constructing a discourse on Islam.[26]

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[23] The official date range is the seventh to the nineteenth century, as indicated on the Met's website and on gallery plaques.
[24] Cotter (2011) writes, "The timing, barely two years after the events of Sept. 11, was unfortunate, if unavoidable. Just when we needed to learn everything we could about Islamic culture, a crucial teaching tool disappeared"
[25] The 2015 fiscal year witnessed 6.3 million visitors to the Met (including the Cloisters), according to a July 28, 2015 announcement by the director and CEO. The DIA, on the other hand, estimated 677,496 visitors in the 2015 fiscal year, according to the online Museum Fact Sheet. LACMA's 2013-2014 fiscal year estimated 1,229,552 visitors, according to a May 8, 2015 *Los Angeles Time*s article (Wagley 2015).
[26] A number of significant Islamic art collections exist worldwide, but as stated earlier I focus only on the American institutions. While collections in Berlin and London, for example, may be

The emergence of these renovated galleries at what many perceive is an opportune time attests to the tremendous value that an Islamic art collection bestows on a major art institution in the post-9/11 landscape. The Met is in a valuable position to be able to educate the public about Islam at a time when it is sorely needed. For one, the institutional power of the Met is exemplified in one particular *New York Times* headline on the 2011 re-opening of the Islamic art galleries: “A Cosmopolitan Trove of Exotic Treasures” (Holland Cotter, Oct 27, 2011). Putting aside the Orientalist image of the exotic treasure trove, the headline first seems to suggest that the Islamic art collection is simultaneously “cosmopolitan” and “exotic,” a seemingly flattering yet contradictory assessment. The bigger issue is that this headline alludes to the power dynamics that structure the presentation of Islamic culture. The Met is “cosmopolitan” because it possesses a “trove of exotic treasures.” The museum here is more important than the objects themselves, particularly in its power to say what Islamic art can “do” or “mean” in the post-9/11 world. Jessica Winegar (2008) speaks to this power when she writes, “objects acquired (often through the colonial enterprise) served both as proof of common humanity, and of Western superiority” (658). The Met’s power is thus drawn from the objects in its possession, particularly by asserting the exoticism, and hence the difference, of those objects. The museum’s ability to construct a discourse on Islam is thus contingent on asserting the contrast been Islam and the so-called West.

I visited the Met's Islamic art galleries several times in the summer of 2014. During these visits, I was struck by a mixture of admiration and confusion; the collection

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more substantial, the Met’s collections are most explicitly oriented towards providing a specific narrative about Islam after 9/11.

was vast and impressive, but even as a Muslim visitor I did not know what "Islam" was supposed to mean in those galleries. And yet I had grown up in the Muslim world—in contrast, what were visitors who had no knowledge of Islam beyond the baleful news headlines supposed to think?[27] The cultural context of the objects felt lacking, a problem that is apparently widespread. Stefan Weber (2012), the director of the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin, discusses the problem of situating an object in its cultural history: "However, having been involved in field research in the Middle East for 12 years, I equally often find it difficult to connect objects in galleries back to their geographies and places of origin, or to link them to the cultural-historical realities of the past. I am not alone. Looking into visitor surveys generally, or analyzing our own survey, the contextual-cultural dimensions of objects are not well communicated" (9). The objects on display were chosen to communicate a particular message, yet that message was vague. What exactly were they supposed to say about Islamic art and Islam more broadly?

Many of the reviews of the galleries that I had read were insistent on connecting the objects to Islam "out there," as though the objects were somehow responsible for mollifying current perceptions about Islam.[28] None of these articles explain what these objects are supposed to communicate about the world today. Indeed, how could these objects do so? The expectation imposed upon these objects, which were all crafted in the

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[27] The art critic Peter Schjedahl offers, as he says, the average visitor's perspective in his review of the galleries in the *New Yorker* (barring his position as a professional critic). He writes in his November 2011 review of the reopening, "I count myself a fit representative of the sketchily informed Occidental viewer, almost confident at some points while gasping like a beached fish at others." And yet, his review is peppered with curious statements such as this: "The Islamic wing affords adventures in difference."

[28] According to Randy Kennedy (2011) in his *New York Times* review of the galleries, the "objects will now stand as a powerful counterpoint to preconceptions about a country [Iran] that has come to symbolize Islamic antagonism."

7th-19th century CE, to shed light on our current conditions not only asks too much of them, but also obscures the articulation of a clear discourse on Islam beyond "let these objects teach us about Islam today." It is also important to note that these objects were crafted at a time before museums—certainly before modern art museums as we recognize them today—existed. So for museum spaces to present the objects in such a way that goes beyond their original functions and instead use them to talk about the world today speaks to the chasm between objects and museum spaces. What we learn instead is that the institution in question desires to formulate a particular message about Islam using objects to discuss politics, resulting in the imposition of binaries between Islamic art in the museum and political Islam in the "real world." Let us imagine that, somehow, the objects were indeed able to educate the public about Islam. Who gets access to these museum representations? Are the same people who visit the Met likely to be the ones who have misinformed views about Islam? Questions of accessibility highlight the impossibility of the task that these museums take upon themselves in attempting representations of Islam.

The desire for museums to assume a pedagogical role in the post-9/11 world is widespread in reviews of the galleries' reopening. Randy Kennedy of the *New York Times* describes the reopening as a "watershed moment in America's awareness of the visual culture of the Islamic world, at a time when that world looms as large as ever on the international stage and in the American psyche" (Kennedy 2011). Here, the importance of learning about Islam emerges out of the perceived threat of the Islamic world and its ominous, "looming" presence, thus pitting a cultural discourse on Islam against a political one. This binary of art and politics is based on the assumption that art can explain some

of the problems that exist in the political world.[29] More problematic is the fact that Kennedy's language is based on a paradoxical temporality wherein the world of pre-nineteenth century Islamic art can speak for the world of Islam today. Perhaps this assumption wouldn't be *as* problematic if the art were contemporary, or even modern. But the fact is that most Islamic art galleries do not include art produced after the nineteenth century.[30] The Met's collection includes objects from the seventh to the nineteenth century CE. Imposing 21st-century demand onto a collection that "ends" in the nineteenth century underlines a troubling binary wherein one can learn about the "problematic" Islam of today by looking for an idyllic version in the past.

This problem of temporality is rooted in the field of Islamic art itself, which rarely examines art produced after the 1800s (Flood 2012, 33). The lack of engagement with modern Islamic art, and the "location of Islamic art in a valorized past from which 'living tradition' is excluded," denies Islamic art its place next to "the art of European modernity" (34). Hence, expecting Islamic art to inform current affairs is a stretch. Art historian Barry Flood illustrates the paradox of having the museum educate the public about Islam with ancient and medieval artifacts. For instance, a 2004 statement from the director of the British Museum, Neil MacGregor, suggested that "the new interim government in Iraq will have to consider how it defines Iraq's identity. And it will be surprising if it does not turn, as every other government in the Middle East has turned, to historical precedents to define the wished-for-future. There is nowhere better to survey

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[29] Jessica Winegar (2008) challenges this notion when she questions that art "ever existed in a world devoid of military conquest and economic inequalities" (663).

[30] Flood 2007: 34 and Winegar 2008: 663-4.

those precedents than the British Museum" (40). The problem with asking a present day government to look at ancient artifacts to define contemporary Iraqi identity is self-evident, and suggests that modern Iraqi society is inferior to its past precedents. Flood calls this a "paradoxical 'back-to-the-future' model of Islamic modernity"—a notion that "champion[s] the utility of the instantiated past as a resource to be deployed in the present" (40). Such temporal paradoxes manifest throughout these art initiatives, which encourage audiences to learn about Islam today (i.e., in the post-9/11 world) by taking a tour of the art collections in their museums.

The idea of a "model" version of Islam—which seems to exist in a valorized past and in the sanctuary of the museum—reinforces the museum's role in assuming a responsibility for educating the public about Islam. In the publication issued with the reopening of the Met, *Masterpieces from the Department of Islamic Art*, the museum clearly articulates this pedagogical position of responsibility. In the Foreword, the director and CEO, Thomas P. Campbell (2011), states that since the last major publication by the Department of Islamic Art, "the study of Islamic art has expanded, as has global awareness of the regions from which the collection comes. What has remained constant is the beauty and the importance of the finest works of art from the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia, many of which are presented here" (vi). Again, we see the claim that Islamic art is in a prime position to speak for the Islamic world as the "global awareness" of this world rises. Here, various sets of oppositions appear between Islamic art and the Islamic world, art and politics, constancy and turbulence, and beauty and ugliness. The beauty of the art is designed to uplift the perceived ugliness of Islam as it is understood today. The museum discourses enforce a dynamic whereby art

can “humanize” Islam; this dynamic, in turn, confines Islam into these two roles: it can either be political and violent or artistic and peaceful.

The humanizing mission is forcefully articulated in another contribution to the aforementioned publication. An essay in the Met’s catalogue by Navina Najat Haider (2011), one of the curators of the collection, suggests that the new space of the gallery “allow[s] for wide-ranging cultural interconnections to be discerned throughout the display. These are particularly meaningful in light of the charged geopolitical climate during the time in which this reinstallation project has been undertaken and the global audiences it seeks to address” (10). The space of the museum is thus meant to serve as a sanctuary amidst a “charged geopolitical climate.” Islamic culture, then, is rendered palatable to the public only when it is confined in the space of the museum; it is inscrutable or dangerous otherwise, which in turn reifies the political and cultural binaries that govern the representation of Islam in the art world.

There are countless examples of language that illustrates the humanizing mission of the museum. In fact, this project was motivated by frequent appearances of the word “humanize” (and its variants) in descriptions of the museums. Sheila Canby (2011), the head curator of the Met's Islamic art galleries, uses this language directly in the aforementioned *New York Times* article by Randy Kennedy: “There is always a tendency to vilify a people as if they have come out of nothing ... But these things [the art] are humanizing. They show the beauty and achievement and even the sense of humor of a great culture.” If art can purportedly humanize Islam, then one imagines that Islam’s default status lacks humanity until otherwise humanized. Nasser Rabat (2012), a professor of Islamic Architecture at MIT, makes a similar claim to Canby’s in *Artforum*

International: "In undertaking its ambitious redesign, the museum set itself the task of contributing to the effort to re-humanize 'Islam' after the attacks of 9/11 without appearing too didactic and without losing sight of the main objective—which is to show art, not elucidate a beleaguered religion." It is worth nothing that Rabat is conscious of the problematic monolith that is "Islam." However, his comment on "rehumanizing" partakes in the project of asserting difference, of assuming that Muslims were otherwise nonhuman by default. Nor is his statement on the museum's distinction between "showing art" and "elucidating a beleaguered religion" convincing. Drawing on the language of humanization, the Met thus casts itself and is perceived as a benevolent savior of Islam.

The museum as an Enlightenment institution

To examine the representational forces of the modern art museum, it is important to study the museum as a site of cultural representation with origins in Enlightenment period (Lord 2005, 2006).[31] Remembering the museum's Enlightenment history illuminates the fact that Europe's project of self-discovery was predicated in its history of subjecting others, as Frantz Fanon, Lisa Lowe and Sylvia Wynter have, among others, argued. Just as the projects of humanism and colonialism are mutually constitutive, as Sylvia Wynter argues, (Scott 2000, 119-20), so too are the projects of establishing

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[31] Although it is much more common to study the museum as a nineteenth century institution, as Foucault does in his essay, "Of Other Spaces" (1986), it is important to emphasize the Enlightenment roots of the museum in order to see how the ideals of its founding period are present to this day, and how they must be challenged in order to make museums more inclusive of representing non-Euro-American arts and cultures. Tony Bennett (2013) argues that the public museum's "distinguishing characteristics [were] crystallized during the first half of the nineteenth century" (in Lord 2005, 92), implying that these characteristics are rather dated.

American and Muslim identities. The museum's role in projecting a definition of Islamic culture via art exemplifies the attempts to negotiate American identity vis-à-vis Islam in the post-9/11 era.

The museum's power of universalizing cultural and aesthetic values is indicative of its Enlightenment values. The term "Islamic art" suggests that this category of art production is monolithic and religious—even though most Islamic art production is secular (Blair and Bloom 2003, 152). The name of the category is a profound marker of difference: if European culture is secular and progressive, Islamic culture is religious and regressive, Avinoam Shalem argues.[32] This kind of Othering embodies a distinct Enlightenment value: the rejection of authority, both monarchical and religious (Lord 2005, 146). While the Met's decision to rename its galleries and exclude the term "Islamic art" is a step towards rejecting this monolithic categorization of culture, its language on humanizing Islam through art suggests that Islam is still perceived as being regressive and religious unless otherwise humanized by art.

Another universalist approach to Islamic art is that museum collections tend to be all-encompassing, having to "cover much more ground than is typical for other equivalent fields, such as Western medieval or Chinese art, and it comes at the cost of a certain shallowness" (Blair Bloom 2003, 158). Such vast approaches enforce the assumption that Islamic art production is monolithic. They also tend to be particular to Western art historians, as scholars in the Islamic world focus entirely on the art of their

[32] Shalem (2012) writes, "It might then be suggested that the myth of a monolithic Islam—and, as a consequence, the creation of the encompassing term of 'Islamic art'—is rooted in traditional Eurocentric patterns of thought concerning 'Us' and 'the Other'. This dialectic seems to give birth to a monolithic Islamic world, characterized particularly by a religious definition that is juxtaposed against the emergence of secularism and the Enlightenment in Europe" (13).

own countries rather than the entire region (157). Bourdieu and Wacquant's fears of the universalization of particularisms are epitomized in the very formation and categorization of the Islamic art, which has inevitably been framed by European ideas on what constitutes art.[33] These universalist approaches to Islamic art exemplify their status as nineteenth century European constructs (Shalem 2012, 13-14). These presentations and constructions of Islamic art elucidate the power of the museum rather than clarify the purpose of the objects on display. The category of "Islamic art" is first and foremost a category of difference in its purpose of educating the American public about Islamic culture, an act that resonates with Horkheimer and Adorno's understanding of "human beings [who] purchase the increase in their power with estrangement from that over which it is exerted" (Horkheimer and Adorno 6). This power dynamic accurately describes the situation of an Islamic art gallery at an American or European institution. By framing Islamic art as a monolith that is radically different from other categories and cultures, the museum is in the position to assert the difference of its objects and simultaneously extend its own institutional power, which then becomes universalized as the so-called default. When cultures that do not fall under the purview of the supposed universal are housed in this space, their distance from that universal is emphasized. If Islamic art is rendered monolithic, it becomes easier to frame as "different;" similarly, reducing Muslims to terrorists suggests that "they" are not like "us," which makes it easier to assert difference (and superiority) over "them." Furthermore, as Deepa Kumar

[33] Bourdieu and Wacquant (1999) write, "Cultural imperialism rests on the power to universalize particularisms linked to a single historical tradition by causing them to be misrecognized as such" (41).

rightfully argues, the rendering of Islam into a monolith—that is, by denying the history and diversity of practices associated with Islam—ensures that Islam is portrayed as possessing "certain inherent, unchanging characteristics that render it antidemocratic, violent, sexist, and so on" (Kumar 2012, 42).

These issues entailed in categorizing Islamic art exemplify the legacy of European constructions of Islam in another way: establishing European art as "modern" while relegating Islamic art to forms of "minor" arts. Avinoam Shalem (20120 roots this distinction in the nineteenth century, "with the beginning of the industrial revolution, that the stigma of 'crafts' was given to any non-European (and occasionally East European) art" (17). This classification locates Islamic art within "traditional" and "folkloric" forms in contrast to the masterpieces of "modern" Western art (ibid). Denying Islamic art modernity in this way—by claiming modernity as an "exclusively Western invention"—is one of the ways in which the humanity of Islamic culture is questioned (17). If the pinnacle of human achievement in the arts is located in the production of masterpieces, then the supposed lack of such masterpieces within Islamic art denies this culture the power of human achievement. And if art is supposed to be a measure for human freedom, a Kantian notion pronounced in the separation of art from "utilitarian interest" (Winegar 2008, 661), then Islamic art falls short, for its objects are widely designated for functionality.[34] Therefore, the institutional governance of Islamic art denies Islamic culture modernity and, consequently, a sense of humanity, even while museum

[34] Blair and Bloom (2003) write, "However, much of what many historians of Islamic art normally study inlaid metalwares, luster ceramics, enameled glass, brocaded textiles, and knotted carpets is not the typical purview of the historian of Western art, who generally considers such handicrafts to be "minor" or "decorative" arts compared with the "nobler" arts of architecture, painting, and sculpture" (153).

representatives claim that their art collections serve to "humanize" Islam for the general public.

Of course, none of these representational schemes are premeditated in contemporary art initiatives. The problem is located in positive attempts at inclusion and representation of Islamic culture. However, the attempt to include Islamic art in order to show that "Islam is harmless" aligns with what Evelyn Alsultany (2012) calls "simplified complex representations," a notion that refers to modes of representation that balance a negative one with a positive one (14). Alsultany refers to the unexpected rise of positive media representations of Arabs and Muslims in the years following 9/11 and argues that this tactic allows the U.S. to be portrayed in a sympathetic light for its positive portrayals of Arabs and Muslims (16).[35] These tactics are keenly present in the museum initiatives, which cast the museums as enlightened for their inclusion of Islamic art and cultures in order to dispel negative impressions of Islam spurred by political events of the twenty-first century. The institution draws its power by possessing and objectifying Islamic culture while simultaneously claiming that its project will "humanize" Islam.

The Detroit Institute of Arts

While the mission to humanize Islamic culture is abundantly manifest in the Met, the project is articulated differently in the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA). Studying the language of the Met illustrates how museums wield institutional powers over a particular

[35] Ali Behdad makes a similar argument in his 2005 book, *A Forgetful Nation*, where he explores the role of the United States as a benevolent immigrant nation that welcomes its "huddled masses" with open arms. The immigrants must be reduced to the image of "huddled masses" in order to empower the image of the United States as a welcoming host (77).

construction of Islam after 9/11; the DIA, however, carries its authority in a different way. The DIA's discourse on Islam is more specifically rooted in envisioning itself as a valuable cultural center amidst the particular issues that affect the city of Detroit.

The DIA boasts an impressive and longstanding collection of Islamic art, though the galleries did not open until 2010.[36] In a statement regarding the 2010 opening of the Islamic art gallery, the director at the time, Graham W. J. Beal, noted that Islamic art would connect audiences with the world outside the museum: "[Beal] believes that giving attention to the collection of Islamic art is crucial for the museum given that the Detroit metropolitan area is home to the largest Middle Eastern population in the United States" (Art Daily). Though Beal does not directly reference the post-9/11 geopolitical climate (as was done with the Met), the timing is implicit: why else would it be "crucial" in 2010 to have a collection that is connected to the local Middle Eastern communities, given that these communities have been around since the early twentieth century?[37] The DIA's aims to have its art attend to the needs of a particular community are similar to the Met's in that both museums wield the collections to boost their own image and authority.[38] Just as

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[36] The museum started acquiring objects for its Islamic galleries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, according to the museum's website (http://www.dia.org/art/asian-arts-and-culture.aspx). Though the gallery did not open until 2010, plans for such a gallery were discussed at least as early as 2004 (Gray 2010).

[37] Holland Cotter's 2007 review of the DIA, three years before the opening of the Islamic gallery, suggests that similar commitments were taken with the African and African-American art: "Of real interest is what the reinstallation tells us about the museum's recent collecting patterns. Its continuing acquisition of African art can surely be taken as a sign of its efforts to engage with the city. In addition, the reinstalled African galleries—overseen by Nii O. Quarcoopome, a curator born in Ghana—are twice their former size and prominently placed near the most trafficked street entrance. The new galleries of African-American art suggest the same commitment." Of course, the assumption that galleries of African and African-American art share the same purpose and serve the same communities is erroneous at best.

[38] Although it is worth noting that the Middle Eastern community in Detroit is largely composed of Christian Arabs—on the other hand, neighboring Dearborn is mostly composed of Muslim

the Met presents itself as a source of knowledge about Islam after 9/11, the DIA sees itself doing the same, especially with the local community in mind. However, while the post-9/11 surge of interest in Islamic culture is important relative to the DIA's collections, the city of Detroit is a more salient factor in the DIA's representational goals.

The DIA is intimately intertwined with the city of Detroit.[39] Diego Rivera's *Detroit Industry* murals, which depict racialized labor at the Ford Motor Company, epitomize this intimacy with the city, and indeed, the museum was owned by the city of Detroit until 2014.[40] Elsewhere, the museum's signs and wall panels stress the importance of being aware of the city's demographics. One such panel reads, "The DIA uses culturally inclusive language whenever possible. We use B.C.E. (Before Common Era) instead of B.C. (Before Christ). We use C.E. (Common Era) instead of A.D. (Anno Domini)." Although this language is widespread throughout many institutions in the country, the DIA makes a point to announce that its diction is culturally inclusive. Wall panels throughout the museum feature a conscious framing of the collections; for example, the Department of American Art includes a panel titled "Depicting Race, Class, Ethnicity, and Gender" in order to problematize the representations of marginalized subjects in this gallery. Panels demonstrating this level of consciousness are not

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Arabs (Shryock 2007: 1). This important distinction is not taken into account in linking the Islamic art to the local communities, thus operating on the misconception that most Arabs in the U.S. are Muslim.

[39] Jeffrey Abt (2001) presses for studying the DIA with an intimacy to the city in mind: "To study the DIA as an isolated subject without taking into account its interrelations with the City of Detroit, the city's suburbs, the State of Michigan, and the diverse constituencies that are served by and pay taxes to these entities would be akin to studying a particular animal or plant outside the context of its natural environment" (15).

[40] Randy Kennedy, "'Grand Bargain' Saves the Detroit Institute of Arts," New York Times. Nov. 7, 2014.

commonly found at art institutions. Indeed, a striking panel at the Met has the opportunity to do something similar but ultimately does not. Located in the Islamic Wing and titled "Exchanges between the Arab World and Europe," the panel points to the adjacent gallery, which features Orientalist paintings by the likes of Jean-Léon Gerôme. Rather than taking the opportunity to educate the visitor about the issues of Orientalist representation, the panel simply states that "Western painters renewed their long-time fascination with Islamic peoples, places, customs, and costumes, in what we today call Orientalist art," and leaves it at that. The DIA, on the other hand, seems more dedicated to informing its visitors about the issues of representation in its paintings. This move is essential in light of the demographics of its neighboring communities and its visitors. The DIA has adapted its language and representational modes to reflect the changing demographics of its city, pointedly communicating these changes to its audience.

What distinguishes the DIA from the Met—and, arguably, from any other museum—is the rhetoric of salvation surrounding this institution. Since the city's descent into bankruptcy, the museum has been beleaguered with threats to sell its holdings in an effort to relieve some of the city's debts. Because the DIA is one of the few major art museums owned by its host city, it would be difficult to talk about the Islamic gallery without considering the fate of the museum and its relationship to the city of Detroit (Kennedy 2013).[41] The Islamic gallery offers not just another avenue for visitors to learn more about a culture that has been in the public mind; the gallery is, along with the museum, tied up with the city and its demographics, as illustrated by the former director's

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[41] According to Kennedy (2014), the museum is now owned by an independent charitable trust, one of the terms of the "grand bargain" that rescued it from financial ruin.

prior comments on the Islamic art gallery and its connection with the local Middle Eastern population. Again, the paradoxical temporality is present here in the link between the DIA's works of Islamic art (which do not include contemporary art) and the communities of Detroit. The DIA does not make as explicit a claim as the Met in wielding its collections to influence public opinion on Islam after 9/11; it does, however, establish a connection between art and the demographic and racial landscape of its city. The opening of the galleries in 2010, two years after the nationwide fiscal descent, may well be a sign that possessing Islamic art—and subsequently weighing in on the role of Islamic culture in the U.S.—is a prerogative for successful American art institutions today. Set against the backdrop of the museum's financial difficulties, the presence of the DIA's Islamic art galleries (which have become one of the most substantial in the nation) is a powerful reminder of the kind of authority this can bring to an institution.

While funding for the Islamic art galleries may not be tied to the funding situation of the museum in general, it is important to note that the opening of the galleries occurred around the time of the museum's fiscal issues,[42] suggesting that the galleries were of significant import. As Holland Cotter states in a 2007 *New York Times* review of the museum: "In short, this story of a vulnerable institution in a spirited but depressed town is one of modest triumphs mingled with failures. And it is a very American story, about the shameful way we treat our ailing cities; about what we value in culture; about how the inescapable politics of race and class shape the institutions that write our history; about how art, that glittering bauble, might have some use after all." To some extent, the DIA's

[42] Although Jeffrey Abt talks about several waves of fiscal issues in the museum's history—see Abt, *Valuing Detroit's Art Museum: A History of Fiscal Abandonment and Rescue* (2017).

narrative mirrors what Cotter calls the "American story" of Detroit. Elaborating on this notion, Cotter writes, in the following paragraph, that the DIA, "like most older American art museums, was the product of a hard-nosed, hardscrabble nation that found itself, at the end of the 19th century, on top of the world. A country that had once defined itself as the un-Europe more and more aspired to be a New Europe, at least in terms of high culture." Cotter's "American story" suggests that the museum, and perhaps art and culture in general, affords opportunities for the city, and perhaps the country, to define itself as uniquely American. If the early part of this country's history was to define itself in opposition to Europe, the impetus for this country at this time is to identify itself against Muslim Others. And this is quite evident in the way American museums construct discourses on Islam. The DIA's Islamic art holdings present an opportunity for the museum to have a say about the changing demographic and racial landscapes of Detroit. While Cotter does not mention the then-unopened Islamic art galleries in his article, his claims echo the ones previously made about the Met and its collections: that art has some utilitarian and pedagogical function to speak about communities previously unaccounted for by the early European precedents of the modern art museum.

The DIA's Islamic wing's opening in 2010 bears more than a connection to the local community; it was also offered a way for the museum to revitalize its image amidst its struggles. A recent and controversial proposition in the *New York Times* called for incoming Syrian refugees to resettle Detroit, and the writers bring the DIA into the picture by noting the museum's rescue from financial ruin in 2014.[43] It seems a little

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[43] Laitin and Jahr (2015) write, "In 2013, the city, which has a higher proportion of black residents than any large city in America, elected its first white mayor in more than 40 years. The

more than coincidental to mention the museum in this plan to revitalize the city with this resettling proposition; perhaps these authors also see the local Middle Eastern population and the Islamic wing as part of this narrative to save the city of Detroit. In this way, the museum's discourse on Islam here is unique: Islam is Other, as it has always been, but an Other that is perhaps necessary to allow this institution and its city to survive. These galleries provide a way of acknowledging that the narrative of Detroit must be revised with newer constituencies in mind. While the DIA's narrative is very different from the Met's, both institutions are involved in constructing a narrative of American history that involves Islamic Others. If Cotter is correct in perceiving that these institutions "write our history," the DIA and the Met form integral parts of envisioning the changing landscapes of these American cities.

Alternative sites: LACMA and the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology

During the course of my research, I found promising developments in several places with more progressive and inclusive representations of Islamic art. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) stands out among major American art museums as it is thus far the only one to display a substantial collection of modern and contemporary Islamic art.[44] The decision to include art produced after the nineteenth century is an important counter to the assumption that Islamic art, and by extension its

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following year, the city showed remarkable resilience and unity in emerging from municipal bankruptcy, with a reorganization plan that, among other things, preserved the collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts and gave the city space to invest in long-neglected public services."

[44] McWilliams (2012) writes, "Like the British Museum, [LACMA] has recently also moved into modern art, adding works by contemporary artists from the Middle East to counter the idea that Islamic art ended in the 19th century" The Smithsonian is included among these institutions (171).

culture, can never be modern. Having contemporary art is perhaps the only viable way to envision the connection that has been suggested between museum art collections and current geopolitical events. Therefore, LACMA is unique as a major American art institution that resists the kinds of institutional powers, exemplified by the Met and its peers, that keep Islamic art locked in its "valorized past," per Finbarr Barry Flood. The push for the inclusion of modern and contemporary art is explicitly tied to changing demographics and interests, as evident in art historian Oleg Grabar debating the question of whether museums should uphold "traditional" and "antiquarian" collecting practices, or whether they should "react to the new interests of the Muslim population and of those who deal with it." The latter includes contemporary Muslim art production throughout the world, including those in the United States.[45] As one of the few American museums to engage in these new developments, LACMA distinguishes itself in its representation of contemporary Islamic art production and reaction to new interest groups, per Grabar. In addition to its permanent collection (which was packed up in the fall of 2014 for travel to various cities around the world), LACMA introduced "Islamic Art Now: Contemporary Art of the Middle East" in late 2014, an initiative that heralded the start of LACMA's permanent installation of modern and contemporary art. LACMA's initiative signals important changes to the work of presenting Islamic art, but one must of course question the title ("Islamic Art Now") and its implicit assertion of the categorization debate ("what

[45] Grabar (2012) writes, "The museum that came out of traditional, antiquarian, collecting gave little attention to the creativity of the past 100 years, in fact even 200 or 300 years. Should this antiquarian preference be maintained? Or should the museum react to the new interests of the Muslim population and of those who deal with it and recognise in its collections the existence of active schools of art from Morocco to Indonesia and the often vibrant art done by artists of Muslim origin in New York or Paris?" (27).

should we call 'Islamic' art?"). There is also the issue of assuming that art from the Middle East is necessarily Islamic. In a National Public Radio interview on the initiative, UCLA professor Ali Behdad notes, "I think the subtitle of this show [Contemporary Art of the Middle East] is actually a more accurate description—artists from the Middle East … Because many of these artists—I think the overwhelming majority of these artists — are actually not Muslim in the very traditional sense of the word at all. They are incredibly secular. Many of them live in the West. If you called Andy Warhol a Christian artist would that make sense?" (Stamberg 2015). This observation highlights the fact that the inclusion of contemporary art does not, of course, solve the categorization problems of the field; it merely expands the field and adds additional issues into the mix. Expanding the range of inclusion neither problematizes nor solves the fundamental issues with constructing cultural discourses on Islam.

There are numerous other issues associated with the inclusion of contemporary art. First, because the field is newly in the process of expanding, the availability of curators for modern and contemporary art at museums is limited. The difference between writing about contemporary art production and buying it is another matter, according to Islamic art curator Mary McWilliams (2012): "It's one thing to write about the contemporary scene, it's another to purchase art with institutional funds," states one curator she interviewed in her 2009 survey (171). Because Islamic art works in these institutions tend to be bequests from private collectors, it is understandable to see how the museums would have more art from the past than from contemporary production. Despite these misgivings, however, McWilliams does note that the curators she interviewed who have indeed decided to include contemporary art "find the contemporary art scene

energising [sic]," noting in particular the opinion that contemporary works in the Islamic galleries were likely to "make the historical objects more relevant to the public" (Ibid). While the inclusion of modern and contemporary art is a burgeoning process with plenty of limitations, it appears to be a step in the right direction in diversifying representations of Islam. In turn, such diversifying efforts might discourage the promotion of any one idea of Islam.

The second museum that I offer as an alternative case study to the institutional norms is the University of Michigan's Kelsey Museum of Archaeology. Specifically, I examine a Fall 2014 exhibit titled "Pearls of Wisdom."[46] The exhibit distinguished itself in its choice of thematic organization over chronological or regionalist organizational schemes. The curators, both at the University of Michigan, were invested in illustrating the thematic alignment of various art forms, as exemplified in a quote by the medieval calligrapher al-Tawhidi that heralded the exhibition: "Handwriting is the necklace of wisdom. It serves to sort the pearls of wisdom, to bring its dispersed pieces into good order, to put its stray bits together" (Gruber and Dimmig 2014, 1). The metaphor of handwriting as a necklace of pearls, according to the curators, serves this purpose of highlighting the connections between different genres (writing and objects). In "Pearls of Wisdom," the real focus was not on Islam or the museum, but on the art itself—specifically, the objects' potential to bear cross-media resemblances to each other, thus

[46] The exhibit was co-curated by Dr. Christiane Gruber and Ashley Dimmig, both at the University of Michigan's History of Art program. "Pearls of Wisdom" was presented an opportunity to display some of the Kelsey Museum's objects, most of which are in storage, as well as items throughout the University of Michigan's extensive collections.

offering a deeply aesthetic and sensory experience to the visitor.[47] "Pearls of Wisdom" was the only display of Islamic art that I saw that was not concerned with constructing a totalizing discourse on Islam.

Because "Pearls of Wisdom" was significantly smaller (and temporary) in comparison to the other collections, it is possible to examine its collections relatively closely. The exhibit featured four main themes of organization—"Everyday Beauty" (objects that are both functional and aesthetic), "Play and Protection" (objects that are visually playful and objects that grant protection, such as amulets), "Media Metaphors" (objects of one medium that imitate the material quality of another object's medium), and "Illumination" (objects of lighting and illuminated manuscripts, a pun on art objects being sources of light and of enlightenment, such as Koranic manuscripts). I found the objects much easier to relate to than in any other exhibit or collection of Islamic art, because each object was clearly situated within the larger thematic scheme. For example, the "Play and Protection" section featured ornate water vessels with fish engraved at the bottom to make the basin look like a fishpond, thus playing a visual trick on the bearer of the bowl (61-3) The vessels were one of the many objects in the collection that wedded a playful and aesthetic design (the fishpond) with utilitarian function (drinking bowl). The curators' elaboration of the objects' purpose was one of the many ways in which the exhibit put the objects front and center. Rather than communicating a general sense of what "Islam" is supposed to represent, the objects

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[47] While "Pearls of Wisdom" is a temporary exhibit and on the same scale of comparison to the permanent collections of the three institutions discussed thus far, it is worth bringing into the conversation because its very purpose lay in unraveling some of the issues of Islamic art presentation.

illustrated their value to the communities in which they were made. Unlike many major art museums, where the emphasis tends to lie on the power of the institution and its role in mediating discourses on Islam in the post-9/11 world, the Kelsey exhibit was more committed to making the various arts of Islam known to unfamiliar audiences, but almost solely on the object's terms rather than that of the institution itself. Chronological and regional organization, which tend to be the norm, obscure the thematic thread linking the objects together, thus muting the purposes of the objects, which in turn makes them more difficult to relate to visitors. The exhibit's clear choice of thematic organization eliminates these issues altogether. In a 2009 overview on Islamic art, Sheila Bloom and Jonathan Blair claim that, "Although art can be used to illustrate history, its primary function is to communicate messages that cannot be said in words." I found this spirit encapsulated in "Pearls of Wisdom"—rather than trying to project a particular discourse on what Islamic culture is supposed to represent, the curators of the exhibit allowed the objects to speak for themselves as items illustrating the particular aesthetic and utilitarian values of the communities in which they were made. Foregrounding the importance of the objects is an important tactic in light of the fact that the notions of art and aesthetics derive from a European intellectual tradition that does not at all correspond with Islamic art traditions, as pointed out in the Introduction to *Islamic Art and the Museum* (2012, 13). This gap between the objects on display and the intellectual tradition that governs how they are displayed in the museum cannot be ignored. With "Pearls of Wisdom," rather than trying to impose a particular kind of organization or discourse onto the objects, the exhibit curators simply let the objects speak for themselves. The operative

goal was to showcase the objects of the collection rather than to construct a discourse on Islam, thus restricting the imposition of the representational structures discussed thus far.

To complement the exhibit's playful combination of aesthetics and function, the curators keenly illustrated the local roots of its objects. All of the items on display were drawn from the University of Michigan's collections, and the colors and design of exhibit were chosen in honor of the university's colors of "blue and maize." The exhibit was bookended with two pieces by contemporary artist Khaled al Sa'ai, both of which were produced in Ann Arbor. The first piece, *Winter in Ann Arbor* (2002), is a calligraphic painting that pays homage to the wintry local landscape, featuring the repetition of certain Arabic letters that visually and aurally evoke puffs of misty air in a cold atmosphere (27). Another piece by the same artist, titled "Resurrection," was also made in Ann Arbor and features the same atmospheric, calligraphic elements of the previous piece. Bookending the exhibit with these two pieces of art, which are produced in homage to the local environment, is a strategic way of placing Islamic art in a highly local—and contemporary—setting. This tactic makes Islamic art familiar, and it challenges assumptions about Islamic art by presenting it as something that can be secular, contemporary, produced locally, and aesthetically stimulating. Other museums have a way of locating Islam in a remote and glorified past, but "Pearls of Wisdom" genuinely seemed to make these objects speak to the visitor in a way that avoided the complicated and sometimes ineffective strategies of constructing humanizing discourses on Islam.

Thematic organization seems to be emerging as a popular choice these days, especially in museums that reject the chronological preference for organization (Necipoglu 2012, 67). But, as Necipoglu warns, thematic organization can be problematic

in the form of pan-Islamic galleries or exhibits as they tend to be stereotypical, if not essentialist, in attempting to capture a particular "spirit" of Islamic art that "transcend[s] 'time and space'" (ibid). Situations such as these highlight the effectiveness of chronological and regional organization. However, the way the Kelsey exhibit was organized demonstrated a keen sensitivity to displaying works of Islamic art without attempting to capture its "spirit," but simply to feature various kinds of art (limited by a small set of thematic categories) that were produced both in Muslim-majority communities and in the United States. A smaller, focused exhibit seems to be the most effective in terms of letting the objects speak for themselves rather than trying to impose a particular pedagogic ideology in order to counter assumptions about other ideologies. Indeed, the reason I analyze specific objects in this exhibit—and not in any of the others—is that the exhibit's objects overshadowed the institutional structures, whereas the reverse was true in the other galleries. The Kelsey was the only institution not to default to "humanizing" its works because there was neither an objectification of Islamic culture nor a particular objective to represent "Islam" in the first place.

Conclusion

As the cultural capital of Islamic art gains currency, so declines its human value. Islamic art is looked to for answers to political questions rather than for the various and intrinsic values of its production. Thus, "Islam" in the space of the museum offers less a rich set of discourses and practices and more an object of representation to affirm or counter other representations, which results in the binary structures examined here. I have examined the ways in which Islamic art and its recent trends are wielded by institutional

forces in an attempt to present their own discourses on Islamic culture. Rather than troubling the modes of representation, the institutions, for the most part, end up reifying the binary structures in place and result in a wider gap between "Islam" and the so-called "West." The complexity and agency of so-called Islamic cultures are downplayed when the art is examined through a particular geopolitical lens and for the particular purpose of "humanizing" Islam. The critical goal undertaken by many of these institutions—to understand Islamic culture in a post-9/11 America—may never be reached without rethinking the category of Islamic art itself, and more importantly, without keeping the institutional forces from establishing binary conceptions of Islam as either political or artistic. The last case study, "Pearls of Wisdom," operates outside of this binary by challenging the tradition of constructing an "Islam" that humanizes its political counterpart. I have no doubt that the attempts to present Islamic art are well-intentioned, thoughtful, and intellectually stimulating across the board. But for American discourses on Islam to be effective, the museums must find a way to resist the current binaries in place.

Chapter Two: Ayad Akhtar and the Burden of Muslim American Responsibility

> Brown writers, by some stupid agreement we seem to have reached, must turn out fiction that engages with someone's—the reader's? the editor's? the publisher's? the critic's?—preconceptions about their life.
>
> Rumaan Alam

> You need to understand that it's not a neutral world out there. Not right now. Not for you. You have to be mindful about sending a different message.
>
> Abe in *Disgraced*

Introduction

In the spring of 2016, I attended an event at the Malcolm X Public Library in San Diego that intended to debunk stereotypes about Islam. The event began with a speech by a young man who had converted from Judaism to Islam, followed by a recitation of prayers (in both Arabic and English) by local imam. The imam then invited the audience to a question and answer session related to the theme of the event. A white-presenting Armenian American woman posed the first question, which would dictate the trajectory of the conversation for the entirety of the event. Her question, she claimed, came from her father's history as a survivor of the Armenian genocide. "Why," she asked, "does Islam cause so much violence?" The conversation picked up as attendees felt obligated to respond to the woman's question, but she ignored all the comments and routinely interrupted to ask more questions: "why do Muslim men get four wives?" and "why aren't there uprisings by Muslims condemning Islamic terrorism?" among various others that many Muslims have become accustomed to hearing. The woman had done what so many have when presented with the opportunity to meet a Muslim, in this case an imam:

she demanded that every part of this conversation revolve around alleviating her own fears about Islam and refused to engage in a conversation between two or more parties. Putting aside the problematic nature of the woman's assumptions—that Islam is monolithic, inherently violent and misogynistic—the event illustrated a reality in which Muslims are not allowed to engage in conversations beyond the demanding, explanatory kind that I had witnessed that day.

This situation seems to afflict Muslim American writers as well, who have found themselves writing in a time that has curbed Muslim American expression. Carol Fadda-Conrey (2014) writes, "In moments of national crisis, certain Arab-Americans and Muslim-Americans, by choice or not, have often acted as singular representatives of what is in fact a wide variety of backgrounds and opinions defining the Arab and Muslim Communities in the U.S." (24). Geopolitical circumstances dictate the nature of conversations that can be had about Islam: Muslim Americans are often made to take the role of the explanatory storyteller, a role that Stephen Sohn explores in *Racial Asymmetries: Asian American Fictional Worlds* (2014). In this text, Sohn tackles assumptions about the Asian American literary canon by examining works that defy the expectation that the author and the storyteller share the same ethnic or cultural background. When this conflation occurs, Sohn argues, the authors are often cast as native informants (6) or, per Jeffrey F. L. Partridge, as tour guides, with Amy Tan being the foremost example of the latter (14). The aims of this chapter are attuned to Sohn's exploration of the "literary marketplace [that] helps articulate some of the forces that render the Asian American writer as a native informant and as a hazy double for the narrator and/or protagonist within the fictional world" (16). In this chapter, I interrogate

the role of the Muslim American writer and the burden of responsibility that falls upon him or her in the post-9/11 landscape. Muslim American writers are almost always judged according to their identity as Muslims, and are either made to act as native informants or to offer corrective depictions of Islam. I examine the works of Ayad Akhtar, a Pulitzer Prize-winning writer who rejects both of these categorizations, which has resulted in his being judged as Islamophobic for his bold representations of Muslims. This chapter examines the controversy surrounding Akhtar's works and his resistance to the burden on Muslim Americans to present humanizing depictions of Islam. I argue that—while Akhtar's portrayals of Muslims can indeed be seen as troubling—his aesthetic strategies are attuned and resistant against the kinds of representations that are expected of Muslim American writers. While Akhtar openly rejects the apologist and native informant narratives, I argue that, additionally, his strategy is rooted in rejecting the humanizing framework. Ultimately, the complexity of Akhtar's works open an important conversation about the role and freedom of representation that belong to Muslim American writers.

Akhtar is unapologetically Muslim in his resistance to the expectation to offer both apologetic and humanizing depictions of Islam, a distinction that I examine in the introduction. He resists the apologist narrative by offering both positive and highly negative portrayals of Muslims on the stage without the inclination to apologize for the actions of a few Muslims. He also resists the humanizing narrative by showing that his depictions of Muslims do not align with the post-9/11 American notion of Muslim humanity. If the Muslim human, according to these standards, is peaceful and secular, Akhtar defies those standards by showing a range of religious, secular, violent, and

peaceful Muslims, albeit with focus on one really troubling character in *Disgraced*. In short, Akhtar explores a wide range of Muslim humanity and does not respond to demands to emphasize one kind of Muslim humanity (the peaceful, secular characterization), a tactic that has landed him in hot water with some audiences. Akhtar's struggles and strategies as a playwright illustrate the limitations faced by artists of color in representations that concern their own communities.

The Muslim American literary landscape

What counts as Muslim American writing? The genre is perhaps trickier to categorize than, say, Arab American writing, which can be identified by the ethnic background of the writer, although many take issue with this parameter. Citing Lisa Suheir Majaj and Steven Salaita, who have each written about the genre of Arab American writing, Carol Fadda-Conrey (2014) notes the difficulty of assessing the boundaries of Arab American literature: should it be assessed by the ethnic background of the writer or the thematic considerations of the text? (24).[48] Either way, ethnic considerations are at the very least possible with Arab American writing, but are far more

[48] In "Of Stories and Storytellers," Lisa Suheir Majaj writes, "One of the hot-button issues in RAWI concerns the definition of the genre. Does anything written by an Arab–American qualify *per se*, or is "Arab–American writing" restricted to Arab–American themes? Some, like [Evelyn] Shakir, cannot understand "why work that does not address the Arab–American experience should be labeled 'Arab–American.'" Others, like Kahf, are of two minds: While the category "Arab–American" is useful and important, writing should be judged not simply on the basis of ethnicity, but of quality."
And Carol Fadda-Conrey writes, "writers should at least have an Arab background or heritage to qualify as Arab-American. However, rather than setting up strict parameters for Arab-American writing, I believe the criteria for determining whether texts can be considered Arab-American should remain as flexible as possible to avoid replicating the exclusionary methods that have and continue to relegate minority voices to the peripheries of US literatures and cultures" (24).

difficult to determine with Muslim American writing. Muslim Americans span a wide range on the racial and ethnic backgrounds spectrum. So are we to mark the boundaries of the genre by religiosity? If so, how does one determine one's religiosity, and moreover, whose right is it to determine someone else's religiosity? Few people have written about Muslim American literature—Mohja Kahf (2010) and Danielle Haque (2014) are among them—but in this chapter I attempt to situate Akhtar's strategies in the context of this Muslim American literary landscape. For the purpose of this chapter, I follow Mohja Kahf in defining Muslim American writing as anyone who self-identifies—religiously or not—as a Muslim. In Akhtar's case, the author has publicly identified himself as a "cultural" Muslim who grew up in a secular household. The power of self-identification lies in the ability to reclaim what it means to be Muslim from other people's expectations and assert that it is possible to be Muslim and secular, or Muslim and feminist, or any other combination that defies narrow expectations about what it means to be Muslim. "Muslim" here, then, is not a label of religiosity but an affirmation of identity.

The post-9/11 literary landscape demands a certain set of expectations from Muslim American writers. One of these expectations is the desire to inform unfamiliar American audiences about Islam, an expectation that has also shaped the presentation of Islamic art, as I discussed in the previous chapter. Certain Muslim writers (not necessarily American) have answered the call to inform by producing what Saba Mahmood categorizes as native testimonials, which comprise autobiographical narratives by Muslim and ex-Muslim individuals who claim to have been persecuted by Islam and,

particularly, its supposedly brutal practices against women.[49] The best known authors of this genre are Ayaan Hirsi Ali (*Nomad: From Islam to America*, among others), Azar Nafisi (*Reading Lolita in Tehran*), Irshad Manji (*The Trouble with Islam*). Notably, Spivak (1999) traces the figure of the native informant (in literature rather than anthropology) as a subject who exists outside of the (Western-imposed) category of the human. The informant is a "mark of expulsion from the name of Man—a mark crossing out the impossibility of the ethical relation" (6). Because the native informant is marked by these Western terms, ("blank, though generative of a text of cultural identity that only the West (or a Western-model discipline) could inscribe."), we can see that his or her role is also a product of Western expectation. Zareena Grewal (2013) discusses this expectation and its ability to group Muslims together regardless of experience:

> For me, the trouble with native neo-Orientalists such as Manji is the pervasiveness of their ideas. I have to explain again and again that their ("native") explanations are different from my ("native") explanations because mine are based not on the color of my skin or my individual experience in Sunday school but on years of research, on the disciplined study of history and culture. As a researcher, the question of whether Islam is "in crisis" is a point of investigation for me, not an assumed fact as it is in the polemics of native informers. (21)

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[49] These include practices such as female genital multination, which are by no means Islamic in any way, though they happen to be practiced in parts of the world with Muslim-majority populations but are in fact cultural practices that have been framed as religions ones. Laila Lalami tackles the way Hirsi Ali abuses this myth in order to cast Islam as misogynist: "According to the United Nations Population Fund, FGM is practiced in sub-Saharan Africa by Animists, Christians and Muslims alike, as well as by Ethiopian Jews, sometimes in collusion with individual representatives of the faiths. For instance, the US State Department report on FGM reveals that some Coptic Christian priests "refuse to baptize girls who have not undergone one of the procedures." And yet Hirsi Ali does not blame Animism, Christianity or Judaism for FGM, or accuse these belief systems of spreading it. With Islam, however, such accusations are acceptable."

Perhaps the most important point (relative to this discussion) that Grewal makes is that of the burden of explanation placed upon her as a researcher who identifies as Muslim. The native informants, though not academic in the least, have had a noticeable effect on anyone who works on representations of Islam, whether academic, literary, or otherwise. It is therefore important to consider the consequences of their ideas when discussing the Muslim American literary landscape.

Akhtar is neither a native informant nor an apologist. I argue that his strategy is to resist both those roles, which are attuned to a humanity of Muslims that is contingent on Western standards. But his resistance is illegible to people who have labeled him as an Islamophobe. And indeed his esteem as a Pulitzer-winning writer merits special consideration quite unlike the attention received by the likes of Manji and Hirsi Ali, whose writings are riddled with misconception and clumsy errors.[50] Nevertheless, the work of these authors, who purport to be "authentically" Muslim, "lend a voice of credibility to some of the worst kinds of prejudices and stereotypes" about Islam (Mahmood 2009, 197). This fuels the desire to have more testimonial-type narratives by Muslim writers, and so any author who identifies as a Muslim American writer would feel the pressure to provide those types of narratives. Native testimonials pose a danger in their power to set expectations for Muslim American writers. In turn, these expectations shape the production of Muslim American writing in ways that limit the freedom of representation. A description of domestic violence, as we will see with Akhtar, will likely be seen through the lens of a misogyny that is mistakenly argued by native informants to

[50] See, for instance, Laila Lalami's account of Hirsi Ali and Manji in *The Nation*, where she traces the grievous errors, misconceptions, and exaggerations that characterize their writings.

be a "Muslim" problem.[51] The thirst for knowledge about Islam, fueled by fear and prejudice in the post-9/11 age, has a deleterious effect on the freedom of Muslim American representation.

Ayad Akhtar and the Artist's Burden

Where exactly does Ayad Akhtar fit into the Muslim American literary landscape? Akhtar (born 1970) is a Muslim American writer from Wisconsin. He is best known for winning the 2013 Pulitzer Prize for the play *Disgraced*. All of his works to date, which include four plays, a novel, and a film, reckon with perceptions about Islam in the United States.[52] I focus on Akhtar's works primarily in order to interrogate the notion of Muslim American positionality. Akhtar is one of the most prominent Muslim American literary voices of the post-9/11 moment: this is demonstrated by the fact that *Disgraced* was awarded both the 2013 Pulitzer and the distinction of being the most produced play in American theatre during the 2015-2016 season. That he has thus been institutionally vetted makes him a natural successor to the previous chapter's study of museological discourses, though from the angle of self-representation. While the museums discussed previously present Islamic art from an institutional and outsider's perspective, Akhtar explores Islamic culture from the perspective of a self-identified secular Muslim American. Therefore, Akhtar's oeuvre illustrates a potent awareness of

[51] Deepa Kumar discusses the myth of Islam as a "uniquely sexist religion" in *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire* (44).
[52] All but one play: *Junk*, the playwright's latest, premiered at the La Jolla Playhouse in San Diego in July 2016. The play revolves around finance and Wall Street.

the intricacies of American representations of Islam, since he is both subject to those representations and arguably responsible for them.

At the same time, Akhtar embodies a set of contradictions particular to his status as a Muslim American writer: he is a secular Muslim American writer who is thought to be Islamophobic for his portrayals of Muslims on the stage. Akhtar's critics, notably from the Muslim American community, have accused him of representing Muslim American culture in a way that confirms many Islamophobic stereotypes, particularly in his presentation of a violent, misogynist Muslim protagonist in *Disgraced*. Akhtar has noted in different interviews the negative reactions that he has received from the Muslim community about *Disgraced.*[53] Several testimonials by Muslim Americans describe the discomfort of watching *Disgraced*—both because of the actions of the violent Muslim American on the stage and due to being surrounded by a predominantly white audience.[54] The discomfort stems from a combination of two factors: first, the audience members feel uncomfortable, if not betrayed, when they witness the presentation of problematic Muslim characters by a Muslim American playwright. Second, they feel uncomfortable by members in the audience who would feel validated by the presence of problematic

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[53] In one interview with *The Economist* (2015), he says, ". . .the reaction in the Muslim community has hurt my enthusiasm. It's like I'm writing for my people and they don't want to pay any attention."

[54] Jamil Khoury discussed his and his partner's experience at a performance of Disgraced where they felt the hostility of their white audience members. Another perspective by Ashraf Hasham in the *Seattle Globalist* of his own experience: "All of the brown people at the show that I attended were visibly nervous afterward, retrieving their proverbial American flag pins they attached their lapels after 9/11, to show their unbridled commitment to this country, to which they have given so much, and sacrificed for. Now, distracted by this eye-rolling position of condemnation of people who look like them — a role they have to play too much in this day and age — they feel betrayed by the playwright, someone of their own community."

Muslim characters on the stage.[55] So the issues with Akhtar's plays entail both a discomfort with the representations on the stage and with potentially hostile audience members.[56]

One of the reasons for these reactions is rooted in the possibility that Akhtar's critics, in an attempt to identify with the playwright, may judge him first as a Muslim and secondly as an artist. This chapter evaluates the fairness of that judgement: while it is unfair to the artist to place his identity before his profession, what are the consequences of rebelling against this positionality, particularly when there are few like him in the profession? Writers of color recognizes this burden of the few. One such writer, Rumaan Alam (2017), writes "Any writer with skin like mine is aware of the paucity of chairs at that table. Writers like us are meant to shoulder the responsibility of representation, and do it well, and hope one of those chairs opens up." So when is it fair to subject the artist to that kind of scrutiny and consequently limit his or her expression to such a narrow scope? That is, should one subject the most prominent Muslim American voice in theatre

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[55] This was certainly the case for playwright Jamil Khoury and his partner, as he describes in his review of the play, "Parsing Disgraced" (2015). Khoury writes, "We attended a Saturday matinee. If I remember correctly, it was a full house. After the performance, my husband Malik, who was the only visibly brown person in an otherwise all-white audience, received suspicious, fearful, and contemptuous looks from various white patrons. The antagonistic and not so subtle nature of their stares caused us to quickly exit the theatre and jettison plans to greet colleagues in the cast."

[56] Akhtar himself acknowledges potential divisions in his audiences. When asked whether his work spoke more to "mainstream American audiences" or the Muslim Americans, Akhtar replied, "Actually, the reaction in the Muslim community has hurt my enthusiasm. It's like I'm writing for my people and they don't want to pay any attention. And so that's the real story, in a way, of my work: the way it's caught between two audiences. And how the tension in the way in which all of the works I'm involved in are servicing two audiences that are often not overlapping. And you know I think that's something that over time, as this community becomes more and more polyglot and more deeply rooted in Western experience, that audience will build. And then the critics of my work will be the young artists who feel I got it wrong. And they will start to respond in new ways and then we'll begin to have a rich process of dialogue. But right now that's not what's happening."

to explaining, in some totalizing fashion, what it means to be Muslim, or indeed to representing Muslim communities only positively? Akhtar is in an impossibly difficult position—a rich and complicated position that will be unpacked throughout the course of this chapter.

When Muslim artists are expected to represent Islam in a positive light after 9/11, it should come as no surprise when, frustrated by these limitations and expectations, they rebel by goading audiences with characters that deliberately play into bigoted caricatures of Muslim characters. Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) is infamous for a scene that depicts the main character smiling when he sees the Twin Towers falling on television on 9/11. Ali Eteraz's *Native Believer* (2016) begins with a fairly unassuming and secular protagonist until his sudden unemployment sets him on a path that radically transforms him into a violent misogynist. And the writer at the core of this chapter, Ayad Akhtar, has presented a protagonist who viciously beats his wife near the end of the play. He has publicly voiced his refusal to acts as a spokesperson for Muslims in the U.S.[57] Instead, he claims that his "aesthetic mandate is to absorb the audience and bring them along a process that's in pursuit of truth. I've been writing stories that feel real and compelling to me, and aren't about correcting or shifting ideas about Islam." Akhtar's position is valid and commendable. But does the reality of his situation as a Muslim American artist allow for such a degree of freedom of expression in

[57] According to a *Seattle Times* interview (Jan 13 2016), "Akhtar stressed repeatedly that he has no intention of being a spokesperson or advocate, or making Amir [the protagonist of *Disgraced*] one, for Muslims in America. . . . My aesthetic mandate is to absorb the audience and bring them along a process that's in pursuit of truth. I've been writing stories that feel real and compelling to me, and aren't about correcting or shifting ideas about Islam."

art, especially at a time when Muslim identity is increasingly criminalized in the United States?[58]

James Baldwin's rumination on the artist's responsibility serves as a useful measure for how to evaluate Akhtar. In his essay, "The Creative Process," Baldwin (1985) puts the artist at war with his expected responsibility to society. The artist, Baldwin claims, is there to unsettle the truth, which, "in spite of appearances and all our hopes, is that everything is always changing and the measure for our maturity as nations and as men is how prepared we are to meet these changes" (317). The context in which Akhtar's plays are being watched—the post-9/11 context, the Islamophobic Trump administration—assumes that Muslims are inherently violent misogynists. Predictably, the Muslim American's responsibility (to society and to his or her community) would be to counter that assumption. Taking Baldwin to heart, however, makes it clear that it is unfair to lay the burden on an artist rather than on society itself to change those perceptions. According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1992), Baldwin preferred to "bear witness" rather than to be a spokesperson, implying that it is not the artist's job to correct societal judgements. Akhtar seems to embody this vision with his rejection of the spokesperson's role in his art. In an interview with Gabriel Greene, the director of new play development at the La Jolla Playhouse (where *The Who and the What* premiered in 2014), Akhtar clarifies his artistic mission:

[58] Consider the fact that an Oklahoma lawmaker recently (March 2017) asked Muslim students who wished to visit him at his office if they beat their wives in order to determine whether they were fit to meet their state representative. In the context of such a reality, where does the representation of Muslims as violent misogynists fit into the creative process for these artists?

> I am trying to write to the universal. That is what I'm trying to do, period. Stories that say "Muslim Americans and Muslims are people too" can't necessarily reach everybody in the audience where they live and breathe. It can illuminate things for them, but it can't necessarily force them to ask the deepest questions of their own lives. What I hope I'm discovering is that by writing from the particular that I know—that I find fascinating and that I have a lot of love for and a whole lot of problems with—I can perhaps open onto the universal. Which is something that I couldn't do before, when I was trying to write in some universal way. (Akhtar 2014, 101)

Akhtar's comments illustrate the tensions between his aims and the reception his plays have received. Whereas Akhtar claims to write from his personal experience in an attempt to have a wide reach, he is recognized—both by the institutional forces and the Muslim American community—as a de facto representative for Muslim American culture. Rumaan Alam, the author of *Rich and Petty* (2016), describes the forces at work in universalizing the author: "While not all writing aims for universality, all of publishing does. Publishing is a business; businesses aim to make money; creating products with universal appeal facilitates just that. Publishers can't be blamed for searching out stories they feel possess such appeal." While Akhtar's representations are not without their problems, the bigger issue that merits a close examination and an even stronger critique is the set of conditions that that has enabled these expectations to made about Akhtar and other Muslim American artists.

What is the role of Muslim American artists in conjunction with other forms of representations of Islam? The media and the government comprise the two main sources of information, and as Evelyn Alsultany (2012) points out, both entities work in tandem to create a "hegemonic field of meaning" (7) whereby they inform each other. The previous chapter illustrates how this works with Jessica Winegar's argument: that

museum discourses on Islam are shaped by and correspond to War on Terror discourses. So where does the individual artist fit in vis-à-vis media, government, and institutional forces, particularly with the artist providing self-representation? If Alsultany claims that media representations are informed by government activities and discourses, I ask: how are Muslim American writers informed by existing discourses about their communities, political, cultural or otherwise? And how do Muslim American writers position themselves relative to these representations? More specifically with regard to Akhtar, how does his resistance to the expectations placed upon Muslim American storytellers, which includes the humanizing framework, shape discourses on Islam in the U.S.? These questions cannot be answered with certainty; they serve only as a guide to examining the pressures placed on artists such as Akhtar. But understanding and sympathizing with Akhtar's positionality does not absolve him of the troubling undercurrents in his work; these are worth interrogating closely to determine what they achieve. In the following section I illustrate three major ways in that highlight Akhtar's tactics to resist the humanizing framework: these include his representations of rage, violence and misogyny; his depiction of ideology; and his representations of domestic life. Incidentally, these themes are commonly used by native informants to accuse Islam and Muslims of being dysfunctional. I examine Akhtar's strategies vis-à-vis these themes to illustrate his resistance to the humanizing framework.

Rage, violence, and misogyny

Disgraced is without question the best known play written by a Muslim American writer to date, and Akhtar himself has been lauded as one of the most important Muslim

American voices in the United States today, if the Pulitzer and the popularity of *Disgraced* serve any indication of his prominence. And yet, critics have accused this play of confirming drastic Islamophobic stereotypes (particularly in the depiction of violence), which begs precisely the question that theater activist Jamil Khoury asks in his 2015 review of the play: "Why is America celebrating a play that triggers racist paranoia and incites racial profiling within the hallowed halls of our theaters?"[59] To follow that question with my own: why is the author of supposedly Islamophobic material—here in the form of rage, violence, and misogyny—being hailed as the foremost Muslim voice today?

The play is set in 2011-2012 and features an almost purposefully diverse cast, which makes them seem like caricatures instead of characters. The protagonist, Amir, is a lawyer and self-declared ex-Muslim. He is married to Emily, a white painter who pays homage to Islamic art motifs in her works. The tensions between them culminate in a dinner party that involves another couple: Jory, an African American colleague of Amir's, and her husband Isaac, a Jewish art collector who invites Emily to be part of his art show, and with whom he has an affair between the second and third scenes of the play. A fifth character not present at the dinner party, Abe, is a Pakistani-born nephew of Amir's who asks his uncle to represent an imam who has been put on trial for soliciting funds for his mosque and is thus accused of fomenting radicalism. Amir refuses to represent the imam but agrees to go to the hearing, and is subsequently described in *The*

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[59] Khoury's question is in reference to the incident in which his "visibly brown" husband, Malik, "received suspicious, fearful, and contemptuous looks from various white patrons" in the predominantly white audience at a performance of *Disgraced*.

New York Times as being part of the imam's legal team, an inaccuracy that arouses the suspicion of Amir's colleagues. Both Amir and Abe have changed their names to sound less Muslim: Amir Abdullah becomes Amir Kapoor (switching from a Muslim to a Punjabi last name), and his nephew Hussein changes his to Abe Jensen. Both characters, in their own way, have obscured or reneged parts of their Muslim identity in order to get by in a post-9/11 world.

The play opens with Emily painting a portrait of Amir as Velázquez's *Portrait of Juan de Pareja*. Her portrait is titled *Study After Velázquez's Moor* and features Amir in his black suit and expensive Charvet shirt ("which is so magnificently rendered") (46). The power balance entailed in this exercise is noted by Amir: "I think it's a little weird. That you want to paint me after seeing a painting of a slave." (6). In the meantime, they are discussing an incident from the previous night where a waiter purportedly looked at Amir in a bigoted manner. According to Emily, the waiter was "Not seeing you. Not seeing who you really are. Not until you started to deal with him. And the deftness with which you did that. You made him see that gap. Between what he was assuming about you and what you really are" (7). Emily links the previous night's incident to Velázquez's painting: "And how people must have reacted when they first saw it. They think they're looking at a picture of a Moor. . . . But whose portrait—it turns out—has more nuance and complexity than his renditions of kings and queens" (7).
By connecting Velázquez's portrait of the Moor and Amir's encounter with the waiter—both involving the act of making someone see beyond another's skin—the act of humanization gets introduced within the first few minutes of the play. However, the burden of humanizing rests primarily in Emily's hands, which is indicative of the purpose

she serves. Throughout the entire play, Emily attempts to bring positive representations of Muslims and Islam into the conversation: “The Muslims gave us Aristotle” (30) and “There’s so much beauty and wisdom in the Islamic tradition. Look at Ibn Arabi, Mulla Sadra” (19) are among the statements that she makes to illustrate the beauty of Islam. As a white artist who weaves Islamic art motifs into her work, Emily’s benevolent attempts at including and humanizing Islam into the conversations of the play echo the discourses of the museum initiatives discussed in the previous chapter. She points to instances of past Islamic glory as a way to diffuse tensions about discussions of Islam today—especially as a counter to Amir’s provocative statements about Islam. Emily is the white, rationalizing foil to the Amir’s rage.

If Emily performs a similar role to the museum initiatives—the institutional, secular, elite attempts to highlight the past glory of Islam—Amir represents the Muslim Other whose irrational passions must be mitigated. Amir is portrayed as temperamental, pugnacious, and selfish: he refuses to help the imam who is on trial because, according to Emily, Amir doesn't “think he’s human” (20). He pronounces blanket statements about Muslims: that they are incapable of rationality (“Muslims don’t *think* about it. They submit” (54)) and incapable of secularism (55, 62). He talks about a monolithic “Muslim psyche” in a way that is reminiscent of Muslim native informants like Irshad Manji.[60] And, in one of the most shocking statements in the play, Amir confirms that he felt pride on 9/11 because “we were finally winning.” When Jory asks what he means by “we,” he

[60] According to Zareena Grewal (2013), Manji “diagnosis the ‘Muslim mind’ as pathological (brutally violent, barbaric, oppressive, misogynistic, inherently intolerant and racist), and she traces these pathologies back to the original Arab ‘desert-mindset’ of the seventh century” (17). Grewal’s characterization of Manji matches Amir’s description of Muslims very closely.

responds, “Yeah . . . I guess I forgot . . . which *we* I was.” Jory counters by reminding him that he's an American, to which he retorts, “It's tribal, Jor. It is in the bones. You have no idea how I was brought up. You have to work *real* hard to root that shit out” (63). This particular outburst seriously challenges Amir’s self-presentation as an ex-Muslim American; in this moment, the tensions between his identities cause him to blurt out ugly statements that confirm an Islamophobe’s worst fears about Muslim Americans—that they are all part of sleeper cells and are waiting to unveil their true identities as terrorists. His comments also highlight the impossibility of a Muslim American to be precisely that—Muslim American, echoing the kinds of Islamophobic narratives that question the allegiance of Muslim Americans to their country.

Amir’s characterization of Muslims would not be remiss coming out of the mouths of the most severely Islamophobic, fear mongering Americans. To have these characterizations come from Amir, whose presence as a violent ex-Muslim on the stage is already uncomfortable, is both shocking and deeply troubling. Furthermore, though he identifies as ex-Muslim, he would not be perceived as such. In an interview with Akhtar, the playwright notes, “Amir wouldn’t see himself as a Muslim, and unfortunately in a post-9/11 world, that’s not a nuance that exists. You can’t say, ‘I was brought up Muslim, but I’m not Muslim.’” (Musiker 2015). Ex-Muslims are still going to be perceived as Muslims; Amir himself admits to being unable to “root out” his Muslim upbringing, which suggests that a general public will be less likely to perceive him as ex-Muslim. At the end of the explosive dinner conversation in which Amir has admitted to feeling pride on 9/11, he spits on Isaac, who responds “There's a reason they call you people animals” (73). And finally, in the terrible and infamous scene towards the end of the play, he

assaults Emily in a vicious barrage of blows. Per the stage directions, "Uncontrolled violence as brutal as it needs to be in order to convey the discharge of a lifetime of discreetly building resentment" (75).

What could Akhtar possibly be doing with the representation of a Muslim character who confirms every possible Islamophobic trope with the exhibition of such relentless rage, violence, and misogyny? In an interview with Madani Younis, artistic theatre of London's Bush Theatre, Akhtar acknowledges that the violence is "obviously playing into certain Islamophobic tropes. I want the audience to be so fully humanly identified with a protagonist who acts out in an understandable but tragically horrifying way" (92). But it is unclear if Akhtar succeeds in generating this "humanly" identification between his audience and Amir. It is difficult to envision Amir as a sympathetic character. Even more troubling is the idea that anyone identifying with Amir will be audience members whose ideas are validated in Amir's Islamophobic rhetoric and actions.[61] More problematically, Akhtar's assertion that Amir has acted out in an "understandable but tragically horrifying way" seems to suggest that domestic violence is understandable, an implication that normalizes violence (and especially violence against women in Muslim communities), thus confirming fear-mongering stereotypes about Muslims being violent misogynists. Akhtar's rejection of the humanizing mission seems to sway him in the opposite direction; sometimes, it seems that Akhtar wants to do the

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[61] My own experience of seeing the play in Los Angeles was free of all these anxieties. I was happy—and quite surprised—to find that during audience talkbacks at a performance in June 2016, members of the audience seemed to genuinely connect with the characters; they perceived Amir as someone who struggled to find his place in the world as the son of immigrants.

opposite and demonize Muslims by presenting these deeply problematic Muslim caricatures.

These misogynist caricatures are not limited to *Disgraced*; they are present throughout his works. In *The Who and the What* (which I will introduce in a later section), there is no shortage of the "bad Muslim" archetype, particularly in the misogynist statements that the patriarch Afzal makes about his daughter. In a conversation about his daughter's choice to not procreate, Afzal offers the following advice to his son-in-law: "Just be a man. Put it in her. Get her pregnant. Women don't always know what they want. . . . And she won't be happy until you break her, son." (57). Afzal's troubling comments echo Islamophobic assumptions about Muslims as violent misogynists. Thus far, misogyny and violence go hand in hand in both of Akhtar's plays. Afzal is the most archetypically "bad" Muslim character in a play of ideologically diverse characters—but what about the other characters in the play? Their experiences offer a range of ideas on what it means to be Muslim, which make it more difficult for a character like Afzal to stand out, as Amir does in *Disgraced*. But on the other hand, one could also argue that Amir receives undue attention as a character—what about Emily's motivations, or Jory's, or Isaac's, or the ensemble's as a whole? Is it Islamophobic to focus too much on Amir? The diversity of experiences in *The Who and the What* makes the question of why *Disgraced* is the most recognized of Akhtar's play even more pressing. Granted, *The Who and the What* arrived on the stage two years after *Disgraced*, but nevertheless the question of why *Disgraced* in particular, with its one and deeply problematic Muslim character, is the play to win the Pulitzer for its work on representations of Islam over Akhtar's other works speaks volumes. *The Who and the*

What offers a subtler understanding of the tensions and workings of a Muslim American life but has yet to receive much recognition for its work.

By presenting such a problematic character in Amir, Akhtar seems to be indulging in goading attempts that are not uncommon in the Muslim American literary canon, as I mentioned previously. These representations, shocking as they are, seem to challenge the perceived burden of representation that Muslim American artists face in the post-9/11 era. Taken in this light, Akhtar's choices present a fascinating but problematic response to this burden. Indeed, why should one expect representations of only "good" Muslim characters? If a so-called good Muslim is secular, rational—in other words, modeled after the Enlightenment notion of an individual—a rejection of this representational burden might constitute a courageous attempt to reframe the notion of the human as separate from Enlightenment standards. If the expectation upon Muslim American writers is to present "good" Muslims in the form of secular, enlightened, and rational characters, then Akhtar's rejection of that expectation in the form of his deeply troubling characters can be viewed as an admirable refusal to conform to these unfair and limited expectations. His rejection can also be viewed as an attempt to constitute his own standards of humanity. Therefore, one can easily suggest that Akhtar's strategies constitute an attempt to reject the humanizing framework in his representation of troubling Muslim characters.

The question of whether the play is Islamophobic or not remains to be answered. On the one hand, Arlene Martínez-Vázquez (2016) suggests that, rather than being Islamophobic, the play is better described as being about internalized oppression. Indeed, Amir's self-hatred absolutely channels the sense of inferiority epitomized in writings by and about Black men, including Malcolm X and Frantz Fanon. This reading of the play is

certainly worth analyzing to see how the post-9/11 context compares to the postcolonial context on the subject of internalized oppression. But isn't this depiction also Islamophobic, especially in the context of the self-hating Muslim man who takes his rage out on white women? It is likely not possible to answer the question of whether the play is Islamophobic or not. Perhaps our energies are better spent wondering why this question is so significant. This is due to the fact that a play with potentially Islamophobic characterizations is being presented to an Islamophobic audience, which lends itself to more immediate audience reactions than a television show might. Martínez-Vázquez also notes that it is impossible to ignore the effect of the play on the audience: "no analysis of any theatre-text or production is complete without accounting for the audience's reaction. After all, theatre is not complete until that exchange between artists and audience takes place." This is especially resonant in the midst of this country's current climate of Islamophobia, and a particularly telling incident experienced by Jamil Khoury (2015) illustrates the troubling impact that an audience's reaction can have. At Khoury and his partner's ("who was the only visibly brown person," like Amir, "in an otherwise all-white audience") first viewing of *Disgraced* in 2012, Khoury notes that his husband, Malik, was subject to hostile glares from the white patrons in attendance. Khoury writes,

> Needless to say, I was livid. The play had created a climate of racist hostility towards a South Asian male audience member. The intrusive and disdainful stares of the ostensibly "liberal" white racists in attendance that afternoon hadn't materialized before at ATC [American Theater Company], at least not for us. Was this arraigning gaze propelled by what unfolded on stage? It's hard to conclude otherwise. Were people projecting onto Malik the same racialized fears affirmed by the play's protagonist, Amir Kapoor (the "apostate" Muslim with the Hindu name)? I'm inclined to think so.

Who bears responsibility for the way Malik was treated after the performance? The play, the playwright, or the audience members? Or is it, in fact, the institutional vetting of a play that invokes such Islamophobic tendencies? While an artist should certainly not bear the burden of dispelling Islamophobic myths about his or her community, the consequences of such representations cannot be denied or ignored, which is part of what makes Akhtar's works worth examining and arguing about. Shifting the focus from Akhtar to the Pulitzer Foundation, one might ask: what does the foundation gain from supporting an artist like Akhtar? Evelyn Alsultany's assessments might provide some answers. I have previously discussed her concept of "complex positive representations," which accounts for the unexpected rise of positive depictions of Arabs and Muslims in American media in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 (Alsultany 2012, 14). Akhtar's plays do not include such positive depictions of Muslim characters, but the Pulitzer's support of a Muslim American artist might count for Alsultany's claim. In a similar vein to the inclusion of Islamic art at American art institutions, the Pulitzer's vetting might suggest that the Foundation is a benevolent and enlightened supporter of Muslim American artistry, even with—and perhaps especially because of—*Disgraced*'s problematic depictions. In attempting to bring Muslim American voices to prominence, the Pulitzer Foundation has benevolently made a point to support Muslim American artistry and, as a result, has sanctioned troubling representations of Muslim Americans.

I do not believe that *Disgraced*—and consequently Akhtar himself—should readily be cast as an Islamophobic play. Instead, I take issue, as Jamil Khoury has, with the institutional vetting of a play that confirms some Islamophobic stereotypes. Why is *Disgraced* the play to win the Pulitzer and not, say, *The Invisible Hand,* which is

Akhtar's most subtle play: it puts money at the center of human experience by bringing together terrorism and the free market, thus interrogating perceived notions of fundamentalism. *The Invisible Hand* equates ideologies of terrorism and capitalism, which makes it very difficult for audiences to attempt to distinguish between ideologies that are attributed to Islam versus the United States, which Amir's character attempts to do throughout *Disgraced.* The illustration of ideological contrasts (or in *The Invisible Hand*'s case, similarities) is the second major strategy that I attribute to Akhtar's method of representing Islam on the stage in an effort to resist the humanizing framework.

Ideological divides

The Invisible Hand revolves around an American banker, Nick Bright, who is held hostage in a cell in Pakistan. His captors include Dar, an orderly who routinely clips Nick's fingernails, Bashir, a British-born terrorist responsible for Nick's kidnapping (26), and Imam Saleem, an older Pakistani former journalist who was radicalized by widespread corruption in his home country, and thus driven to fundamentalist violence (27). In order to pay his own ransom, Nick helps his captors play the stock market and generate substantial funds, which primarily arise from the death of a Pakistani Minister. Capital is at the heart of this play in its ability to unite religious and capitalist extremism.[62] In the preface to the play, Akhtar writes, "An old American obsession was finding new and vibrant life, finding a figure and form that would make money—its exigencies, its amorality, its language, its ethos—central not only to the

[62] In an interview with the *Seattle Times,* Akhtar observes, "In a way our faith in free-market capitalism rivals the kind of fundamentalism we see elsewhere" (Berson 2014)

larger cultural conversation but to our experience of the human" (xiv). *The Invisible Hand*, unlike Akhtar's other works, is not concerned with interrogating the place of Islam in American society; instead, it peers deep into the heart of American society to interrogate its own evils.

The greatest irony of the play is that it humanizes the terrorists by portraying them as being just as devoted to capitalism as the American bankers. Amitava Kumar's review of the play suggests that for this reason, *The Invisible Hand* will never be as celebrated as *Disgraced*, as it "trades on the avarice and savagery of the jihadists, but it leaves us in no doubt about the complicity of market capitalism" (Kumar 2014). It is a savvy tactic on Akhtar's part to put greed at the center of ideology. Whereas the museum initiatives discussed in the previous chapter and *Disgraced's* Emily both use art to humanize Islam, Akhtar's use of money as a humanizing force suggests a much bleaker theme at the heart of this play; it establishes a standard for humanity that is rooted in evil and corruption rather than goodness, which contrasts starkly with statements that suggest that Muslims are "also human" in their ability to produce art. In one scene, a video pleading for Nick's release by his wife is heard on the stage. She says, "Please let my husband go. I've learned that Islam is about mercy and forgiveness—" and Bashir interrupts to say, "Then she goes on and on about Islam, like she's got a fucking clue" (17). Unlike *Disgraced* and *The Who and the What*, this play lacks a white character on the stage who is allowed to humanize Islam to Muslims of color; the voice of Nick's wife is abruptly prevented from taking on that role. But then again, this play is less about portraying Muslim characters than it is about exploring the evil at the root of ideologies, which is what makes it the most intriguing—and, perhaps, the least problematic—of all of

Akhtar's works. *The Invisible Hand* lacks an ideological divide between Muslims and non-Muslim Americans, and for that reason it is less marketable—and more frightening—than works that do cater to that divide.

My own experience with *Disgraced* did not in fact present any of the problems that I had anticipated, particularly in the way the audience would receive Amir's troubling ideologies during a time of heightened Islamophobia nationwide. Since *Disgraced* was in its most produced season at the time of writing this chapter, I had the opportunity to see a production of the play in Los Angeles in June 2016. I attended the play one day after the massacre of 49 people at a queer night club in Orlando by an American of Afghan descent, and so I assumed the audience's reactions would be attuned to the previous night's murders. That was indeed the case, but not in the way that I had expected. While most of the audience members were indeed white and older, those who voiced their opinions during the talkback at the end of the show demonstrated genuine engagement with the play. There was not a single Islamophobic comment from the crowd (granted, this was in Los Angeles, so perhaps surprise was not merited). Some people admitted that they identified with Amir: that his struggle to find his place in the world, and the tensions of negotiating between "old" and "new" world identities spoke to them. Far from being turned off by Amir's embodiment of ideological tension, the audiences were more attuned to his identity as the son of immigrants.

The most striking moment of the talkbacks arose with an observation offered by one audience member who pointed to a scene in the play where the characters identified what the next terrorist attack in the U.S. would look like. Amir claims, "The next terrorist track is probably gonna come from some guy who more or less looks like me" while

Emily retorts, "I totally disagree. The next attack is coming from some white guy who's got a gun he shouldn't have. . ." Both comments proved to be true in the Orlando attacks. The night before, a "guy who more or less looks like" Amir (he was of Afghan descent) attacked the nightclub with a gun "he shouldn't have" (an assault rifle). The comment touched a nerve as it identified the two polarizing factions that tried to make sense of the attack: an act of terrorism by a Muslim (even though the man was born and raised in the U.S.) versus an act of mass gun violence so unique to American society. Although both kinds of killings— religiously-motivated and bigoted mass gun violence—constitute acts of terrorism, mass shootings are never framed as acts of terrorism in the mass media when they are committed by white shooters. Indeed, even when mass shootings are committed with ideological motivations (for instance, Dylann Roof and the Charleston church shooting is one of countless other examples), the killers are framed as mentally disturbed lone wolves rather than terrorists. These media framings place Muslims in unique positions—Islam is the only force that carries an ideological bent. Plays like *Disgraced*, with their representations of ideological tensions, are therefore risky when performed in an Islamophobic world, and while my own experience in Los Angeles was fortunately unremarkable, it is apparent that we do not yet live in a world that allow playwrights like Akhtar to be read as neutrally as other writers.

Seeing the performance of *Disgraced* altered my perspective on the play. When I first read the text, I could easily identify what lines made Akhtar come off as Islamophobic; those moments jumped out of the page to me. Seeing the characters on the stage, however, complicated the presentations for me. It goes without saying that Amir's struggles were rendered more visible when presented by a person on the stage rather than

by lines on a page. Different moments jumped out at me during the performance than they did during my readings of the play. In particular, the scene at the end when a chastened Amir warns his nephew Abe, who has been stopped by the FBI: "When you step out of your parents' house, you need to understand that it's not a neutral world out there. Not right now. Not for you. You have to be mindful about sending a different message." Amir's line seemed like it could have been directed at Akhtar himself: the impossibility of having a neutral space, the necessity of constantly being mindful. Hearing that line made me much more sympathetic to the playwright's endeavors, and to the burdens and limitations he faces as a Muslim American writer.

Family life

The Who and the What (2014) presents a more complicated position regarding the depiction of ideological divides between Muslims and non-Muslim Americans by presenting these divides in one family. On the one hand, every character in the play is Muslim. On the other hand, the tensions between the immigrant father, his American-born daughters, and a white convert son-in-law illustrate the tensions between immigrant, Americanized, and domestic Islam. The issues that come up are less ideological and more pertinent to issues of domestic life, which in turn makes it less problematic and therefore less likely that Akhtar will be looked to as a spokesperson for Islam.

The Who and the What premiered at the La Jolla Playhouse in San Diego in 2014: I was fortunate to attend one of the shows and encounter the play first as a performance and later as a text, which is the opposite of my experience with *Disgraced*. The play revolves around a Pakistani Muslim American family in Atlanta, consisting of a widowed

father, Afzal, and his two daughters. The protagonist, Zarina, is writing a book that attempts to humanize the Prophet Muhammad. She does so by presenting him as a man “at war with his own desire” whose “contradictions only make him more human, which only make him more extraordinary” (36). This project of humanization, which entails understanding internal struggle to make someone seem more human, is central to each of the characters. While the universality of this internal strife allows audiences to connect with the characters, the tensions between Muslim and American identities are sometimes severe enough to be alienating, as we saw with Amir in *Disgraced* and as I have described with Afzal’s misogyny in this play.

The four-person cast includes Zarina and her sister Mahwish, their immigrant father Afzal, and Zarina’s suitor (and then husband), Eli, a white convert.
Unlike *Disgraced*, *The Who and the What* features an all-Muslim cast of characters. The protagonist, Zarina, is in her thirties and her status as a single woman means, to her Pakistani family, that her younger sister cannot get married until Zarina does (Akhtar notes that his play is loosely based on *The Taming of the Shrew*). At the start of the play, Zarina has broken off an engagement with Ryan, a white man, because her father does not approve of Zarina marrying a non-Muslim. Zarina’s decision is based on a story that her father had told her about the Prophet Muhammad’s daughter, who “gave up the man she loved because he wouldn’t become a Muslim (78). This story, in fact, was a distortion of the truth: her father had misinterpreted the story of the prophet, which provides the impetus for Zarina to write her own narrative about the prophet Muhammad. Her mandate is to provide some kind of truth; her book, she says, is about how “what we think we know about [the Prophet and the Quran] is not real” (77). The book also serves

to help her resist the limitations against Muslim self-expression; she says, “We can’t keep not saying things because we’re afraid of what somebody’s going to do,” (78). Both of these prerogatives are poignantly attuned to Akhtar’s own statements about his own mission. Akhtar has thus provided a protagonist who echoes the burdens faced by Muslim American writers.

In the early stages of her writing, Zarina routinely describes the topic of her book as one of “gender politics,” a theme that underlines the dynamics of the family. Zarina’s sister, who cannot marry her longtime boyfriend until Zarina herself marries, has resorted to engaging in anal sex with him in order to technically remain a virgin until their wedding and to ensure that he does not seek sexual release outside of their relationship (“He’s a man,” Mahwish fears, “If I don’t do something with him, he’ll find somebody else to do it with…” (8)). Their father, meanwhile, continues to mourn the death of their mother, and so has developed a highly possessive complex, manifest in his decision to sign up his daughter for online dating profiles without her consent. Afzal’s desire to be the glue that his wife was to the family is acute (“When that cancer had finally eaten your mother alive, behti, when she was dying. . . I promised her. She was the center. I promised I would be the center to hold the family together,” (80)). Everyone in the family has some kind of issue with sex or gender, which is a common trope in Islamophobic discourse.[63] But is it not also common in every family? There are fewer Islamophobic bones to pick with this play than with *Disgraced*. I suggest that Akhtar’s strategies here

[63] See, for instance, the highly problematic and profoundly orientalist discussion of the topic in Kamel Daoud’s *New York Times* Op-Ed (“The Sexual Misery of the Arab World”) and the resulting counter-responses by Samar Kaukab (“Kamel Daoud and the Sexual Misery of the Arab World: Y’all Haters Corny with that Orientalist Mess”) and a collective letter on Jadaliyya that comprises a response from nineteen scholars (“The Fantasies of Kamel Daoud”).

are more attuned to representing the kinds of Muslim American family life that he is familiar with than with representing provocative characters that land him accusations of Islamophobia. Akhtar's representation of family life illustrates the breadth of his work in tackling representations of Muslims—they run the gamut from problematic to mundane. A play like the *Who and the What* and his novel, *American Dervish*, highlight how little credit Akhtar gets about his range and how much attention he gets as the writer of the supposedly Islamophobic *Disgraced.*

American Dervish (2012*)*, Akhtar's only novel to date, is a family drama that wrestles with the place of Islam in a Midwestern Muslim American family. It is by far the most nuanced representation of Muslim family life among Akhtar's works, probably because the form of the novel allows for that more than a play would. The Pakistani American protagonist is a young boy of about 12, Hayat Shah, who aspires to be a *Hafiz* (one who memorizes the Quran in its entirety), a goal that is inspired by a new arrival to his household: Mina, a recently divorced mother of a very young son, Imran, who has left her abusive marriage in Pakistan to start a new life in Wisconsin with her childhood friend, Hayat's mother, Muneer. Muneer is married to Naveed, a disaffected, philandering alcoholic doctor. Naveed's best friend and medical partner, Nathan, courts Mina, and the two plan on marrying, which drives Nathan to convert from Judaism to Islam, a prospect that greatly troubles Hayat, who is quite taken with Mina.

The Shah household is divided in terms religious practice: Mina is easily the most devoted to Islam, and engages in religious study each night with Hayat. Muneer, Hayat's mother, is less pious than Mina, but faithfully abstains from drinking and eating pork. Muneer is particularly enamored with the Jewish faith, even going so far as to keep her

son from school on Rosh Hashanah, a holiday that she feels everyone should practice. She believes that Nathan should not have to convert to Islam for Mina's sake, a position that many in the Muslim community would not agree with in accordance with Islamic law that maintains that Muslim men can marry non-Muslim women but Muslim women cannot marry non-Muslims. Naveed, the patriarch, is not in the least religious, and even burns Hayat's copy of the Quran in a scene near the end of the novel. Hayat, a confused young boy who wrestles both with his piety in this divided household and with his affections for Mina, tries to make sense of life by observing all the practicing and non-practicing Muslims around him, particularly by searching for answers in the Quran. In one particularly brutal moment after an anti-Semitic sermon at the mosque (which Nathan attends with Naveed and Hayat in order to start the conversion process to be ablate marry Mina), Hayat uses verses from the Quran that the anti-Semitic Imam had picked to turn Irfan, Mina's son, against his future stepfather, which ends their engagement. This in turn leads Naveed to burn the Quran that his son had mistakenly wielded to break his best friend's heart.

Hayat's faith is misplaced and put to destructive ends. So is Mina's—she is the most readily recognizable "dervish" in the novel, as she sacrifices everything for her faith (she leaves Nathan and ends up married to a brutally abusive Pakistani Muslim man). While the novel can be read as a warning against staying too close to scripture, it is also a representation of a family that is deeply divided by varying stances on religion. Akhtar uses the narrative voice of a confused adolescent to illustrate these different levels of faith among the family and the community. Hayat is not torn between his Muslim and American identities so much as he is confused by his experience of the world. Hayat

eventually learns that being a Muslim, as many of the other characters illustrate, need not entail a devotion to scripture. Hayat is devout but memorizes the Quran in English, which many Muslims say does not count towards being a Hafiz (Akhtar 317). The "true" Hafiz in the novel, an odious teenager who brags that memorizing the Koran was like "drinking castor oil every day," lacks goodness and true piety. Mina, on the other hand, assures Hayat that it is his intention that counts the most for faith more than anything (323).

In the section at the end of the novel, *A Conversation with Ayad Akhtar*, the author was asked, "Were you hesitant in including some controversial or troubling aspects of Islam in the novel and thereby perhaps confirming some secular readers' preconceptions of the faith?" Akhtar responds,

> In a post-9/11 world where there is very real and rampant anti-Muslim bigotry, I certainly understand that folks would like to have me perform a corrective, to pen a portrayal of Muslim life that would mitigate the culture's prejudices. But I can't be guided by these sorts of consideration. As an artist I have to have the freedom to wrestle with my own demons, allow of my own ecstasies and those of my community. In the end, my aesthetic mandate is twofold: that the work give pleasure, and that it be guided by the pursuit of the truth. It is up to readers to make what they will of what I've done.

The portrayals of Muslim characters in *American Dervish* are certainly less striking than they are in *Disgraced*. The most grievous error committed by a Muslim here—apart from Mina's despicable two husbands, who do not make much of an appearance—is by the protagonist himself, twelve-year-old Hayat. Akhtar's use of Hayat as the most problematic Muslim character in the novel is indicative of his artistic freedom, as he refers to it in the quote above. Hayat is neither wholly good nor wholly bad; he is as good and as terrible as every child who tries make sense of the world, committing sin and

errors along the way. His actions, though motivated by comparison some Muslims around him, are more a product of his immaturity than they are of his identity.

With Hayat, Akhtar has provided a representation of a Muslim whose character is judged not according to his religion but according to his actions as a child. Perhaps this is the kind of judgement that Akhtar seeks—one that is concerned with his abilities rather than his background. “Performing a corrective” or humanizing Muslims should not have to be the task of the Muslim American writer. It is not up to anyone to propose what the artist’s task should be, and Akhtar has illustrated that rather poignantly in the way his work is talked about. In describing his aesthetic mandate as the deliverance of both pleasure and truth, Akhtar undertakes the work of any artist describing the world around him, thereby freeing himself of any burden of representation.

Chapter Three: James Baldwin, Islam, and the Route to Self-Knowledge

> What white people have to do is try to find out in their hearts why it was necessary for them to have a nigger in the first place. Because I am not a nigger. I'm a man. If I'm not the nigger here, and if you invented him, you the white people invented him, then you have to find out why. And the future of the country depends on that. Whether or not it is able to ask that question.
>
> James Baldwin, 1963.

Introduction

The most spectacular moment in the life of Malcolm X is his pilgrimage to Mecca. There, Malcolm sees people of all races in one place performing the same rite: the Islamic tenet of the pilgrimage, the *hajj*. The unity of the pilgrims allows him to imagine the possibility of unity back home in the United States, where his experiences with the Nation of Islam had led him to believe that Islam was decidedly Black and necessarily separatist. In Mecca, Malcolm saw for the first time that Islam allowed people of all races to surmount their differences. As a Black man abroad, Malcolm's identity was no longer predicated on exclusion by white supremacy.[64] James Baldwin, a contemporary of Malcolm's, also experienced moments of racial self-awareness in his encounters with Muslims in the U.S., France, and Turkey. In some instances, Baldwin knew moments of great privilege and power over people more vulnerable than him, which certainly was the reverse of the situation back home. For both of these men, encountering Islam in the United States and abroad allowed these possibilities for self-knowledge to arise. While

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[64] Manning Marable, author of the latest Malcolm X biography (2011), notes the particular effect being in Mecca had on his racial outlook: "Malcolm candidly admitted that his "racial philosophy" had been altered after all he had seen—'thousands of people of different races and colors who treated me as a human being.'" (319)

Malcolm's encounters with Islam are well-studied, Baldwin's writings suggest that he understood Malcolm's message more than anyone else—perhaps even more than Malcolm himself. This chapter presents Baldwin's understanding of Islam—primarily through Malcolm and the Nation of Islam—as a set of secular and racial practices that empowered communities of color in the United States.

In the previous chapters I discussed the humanizing framework entailed in presenting discourses on Islam in the U.S. Both the discourses in museum galleries and counter-discourses in certain Muslim American writers exemplify the tensions in capturing the humanity of Muslim subjects in the United States today. The attempts at including Islam within the purview of humanity end up being dehumanizing instead of humanizing; hence, the humanizing framework is problematic in its attempt to conceive of Muslims "as humans too." In contrast, this chapter offers a very different conceptualization of Islam; Islam itself wields the humanizing role. The middle of the twentieth century continued to subjugate the rights and bodies of African American citizens. While strides were made with the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s, many of its critics, who were instead attracted to the Nation of Islam, argued that nonviolence and integration were neither wholly effective nor sustainable. Where the subjugation of African American citizens persisted, Islam provided an alternative force that was more empowering to the humanity of African American citizens, as sources concerning both Malcolm and Baldwin illustrate. Baldwin in particular conceived of Islam in racial and secular terms that asserted the humanity of African Americans separate from the white integrationists who sought to include, very belatedly, African Americans into their framework of humanity.

A substantial scholarly analysis of Baldwin's conceptualization on Islam has never been made.[65] Nor, in fact, has a significant comparison of Baldwin and Malcolm's perspectives been made, presumably since their encounters were fleeting. However, there was a certain connection between the two men, brief as it was; otherwise, Baldwin would have never undertaken the project of writing a screenplay (titled *One Day, When I Was Lost)* based on Malcolm's *Autobiography*.[66] One of Baldwin's final projects was to attempt a narrative of Malcolm, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Medgar Evers.[67] Both Baldwin and Malcolm, according to Baldwin's biographer, David Leeming (1994), "shared a temperament and an anger that was based in self-education and the deprivation of the northern ghettoes" (Leeming 295). Leeming points to the connection between the two men, particularly in their longing for self-education, which illuminates the role that Islam served in shaping their understandings of race. But the purpose of self-education was not meant for individuals only; both Baldwin and Malcolm discussed the importance of the entire nation undertaking an understanding of its own history.

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[65] To date, only one scholar, Magdalena Zaborowska, has considered the tremendous impact that Turkey, a Muslim country, has had on Baldwin's career and life. While Zaborowska examines the entire decade in which Baldwin lived abroad in Turkey, this chapter specifically attends to discussions of Islam by both Baldwin in order to illuminate American perspectives on race and social justice.

[66] According to Marable (2011), Baldwin and Malcolm's "lifelong friendship" began during a taping of a panel in which they appeared together at Yale (188). It might be a stretch to consider their relationship a "lifelong friendship," but it is certainly accurate that Malcolm, at the very least, left a lifelong impression on Baldwin. David Leeming (1994), Baldwin's biographer, writes, "Because of his work on the film Baldwin had by now closely identified with Malcolm and thought of him as a soul mate" (295).

[67] This unfinished book, titled *Remember This House*, had its beginnings in *No Name in the Street*, an extended essay in which Baldwin contemplated the fates of these three men. The thirty page draft of *Remember This House* would then be adapted into a screenplay by Raoul Peck titled *I Am Not Your Negro* (2017).

Discussing Baldwin's perspective on Islam serves another purpose beyond the examination of racial configurations in the U.S.: it identifies Islam as an element of American culture. Whereas today Islam is largely perceived as a foreign and immigrant religion, most Muslims in the twentieth century U.S. were African Americans,[68] and the earliest Muslims arrived in the U.S. on some of the first slave ships.[69] That Islam existed in this country since its settling, and its vital emergence during the civil rights and Black nationalist movements, is elided by the immigration of Arab and South Asian Muslims in 1965 and onward, which has led Islam to be identified more as a foreign religion, and not as a domestic, racial, and often secular means of empowerment for African American subjects. Islam is discussed here largely through the lens of the Nation of Islam, the Black separatist and heterodox movement that grew primarily through the efforts of Malcolm X. James Baldwin, it is worth noting, was not Muslim, but his experiences with Muslims at home and abroad are as central to this discussion on Islam in the U.S. as Malcolm's. Baldwin's perspective lends insight to how Islam is racialized. He understood Islam as a religion and culture that served African American citizens in unique ways. This chapter unpacks the significance of that conceptualization at that particular moment in the U.S.

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[68] It was not until after the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act that Muslims from Asia began migrating to the United States. Marable (2011) writes, "Before immigration law reform in 1965, the most prominent group of self-identified American Muslims was the heretical Nation of Islam" (486).

[69] For a comprehensive account of these early Muslim arrivals from West Africa, see Sylviane Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (1998). Manning Marable (2011) estimates that Muslims constituted "7 or 8 percent" of the 650,000 slaves who were taken to the U.S. in the sixteenth century (80).

Baldwin's perspective also serves to signal this project's investment in secular approaches to Islam. By secular, I mean a practice of Islam that sometimes eschews orthodoxy, and that is grounded in civil and societal modes of embodiment and practice over religious ones. The notion of a secular Islam may indeed seem like a paradox, but this is an assumption that needs to be addressed and carefully critiqued. Islam has yet to be envisioned as a religion with secular adherents the way Christian or Jewish traditions have come to achieve. And indeed, the secular as it is understood today is rooted in "an imagined opposite in Islam," as Wendy Brown notes in the *Introduction to Is Critique Secular?* The notion of a secular Islam is germane to the task of undermining such binary oppositions between the religious and the secular (Asad et al 4). Islam among African Americans had a strong secular bent: Malcolm himself—in one of his later speeches, "The Ballot or the Bullet" (1964)—called for personal religion to be left at home in order for African Americans to achieve a greater unity.[70] Islam in mid-century America needed these secular impulses in order to gain traction: its popularity among Black subjects was due to its ability to capture widespread civil discontent rather than its advancement of a particular mode of religiosity. The Nation of Islam eschewed several aspects of institutionalized Islam: for instance, their meetings were held in buildings called "temples" rather than mosques, and they did not engage in any of the Five Pillars of Islam.[71] The Nation's purpose was to empower Black individuals by furnishing them

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[70] Marable (2011) writes, "The first part of Malcolm's lecture made an appeal for black unity despite ideological quarrels . . . For Malcolm, a precondition for unity was finding a secular basis for common ground, which is why he also strove to decouple his identity as a Muslim cleric from his political engagements" (303).

[71] These include praying five times a day (*salat*), fasting during Ramadan (*sawm*), alms (*zakat*), the pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*), and belief in the one God, Allah, and his Prophet Muhammad (*shahada*).

with knowledge and self-determination, and despite his issues with the organization, Baldwin clearly saw how they achieved these goals.

Secularism, as Saba Mahmood argues, is often deployed too easily as a neat counter to religiosity.[72] This chapter sets out to achieve two things: it suggests that, based on the Nation of Islam's practices, secularism and religiosity worked hand in hand to empower African American subjects,[73] which is why aspects of the Nation was appealing to Malcolm and Baldwin in different ways. Resisting the religious/secular binary, as Shahab Ahmed explains in his posthumous tome *What Is Islam?,* is critical to conceptualizing Islam—as many Black Muslims did in the twentieth century—as a civil, political, *and* religious project.[74] Second, that the "civilizing and disciplinary" powers of secularism, per Mahmood, has a radically different effect in this context. In Chapter One, I examined arguments on the civilizing mission of museums after 9/11 that pitted a peaceful, secular Islam against a violent, religious one. Whereas the goal for these museums was to present a palatable version of Islam, the civilizing practices of the

[72] In "Secularism, Hermeneutics, Empire," Mahmood writes, "They concede too much in accepting at face value the claim that secularism is about the banishment of religiosity from the public domain, and they concede too little by failing to interrogate secularism's contention that it is the most effective political solution to warding off religious strife" (326).
[73] The idea of secularism and religion working hand in hand—"co-constitutive, indelibly intertwined, each structuring and suffusing the sphere of the other"— is central to *Is Critique Secular?* (Asad et al 2003, x)
[74] Shahab Ahmed (2015) writes, ". . . I will argue that the human and historical phenomenon of Islam is a field of meaning where truth is constituted, arranged, and lived in terms not of categories constituted by mutual exclusion, but rather by categories of mutual inter-sorption and inter-locution that run athwart and conceptually frustrate the religious/secular binary or religion/culture division. As such, the use of a vocabulary that seeks, in the first instance, to organize and understand phenomena by categorically distinguishing between religion and secular, or between religion and culture, simply does not help us clearly to *see* the human and historical phenomenon of Islam (and we should not imagine that the solution to this is to argue that, in Islam, everything is "religion"—or that everything is "culture") (116).

Nation of Islam aimed to achieve a powerful model of Blackness and a radical alternative to white, Christian America. In the context of this chapter, civilizing and disciplinary tactics were meant to empower rather than subdue.

The Nation of Islam (henceforth the NOI) was founded in Detroit in 1930 by Wallace D. Fard, a mysterious man of unknown origin who eventually disappeared without a trace. Elijah Muhammad, a man who recognized Fard as God, succeeded him as leader of the NOI. The NOI was a Black separatist movement that sought to empower its followers in civil society by imploring them to reject integration and instead opt for an independent political and geographical community. Self-discipline was a major component of this movement: its members dressed in sharp suits, maintained close-cut hair styles, and abstained from a wide range of things, including pork, alcohol, and even political enfranchisement. Some of their practices were peculiar; for instance, they were encouraged to eat one meal a day (Malcolm was well known for being very slim).[75] The NOI's membership was middling up until 1952, when Malcolm X joined during his seven-year period of incarceration. He eventually became the second in command to Elijah Muhammad until his excommunication and departure from the group in 1964.[76]

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[75] According to Manning Marable (2011), Louis Farrakhan—the current leader of the NOI—observed that Malcolm "was disciplined . . . He ate one meal a day. He got up at 5 o'clock in the morning to say his prayers. I never saw Malcolm late for one appointment. Malcolm was like a clock" (121). The first time Betty Sanders, who would become Malcolm's wife, saw him she had reportedly thought, "This man is totally malnourished!" (139).

[76] The reasons for Malcolm's excommunication were as follows: in 1964, Malcolm was silenced by Muhammad after his comments regarding the assassination of John F. Kennedy. He had reportedly said, "[President Kennedy] never foresaw that the chickens would come home to roost so soon. Being an old farm boy myself, chickens coming home to roost never did make me sad; they always made me glad" (Marable 2011, 272-3). The second reason is that Malcolm had known for some time that Muhammad had been impregnating various female secretaries in the Nation of Islam and could not reconcile these developments with Muhammad's role as the divine leader of the NOI.

The NOI was considered heretical by Islamic religious leaders, and its practices were not rooted in orthodox Islamic tenets and practices but instead in disciplinary tactics, which, combined with Malcolm X's revolution preaching of self-respect, inspired legions of followers to join their cause.

Malcolm's involvement with the NOI is legendary, but James Baldwin's encounters with them, though less known, were also significant: "Letter From a Region in My Mind," one of Baldwin's best known essays, emerged out of an interview with Elijah Muhammad on behalf of *The New Yorker*.[77] In this essay, Baldwin recognizes the NOI's tremendous impact on the Black community in the United States. Later, with his travels abroad, his encounters with various other forms of Islam also serve to illuminate Islam's role in shaping Baldwin's racial framework. In our current time, given that Islamophobia is rooted in the dehumanization and alienation of Muslim subjects, the role of self-knowledge and empowerment in the history of American Islam is key to unraveling the cultural impact of Islam in the modern United States.

Encountering the Nation of Islam

"Letter From a Region in My Mind" (1962) is the only text that concerns Islam directly and at length, relative to Baldwin's other works.[78] Here, Islam figures as a

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[77] Nowhere in the essay does Baldwin ever state that his piece is derived out of a scheduled interview with Muhammad. He casually notes, "I had not gone to Chicago to meet Elijah Muhammad—he was not in my thoughts at all—but the moment I received the invitation, it occurred to me that I ought to have accepted it." Baldwin's vagueness about these circumstances is peculiar indeed and worth noting, though there are not enough details to allow for further investigation, at least for the scope of this project.

[78] He discusses Islam briefly, generally in relation to the NOI, in various interviews, including an interview with Studs Terkel in 1961, and an interview with Dr. Kenneth Clark in 1963. Both transcripts are in *Conversations with James Baldwin* (1989).

potential antidote to the white Christian mainstream. Baldwin begins with a lengthy autobiographical summary of his "prolonged religious crisis," detailing his traumatic departure from the church. Baldwin, who was a teenage preacher, was initially attracted to the church due to his desire to escape humiliation at the hands of white men (and especially white policemen): "The humiliation did not apply merely to working days, or workers; I was thirteen and was crossing Fifth Avenue on my way to the Forty-second Street library, and the cop in the middle of the street muttered as I passed him, 'Why don't you niggers stay uptown where you belong?' . . . And others, like me, fled into the church" (Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket*, 339). Baldwin weaves the fear that drove him to the church throughout the essay and eventually comes to the realization that the only people meant for the church's salvation were white. His Jewish high school friends, for instance, ". . . brought the whole question of color, which I had been desperately avoiding, into the terrified center of my mind. I had realized that the Bible had been written by white men. I knew that, according to many Christians, I was a descendant of Ham, who had been cursed, and that I was therefore predestined to be a slave" (347). As Baldwin sees how the Church, in its present condition, could only save white souls, he envisions Islam as an antidote to the limited purview of Christianity: "God had come a long way from the desert—but then so had Allah, though in a very different direction. God, going north, and rising on the wings of power, had become white, and Allah, out of power, and on the dark side of Heaven, had become—for all practical purposes, anyway—black" (352). In describing Christianity's total abandonment of Black souls, Baldwin concludes that, "to become a truly moral being . . . [one] must divorce himself from all the prohibitions, crimes, and hypocrisies of the Christian church." For Baldwin,

then, Islam serves as an alternative to Christianity's failure to serve Black lives, and the personification of Allah as Black suggests a longing for a deity who would serve communities of color. Furthermore, a "truly moral" human being could not be aligned with the teachings of the Church: completeness of person, in this sense, lay beyond the confines of Christianity.

As he describes his visit to Elijah Muhammad's South Side mansion, Baldwin portrays the leader of the NOI and his followers as gracious, seemingly genuine, and also unnerving: "I had the stifling feeling that *they* knew I belonged to them but knew that I did not know it yet, that I remained unready, and that they were simply waiting, patiently, and with assurance, for me to discover the truth for myself. For where else, after all, could I go? I was black, and therefore a part of Islam, and would be saved from the holocaust awaiting the white world whether I would or no" (363). Here, Baldwin points to a "truth" that lay waiting to be discovered: the notion that as a Black man, Baldwin should be aligned with these separatists, given the failure of white America to protect its Black constituents from injustice. The NOI's followers embraced the narrative that African Americans had been torn from their original identities as Muslims in Africa, and so self-discovery was an important step in the journey of empowerment. It is in this sense that Muhammad and his followers expected Baldwin to join their ranks. Further, the idea of redemption being found in Islam rather than in Christianity reifies the notion of Islam as an emergent and alternative force of empowerment for Black subjects who had been stripped of their humanity. At one point, Baldwin becomes aware of the Muslim speakers in Harlem, not because of what they were saying ("what these men were saying about white people I had often heard before"), but because of the behavior of the surrounding

police, who stood afraid, and of the crowd and its "silent intensity," looking at the speakers "with a kind of intelligence of hope on their faces — not as though they were being consoled or drugged but as though they were being jolted" (353). As Baldwin observes the crowd, who awaken to the rejection of white systems of oppression, he concludes, "The white God has not delivered them; perhaps the black God will" (357). In this moment, Baldwin sees the potential for the NOI to deliver both freedom and self-knowledge to African Americans.

However, Baldwin's rejection of the Church does not automatically entail a vetting of the alternative. While he speaks admiringly of Islam and the NOI's potential in empowering African Americans, he cannot agree with the movement's separatist outlook. He writes, "I love a few people and they love me and some of them are white, and isn't love more important than color?" (363). At dinner with Elijah Muhammad and company, Baldwin makes a mental list of white friends of his who might be exceptions to the NOI's dictum that the white man is the devil, soon realizing the irony entailed in this exercise: "In the eeriest way possible, I suddenly had a glimpse of what white people must go through at a dinner table when they are trying to prove that Negros are not subhuman. I had almost said, after all, 'Well take my friend Mary,' and very nearly descended to a catalogue of those virtues that gave Mary the right to be alive" (Ibid). Baldwin appraises the act of humanization from both perspectives: the humanization of African Americans by white Americans, and humanization of white friends by the author himself. Indulging in this imaginative project of humanizing lends some clarity to the virtues of separatism, whose proponents "no longer wish for a recognition so grudging and (should it ever be received) so tardy" (364). By rejecting the humanizing mission entailed in integration—

that African Americans should very belatedly be received into the ranks of humanity—Baldwin sees the Nation's separatism as establishing its own standards for humanity. Thus, Baldwin understands Islam as a force that affirms Black humanity as distinct from standards of humanity that have been established by the dominant culture.

Baldwin famously characterized integration in this way—as a belated inclusion of Black people as human subjects—throughout his works, and especially in his conversation with the anthropologist Margaret Mead. In *A Rap on Race* (1971), which was originally televised in 1970 and then transcribed and published, Baldwin characterized integration as "everyone . . . very generously saying to black people—that is, the white people who believed in integration—'We'll share what we have with you,' And they thought that was all the generosity that was needed, you see" (8). Here, Baldwin points to the problematic core of integration as a process of inclusion that lacks self-recognition. If segregation comprises a generous inclusion of African Americans into the rank of humanity, its opponents understand this inclusion is a self-serving means of affirming the generosity of the dominant culture without taking an inward look at the subjugation of marginalized groups in the first place.

By the end of his "Letter," however, Baldwin rejects separatism and calls for one nation: "In short, we, the black and the white, deeply need each other here if we are really to become a nation . . . To create one nation has proved to be a hideously difficult task; there is certainly no need now to create two, one black and one white" (Baldwin 1985, 375-6). The sentiments with which Baldwin ends his essay mark the complicated nature of his own position: he sees Islam as an alternative to Christianity, though he is not religious in any sense. He sees the appeal of separatism but ultimately cannot agree with

its aims.[79] Most importantly, his discussion of separatism allows him to formulate an understanding of humanity that is not predicated on standards determined by the white mainstream. Despite his disagreement with the concept, his discussion of separatism is crucial towards understanding the issues with integration. As explored in the previous chapter, integration by means of inclusion is not a sufficient way to resolve issues of inequality in this country. The attempts to include marginalized people—whether African Americans or Muslims—into the ranks of humanity serve only as a reminder that the standards for the category of the human continue to be defined by the white Anglo-American mainstream. By criticizing separatism through a discussion of the Nation of Islam, Baldwin rejects these standards of humanity that are dependent on the white mainstream.

Baldwin's analysis of separatism also illuminates mischaracterizations of Malcolm as a hate-monger. While Malcolm's initial separatist outlook certainly prevented him from allowing white people to join his anti-racism endeavors, his position changed towards the end of his short life. Upon announcing his conversion to Sunni Islam, Malcolm remarks that his decision would shock his "loved ones, friends, and enemies alike" as well as "millions whom [he] did not know—who had gained during [his] twelve years with Elijah Muhammad a "hate" image of Malcolm X" (X and Haley

[79] While Baldwin presents Islam as a viable alternative for the African American community, it is also important to note that at this point in Baldwin's life, his understanding of Islam is limited to his encounters with the NOI, which was by no means orthodox, and served the community more in the way of social empowerment than in religious function, as discussed earlier in this chapter. It is thus Islam's secular power, rather than its religiosity, that Baldwin explores as an attractive means of empowerment for Black subjects in the middle of the twentieth century. His assessment from an atheist's standpoint makes this important distinction clear.

[1965] 1981, 390).[80] The shock that he anticipates speaks to the degree to which he is thus perceived as a separatist, and so Baldwin's careful exploration of some of the benefits of separatism lend clarity to Malcolm's outlook. Baldwin's perspectives on separatism allows us to look past its flaws and understand how its proponents used it to determine their own standards for humanity.

Baldwin's encounters with Malcolm serve to tackle some of the stereotypes surrounding Malcolm.[81] Baldwin's first impression of him led him to declare that Malcolm was "one of the gentlest men [he] ever knew" in spite of the intimidating reputation that preceded him (Baldwin 1985, 498). In fact, Manning Marable concludes his biography of Malcolm with this description of Baldwin's impression of his gentleness (Marable 2011, 487). But at the same time, Baldwin (1985) acknowledges Malcolm X's forceful nature and sees him as a "genuine revolutionary, a virile impulse long since fled from the American way of life" (499). By capturing his gentleness and virility—the marvelous complexity of Malcolm's character—Baldwin rejects oversimplified characterizations of Malcolm and offers unique insight into his life, making him one of the people most suited to illustrating the depth of Malcolm's character.

Perhaps the most significant of these insights is Baldwin's comparison of Malcolm to Frantz Fanon, which signals a profound understanding of Malcolm's work on race and racism: "All of the western nations have been caught in a lie, the lie of their

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[80] Marable (2011) writes, "Malcolm's dilemma was that virtually all his enemies—and friends—perceived him as the high priest of black social revolution, and despite his letters from Mecca and abroad, and his dramatic address in Chicago, he continued to be perceived as an antiwhite demagogue" (33).

[81] Although their relationship was more complicated than "friendship." Henry Louis Gates, Jr. claimed that Baldwin's reverence for Malcolm was posthumous (Gates 1992). They encountered each other a handful of times during the window of time in which they both lived.

pretended humanism; this means that their history has no moral justification, and that the West has no moral authority. Malcolm, yet more concretely than Frantz Fanon—since Malcolm operated in the Afro-American idiom, and referred to the Afro-American situation—made the nature of this lie, and its implications, relevant and articulate to the people whom he served" (Baldwin 1985, 492). Both Fanon and Malcolm delivered the truth of blackness as a construct designed to serve white supremacy. When Malcolm famously asked attendees at a funeral in Los Angeles, "Who taught you to hate yourself from the top of your head to the sole of your feet? Who taught you to hate your own kind?",[82] he awakened them to the realization that their self-hatred is imposed externally by a white supremacist society, just as Fanon ([1961] 2007) aimed to "liberate the black man from the arsenal of complexes that germinated in a colonial situation" (14). For Baldwin to recognize in Malcolm a Fanonian deliverance of truth about race and racism suggests a deep understanding of Malcolm's service to the African American community.

In recognizing Malcolm's purpose, Baldwin amplifies his aggravation at attempts to "claim" Malcolm. In his nonfictional book-length essay, *No Name in the Street*, Baldwin compares Malcolm to Joan of Arc. What initially appears to be an attempt to frame Malcolm as a martyr is instead a critique of the process of making Malcolm a martyr. Baldwin (1985) writes, "And there is, since his death, a Malcolm, virtually, for every persuasion. People who hated him, people who despised him, people who feared

[82] Speech delivered on May 5, 1962 in Los Angeles at the funeral of Ronald Stokes, a fellow NOI member and victim of police brutality. Curiously, there are no transcripts of this speech available in book form, and only excerpts are available on the Internet. A video recording speech is available on YouTube. Generally, only Malcolm's later speeches—from 1964 and 1965—have been preserved and documented in books. *Malcolm X Speaks* (Ed. George Breitman) and *Malcolm X: The Last Speeches* (Ed. Bruce Perry) are two such collections of his later speeches.

him, and people who, in their various lights and darknesses, loved him, all claim him now. It is easy to claim him now, just as it was easy for the church to claim Saint Joan" (511). Resisting these claims to Malcolm, Baldwin offers a perspective that is critical for unpacking the complexities of Malcolm's character, which in turn sheds light on the representations of Islam in midcentury America.

These claims to Malcolm's image would begin early in his life. The Nation of Islam attracted its followers by telling them that they had been robbed of their original identities and could cultivate a new one with the NOI. Malcolm's escape from prison was enabled by his joining the NOI at the injunction of his brother Reginald (who along with the other siblings had joined the NOI in the meanwhile), who appeals to Malcolm by telling him, "you don't even know who you are. . . the white devil has hidden it from you, that you are a race of people of ancient civilizations. . . You have been cut off by the devil white man from all true knowledge of your own kind" (X and Haley 1965 [1981] 186).[83] This appeal to the unknown past reflects the NOI's signature way of claiming its followers, who would then become Muslims in order to erase the slave-bearing past implicated in their current names.[84] Hence, the NOI encouraged the switch to Muslim

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[83] Malcolm was incarcerated in 1946, ostensibly for robbery, but more realistically for fraternizing with white women. His partners in crime were the Caragulian sisters; Malcolm was intimately involved with Bea, the older sister (referred to as Sophia in the *Autobiography*). When questioned by the social workers involved in his case, Malcolm claimed: "Nobody wanted to know anything at all about the robberies. All they could see was that we had taken the white man's women . . . Before the judge entered, I said to one lawyer, 'We seem to be getting sentenced because of those girls.' He got red from the neck up and shuffled his papers: 'You had no business with white girls!'" (*Autobiography* 173)

[84] Malcolm would later use the same appeal to one's stolen past as Reginald had done to him in prison. As Alex Haley ([1965] 1981) wrote in the epilogue of the *Autobiography*, "As I came out of the store, one woman was excitedly describing for the rest a Malcolm X lecture she had heard in Mosque Number 7 one Sunday. 'Oooooh, he *burnt* that white man, burnt him *up,* chile . . .

names: Elijah Poole became Elijah Muhammad and Cassius Clay became Muhammad Ali. Others took the more enigmatic "X" as a surname, which marked the unknown origins from which their ancestors were stripped upon enslavement. The NOI sought to fill a void in identity that many Black citizens felt by equipping them with self-knowledge in order to fight back against the dehumanization of losing one's identity. Malcolm's early foray into Islam, including his name change from Malcolm Little to Malcolm X, marked the first acts of personal reclamation and of public claims to his image as he began to devote himself wholly to the NOI.

After his tenure with the NOI, which lasted twelve years, and his conversion to Sunni Islam, Malcolm was swiftly claimed as a representative for orthodox Islam. Muslim officials abroad were thrilled that this prominent American finally embraced Sunni Islam,[85] especially since Elijah Muhammad and the NOI had long rejected orthodox Islamic practices. The language that emerged after Malcolm's death distinctly framed him as a martyr of Islam, as seen in various paraphernalia obtained from archival collections in Michigan.[86] In a pamphlet by the orthodox Islamic Funeral Service, Malcolm is called a martyr: "In memorium [sic] of Haj Malik Shabazz (the former Malcolm X) who died martyred for the cause of Islam and the enlightenment and uplifting of his people." The Muslim Herald features an editorial that notes how another

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chile, he told us we descendin' from black kings an' queens—Lawd, I didn't know it!' Another woman asked, "You believe that?" and the first vehemently responded, 'Yes, I *do!'"* (463-4).

[85] As illustrated by the splendid reception he received as a "guest of the state" of Prince Faisal of Saudi Arabia (Marable 2011, 308)

[86] These include the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit, MI. and the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

newspaper, "'Al Bilad' (a Saudi Arabia newspaper) considered him a martyr.[87]" A pamphlet entitled "1967 Malcolm X Day Souvenir Journal,"[88] mixes metaphors by juxtaposing an image of Malcolm, "El Hajj El Malik El Shabbazz of Afro America," to Jesus of Nazareth. According to the pamphlet, both figures "gave their lives that others might live." Branding Malcolm X as a martyr was a way for representatives of Sunni Islam to eagerly claim him for their own movements after his many years with the NOI, signaling both the extent to which Malcolm was defined as a symbol of American Islam and the stakes of that representation.

Malcolm's many name changes also exemplify the life changes he underwent and the public attempts to claim him at those various stages in life. Malcolm's name changes—from Malcolm Little to Malcolm X to Hajj Malik Shabazz, among others in between—illustrate how much Malcolm's identity had been appropriated and celebrated by various causes throughout his life. In particular, the name change from Malcolm X to Hajj Malik Shabazz signals yet another claim to his identity, from the X of the NOI to orthodox Islam ("Hajj" is given to those who have undertaken the required pilgrimage ("hajj") to Mecca). The name changes exemplify the dizzying number of avenues that would attempt to lay claim to the trope of Malcolm as a martyr and religious icon and beyond.

There were, of course, many other non-religious avenues that claimed Malcolm for their own, not least the legions of youth who, after his death, proclaimed him to be a

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[87] "Excerpts on Hajji Malik Shabazz," March/April 1965, p.7, in Box 1 of the Aliya Hassen papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor
[88] Box 1, Folder 73 in the Malcolm X Papers at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit, MI

veritable symbol of resistance against the oppression and injustice that governed their lives, which I discuss in the next and final chapter. Malcolm was further enshrined not just with the posthumous publication of the *Autobiography*, which became a sort of Bible for disaffected American youth, but also with Spike Lee's adaptation of the *Autobiography* into a feature film in 1991. Baldwin himself was signed on to write the screenplay until those plans fell through due to disagreements with the Hollywood producers (Leeming 300-1). For so many different avenues to claim Malcolm as a martyr confounds the causes for his death, which is part of Baldwin's critique of these claiming acts: "And there is, since his death, a Malcolm, virtually, for every persuasion. People who hated him, people who despised him, people who feared him, and people who, in their various lights and darknesses, loved him, all claim him now. It is easy to claim him now, just as it was easy for the church to claim Saint Joan" (511). Baldwin's critique illustrates the complex character of a man who was widely denounced as a hateful separatist. Reducing such a complicated figure in this way would have naturally irked Baldwin, whose own identity as a queer Black American writer in self-exile was often limited to those five descriptors.[89] Baldwin's complexity is no small part of the reason that he challenges categorizations of his oeuvre; he could easily fit into the genres of modern American, modern African American, American in Paris, queer literature, exile literature, or travel literature, and so on. Malcolm himself falls into a multiplicity of categories: African American, Muslim American, Black Muslim, Black Nationalist, to

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[89] Although as Max S. Gordon argues, Baldwin's queer identity is often erased from projects on and discussions about Baldwin. Gordon discusses this extensively in his meditation on Raoul Peck's *I Am Not Your Negro* (2017). See Gordon, "Faggot As Footnote: On James Baldwin, 'I Am Not Your Negro,' 'Can I Get A Witness?' and 'Moonlight'" in The New Civil Rights Movement.

name a few. In this vein, it makes sense to compare these two men in that they are impossible to contain. Both of them epitomized what it meant to be a person in the onslaught of civil rights injustices of the mid-twentieth century. Amidst the assaults against all their identities (Black, Muslim, queer, and so on), the struggle to assert their own humanity was keenly felt. The appeal of the NOI, as both men saw, lay in their attempts to carve out spaces of affirmation and empowerment for Black subjects.

The limits of the Nation of Islam and the Civil Rights Movement

Despite their significant efforts to empower Black subjects, the NOI's flaws were manifold. In "Letter from a Region in My Mind" (also known as "Down at the Cross"), Baldwin concludes that the Nation of Islam falls short of that goal, a realization that heightens at his meeting with Elijah Muhammad. When Baldwin shows up at Muhammad's house in Chicago, he observes, "it seemed to him that I was not yet brainwashed and was trying to become myself . . . I suppose that I *would* like to become myself, whatever that may mean, but I knew that Elijah's meaning and mine were not the same." The tensions between "brainwashed" and "become myself" alert Baldwin to the possibility that Muhammad may not have his best interests in mind. There are other instances that trouble the veneer of authenticity among the NOI followers, who behave in a cultish manner: the women all wearing white, the men all in dark suits. And, according to Baldwin, "whenever Elijah spoke, a kind of chorus arose from the table, saying 'yes, that's right.' This began to set my teeth on edge." This image contrasts with the easy manner in which Muhammad conducted with the women. Baldwin observes that Muhammad "tease[d] the women, like a father, with no hint of that ugly and unctuous

flirtatiousness I knew so well from the churches.” We now know that Muhammad had impregnated various NOI secretaries, and so Muhammad’s manners were greatly affected.[90] But at least to Baldwin’s knowledge at the time, the empowering value of the NOI held fast, though seeming to crack a little upon the observation of its cultish atmosphere.

Ultimately, Baldwin could not come to terms with Muhammad’s categorical demonization of white people. He argues that the success of the American nation cannot function on the debasement of any, black or white, and must depend on the establishment of one nation, not two. Baldwin thus disagrees with the separatism and the disavowal of political enfranchisement (such as voting) among NOI members: “It is entirely unacceptable that I should have no voice in the political affairs of my own country, for I am not a ward of America; I am one of the first Americans to arrive on these shores.” For Baldwin, the affirmation of African American humanity entails imagining a shared nation: an expanded vision of humanity where Black and white Americans coexist.

Although this vision would appear to be in line with the pluralist ideal of coexistence as epitomized by the integrationist aims of the Civil Rights Movement, that was far from the case. For both Baldwin and Malcolm, being an American meant rejecting the nation’s complicity in violence and imperialism, both abroad and on its own shores, just as Martin Luther King, Jr. had advocated towards the end of his life.[91] In fact, the perception of King as a promoter of peace and coexistence is important to

[90] According to Marable (2011), Muhammad had impregnated at least three of his former secretaries, to whom he had provided “little or no financial support for his out-of-wedlock children” (233)
[91] As evident in “A Time to Break Silence,” the speech at Riverside Church for which King was assassinated exactly one year later.

understanding Baldwin and Malcolm's positions. While many perceive King as promoting a liberal vision of his country where its citizens coexist peacefully—in short, as the antithesis to Malcolm and the NOI—they do so forgetting the period at the end of his life when anti-war and especially anti-Vietnam perspectives radically shifted his stance and altered his standing among his fellow citizens.[92] For King, Malcolm, and Baldwin, being a part of American society meant confronting the way America had subjugated peoples local and foreign. It also meant confronting the most American of values: capitalism.

One can see the invocation of capitalism as quintessentially American value in Malcolm's description of it as an eagle-turned-vulture: "It used to be strong enough to go and suck anybody's blood whether they were strong or not. But now it has become more cowardly, like the vulture, and it can only suck the blood of the victims."[93] In his 1964 "Ballot or the Bullet" speech, delivered after his break with the NOI, Malcolm's trenchant critique of capitalism is centered in the disempowerment of Black economies by white businesses. He enjoins his audience to consider that every dollar spent outside

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[92] Michael Eric Dyson writes, "King's legacy is viewed as most useful when promoting an unalloyed optimism about the possibilities of American social transformation, which peaked during his "I Have a Dream" speech. What is often not discussed—and is perhaps deliberately ignored—is how King dramatically revised his views, glimpsed most eloquently in his Vietnam-era antiwar rhetoric and his War-on-Poverty social activism. Corporation-sponsored commercials that celebrate King's memory—most notably, television spots by McDonald's and Coca-Cola aimed at connecting their products to King's legacy—reveal a truncated understanding of King's meaning and value to American democracy. These and other efforts at public explanation of King's meaning portray his worth as underwriting the interests of the state, which advocates a distorted cultural history of an era actually shaped more by blood and brutality than by distant dreams" (Dyson 1995, 27)

[93] Malcolm's statement was made in a January 18, 1965 interview with *Young Socialist* magazine, when asked about the "world-wide struggle now going on between capitalism and socialism" (Breitman 1965, 199).

of the Black community empowers white businesses while weakening Black ones. Capitalism and racism, Malcolm argued, operated jointly to subjugate African Americans, and it was through his education with the NOI that Malcolm reached these conclusions. Malcolm's remarks on capitalism reflect the way his encounters with Islam in its various forms shaped his understanding of how civil society might be improved. Through the activities of the NOI, Islam had a secular and civil purpose rather than a religious one, and it formed the foundation through which the Black nationalist and Black Power movements would later arise.

Islam also allowed African Americans to envision themselves as part of the global community of the Muslim Third World rather than exclusively as American citizens.[94] This attitude is exemplified in the statement made by fellow NOI member Muhammad Ali, who upon his return from his tour of Africa and the Middle East declared to the press, "I'm not an American; I'm a black man." (McAlister 623). Malcolm invokes the Muslim Third World in his the "Ballot or the Bullet" speech in his call for nationalism per the Asian and African countries.[95] Discussing these worldwide struggles for

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[94] McAlister (2005) writes, "For African Americans disaffected with the Christian church—those frustrated by the commitment of black Christians to brotherhood with whites or angered by the continuing violence by white Christians against non-violent civil rights activists—Islam offered an alternative. Islam, its adherents argued, provided the basis for a black nationalist consciousness that was separate from the civil rights goals of integration into a white-dominated and oppressive nation. Islam offered a set of values and beliefs that were at once spiritual, political, and cultural. As LeRoi Jones described it, Islam offered 'what the Black man needs, a reconstruction ... a total way of life that he can involve himself with that is post-American, in a sense.' The Nation of Islam in particular provided both an alternative religious affiliation and a counter-citizenship, an identity that challenged black incorporation into the dominant discourse of Judeo-Christian American-ness" (93).

[95] Malcolm said, in "The Ballot or the Bullet," —"This is the day of the guerrilla. They did the same thing in Algeria. Algerians, who were nothing but Bedouins, took a rine and sneaked off to the hills, and de Gaulle and all of his highfalutin' war machinery couldn't defeat those guerrillas. Nowhere on this earth does the white man win in a guerrilla warfare. It's not his speed. Just as

independence, Malcolm envisioned a political purpose that aligned his fellow Muslims with communities of color abroad, which not only gave Islam a secular purpose, but enabled African Americans to think of themselves beyond their identity as Americans. It is notable that Malcolm delivered this speech after his break with the NOI, while he was in the process of gravitating towards orthodox Islam; this timing shows that the move towards orthodoxy did not curb the secular bent that had guided Malcolm's outlook. The various forms of Islam, whether through the NOI or Sunni Islam, held secular and political ambitions for Malcolm and his community.

Malcolm's reversal on the matter of political enfranchisement (as evident in his advocacy for voting in "The Ballot or the Bullet," and his growing interest in nationalist movements abroad seem to contradict one another. Was Malcolm becoming more pro- or more anti-American (or post-American, per Amiri Baraka) with the shifts in his views? I would argue that he was becoming both of those things. Malcolm's changing attitudes, no doubt spurred by his departure from the NOI and conversion to Sunni Islam, made him more committed to holding his country accountable towards its African American citizens. Conversion to Sunni Islam may have helped him embrace matters such as integration and enfranchisement but it did so by widening his worldly outlook beyond civil and domestic rights and towards the broader domain of human rights. In his rumination on Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., James Baldwin wrote that at the time of their deaths, both men were one and the same, which suggests that Malcolm had

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guerrilla warfare is prevailing in Asia and in parts of Africa and in parts of Latin America, you've got to be mighty naive, or you've got to play the black man cheap, if you don't think some day he's going to wake up and find that it's got to be the ballot or the bullet."

reconciled with King's vision for advancing civil rights. But in fact, the opposite was true—King veered more in the direction of Malcolm's views and away from the nonviolence aims of the Civil Rights Movement with his increasingly radical stance against the Vietnam War,[96] leading to his eventual assassination.[97] Indeed, Baldwin (1972) famously wrote in his Esquire piece on Malcolm and Martin that "by the time each met his death there was practically no difference between them." It is important to stress that these transnational outlooks were critical for the development of racial understanding among leading African American figures of the twentieth century. For both Malcolm and Baldwin, these outlooks were indelibly shaped by their encounters with Islam and with Muslims—both at home and abroad.

Encounters with Islam abroad

Leaving the U.S. opened Malcolm up to a different conception of whiteness. En route to Mecca in Europe, Malcolm observes that "Europeans act more human, or humane, whichever the right word is . . . People seeing you as a Muslim saw you as a

[96] In his speech, "A Time to Break Silence" King said, "My third reason moves to an even deeper level of awareness, for it grows out of my experience in the ghettos of the North over the last three years—especially the last three summers. As I have walked among the desperate, rejected and angry young men I have told them that Molotov cocktails and rifles would not solve their problem. I have tried to offer them my deepest compassion while maintaining my conviction that social change comes most meaningfully through nonviolent action. But they asked—and rightly so—what about Vietnam? They asked if our own nation wasn't using massive doses of violence to solve its problems, to bring about the changes it wanted. Their questions hit home, and I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today—my own government, For the sake of those boys, for the sake of this government, for the sake of the hundreds of thousands trembling under our violence, I cannot be silent" (King 1992, 138-9).

[97] "A Time to Break Silence" made King extremely unpopular and feared. He was assassinated a year to the day the speech was first delivered at Riverside Church.

human being, and they had a different look, different talk, everything" (367). This is a startling observation for someone living in the post-911 era: the fact that one's Muslim identity led to more favorable treatment, and that Islam had a humanizing effect on both Malcolm and, consequently, on the Europeans he talks about. The striking nature of this observation only amplifies the state of injustice endured by African Americans at that time. In Mecca, the site of his pilgrimage to Hajj, Malcolm realizes that whiteness is predicated primarily on attitude rather than complexion, and that the construct of whiteness served primarily to define Black, rather than white, identity.[98]

Malcolm's observations in Mecca also shed light on the limitations of separatism. In a letter that he addressed both publicly and to his assistants at his post-NOI organization, the Muslim Mosque, Inc. with the intent of press distribution (Haley 390), Malcolm observes about his fellow pilgrims, many of whom were white or white-presenting (such as lighter-skinned Arabs): "we were *truly* all the same (brothers)—because their belief in one God had removed the 'white' from their *minds*, the 'white' from their *behavior*, and the 'white' from their *attitude"* (391). Malcolm sees that Muslims of all races were "all participating in the same ritual, displaying a unity of brotherhood that [his] experiences in America had led [him] to believe never would exist between the white and the non-white" (391). The letter dictated to Haley in the *Autobiography* differs from the actual letter, obtained from the University of Michigan's

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[98] From the *Autobiography*: "That morning was when I first began to reappraise the 'white man.' It was when I first began to perceive that 'white man,' as commonly used, means complexion only secondarily; primarily it described attitudes and actions. In America, 'white man' meant specific attitudes and actions toward the black man, and toward all other non-white men. But in the Muslim world, I had seen that men with white complexions where more genuinely brotherly than anyone else had ever been" (383).

Bentley Historical Library.[99] One paragraph from this letter that is not in the *Autobiography* reads, "*True Islam* removes racism, because people of all colors and races who accept its religious principles and bow down to the *One God, Allah*, also automatically accept each other as brothers and sisters, regardless of differences in complexion" (emphasis mine).[100]

This addendum is significant not only because it signals a clear departure from Elijah Muhammad and the NOI,[101] but also because it does so by invoking a rhetoric on humanity that stems from Malcolm's newfound understanding of race, which he cultivates abroad. The universality of "all colors and races" signals the move from separatism to a wider acceptance of humanity. And in the previous excerpt, admitting that he could never have previously imagined the unity between "the white and the non-white," Malcolm's acceptance of people who he had formerly regarded as "white devils" emerges from his encounters with Sunni Islam while he is abroad. In the same letter, he writes, following his pilgrimage to Mecca, "During the past eleven days here in the Muslim world, I have eaten from the same plate, drunk from the same glass, and slept in the same bed (or on the same rug)—while praying to the same God—with fellow

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[99] "Letter from Malcolm X," April 20, 1964, p. 2. In Box 1 of the Aliya Hassen Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan. Aliya Hassen befriended Malcolm upon his conversion to Sunni Islam. She was a leading Arab American figure in Dearborn, MI and helped organize Malcolm's trip to Mecca. The collection at the Bentley Historical Library contains a number of items, clippings, and paraphernalia related to Malcolm, including a postcard that he had sent her from Mecca.

[100] It is unclear why this section is not included in the *Autobiography* as it marks a monumental shift in Malcolm's beliefs on religion and on race.

[101] "True Islam" hints at Elijah Muhammad's refusal to shift the NOI towards orthodoxy, and "the One God, Allah" rejects the Nation of Islam's doctrine of worship where its leaders are deified: For example, Elijah Muhammad believed that Wallace D. Fard, the NOI's founder, was God (Marable 2011, 86), and that Elijah Muhammad was a prophet, thus rejecting the orthodox Islamic belief that the last messenger was the Prophet Muhammad).

Muslims, whose eyes were the bluest of blue, whose hair was the whitest of white. And in the *words* and in the *actions* and in the *deeds* of the 'white' Muslims, I felt the same sincerity that I felt among the black African Muslims of Nigeria, Sudan, and Ghana" (391). In his letter, Malcolm recognizes the humanity of the white men he encounters *because* they are Muslim.[102] His language highlights the unique role of Islam in the African American experience, where Islam represents a totally different system of meaning than it does with the dominant culture. Islam was not only empowering for Black subjects; it humanized white people for Malcolm, who had spent twelve years with the NOI preaching that the white man was the devil. Going abroad offered a new understanding of humanity for African American expats who were privileged enough to do so, giving them a clearer view of the landscape back home. It did so by encouraging these expats to expand the fight for civil rights to the more broadly encompassing fight for human rights. For Malcolm, the conversion to orthodox Islam allowed him to achieve a greater transnational perspective that saw the construct of whiteness as predicated on attitude rather than skin color, as the letter excerpted earlier shows.

For Baldwin, on the other hand, traveling abroad to Europe offered an escape and a haven, but not a home—a distinction that he makes in his introduction to the nonfiction collection *Nobody Knows My Name* where he confesses that neither he nor his white American counterparts were "at home" in Europe. Europe is where Baldwin goes to learn about being an American from a detached perspective; America is where he furthers and

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[102] And upon his return from Mecca, Malcolm told a reporter: "My trip to Mecca has opened my eyes. I no longer subscribe to racism. I have adjusted my thinking to the point where I believe that whites are human beings" (X and Haley [1965] 1981, 474).

fully embraces that self-knowledge. While he praises Europe as a haven where America's color problem does not exist, he notes the illusion behind such havens: "Havens are high-priced. The price exacted of the haven-dweller is that he contrive to delude himself into believing that he has found a haven" (Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, xii). Europe thus figured as a complicated space for intellectuals like Baldwin; it was not a quick and easy alternative to racism in America, just as the Nation of Islam could not entirely alleviate the injustices against African Americans. Furthermore, the delusion of perceiving Europe as a haven impedes the journey to self-knowledge, which was a problem inherent to the NOI as well. Baldwin writes, "It turned out that the question of who I was was not solved because I had removed myself from the social forces which menaced me—anyway, these forces had become interior, and I had dragged them across the ocean with me." Neither separatism nor sojourns abroad would remove these "menacing" social forces; they each afforded opportunities for further examining but not for solving the "color problem." With time and travels abroad, both Baldwin and Malcolm came to embrace integration as the most viable solution for dealing with the so-called "color problem."

Eventually, Baldwin left Europe and found another haven of sorts in Turkey.[103] Turkey presented an unusual alternative for Baldwin; it was not the typical European

[103] Magdalena Zaborowska (2008) writes, "Turkey was an alternative location, a space of exile, but also a nurturing dwelling place after Baldwin had spent nearly a decade in France and Western Europe and failed to reestablish a permanent residency in his homeland upon his return in 1957. It became a hideaway during the depressed years following the assassinations of Malcolm X, Medgar Evers, and Martin Luther King Jr., all of whom Baldwin knew and considered friends. As a dramatically different location far removed from his home country, Turkey also provided a powerful lens through which he reimagined himself as a black and queer writer and readjusted his view of American race relations as the 1960s drew to a close" (8).

retreat to which many expats like him fled. In fact, it was a place for him to isolate himself in some ways: he claimed that he was "left alone there and could work better there" (Zaborowska 13). The greater sense of isolation (at least from his fellow Americans) marked an important moment in Baldwin's trajectory, as this particular sojourn would allow him to work diligently and journey further towards self-discovery.[104] Baldwin's primary motive for leaving his home country was survival, which points to the direness of situation back home for him and his peers.[105] That he sought survival in a Muslim country that was in many ways so unlike his own signals the extent to which he felt isolated in the cultural and religious mainstream of his own nation.

The Turkish sojourn allowed Baldwin's artistry to flourish. He was, according to Magdalena Zaborowska, author of *James Baldwin's Turkish Decade*, "able to turn his marginalization into a catalyst for writing that redefined the meaning of American identity not only for the twentieth century but also for our own" (26). From a vast distance, being an American made a little more sense to someone who grew up as an outcast in his own country in the sense that being a stranger and not an outcast made for a refreshing change of scene. And it suited Baldwin to be in a Muslim country; not because

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[104] Baldwin was not wholly isolated—he was especially intimate with a number of Turkish friends, including the actor Engin Cezar and his wife and their circle, and the filmmaker Sedat Pakay, a noted photographer and filmmaker who produced a short film on Baldwin (*James Baldwin: From Another Place*, 1970) in addition to a remarkable collection of photographs of Baldwin in Istanbul (*James Baldwin in Turkey: Bearing Witness from Another Place*, 2012).

[105] In an interview with Jordan Elgrably (1984) for the *Paris Review*, Baldwin said, "I got to Paris with forty dollars in my pocket, but I had to get out of New York. My reflexes were tormented by the plight of other people. Reading had taken me away for long periods at a time, yet I still had to deal with the streets and the authorities and the cold. I knew what it meant to be white and I knew what it meant to be a nigger, and I knew what was going to happen to me. My luck was running out. I was going to go to jail, I was going to kill somebody or be killed. My best friend had committed suicide two years earlier, jumping off the George Washington Bridge."

he himself had any true inclinations towards Islam, but because he believed that it was a "relief to deal with people who, whatever they are pretending, are not pretending to be Christians" (13). Turkey felt more authentic to Baldwin because its citizens had a different set of pretenses; in contrast, the pretense to Christianity was particularly off-putting to Baldwin, whose years as a teen preacher and subsequent departure from the church made him feel that pretense more keenly. Being in a Muslim country helped Baldwin establish an alternative space where he could live and write more authentically—and perhaps feel more human, as he expressed in an interview with David Frost about his Turkish sojourn, who asked him whether he was a Christian or a Muslim. Baldwin stated, "I am trying to become a human being."[106] Zaborowska argues that the exchange between Frost and Baldwin both highlights the writer's "comical" situation ("a black queer who used to be a preacher and now resides in a Muslim country") and signals his desire to move his work in a more "humanistic" direction "that emphasized identity as process and shedding of established labels and notions as key to attaining awareness and selfhood" (238). By virtue of being in a Muslim country—in that it provided a sharp alternative to the dominant culture of his home country—Baldwin's contact with Islam abroad fueled the humanistic impulses of self-knowledge in his artistry.

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[106] A short excerpt of the interview with David Frost in Zaborowska's *Turkish Decade* (2008):
"Frost: Are you Christian or Muslim?
Baldwin: (Laughing) I was born a Baptist.
Frost: It's not that funny!
Baldwin: It is to me.
Frost: And what are you now?
Baldwin: I am trying to become a human being.
Frost: And what does one know when one's reached that stage?
Baldwin: I don't think you ever do. You work at it, you know. You take it as it comes. You try not to tell too many lies. You try to love other people and hope that you'll be loved" (237).

It is important to note that Baldwin's encounters with Islam in Turkey were of a secular nature. In Istanbul—"itself 'another country' within Turkey, Baldwin hardly experienced the raw realities of local Islamic orthodoxy," Zaborowska notes (86). Baldwin thus appeared to look upon Islam favorably because of the secular manifestations that he encountered in Istanbul. The actor Engin Cezzar, who first welcomed Baldwin upon his arrival in Turkey and remained one of his most intimate friends, juxtaposes the secular Islam that Baldwin finds in Istanbul against the Islam of the NOI, noting that whatever initial impression he had from NOI was overcast by his experiences in Turkey (ibid). So to Baldwin, the more effective alternative to the Christianity that haunted him, as famously illustrated in his novel *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, was not the version of Islam espoused by the NOI but the version that he found in Turkey, although both were secular in their own ways. Zaborowska suggests that secular Islam, insofar as it was a radical alternative to his experiences, may have played a part in helping him "exorcis[e] his experience of racism at home and even his having been 'saved' as a teenager in his Pentecostal storefront church in Harlem" (85).

Baldwin's encounters with Islam in France and Turkey influenced the direction of his work tremendously. In Saint Paul de Vence, France, his final sojourn and site of death in 1987, Baldwin had started writing a novel, *No Papers for Mohammed,* whose "title character was based on a gardener named Mohammed who worked for Baldwin in Saint Paul de Vence . . . Baldwin sympathized with Muslim immigrants to Europe as 'an outcast of a different continent.'" Baldwin's relationship with Muslims in Europe was curious. On the one hand, there was certainly an affinity between these marginalized groups, but on the other hand, the French Muslims allowed Baldwin to come to a startling

realization: he feared that the gardener saw him as the “master of the plantation” (273). Baldwin’s relationship with his Muslim gardener in particular carried an unusual power dynamic wherein Baldwin presided over him as his superior but was simultaneously reminded of forces of subjugation that existed back home in America. Ultimately, residing in a Muslim country opened Baldwin up to an expansive humanist perspective that alerted him to the possibilities of peoples elsewhere who were more vulnerable than him. Rather than dwelling on the struggles that forced him to run away from his home country, he could imagine an alternative set of conditions that affected different people on a global scale. Baldwin’s situation parallels that of many African American writers who went abroad and experienced a similar expansion of their worldview. Paul Gilroy (1993) describes Richard Wright’s own experience in being far away from the U.S., which “contributes much to the presentation of the links between the struggles against racial subordination inside America and wider, global dimensions of political antagonism: anti-fascism, anti-imperialism, and political and economic emancipation form colonial domination” (154). Baldwin’s particular situation is particularly significant to the aims of this project because one of the primary forces that widened his perspective in the way that Gilroy describes is his encounter with Islam. For Baldwin, Islam functioned as a force that linked the racial situation back home to larger, postcolonial Black and brown struggles worldwide.

A time for self-reckoning at home

Baldwin and Malcolm’s respective sojourns abroad illuminated some of the central issues in their home country. In spite of their disagreements with the NOI, the

movement's critiques against integration and nonviolence allowed Malcolm and Baldwin's perspectives to align after their time abroad. In an interview with Studs Terkel (1961). Baldwin, when asked about the competing aims of the NOI and that of Martin Luther King, Jr. ("two movements happening simultaneously with the Negro in America today"), cannot bring himself to align with the nonviolent aims of the Civil Rights Movement. Instead, he sees violence as inevitable: "I can't tell my nephew that if someone hits him he shouldn't hit back. I really cannot tell him that. And I can still less tell my brother that, if someone comes to his house with a gun, he should let him in, and allow him to do what he wants with his children and his wife. But the point is: even if I were able to tell my brother that he should, there is absolutely no guarantee that my brother will, and I can't blame him" (17-8). Baldwin's rejection of nonviolence parallels Malcolm's criticism of the Civil Rights Movement in his "Message to the Grassroots" speech, where he stated, "you don't have a peaceful revolution. You don't have a turn-the-other-cheek revolution. There's no such thing as a nonviolent revolution."[107] In the speech, Malcolm implores his listeners to think more globally when he states, "If violence is wrong in America, violence is wrong abroad," invoking the hypocrisy of a nation and a movement that preaches nonviolence when violence in the name of this country's freedom is perpetuated abroad.

These challenges to the conditions that have subjugated African Americans are exemplified in the figure of the self-determined Black Muslim, who asserts the superiority of Black over white Americans, which Baldwin (1985) claims is a "perfectly

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[107] Delivered on November 10, 1963 in Detroit, Michigan

inevitable development" (19) in the history of a nation that has consistently shown the opposite: "The white world can't do anything about this, can't call down the Muslim leaders, or anybody else on this, until they are willing to face their own history" (ibid). To Baldwin, then, the Black Muslims presented an opportunity for white America to confront its history and reckon with self-knowledge, the absence of which was, according to Baldwin, the central problem of the United States: "the incoherent, totally incoherent, foreign policy of this country is a reflection of the incoherence of the private lives here . . . In order to learn your name, you are going to have to learn mine. In a way, the American Negro is *the* key figure in this country; and if you don't face him, you will never face anything" (22). With Baldwin's assertion that the figure of the "American Negro" would force Americans to learn about themselves, individually and collectively, one is reminded that even back in the twentieth century and up until this day, Muslims embodied a similar role. African Americans and Muslim Americans served to remind other Americans that they lacked knowledge of themselves and their country, which is why the experiences of Baldwin and Malcolm abroad enabled them to adopt a broader vision of humanity. Baldwin's message rings especially clear in the post-9/11 era, when nationalist and patriotic fervor has reached an all time high in response to the possibility of non-white constituents, including Muslim Americans, being part of the so-called fabric of this country.

Dehumanization as a consequence of a lack of self-knowledge is at the crux of Baldwin's last essay collection, *Nobody Knows My Name*, epitomized in the notion of not knowing one's name. It is also behind the Black Muslim movement's mission to give its followers new names. As Sohail Daulatzai (2012) writes on the NOI's use of "original"

names. For Malcolm and for Black Islam more generally, a central part of this historical recovery had to do with conversion to Islam, which has reclaimed the power to define oneself to change from a "slave name" to the "X" (the unknown), and then to the "original" Muslim name. In this way, Islam became a vehicle for Malcolm and other Black converts to reject the master narrative of slavery—and by extension America—and to define themselves from property to person, and from slave to human (xiv-xv)." The impetus to re-name is an act of affirmation and empowerment. Indeed, one could see the anxiety surrounding the issues of naming and identity throughout Baldwin's oeuvre: *Nobody Knows My Name*, *No Name in the Stree*t, *One Day, When I was Lost*, and *No Papers for Mohammed*. One of Baldwin's greatest endeavors was to articulate the feeling of being dehumanized and alienated in American society, and this struggle ultimately aligned his vision with Malcolm's. His admiration for Malcolm was rooted in the latter's ability to identify the suffering that plagued African Americans and his desire for them to be proud of their identities in a society that did not perceive its fellow Black citizens as human beings.

Conclusion

Despite the tensions and differences between the Nation of Islam, Sunni Islam, and secular Islam, there is no doubt that encounters with these various manifestations of Islam opened up the discourse on notions of humanity and the dehumanization of Black lives in midcentury America. During a time of social and civil antagonism against Black subjects, Islam emerged as an alternative force of empowerment. It seemed that the way to empower disenfranchised American citizens was to find alternatives to the American

mainstream. Figures like Malcolm X and James Baldwin, among many others, challenged many assumptions about American culture and identity, and it was through their outward-looking visions, particularly towards the Muslim Third World and the politics of diaspora, that they expanded upon notions of humanity by challenging what it meant to be a person at home, in prison, in exile, and in the world. Their encounters with Islam at home and abroad tapped into a vital moment in the emergence of Islam in midcentury American culture, laying the groundwork for conceiving of Islam as a transnational and countercultural force, as the next chapter will show.

Chapter Four, Malcolm X, Radical Islam, and the Art of Hip Hop

Introduction

In the fall of 2014, an exhibit titled *Return of the Mecca: The Art of Islam and Hip Hop* appeared at the William Grant Still Community Arts Center in Los Angeles. The juxtaposition of Islam and hip hop might have surprised visitors who knew very little about hip hop's origins. Particularly striking was the range of American icons who were either Muslim or affiliated with Islam in some way, either religiously or aesthetically. These included Malcolm X, Muhammad Ali, Queen Latifah, the Wu Tang Clan, Nas, and Ice Cube, to name a few. By highlighting the accomplishments of major American personalities who were connected to Islam in some way or another the exhibit offered both a quintessentially American and an unapologetically Muslim experience. *Return of the Mecca* helped spark the very first embers of this dissertation as it illustrated how Islam had shaped one of the foremost genres of American music and culture. By beginning this chapter with *Return of the Mecca*, I end this dissertation with a final note on how museums encompass a range of ways in which cultural representations of Islam appear in the United States. Museums serve increasingly large roles in educating the American public about Islam, even, as *Return of the Mecca* illustrates, in the way Islam and hip hop intertwine, and so they play an important role in the examination of American cultural and even counter-cultural productions such as hip hop. In great contrast to the museum initiatives featured in Chapter One, *Return of the Mecca*

exemplifies an understanding of Islam that is racialized for the empowerment of communities of color, just as Baldwin had done.

Arguably the most illuminating aspect of the exhibit was its illustration of Malcolm X's effect on the development of hip hop culture. Early hip hop artists encountered Islam largely through the image of Malcolm, and so the influence of his revolutionary spirit was legion to hip hop culture. This chapter begins with a discussion of the *Return of the Mecca* exhibit to extend some of the previous chapter's discussions of Malcolm X, who is the foremost exemplar of the attitudes that characterized early hip hop culture: the anger, disaffection, and self-determination against the injustices that dogged African American citizens despite some of the advances achieved by the Civil Rights Movement.[108] Thus, it made sense for frustrated hip hop artists to look to Malcolm, who was in some ways critical of the Civil Rights Movement (CRM), as their icon for anger and dissatisfaction in the post-CRM era. Just as Malcolm was a symbol of empowerment alternative to the Civil Rights Movement, hip hop provided a viable and affirming alternative to mainstream elements of society and culture, largely due to its incorporation of Malcolm and references to Islam.

This chapter examines the trope of Malcolm X through the lens of hip hop cultural production. Malcolm was an integral figure to the development of hip hop culture, appearing as a radical revolutionary to marginalized communities who were oppressed by the dominant culture. I take the notion of the radical in this sense—as a

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[108] For a more thorough discussion of the successes and failures of the Civil Rights Movement in achieving racial equality, and the resulting disaffection, see Bakari Kitwana's *The Hip-Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture* (2003)

figure whose opposition to the dominant culture empowered marginalized constituents—and explain how Malcolm was revered in hip hop circles as a humanizing force.[109] However, in other circles, Malcolm was understood as a different kind of radical—a radical in the sense of "fundamentalist." Certainly this was how the U.S. government viewed him before they decided that Malcolm was an appropriate figure to help de-radicalize Muslim youth abroad. These competing notions of radicalism illustrate the many ways in which Malcolm's image was appropriated for different purposes. The trope of Malcolm poses a significant contrast to the way "Islam" figures as a trope to American identity.[110] If this latter trope figures Islam and Muslims as antithetical to the United States, the trope of Malcolm works to diversify "Muslim" as a signifier since Malcolm and his identity as a Muslim embodies a different set of meanings to different audiences. Sohail Daulatzai (2012) notes, "with the 'Black criminal' and the 'Muslim terrorist' becoming the twin pillars of U.S. state formation in the post-Civil Rights era, it is deeply ironic that Malcolm X would become the iconic figure for Black radicalism and

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[109] I use the term "humanizing" here in a very different sense than the way it is used in the museum initiatives I explore in chapter one. Whereas in the first chapter museums sought to "humanize" Islam for the general public, Islam in the twentieth century was "humanizing" in the sense of empowering for African American citizens who looked to the Nation of Islam and Malcolm for a sense of affirmation alternative to the dominant culture. This latter understanding of humanization stems from the philosophy of self-determination emblematic of the Nation of Islam and, later, the Black Power movement.

[110] In discussing the European context, Fatima El-Tayeb (2011) writes, "Islam at times appears as a signifier almost as empty as race, ascribing a combination of naturalized cultural attributes to 'Muslims' that has little to do with religious beliefs or even with being a believer. Instead, the trope of the Muslim as Other offers an apparently easy and unambiguous means to divide Europeans and migrants. However, this discursive centrality of the (second-generation) Muslim as cultural Other can be read as being caused by and at the same time covering a paradigm-shifting change, namely the continentwide demographic move to a migrant population that is predominantly minoritarian, consisting of so-called immigrants who were born and raised in their countries of residence" (*European Others*, xxx)

hip-hop culture late in the twentieth century" (97). It is not just ironic that Malcolm was transformed into a symbol of Black radicalism and hip hop culture; this transformation speaks to the fact that his perceived threat to the country was minimized, particularly in comparison to the perceived threat that Arab and South Asian Muslims now presented to the U.S. Malcolm's transformation reminds us of the transfer of threatening potential from Black to brown Muslim bodies.

In line with the overall mission of this project, the goal of this chapter is to examine intersecting spaces of Muslim and American culture and show how the formation of one of the most quintessentially American forms of music—at a time when hip hop's mission of social and political protest was clearest—was influenced by Islam. Rather then doing an extensive analysis of the lyrics, styles, and images of individual hip hop artists, as some scholars have done,[111] I focus specifically on the trope of Malcolm in order to demonstrate hip hop's appropriation of Islamic motifs. I begin with the role that Malcolm has had in the development of hip hop culture, largely through an analysis of the *Return of the Mecca* exhibit. I then look at attempts to appropriate Malcolm and other aspects of hip hop culture by fundamentalists such as Al Qaeda and John Walker Lindh as well as the U.S. government, with hip hop appearing as a radicalizing or de-radicalizing force depending on who uses it. I end with a study of transnational appropriations of U.S. hip hop culture in Europe to illustrate the extent to which Malcolm and American hip hop allowed Muslims abroad to articulate an identity of self-affirmation abroad. Parallel to the way Malcolm and Baldwin found expressions of their

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[111] See Sohail Daulatzai, *Black Star, Crescent Moon* (2012)

identity as Americans (and in Malcolm's case as a Muslim) during their travels abroad, European Muslim hip hop artists engaged with the trope of Malcolm in a way that affirmed their sense of belonging as Muslims in a hostile society.

"Islam" in hip hop culture is broadly represented. I include orthodox and heterodox versions of Islam in order to challenge the notion of a monolithic Islam, although it goes without saying that one need not look beyond the orthodox versions of Islam to reject this notion: even within Sunni or Shia Muslims the range of practice and mindset cannot nor should not be construed as monolithic. The three branches of Sunni Islam, the Nation of Islam, and the Five-Percent Nation of Islam are the most popular forms of Islam in the hip hop movement, according to H. Samy Alim in his own injunction that "'Islam' needs to be broadly conceived, encompassing a spectrum of ideologies and schools of thought" (cooke and Lawrence 265-6). The diversity of artist expressions of Islam is critical to the project of illustrating what Islam can mean to different people and groups. By ending this dissertation with this chapter on the various forms of Islam in hip hop culture, I aim to have elucidated how the practice of racializing secular forms of Islam, as Baldwin's perspective illustrates in the previous chapter, manifests in aspects of popular American culture.[112]

Return of the Mecca

[112] I have not chosen to discuss contemporary (that is, artists who came of age and rose to prominence after 9/11) Muslim American hip hop artists as I am most concerned with examining unexpected places where American and Muslim places intersect. Focusing on early hip hop culture serves to illustrate the impact of domestic forms of Islam on American culture. The last two chapters of this dissertation deliberately focus on the early twentieth representations of Islam in order to shift conversations and scholarships to root Islam in the development of modern American culture.

Return of the Mecca opened at the William Grant Still Arts Center as part of the Los Angeles/Islam Arts Initiative in October 2014.[113] Curated by Sohail Daulatzai, a professor of film and media studies at the University of California, Irvine, *Return of the Mecca* (ROM) highlighted three major points of interest: a glance at the intersecting histories of Islam and hip hop, an understanding of Malcolm X's influence on hip hop culture, and an introduction to the internationalist vision that connected American hip hop culture to Black and brown struggles worldwide, a vision that Malcolm cultivated especially in the last year of his life.

The exhibit catalogue's introductory essay offers a powerful illustration of how Islam was a humanizing force for Black subjects of the twentieth century. In the essay, Daulatzai (2014) asserts that "conversion to Islam was a powerful act, a radical redefinition of the self" that allowed African Americans to "redefine themselves not as property but as person, not as slave but as human" (6). Malcolm was, of course, central to this idea of "radical redefinition:" the number of converts to Islam was middling until Malcolm joined the Nation of Islam and became their most prominent spokesman after his release from prison in 1952. This notion of the "radical redefinition of the self" is perhaps the most defining feature of the Islam that appealed to African Americans in the twentieth century. It is also the clearest link between Islam and hip hop as the formation

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[113] The Los Angeles/Islam Arts Initiative was a 2014 mission to bring thirty different community and art spaces throughout Los Angeles in order to showcase both traditional and contemporary Islamic art, broadly defined as "work created by non-Muslim artists from Muslim-dominant countries, work by Muslims creating art in non-Muslim dominant countries, and work by artists culturally influenced by Islam." http://laislamarts.org/about/

of hip hop culture followed in the footsteps of the Black nationalist politics of affirmation that characterized Malcolm, the Nation of Islam, and the Black Power movement.[114]

The exhibit also shatters prevailing stereotypes about both Islam and hip hop, stereotypes that are responsible for the perceived unlikeliness of the connection between both. According to the curator, Sohail Daulatzai (2014), "To most, Islam is viewed as being pre-modern and anti-Western, with a strict, puritanical code that is also anti-pleasure, while to most people, hip hop is viewed as the exact opposite: it's decadent, rampantly materialistic, hypersexual, and hedonistic" (6). Both of those characterizations are severely limited, not to mention inaccurate, as *Return of the Mecca* shows. The exhibit unravels realities about both hip hop and Islam: that hip hop is a cultural manifestation of the politics of affirmation exemplified by the Black Power movement (which in turn were influenced by Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam), and that Islam is a non-monolithic, non-homogenous religion and culture with secular impulses that are present in both the political and cultural aspects of Black self-determination. Hip hop being one of these avenues of self-determination, the exhibit unpacks the ways in which hip hop culture was indelibly shaped by Islam.

Return of the Mecca's greatest driving point was its presentation of Islam as counterculture. In the previous chapter, I discussed Baldwin's understanding of Islam as a secular and racial force of empowerment, which guides the central theme of this chapter as well. In this chapter, I discuss Malcolm's image as a countercultural revolutionary and

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[114] For more on hip hop's development in the legacy of these movements, see Jeff Chang's *Can't Stop Won't Stop* (2005). Baker Kitwana's *The Hip-Hop Generation* (2003), and Patricia Hill Collins's *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism, Feminism* (2006)

how his embodiment of Islam was influential to early hop hip culture. The trope of Malcolm as a radical revolutionary allowed many Muslims and non-Muslims alike to see that Islam provided something that the rest of American society failed to give: a sense of reclamation of the past, of dignity and of self worth in a hostile society. Because Islam was both the original religion for many of the Africans who were enslaved and brought to the Americas and a radical alternative to the dominant practices of Christianity in this country for the descendants of the enslaved, Islam was therefore appealing to those who rejected or were rejected by the dominant culture.

The radical assertion of the self in an unjust society is at the heart of hip hop culture. This kind of radicalism—a rejection of the dehumanizing forces of the status quo—is one definition of a word that is often and crudely taken to mean "fundamentalist" or "terrorist," particularly when associated with Islam. Bringing Islam into the conversation on hip hop places these different notions of radicalism side by side, especially since hip hop speaks to a moment of time in pre-9/11 America when resisting the status quo was a survival and cultural tactic, particularly since the dominant culture sought to suppress the civil and human rights of communities of color. This particular definition of radicalism as a mode of survival is particularly salient for Muslims in a deeply Islamophobic era. For many Muslims, simply existing as themselves is a radical act. Others were inspired to take their faith to the next level; this includes Muslim American women who decided to start wearing the hijab after 9/11 as a radical affirmation of their faith and identity when they may not have been drawn to the hijab

prior to being ushered into a new Islamophobic age.[115] These women were radical in the sense that they resisted the Islamophobic status quo by marking themselves as visibly Muslim.

My definition of the radical considers counterculture as a crucial element: specifically, what makes something a viable alternative to the mainstream. Su'ad Abdul Khabeer's *Muslim Cool* (2016) concerns the importance of counterculture; in an interview with *The Atlantic*, she says, ". . . in the United States, black cultural production has always been a source of culture and cool. When we think of "cool," we think of something that goes against the grain. To be black is to always be against the grain already. That 'cool' has always been about resistance and revolution, and this is why black Muslims fit in that really well. I think hip-hop music has always been about that. . ." (Green 2016). However, I also examine discourses that consider hip hop culture to be radicalizing, and study subsequent attempts by the U.S. State Department to de-radicalize "at risk" Muslim populations abroad *using* hip hop culture. Hence, this chapter brings multiple understandings of the notion of the radical together in the intersections of Islam and hip hop.

The connections between Islam and hip hop are more visible in the wider context of hip hop scholarship, which has been in formation since the 1990s with the seminal study by Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (1994). Other major scholars include S. Craig Watkins (who coined the term "hip hop intelligentsia" in reference to these scholars), Michael Eric Dyson, Jeff Chang,

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[115] Yvonne Haddad Yazbek discusses these choices in her article, "The Post-9/11 *Hijab* as Icon" (2007).

Bakari Kitwana, Mark Anthony Neal and Monica R. Miller, to name a few. These scholars have unpacked the intersections between social protest, hip hop culture, and alternative productions of knowledge. Indeed, Chuck D of the group Public Enemy described hip hop as "the Black CNN" to highlight its role in "sharing news of the social and political realities of urban, disadvantaged youth of color" (Maira 2013, 195). The elitist dismissal of hip hop as a marginal form of "urban" rap (rap being only one of hip hop's components) serves only to reinforce mainstream cultural productions and practices, which hip hop scholarship counters in its recognition of hip hop culture as significant tool for social awareness, knowledge, and protest for communities on the margins. Paul Gilroy (2013) explores this elitism further in his suggestion that the affirmative and self-deterministic politics of Black music practices are not understood as intellectual projects by "the writing elite and the masses of people who exist outside literacy" (76-77).[116] Even more specific is the field of hip hop and religion, of which there are multiple scholars, including but not limited to Monica Miller (2013), Anthony Pinn (2014), Ebony A. Utley (2012), and Bernard 'Bun B' Freeman. This particular intersection affirms the way both religion and hip hop can be considered as producers of culture rather than isolated elements of religiosity and music, respectively.

Hip hop studies is a formative part of the study of African American cultural production, and more recently, it has become a feature of Islamic Studies. Su'ad Abdul Khabeer, Hisham Aidi, and Sohail Daulatzai are among leading figures in the study of

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[116] Gilroy writes, "I want to endorse the suggestion that these subversive music makers and users represent a different kind of intellectual not least because their self-identity and their practice of cultural politics remain outside the dialectic of pity and guilt which, especially among oppressed people, has so often governed the relationship between the writing elite and the masses of people who exist outside literacy."

Islam and hip hop, and who have each shown how hip hop artists rely on Islamic culture and sometimes faith in order to generate alternative social spaces. A recent book by Su'ad Abdul Khabeer, *Muslim Cool* (2016) details the specific ways in which hip hop operates as a site though which American Muslims—Black and otherwise—construct and engage with their identities through the stylistic, musical, sartorial, and activist elements of hip hop culture. As the context of hip hop scholarship illustrates, envisioning hip hop culture as an alternative means of knowledge brings it closer to Islam, which was also seen as a viable alternative to a predominantly Christian society.

Islam, hip hop culture, and the production of knowledge

What exactly made Islam appealing to the hip hop scene? The question can be answered first by considering why Islam was appealing to African American communities in the middle of the twentieth century, as the previous chapter explored through the perspective of James Baldwin. This chapter picks up in the aftermath of the deaths of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., which were succeeded by persisting civil rights injustices and, consequently, a sense of disillusionment in the 1970s for communities of color (Kitwana 2003). A very specific set of circumstances, particularly those that concerned urban dispossession, led to the birth of hip hop culture in the Bronx borough of New York, as Jeff Chang meticulously narrates in *Can't Stop Won't Stop* (2005). Hip hop was established as a countercultural form of expression for those who resisted, in myriad ways, the conditions that allowed communities of color to be subjugated in their own homes and cities, even after the advances of the Civil Rights Movement. Islam fit into this narrative of resistance by virtue of its appeal as an

alternative to the dominant culture.[117] Malcolm's leadership in the Nation of Islam was essential to getting Islam to be embraced as an alternative to the mainstream, which is evident in the prevalence of his image in hip hop culture. In this chapter, Malcolm appears as the primary means of elucidating the connections between Islam and hip hop culture.

Before examining Malcolm's role in hip hop, however, I begin with a brief look at the role that self-knowledge plays in establishing the history of Islam in hip hop. Several hip hop pioneers emphasize the role of knowledge and especially self-knowledge as foundational to hip hop culture. Among these pioneers are Afrika Bambaataa, who founded the Universal Zulu Nation in 1973 as the first hip hop organization and also the first element of hip hop culture to incorporate references to Islam.[118] The Zulu Nation was founded as a hip hop society to promote awareness. According to Sohail Daulatzai (2012), the Zulu Nation

> was formed in an attempt to use the arts as a vehicle to influence Black and Brown youth in the shadows of domestic war. Extending the Black Arts Movement's imperative to use art for social uplift and to connect it to community organizing, Zulu Nation is considered the founding ideological movement or hip-hop culture, as Bambaataa detailed a whole philosophical approach to Zulu Nation that was about social uplift, transcendence, and unity. (113)

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[117] Sohail Daulatzai (0212) writes, "Black Islam in hip-hop culture reclaimed the interpretive authority over Black destiny in the United States and imagined a different community of belonging with very different possibilities for freedom, in which Black peoples would be seen not as national minorities but as global majorities" (97).

[118] According to Hishaam Aidi, the Zulu Nation was the first element of hip hop culture that incorporated references to Islam (Aidi, "America's Hip Hop Foreign Policy," 2014a). It was also the first organization related to hip hop (Abdul Khabeer 2016, 47).

Self-knowledge is therefore central to aims of the Zulu Nation; in that respect Bambaataa was clearly influenced by the mission of the Nation of Islam. In *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, he tells Jeff Chang, "[The Nation of Islam] held the teachings of 'You're not a nigga.' You're not colored. Wake up Black man and Black woman and love yourself. Respect your own. Turn back to Africa. That started sticking with a lot of the brothers and sisters" (Chang 100). Founding the Zulu Nation with the Nation of Islam's spirit of self-knowledge and empowerment, Bambaataa established early on the connections between Islam—specifically Black Islam—and hip hop. Su'ad Abdul Khabeer (2016) writes that Black Islam "was a social phenomenon known for advancing the principles of Black consciousness, resistance, and redemption, and an interdependent notion of community that was broadly experienced in U.S. Black communities," and this phenomenon spread via music and poetry in particular in order to allow Black Islam to transform into Black vernacular culture (Abdul Khabeer 57). As one of these musical (and arguably poetic) forms, hip hop was one of the means through which Black Islam helped establish cultural practices in the African American community.[119]

Chuck D of Public Enemy also affirms the centrality of unity and enlightenment in hip hop culture. Public Enemy (formed in 1982) was informed by multiple strains of Islam: Sunni Islam (which was Malcolm's final point of conversion), the Nation of Islam, and the Five-Percent Nation. These strains were politically and spiritually influential to Public Enemy's outlook and crucial to the group's mission of education (Daulatzai 2014,

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[119] Def Poetry Jam, a spoken word series on HBO (2002-2007), is particularly illustrative of the intersections between hip hop and poetry in the transformation of Black cultural and artistic practices. The series brought a range of voices together—from Mos Def to Sonia Sanchez, Amiri Baraka, suhair hammed, and Nikki Giovanni.

71). In an essay in the *Return of the Mecca* exhibit catalogue, Chuck D describes a moment in 1985 when a young person sees him hanging a poster of Malcolm X and asks, "Who was Malcolm the Tenth?" This moment inspires Chuck and the rest of his group to "at least try to fill the void of these missing histories for a new generation—and this galvanized the idea behind Public Enemy" (71). Thus Public Enemy, among many other hip hop groups, undertook such projects of understanding history and self-knowledge the way Malcolm and the Nation of Islam did, as the previous chapter illustrated. Following in the footsteps of Malcolm, hip hop groups such as Public Enemy took it upon themselves to arm their communities with knowledge about themselves and their histories in order to help them affirm their rights as human beings in the United States.

Nasir Jones, better known as Nas, might be considered one of the most important hip hop artists of all time; he of all artists articulated with exceptional grace the issues that were endemic to communities of color in the post-Civil Rights period.[120] His 1994 album, *Illmatic*, is one of the most acclaimed hip hop albums ever produced. A volume by Michael Eric Dyson and Sohail Daulatzai, *Born to Use Mics: Reading Nas's Illmatic* (2010), revolves entirely around the album, making it perhaps the only scholarly book out there devoted to a particular hip hop album. Nas's expert abilities as a storyteller cemented the role of self-knowledge in hip hop culture. With *Illmatic*, Nas was not only able to capture a life in the projects (Queensbridge, to be precise) that forged his development as a hip hop artist (which echoed the trajectory of many other hip hop

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[120] Nas's influence is so extensive that he received the Du Bois medal from Harvard, the university's "highest honor in the field of African and African American Studies," according to The Hip Hop Archive. Harvard also established in his honor a fellowship, the first of its kind to be named after a hip hop artist: the Nasir Jones Hip Hop Fellowship.

artists); he was also able to capture the most generative moment in hip hop culture (Daulatzai and Dyson x-xi, 3). He was not without connections to Islam, either, which manifested primarily in some allegiance to the Five Percent Nation, an offshoot of the Nation of Islam that revolved around the production and dissemination of knowledge. The Five Percenters allege that ten percent of the world's population hold the key to the knowledge of existence and keep that knowledge hidden from the eighty-five percent of whose who are in the dark. The five percent, on the other hand, possess the truth and are willing to enlighten the rest. The Five Percent theology is quite widespread in hip hop culture—beyond Nas, its (not necessarily consistent) adherents include Jay Z, members of the Wu Tang Clan, Queen Latifa, Erykah Badu, Rakim, and Jay Electronica. Its popularity signals the importance of the role of knowledge in hip hop culture—think of the prevalence of the term "droppin' knowledge" (that is, educating someone) among hip hop heads—a role that can be traced back to the influence of Malcolm X.

Malcolm in hip hop culture

Malcolm X's role is without any doubt central to the hip hop imaginary. The radical vision of Black self-determination that he espoused, which lived on in the Black Power movement, would weave its way into the general philosophy of hip hop. As the previous chapter articulated, Malcolm became the face of Black civil and human rights movements during the middle of the twentieth century. His symbol was so powerful that he continued to be the face of movements in the aftermath of his death, including hip hop culture. The specific instances of references to Malcolm, both in the overall spirit of hip hop culture and in particular songs, are too numerous to count, so instead I look at four

major ways in which Malcolm was influential to hip hop culture: as a model of affirmation, a prophetic figure, an aesthetic figure, and an internationalist symbol. Taking Jeff Chang's assertion that hip hop is more than its four components, and that it is in many ways a lifestyle culture, I contend that Malcolm serves as a model for hip hop artists in four distinct waves.

First, Malcolm offers a model of affirmation for hip hop artists. A dynamic persona, Malcolm serves as a figure that would allow various disaffected communities of color to express their anger and feel affirmed in their humanity. In a dominant culture that dehumanized African Americans, particularly Black men, the affirmation of manhood is central to hip hop culture, and Malcolm was seen as an exemplar of manhood. One thinks of actor Ossie Davis's magnificent eulogy of Malcolm at his funeral on February 27, 1965, titled "Our Shining Black Prince." Davis famously said, "Malcolm was our manhood, our living, black manhood! This was his meaning to his people. And in honoring him we honor the best in ourselves." By invoking the intimacy between Malcolm and his admirers, Davis articulates the kind of affirmation the Malcolm provided his followers. In particular, the statement "in honoring him we honor the best in ourselves" illustrates the connection that Malcolm presented to many, even to those who had never met him. This intimacy is famously portrayed at the end of Spike Lee's film adaptation of the *Autobiography*, which features a montage of Black children in classrooms around the world who stand up and exclaim, "I am Malcolm X!" to their peers. The montage ends with a speech by Nelson Mandela in front of a classroom, who quotes Malcolm's speech at a 1964 rally: "we declare our right on this earth to be a man. To be a human being. To be given the rights of a human being. To be respected as a

human being in this society, on this earth, on this day, which we intend to bring into existence." The role that Malcolm had in allowing people to have their humanity, dignity, and rights affirmed would be a central force of hip hop culture, and Davis' eulogy as featured in Lee's film helped circulate the exemplary model of Malcolm's manhood.

Mos Def (now primarily known as Yasiin Bey), one of the most illustrious hip hop figures of our time, also echoes the spirit of Malcolm's affirmation of humanity. In an interview with Sohail Daulatzai, curator of the *Return of the Mecca* exhibit, Bey talks about Malcolm's radical transformation from a hustler to one of the most prominent voices of the twentieth century. For African Americans, Malcolm's transformation was inspiring: he symbolized a "refashioning of a new kind of self," according to Daulatzai (Daulatzai 32). Bey elaborates on this self-making and explains his preference for the term "reversion" over "conversion:"

> I do like the term 'revert' more. Not in some kind of retrograde way, but more of a return to the Fitrah (a state of oneness that Muslims believe all humans are born into) that modern society in many instances has distanced us from the true nature of ourselves and humanity. So that we are coming back and reacquainting ourselves with ourselves. And so I think, in that essence, 'revert' is a proper term. And it is also a conversion, a transformation. But it's not a departure from yourself. It's really a full integration of your highest self. (32-33)

In discussing the significance of Malcolm's transformation, Bey, as one of the more prominent hip hop artists, echoes the centrality of the spirit of this reversion and conversion, as epitomized by Malcolm, in hip hop culture. One particular expression in Bey's explanation—that "we are coming back and reacquainting ourselves with ourselves"—speaks to the severe alienation present in modern society. Here, Bey sees

Islam as allowing people to "come back" to themselves—indeed, to re-humanize themselves. If Islam appears as a force—to African Americans, to hip hop artists—that "re-humanizes" oneself, this particular understanding of Islam lies in direct contrast to mainstream and institutional attempts to "humanize" Islam for the general American public. This contrast speaks to the particular way in which Islam, in its various forms, is understood in hip hop culture, largely through the transformative and affirmative model that Malcolm provided.

Malcolm the Prophet

The second way in which Malcolm has influenced hip hop culture can be seen in his prophet-like figure. Prophetic qualities are widely embraced in hip hop culture. In an interview with *The Atlantic*, Su'ad Abdul Khabeer claims that while Muslims are perceived as threats in the perception of the American mainstream, they "are more like prophets" in the hip hop community (Green 2016). In the quote above, Yasiin Bey echoes both traditional Islamic theology (in the idea of oneness) and the Black Nationalist self-determination that Malcolm and the Nation of Islam espoused. The idea of returning to an unknown past from which one's ancestors were stolen (during the slave trade) manifested in the way African Americans converted to Islam and changed their names in an act of symbolizing this reclamation of their own past. Bey's statement of "coming back and reacquainting ourselves with ourselves" was not just affirmative; it was a message delivered by a prophet-like figure who understood the conditions of dehumanization better than most other human beings. The idea of reversion leading to a "full integration of [one's] highest self" is more than a humanizing statement - it is indicative of the

divinity of humankind. Conversion to Islam was humanizing in this way, and Malcolm operated as a messenger to deliver this message that anyone could achieve this higher level of self. In this way, Malcolm was prophetic to the hip hop community.

The prophetic nature of the way Malcolm came into the scene and delivered a sense of self to his admirers is supported in Sohail Daulatzai's analysis of Malcolm as "hip hop's prophetic voice." Malcolm "connect[ed] Black peoples in the United States to the larger Third World of Africa and Asia as he cast his verbal stones at the evils of white world supremacy" (Daulatzai 2012, 89). According to Daulatzai, the notion of Malcolm as a prophet is also rooted in the timing of his emergence: "his influence and the embrace of Black Islam in hip-hop culture were forged out of a crucible of post–Civil Rights America and the expansion of U.S. empire abroad, a volitile [sic] period when the 'Black criminal' and the 'Muslim terrorist' became the domestic and foreign threats, respectively, to U.S. national security" (ibid). Hip hop's emergence after the death of Malcolm was no coincidence; at this time, the trope of Malcolm was deeply necessary to communities of color in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement, and this need was keenly expressed in hip hop culture. If anything cements Malcolm's comparison to a prophet, it's this assessment by Daulatzai:

> Malcolm's resurgence in urban America in the mid-1980s also spoke to the profound failure of and disillusionment with the Civil Rights project. Put plainly, the mountaintop was not reached. And Malcolm became an enduring reminder of that failure, for no one sounded the warning about the limitations of Civil Rights more so than Malcolm. It was no surprise that when hip-hop embraced Black radicalism and Islam that Malcolm became the iconic image of the culture. (98)

The trope of Malcolm as prophet is particularly fitting in his deliverance of truths to marginalized communities in the time that he did.

The process of emulation is also important to conceiving of Malcolm as a prophetic figure. In the Muslim tradition, the last Prophet, Muhammad, was a man whose practices were to be emulated. This practice is discussed by Saba Mahmoud in her chapter of *Is Critique Secular?:*

> Schesis aptly captures not only how a devout Muslim's relationship to Muhammad is described in Islamic devotional literature but also how it is lived and practiced in various parts of the Muslim world. . . . [The Prophet's] persona and habits understood as exemplars for the constitution of one's own ethical and affective equipment. For many pious Muslims, these embodied practices and virtues provide the substrate through which one comes to acquire a devoted and pious disposition. Such an inhabitation of the model (as the term schesis suggests) is the result of a labor of love in which one is bound to the authorial figure through a sense of intimacy and desire. (71-2)[121]

Mahmoud's description of the desire to "inhabit" the model of the Prophet as a "result of a labor of love" can be witnessed in the ways that Malcolm X was emulated by those who envisioned him as the model of Black humanity (though not necessarily with pious intent). One particularly moving illustration of this emulation is the final scene Spike

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[121] And elsewhere, she writes, "The relationship of intimacy with the Prophet expressed here has been the subject of many studies by scholars of Islam and explicitly thematized in Islamic devotional literature on Muhammed and his immediate family (ahl al-bayt). In this literature, Muhammed is regarded as a moral exemplar whose words and deeds are understood not so much as commandments but as ways of inhabiting the world, bodily and ethically. Those who profess love for the Prophet do not simply follow his advice and admonitions to the umma (that exist in the form of the hadith) but also try to emulate how he dressed, what he ate, how he spoke to his friends and adversaries, how he slept, walked, and so on. These mimetic ways of realizing the Prophet's behavior are lived not as commandments but as virtues; one wants to ingest, as it were, the Prophet's persona. It needs to be acknowledged of course that insomuch as Muhammed is a human figure in Islamic doctrine who does not share in divine essence, he is more an object of veneration than worship." (Asad et al)

Lee's adaptation of Malcolm's *Autobiograph*y, which I described previously. Before Nelson Mandela's appearance, the scene opens to a classroom where an African American schoolteacher tells her class, "And so today, May 19th, we celebrate Malcolm X's birthday, because he was a great, great Afro-American. Malcolm X is you, all of you. And you are Malcolm X." One child immediate stands up to exclaim "I am Malcolm X!" and the scene shifts to Black children in classrooms around the world who each stand up and proclaim the same statement with pride, and the scene closes with Nelson Mandela quoting from Malcolm's speech, as described previously. The juxtaposition of Black children claiming to be Malcolm X with Mandela assertion—of Malcolm's declaration of the right "to be a human being"—signifies the extent to which Malcolm provides a model to be emulated by youth of color. Malcolm embodied not just what it meant to be a powerful Black man, but also what it meant to be a human being amidst the onslaught against civil and human rights; in this sense of emulation, then, that we can understand the trope of Malcolm as prophet.

The Malcolm Aesthetic

The third way in which Malcolm's influence on hip hop culture is evident manifests in the desire to emulate his sense of style. While Ossie Davis and Yasiin Bey's reverence of Malcolm captures the self-affirmative and prophetic influences of Malcolm, there are also appropriations of Malcolm that serve more aesthetic purposes. Several hip hop album covers illustrate this appropriation. For instance, the hip hop group Boogie Down Productions's album is titled "By Any Means Necessary," a phrase that had become strongly associated with Malcolm. The image of the album features group

member KRS One imitating a famous image of Malcolm holding a gun while peering through the curtains of a window. The image of Malcolm with the gun is potent in its invocation of the symbol of self-defense that Malcolm had espoused (though Malcolm and the Nation of Islam were often misread by others as advocating for violence).[122] Sister Souljah's album, which features an image of herself giving a thumbs-up, is titled *The Hate That Hate Produced*, named after the documentary on the Nation of Islam. These examples—which do not even include the various ways in which Malcolm's speeches have been sampled in countless hip hop songs—are few amidst scores of other ways in which Malcolm appears as a visual and verbal icon for those spellbound by his appearance and speaking style. The prevalence of Malcolm's aesthetic in hip hop production speaks to the desire to find an aesthetic that was not rooted in the dominant culture. Malcolm was a pioneer in rejecting self-hatred imposed by skin color. When he famously exclaimed, "Who taught you to hate yourself from the top of your head to soles of your feet?", Malcolm issued a warning to all who modeled their understanding of beauty and their aesthetic according to white normative standards. In the spirit of hip hop's culture of resistance, Malcolm's aesthetic influence signaled a call for Black pride and self-love, and the prevalence of his style throughout hip hop culture speaks to the appreciation of his self-determined standards of aestheticism.

[122] The photograph in question was published in Ebony magazine in 1964; the photographer is unknown.

Malcolm the Internationalist

The fourth and final way in which the trope of Malcolm manifests in hip hop culture is in his internationalist perspective. By internationalism, I refer to a global alliance between Black and brown communities in an effort to imagine their rights and struggles beyond their histories and states of oppression in the United States, as Sohail Daulatzai outlines in *Black Star, Crescent Moon.*[123] In his interview with Sohail Daulatzai (2014), Yasiin Bey articulates the global purpose and symbol of political struggle that Malcolm held: "Malcolm is a man of African descent born and raised in North American representing that tribe on a global scale. A statesman without a state. A revolutionary. An outlaw. A style icon. A political thinker, a philosopher. A leader. And a leader of himself, not seeking to be a boss or a tyrant over men. He was someone seeking mastery over himself and speaking out against the injustice that exists in the world , and dealing with our struggle in America not as an isolated, domestic issue, but as an international problem that is rooted in the oppression of the world" (33). It is critical that Malcolm is not seen here as an American icon, but instead as "a man of African descent . . . representing that tribe on a global scale." The internationalist appeal to Malcolm is an important aspect of hip hop culture, encompassing a critique of the American imperial practices for which early hip hop culture was known.[124] Presenting Malcolm as a global

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[123] Daulatzai (2012) writes, "When the hypernationalism of the post-Civil Rights backlash created the 'Black criminal' and the 'Muslim terrorist' as threats to U.S. national identity, it was through the presence of Malcolm X and the embrace of Black Islam that hip-hop artists responded, using their collective exclusion as both Black *and* Muslim to tap into a deep vein of Black internationalism that not only challenged domestic racism but also imagined Black belonging beyond the United States, into Africa and the Muslim Third World" (90).

[124] Sohail Daulatzai writes, "…it's important to know that American society—its consumption, its economic structure, its political maneuvering, its very being—is dependent on the exploitation of countries and the peoples of the Third World, and that poverty in U.S. urban centers is partly due

icon rather than an American one is an important part of hip hop's vision. Envisioning oneself as part of the global African diaspora was also part of the Nation of Islam's outlook of embracing the unknown past of one's origins in Africa (hence the popular surname "X" that signified the unknown). The Nation of Islam's "radical geographic remixes of Black origins," per Daulatzai, inspired various hip hop artists—among them Nas and Rakim—to envision themselves as citizens of Asia. Chuck D of Public Enemy expands on this vision when he declares himself "an Earthizen, a citizen of no one government, a follower of no one religion. But I am a realist: whereas human beings fall in lines, quite often their lives fall in lies, from which a government makes them swear to a God they should trust. I viewed the culture of music bringing humans together as a spiritual experience of similarity, while shedding differences today." Chuck D echoes the force of internationalism in uniting people together in the face of a dominant culture that sought to separate communities of color from the white mainstream

The internationalist perspective also works to challenge the grasp of American Exceptionalism, particularly in its attack on the false nature of the American Dream. The America depicted in hip hop is bleak, governed by urban dispossession and violence, a reality faced by millions of communities of color in this country. James Braxton Peterson discusses the hip hop version of the American Dream, known as the "come-up," which

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to the movement of factories abroad, which did not enrich these countries or their people, but exacerbated poverty both in the United States and in the Third World . . . what does that have to do with hip-hop? A great deal, because hip-hop itself emerged out of this global economy of fluid capital and massive repression. Its deep roots to the Third World are not just in its connections to the rebel music of dub reggae and sound system culture that emerged out of Jamaica in the 1970s . . . I'm just saying, not only did hip-hop emerge out of the global economy but it-like all of American society—is now deeply entrenched in it too, making for some really ill and awkward alliances with global corporate power, blood money, war, and repression in the Third World" (Daulatzai and Dyson 2010, 42-3)

"represents the aspirations of inner-city African American culture, the idea that even oppressive, violent challenges do not prevent everyone from transcending poverty. Moreover, the come-up experience produces narratives that inspire others to follow nontraditional paths, so that dispossessed folk know the there is a path for them when all mainstream opportunities are closed" (Daulatzai and Dyson 2010, 76). There are several important points to be considered here. First, that the "come-up" does not directly oppose the idea of the American Dream; instead, it provides a parallel, although one that challenges the universality of the Dream: overcoming poverty is possible, but not for everyone (as firm believers in the Dream would maintain). Second, that the "come-up" is a viable alternative to the mainstream narrative, aligning with the way that Black nationalism, Black Power, and the Nation of Islam provided alternative venues of empowerment to African American subjects when the Civil Rights Movement did not suffice. By cultivating an internationalist perspective à la Malcolm, hip hop artists bypassed mainstream narratives about American culture and identity that did not include them and instead forged solidarities with communities worldwide.

Part II: Hip hop's global and transnational reaches

Malcolm's influence among hip hop artists is potent enough to be recognized by the U.S. government. In a bizarre attempt to wield hip hop culture as a means of pacifying potential radicals in Muslim populations abroad, Malcolm's symbol has been appropriated by the U.S. government to achieve these aims. Malcolm was recognized as

foundational the rebellious spirit of hip hop.[125] In this section, I focus first on the government's tactics of appropriating the trope of Malcolm and then on the Rhythm Road initiative, which wielded hip hop culture to "de-radicalize" Muslim populations in foreign countries. The government's initiatives are vastly inappropriate and counterintuitive given that Malcolm and hip hop culture were resistant to the oppressive means of the government. Furthermore, the government's use of Malcolm as a venerated symbol is quite rich: as Hisham Aidi notes, "These diplomatic initiatives are ironic not least because, fifty years ago, the U.S. government harassed and hounded Malcolm at every step. Today, they are using his figure—and black protest more broadly—to win over hostile populations" (Aidi 2015). These initiatives echo Baldwin's concerns about the notion of "claiming Malcolm." In *No Name on the Street*, Baldwin (1985) wrote, "And there is, since his death, a Malcolm, virtually, for every persuasion" (511). However, the idea of the government appropriating Malcolm's image would be inconceivable even to Baldwin, who was, along with Malcolm, targeted by the FBI.[126]

That Malcolm is "claimed" in this way by the very government that may have had a hand in his death speaks to the specious nature of the government's attempt at appropriation. Further, using Malcolm to "win over hostile populations" —the black and brown populations with whom he formed a Third World solidarity—undercuts the

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[125] A Brookings report (2008) on hip hop diplomacy notes that "Hip-hop originated in African American communities in the inner city; some of its early pioneers were American Muslims. They carry on an African American Muslim tradition of protest against authority, most powerfully represented by Malcolm X" (Nelson and Schneider 15).

[126] According to Hannah K. Gold in *The Intercept*, "Baldwin's file was closer in size to activists and radicals of the day [than to writers]— for example, it's nearly half as thick as Malcolm X's." Notably, the FBI files begin with Baldwin's comments on the Black Muslims, which solidifies Baldwin's ties to Islam in the twentieth century.

foundation of that solidarity. Malcolm's vision was to unite with the Third World in an effort to transcend and reject the U.S.'s definition of African Americans as "Negros." Malcolm stood up—in his life time and posthumously— for the communities who were dehumanized by the state, whether by urban dispossession or COINTELPRO or the myriad other forms of subjugation. In our current time, Malcolm is proudly embraced as an exemplar of (Black) Muslim life for communities worldwide, but in his own time he was criminalized by the government. As a result, many who embrace him take him to be a symbol of antigovernment resistance. Hisham Aidi (2014b) writes, "Young Muslims are drawn to Malcolm X's radical internationalism and embrace of a political identity that transcends the nation-state" (35). By asserting himself as a citizen of Asia, as he declared on his draft card, Malcolm disassociated himself with the white supremacist attitudes of his home country in favor of establishing a Third World solidarity with marginalized communities around the world (Daulatzai 2012, 1). Thus, the government's mission to make Malcolm one of the faces of American diplomacy represents a vast misunderstanding of the values that Malcolm espoused and represented to the communities he empowered.

Even more peculiar is the attempt to appropriate Malcolm by practitioners of fundamentalist violence. This includes Al Qaeda and individuals who have been attracted to that group and others, such as John Walker Lindh. Lindh is a white man from the affluent Marin County in California who stunned the nation when he decided, as a teenager, to join Al Qaeda in late 2001. Attempts to explain Lindh's choices were fixated on the notion that Lindh had become radicalized when he read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and listened to hip hop (Aidi 2014b, 234). Here, the notion of Malcolm as a

radical in the fundamentalist sense—instead of as a challenge to the status quo—is at play in the attempts to make sense of Lindh's story. Furthermore, in a video released by Al Qaeda's Ayman Al Zawahiri on the occasion of Barack Obama's election in 2008, Al Zawahiri infamously placed two photos side by side: one, an image of Barack Obama in a yarmulke, and the other, a photo of Malcolm X praying in a mosque (in Cairo). The invocation of Malcolm X as a figure of inspiration for Al Qaeda was simultaneously used to denigrate the first African American president of the United States using Malcolm's own language (Cole 2008). Obama was called a "house negro"—the term made famous by Malcolm's "Message to the Grassroots speech"—while Malcolm was held up as an example of a "true" Muslim and African American leader. Al Qaeda's use of Malcolm illustrates again the notion of radicalism: Malcolm's radicalism was perceived by radical fundamentalists as a more viable affirmation of Black and Muslim identity than that represented by Obama.

Whether in the case of terrorists, or in Black and brown populations at home or abroad who found in Malcolm a way to resist the white supremacist narratives sanctioned by their country, the government's use of the Malcolm trope presents hip hop culture as dangerous and radicalizing forces to the dominant culture. We can thus see the government attempts to claim Malcolm as symbol of American identity as a means of containing Malcolm's force in government-sanctioned representations. These attempts are not unlike the techniques examined in Chapter One that illustrate museological containments of Islam in the space of the museum. Malcolm, too, has come to embody both sides of the so-called good Muslim, bad Muslim binary.

Rhythm Road

In the mid-2000s, the U.S. State Department launched an outreach initiative that sent hip hop "envoys" abroad for a host of reasons. The artists, who are Muslim Americans, are sent to demonstrate that Muslims in America are well-integrated, to boast a positive image of the United States, and to preach the gospel of democracy in order to stave off tyranny and fundamentalist tendencies abroad. The envoys undertake these missions by performing in their capacity as hip hop artists, which is seen as a quintessentially American form of art, a statement made by the likes of Hillary Clinton, who was Secretary of State during these initiatives (Aidi 2011b). The artists are send to parts of the Muslim world: according to Aidi, as far as "Senegal and Ivory Coast, across North Africa, the Levant and Middle East, and extending to Mongolia, Pakistan and Indonesia." Evidently, these are parts of the world that the U.S. government sees as a threat to U.S. interests, and not as Black and brown allies à la Malcolm's internationalist vision of the Muslim Third World.

Rhythm Road is modeled after the Jazz Ambassadors program of the Cold War period, where jazz musicians such as Louis Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie, and Duke Ellington performed abroad in order to promote aspects of American culture (predominantly jazz) against the spread of Soviet influence, particularly "Soviet propaganda about American racial practices" (ibid).[127] Similarly, Rhythm Road appears to be a post-War on Terror undertaking to pit American culture (in the form of hip hop)

[127] African Americans were specifically chosen as jazz diplomats because, as historian Penny Von Eschen notes in *Satchmo Blows Up the World* (2004), that they would be able to generate empathy among the colonized in Europe and show them that anyone could indeed gain equality in the United States (Aidi 2011).

against radical Islamic culture. Rhythm Road is a particularly salient example of framing American and Islamic cultures as binary opposites, and its use of hip hop to do so—hip hop being one of the foremost examples of the rich intersections of American and Islamic cultures—goes against the founding spirit of hip hop culture. Both music initiatives—jazz diplomacy and hip hop diplomacy—were ironic in sending musicians who were marginalized in their own countries in order to boost the image of that country. Sending African American musicians in the midst of the Civil Rights period, or Muslim American musicians in the midst of heightened Islamophobia in the U.S., erases the state's complicity in oppressing those communities.

The other deeply ironic aspect of Rhythm Road is its use of an anti-authoritarian art form to boost the image of U.S. as a haven of freedom and democracy. The origins of hip hop were rooted in social protest and performed by constituents who felt marginalized by their society and government. For the government to then appropriate hip hop in order to show that American society is ideal or worthy of emulation is both tone deaf and elides the history of struggle rooted in this music. Aidi comments further on the inappropriate use of hip hop by the government: "The very music blamed for a range of social ills at home—violence, misogyny, consumerism, academic underperformance—is being deployed abroad in the hopes of making the US safer and better-liked" (ibid). Government appropriation lends credence to the notion of the American Dream, which is criticized in hip hop culture via the use of come-up narratives, as discussed previously in this chapter.

Perhaps the most problematic aspect of this initiative is the fact that, according to a Brookings report (2008), hip hop was chosen as a "humanizing" form of art that

represented the cultural “other” (Nelson and Schneider 17). For the government to wield hip hop—which afforded affirmation and dignity when other avenues did not—as a “humanizing” force for non-white populations aligns with institutional attempts to “humanize” Islam. Cultural productions by non-white populations are again seen as dangerous when they are in the “wrong” hands; that is, beyond the confines of an appropriate institutional force.

Transnational turns

Beyond the government initiatives I described, hip hop’s reach extends beyond the United States. The extent of the convergences between Islam and hip hop is such that Muslims abroad have taken to articulating their identity and sense of place by connecting to the American hip hop scene. Although this is a U.S.-focused dissertation, hip hop’s transnational reaches illustrate the power of hip hop in projecting an American identity that is forged by communities of color. Marginalized communities abroad were, due to hip hop’s influence, inspired to establish their own acts of reclamation. Speaking more generally about Black music production, Paul Gilroy (2013) illustrates its transcendental nature when he writes,

> When I was a child and a young man growing up in London, black music provided me with a means to gain proximity to the sources of feeling from which our local conceptions of blackness were assembled. The Caribbean, Africa, Latin America, and above all black America contributed to our lived sense of a racial self. The urban context in which these forms were encountered cemented their stylistic appeal and facilitated their solicitation of our identification. They were important also as a source for the discourses of blackness with which we located our own struggles and experiences. (109)

Gilroy's experiences echo that of many others: the ability to establish connections to something larger than oneself through hip hop culture. The ability of hip hop to generate these transnational connections is certainly not limited to the role that Islam plays in hip hop culture. But for the scope of this dissertation I focus primarily on Islam as an American cultural and racial force that would eventually contain transnational reaches, as the following examples illustrate. Here I focus on two studies by Fatima El-Tayeb and Hisham Aidi to illustrate hip hop's transnational reaches in France and Germany.

In *European Others* (2011), Fatima El-Tayeb discusses specific aspects of U.S. hip hop culture that echoed with European youth in Germany. The theme of alienation is particularly resonant: marginalized communities of color in Europe were drawn to expressions of alienation in U.S. hip hop, specifically "old school raps revolving around racism, exclusion, and the search for a place of one's own" (29). This shared sentiment allowed hip hop to function as a "diasporic lingua franca" (ibid). Eventually, European artists shifted from rapping in English to rapping in each community's native language in the late 1980s. El-Tayeb explains that this "diversification of languages was key to hip hop becoming a continental political force, amounting to a declaration of independence from the overbearing U.S. paradigm and allowing European rappers to find their own voices" (31). The shifts in language reflect the original spirit of hip hop by comprising an act of rebellion against the dominant culture in an attempt to document the narratives and experiences of those who were marginalized by the mainstream. Rather than allowing a particular language or culture to dominate hip hop productions abroad, rappers sought to keep make hip hop local to their experiences, and free from any one particular form of production, thus preserving its revolutionary spirit.

El-Tayeb's book focuses specifically on localized activism of Muslim communities of color in Europe, hip hop being one of the manifestations of this activism. American hip hop, later adapted to each local subculture, was admired especially for its local roots. Hisham Aidi illustrates an example of this kind of admiration in the story of a Marseille hip hop group's connection to the Bronx, the birthplace of hip hop culture. Aidi (2014b) writes, "One of the members of the Marseille-based group 3ième Oeuil (Third Eye) admitted, "I have dreamed of visiting the Bronx for all thirty-six years of my life. This is where hip-hop started, this music which has liberated us, which has saved us," he said with apparent seriousness. "Yesterday we met Bambaataa and Kool Herc. I thanked them personally for what they have done for us blacks and Muslims in France—they gave us a language, a culture, a community" (xi). Language, culture, and community are all local forms of grouping. That something as specific as early hip hop culture, rooted in its origins in the Bronx and its expression of African American struggle, could affirm communities as far away as France speaks to the power of hip hop culture in spite of its localized origins. But more specifically, the individual quoted above notes that hip hop pioneers Afrika Bambaataa and Kool Herc spoke to those who are "black and Muslim" in France. While the conditions for Black Muslims in the U.S. and France are vastly different, it is clear that hip hop offers a sense of identity that could be claimed by these different groups.

In *Rebel Music*, Hisham Aidi discusses the centrality of American hip hop artists to French youth. "Why," he asks, "was the Bronx so central to the 'moral geography' of working-class kids in Marseille?" (xi). The notion of a moral geography signifies a structure that goes beyond artistry. Seeking morality as a guiding factor, Muslims abroad

articulated the need for a spiritual reckoning that could not be fulfilled by their immediate landscape. For the Bronx—the site of hip hop's origins—to fill this need indicated that hip hop has a particular power in making a place and time powerfully resonant to those outside of that space and time.

Hip hop's transnational ties illustrate another important element: that situation of American Muslims was felt to be enviable, a sentiment upon which Rhythm Road attempted to capitalize. In a sense, this is true—the majority of American Muslims are of African American descent, and they are not immigrants or children of immigrants to U.S., unlike their French Muslim counterparts. Instead of immediately dismissing the notion that American Muslims would be envied for being relatively well-integrated (an easy dismissal in the age of Islamophobia today), it is important to pause here for a moment in order to appreciate that being an American Muslim, and being envied for being an American Muslim, serves to illustrate the appeal of Islam for African Americans. If the first image of an American Muslim that comes to mind is that of an Arab or South Asian immigrant or child of immigrants, then it is certainly more difficult to accept that American Muslims are well integrated. But to consider American Muslims as African Americans first makes that notion more credible.[128] The transnational element thus helps expand the notion of what it means to be an American Muslim, which aligns with the aims of this dissertation.

[128] An important counterpoint to this is the fact that despite being on American shores since this country's founding, African Americans have never been fully integrated—that is, they have yet to receive the full social, civil, and political rights as their white counterparts.

Malcolm certainly played a role in cultivating this image of American Muslims. In the previous chapter, I quoted from a passage the *Autobiography* that illustrates the treatment of African Americans abroad: “Europeans act more human, or humane, whichever the right word is . . . People seeing you as a Muslim saw you as a human being, and they had a different look, different talk, everything” (X and Haley [1965] 1981, 367). The situation of American Muslims was due in no small part to Malcolm’s leadership, and his legacy in that regard is evident in the way American Muslims are perceived in transnational hip hop communities today. The exploration of American identity abroad illuminates some of the core ideas that define what it means to be an American. Hip hop’s transnational ties are integral to the process of understanding what makes it a uniquely American art. Consequently, examining the role of Islam in the development of hip hop culture allows us to see how Islam—in all its various manifestations—was integral to the development of modern American culture both on a local and global scale.

Conclusion

In the preface to this dissertation I mentioned that this project began in 2014 and ended in 2017, which was an exceptionally eventful period of time to be writing about Islam in the U.S. Zareena Grewal, one of the most distinguished anthropologists of Muslim America, offers a helpful signpost for researchers in this field who are caught up in the constant onslaught of Islamophobic incidents and injustices. Grewal acknowledges in her own work, "I would also express my own doubts about the value of my work in the current political climate, the futility of trying to represent Muslim hearts and minds as anything other than objects to be won or lost in a global battle of civilizations" (26-7). Though Grewal writes this in 2013, the "current political climate" seems to have been what it is for a while now; the phrase has been a handy template in this extended period of Islamophobia. In the spirit of Grewal's doubts, I too must add that by no means is my own project—at its earliest stages, its current stage, or in its future manifestations—ever an attempt to "represent" Islam. I am more interested in representing the failures of those attempts, or indeed to focus more on representations that arise organically, as with James Baldwin and the hip hop movement. But I cannot pretend that this project exists in a neutral world—Ayad Akhtar reminds us in *Disgraced* that neutrality is impossible, at least for anyone writing on Islam.

With this dissertation, I have endeavored to achieve three major goals: envision Islam as part of American culture, undertake a humanistic study of Islam when most scholarship on Islam is based in the social sciences, and shake the Euro-American foundations on notions of humanity. Rooting this study in American, cultural, and literary

studies rather than, say, Islamic studies, religious studies, or history—fields that are typically Arab and Middle East-centric (Ayubi and Fuerst 2016)—provides the opportunity to frame Islam as an American cultural force. The retrospective narrative I present here is the result of two goals. The first is that I wanted to free my work of the stronghold of 9/11. I argue that we are in a new, post-post-9/11 moment (flawed as the term “post-9/11” might be, as Deepa Kumar argues) that could only be reckoned with through an exploration of the past. Hence, my retrospective timeline emphasizes the perspective of people like Malcolm X and James Baldwin, whose projects of self-knowledge are perhaps the most viable way of reckoning with difference. Cultivating a knowledge of Islam in the United States should prioritize an understanding of the nation’s cultural history in order to understand how we got here. To phrase this with an individual in mind: trying to understand someone else is best practiced with a healthy dose of self-reflection.

The second goal—which precedes the first, to be honest—is the result of a series of fortuitous encounters. I had originally envisioned this entire dissertation to focus on museum representations; I had grown frustrated with reading about museums as the means of “humanizing” Islam for American audiences. In Los Angeles, after a summer of pursuing the museum trail in New York and Michigan, I followed suit on a Doris Duke exhibit on her Islamic art collections (transplanted all the way from her estate in Hawaii). There, at the museum, I found a pamphlet for another exhibit that was part of the LA/Islam Arts Initiative—on The Art of Islam and Hip Hop. I decided to go out of curiosity, braving Los Angeles traffic. I walked into the William Grant Still Community Arts Center and felt more at home than I had at any of the Islamic arts galleries I had

visited that year. There was a jovial crowd of mostly brown and Black visitors who nodded their heads to Public Enemy and Talib Kweli as they milled from room to room, gazing at photographs of Malcolm X, Muhammad Ali, Jay Electronica, and the Wu Tang Clan, among many others, proud to see the connections between these figures and Islam. Truthfully, I had never really listened to hip hop before, let alone knew that Islam was central to its formation. But encountering that genre at that particular moment allowed something in my mind to click, especially after a string of assaults against Black lives, notable among them Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown. Black and brown and Muslim voices and bodies were at a confluence here, and hip hop articulated—and continues to articulate—those struggles more than anything. Having arrived in this country in 2005, this was the first time I saw myself as a Muslim in this country irrespective of 9/11. When Malcolm X and James Baldwin traveled abroad, they understood themselves outside the particular context of U.S. racism during the civil rights period. Hip hop captures all of these connections perfectly: what it is like for someone to see themselves beyond the confines of a particular nation or culture. If any two groups of people understand that particularly well, it's Muslim and African Americans.

Shortly after that afternoon of Islam and hip hop in Los Angeles, I happened to encounter James Baldwin's "Letter From a Region in My Mind" for the first time. Baldwin, analyzing Islam through Malcolm and the Nation of Islam, articulated its appeal as an alternative force of empowerment. Offering a history of the onslaught against Black humanity, Baldwin helped me make sense of the present moment and illuminated ways of problematizing the notion of humanity. His articulation of humanity—its tensions and failures—revealed more than any promise by these museums to offer a presentation of

Islam that would unite and enlighten. Though he was not Muslim, Baldwin ended up being the most important voice in this project; his perspective gracefully illuminates the problem of the humanizing framework. His vision of humanity was simultaneously bleak and hopeful—it was realistic. What is truly grating about the humanizing framework is its presumption that the human race is good and worthy of being emulated. Baldwin harbored no such pretensions about our kind, and therefore did not feel compelled to measure people against one another in their capacity to "be human."

While I am tempted to end with a baleful note about how terrible we humans are, I will relent. I am not interested in attempting to define what we are: that is indeed the root of all evil in projects of humanization. As Judith Butler reminds us,

> We make a mistake, therefore, if we take a single definition of the human, or a single model of rationality, to be the defining feature of the human, and then extrapolate from that established understanding to the human to all of its various cultural forms . . . To come up against what functions, for some, as a limit case of the human is a challenge to rethink the human. And the task to rethink the human is part of the democratic trajectory of an evolving human rights jurisprudence. (Butler 2006, 90)

I have not engaged in so lofty as a goal as to "rethink the human." I am not quite up to that challenge yet. What I have endeavored to do is show how our model of humanity is terribly flawed in our attempts to define ourselves. In offering a critique of the humanizing framework, I illustrate our inability to move past the delusion that our humanity is a steady model for assessing the value of others.

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