

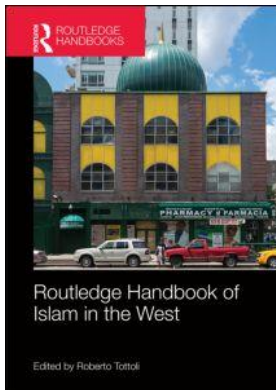
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Roberto Tottoli

### **Islam in the arts in the USA**

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Sylvia Chan-Malik

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# Islam in the arts in the USA

Sylvia Chan-Malik

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## Introduction

In his oft-cited definition of “culture” published in *Keywords*, Raymond Williams tracks the term’s genealogy from the early fifteenth century onward, identifying that “culture in all its early uses was a noun of process” (Williams 1985: 87). Used to describe “the tending of something, basically crops or animals,” culture’s usage was eventually extended to apply to processes of human development, and by the mid-nineteenth century had begun to express its current multivalent connotations, often used in relationship with notions of civility and civilization, folk-life, and artistic work (Williams 1985). Writing in 1976, Williams explored how the word had come to be used in almost entirely metaphorical – as opposed to physical – senses, specifically as: (1) a noun describing a process of intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic development (e.g. to become “cultured” or “enculturated”); (2) a noun indicating a particular way of life (e.g. Chinese culture, Victorian culture, New York culture); and (3) a noun denoting the “works and practices of intellectual and especially, artistic activity” (i.e. music, literature, painting and sculpture, theater and film). These varied usages of the word made culture, Williams wrote, “one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language” (Williams 1985: 87).

These multiple meanings of culture are central to this essay’s focus on Islam in the arts in the United States. More precisely, I do not want simply to catalog instances of artistic creation emanating from Muslim communities and/or Islam’s impact in the United States here. Rather, I seek to explore the complex “cultures” facilitated by Islam’s presence in the USA, both in how Islam and Muslims have informed broader constructions of American culture, and in how Muslims themselves have worked to express their Islamic identities through artistic expressions. As per Williams’s definition, critical here is the notion of *process*, specifically in thinking through how the emergence of something named “Muslim American culture” (following Williams’s third definition as the works and practices of artistic activity) in the post-9/11 era has been shaped and informed by the ways in which Islam has been “enculturated” in the USA. By enculturation, I mean the ways in which Islam both as an *idea* (e.g. through cultural representations and discourses) and as a *material presence* (e.g. Muslim individuals, communities, and institutions) within the USA has found expression in American artistic milieus by Muslims and

non-Muslims. Through the interactions between how Islam has been *imagined* and *lived*, I argue, emerges the process by which Islam in the arts – and Muslim American culture itself – has developed, and continues to develop, within the United States.

In order to discuss this process, this essay moves chronologically, first functioning as a brief and selective historical archive which tracks different configurations and formations of “Muslim” or “Islamic” artistic expressions in the USA from the 1600s through the late-twentieth century. As with Islam itself, these expressions are rooted in black American communities and the black experience in the USA, in which the most significant and most well-documented instances of Muslim and Islamic artistic expressions have been, and in many instances, I suggest, continue to be, found. Blackness and the creativity and labor of black people, this first section will demonstrate, are foundational to understanding Islam’s cultural expressions in the USA as well as the ways Islam has been constructed in the nation’s cultural imaginary. This historical centrality of blackness becomes the backdrop and central context for the second, and more extended, section of the piece (pp. 327–32), in which I move to a discussion of “Muslim American” culture, a signifier which has gained momentum in the years since 9/11. As Muslim American artists, writers, musicians, and performers gain visibility in the public sphere, the media and scholars have often characterized their emergence as a “post-9/11” phenomenon. Again returning to the notion of process, I suggest a longer historical trajectory, arguing that while 9/11 certainly spurred interest in Islam and Muslims in the USA, contemporary Muslim American cultural expressions are in fact an outgrowth of the work of black American Muslim artists and writers during the 1960s and 1970s, the contributions of immigrants from the Middle East and South Asia from the mid-1960s onward, and developing interest toward “multicultural” arts and literature in the 1980s and 1990s. Taken together, these phenomena form the backdrop for artistic expressions by Muslim American writers, musicians, actors, visual artists, and others which are rapidly gaining visibility in the post-9/11 USA. Throughout my examination and engagement with these works, I pay close attention to how issues of race, religion, and gender have figured heavily into how Islam is perceived in the USA, and how these perceptions have shaped the emergence of Muslim voices in various historical periods. In the end, I revisit how Williams’s notions of process and the multiple meanings of culture are critical to understanding the continually developing discourse around Islam’s presence and influence in the arts in the USA.

Before I begin, a note on terminology. I utilize the terms “Muslim,” “Islamic,” and “Muslim American” throughout this essay. The first two terms, “Muslim” and “Islamic,” are often (mis) used interchangeably in popular and scholarly discourse. Herein, “Muslim” is used as a noun to describe individuals who identify themselves as a follower of the religion of Islam, or those who view themselves as culturally connected to a Muslim identity, whether through family, nation of origin, etc. “Muslim” is also used as an adjective referring to groups of people who identify as Muslims (e.g. the Muslim community, Muslim women, etc.). “Islamic,” on the other hand, is an adjective used to denote phenomena guided or influenced by Islam’s teachings and principles (e.g. Islamic art, Islamic education). Thus, I explore both “Muslim” and “Islamic” artistic expressions here, works created by individuals who self-identify as Muslim, as well as work that expresses Islamic principles. However, as I also discuss how Islam and Muslims are portrayed in mainstream American culture, I may at times cite authors and works who use the terms in different, and non-corresponding, ways, which I hope does not cause confusion. Finally, I utilize the term “Muslim American” to signify cultural and literary works created by Muslims in the USA, as well as the communities they serve, a designation directly born from a confluence out of multicultural discourse in the USA since the formal civil rights era and the political exigencies of the post-9/11 period.<sup>1</sup> My aim is to reveal the necessity of examining contemporary artistic

expressions of Muslim Americans through a trajectory that long precedes the events of September 11, 2001, and contextualizes these works in light of historical legacies of race, gender, and religion in the USA.

### From the blues to Black Power

Islam has exerted significant influence upon the USA from the earliest days of the nation's origins. Even Christopher Columbus's "discovery" of America was shaped by Islam's influence in Spain: Columbus and his benefactress Queen Isabella were indirectly motivated to seek power due to their violent opposition to Islamic – or "Moorish" – influence in their native land. The first significant presence of Islamic practices and Muslims themselves in the USA, however, occurred with the arrival of slaves from West Africa, a presence which various historians and ethnomusicologists have argued birthed the beginnings of what is known as the first organic American art form: the blues. Of the blues' origins, Amiri Baraka writes:

it is impossible to say exactly how old blues is – certainly no older than the presence of Negroes in the United States. It is a native American music, the product of the black man in this country; or to put it more exactly the way I have come to think about it, blues could not exist if African captives had not become American captives.

*(Baraka 1999: 17)*

As Baraka infers, the blues were the cultural byproduct of the transatlantic slave trade in the USA. Though the genre did not rise to popular prominence until the early twentieth century (through artists such as W.C. Handy, Leadbelly, and Robert Johnson), the blues were undeniably rooted in the Southern plantation, its direct predecessors the work songs and field hollers sung by slaves to help them endure backbreaking labor and relentless dehumanization.

However, while the blues were born on the plantation, the music's origins lay in West Africa, where upwards of 30 percent of slaves were born. Historian Sylviane Diouf estimates that, of the roughly 400,000 African captives who were first transported to the USA, many were Sunni Muslims who came from an area known as the Sahel, a vast area in Africa "stretching from Senegal in the West to Sudan in the east" (Diouf 2009). This region, known as Senegambia, was fundamentally shaped by the contact between its natives and the Arab-Berber Islamic world since the eighth century. Islamic influences infused the local culture, in particular the region's music. Subsequently, West Africans deported through the trans-Saharan trade brought their music and rhythms (including those that had already been changed by the Arab-Islamic contact) north to the Maghreb. As Diouf writes, "There was much cross-fertilization on both sides of the desert and it is this complex heritage that West African Muslim captives brought to the United States where it found a fertile ground" (Diouf 2009). Unlike non-Muslim slave groups from coastal West Africa and Central Africa, who relied heavily on drumming and chants for their musical expression, slaves from Senegambia stood a much better chance of preserving their musical culture due to the region's traditional emphasis on string and wind instruments. Due to Southern plantation owners' fear of slave revolt and uprising, drumming and group chants were outlawed, while Sahelian slaves were able to adapt their skills to local instruments such as the fiddle or guitar, later even producing the banjo as an American incarnation of their traditional lute. As a result of the seemingly less threatening nature of their style, they were allowed to perform their music, sometimes even at slaveholder's balls, which allowed for the music's migration across the Deep South, including Mississippi, the birthplace of the blues.

Islam would resurface in the USA in the early twentieth century, as black Southern migrants flooded to Northern industrial centers such as Chicago, Detroit, New York, Philadelphia, etc. during the post-Reconstruction era. Seeking work and new opportunities, many came in contact with burgeoning discourses of Pan-Africanism, guided by the philosophies of early black nationalist thinkers such as Edward Wilmot Blyden and Marcus Garvey, who expressed a deep respect and admiration for the teachings of Islam. Pan-Africanist thought fueled interest in Islam, spurring the widespread appeal of early twentieth-century Islamic organizations such as the Moorish Science Temple (MST), the Ahmadiyyat Movement in Islam (AMI), and, most famously, the Nation of Islam (NOI). Both Pan-Africanism and Islamic organizations such as these called for the redefinition of black cultural and political identities in ways which rejected the racist and oppressive ideologies of the plantation and the Christian church. Characterized by a spirit of internationalism, a refusal of white supremacy, and acknowledgment of the creativity of black urban cultures, such Pan-Africanist and Islamically oriented ideologies were instrumental in the development of a black cultural renaissance across the North, exemplified by the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and 1930s. From the 1930s to the 1950s, when the genre reigned as the nation's most popular musical form, numerous prominent black jazz musicians converted to Islam, including pianist Ahmad Jamal, saxophonist Yusef Lateef, drummer Art Blakey (Abdullah Ibn Buhaina), pianist McCoy Tyner (Suliman Saud), vocalist Dakota Staton (Aliyah Rabia), bassist Ahmed Abdul-Malik (best known for his work with Thelonious Monk), and many others.

Almost all entered the religion through the AMI, a group Richard Brent Turner has called “unquestionably one of the most significant movements in the history of Islam in the United States in the twentieth century, providing ... the *first multi-racial model* for American Islam” (Turner 1997: 110, emphasis in original). Founded by Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835?–1908), a native of Qadian, Punjab, who claimed to be the Promised Messiah of Islam, the AMI was a South Asia-based missionary movement which appealed to black Americans due to its racially inclusive doctrines, ambitious internationalist scope, and notion of continuous prophecy. To these musicians, Ahmadiyya Islam was “a force which directly opposed the deterioration of the mind and body through either spiritual or physical deterrents” (Turner 1997: 139), a respite from racism, nights in smoke-filled clubs, and the perils of drugs and alcohol. At the same time, as trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie noted in his autobiography, many musicians converted to Islam merely to escape blackness; as one musician says: “Man, if you join the Muslim faith, you ain't colored no more, you'll be white. You get a new name and you won't be a nigger no more” (Gillespie 2009: 291). Thus, conversion to Islam was a “tonic” as well, providing jazz musicians spiritual protection from the harmful trappings of their profession, alongside a political safeguard from white supremacy, an identity which at times allowed them to transcend their parochial identities as “blacks” and embrace a global community of Muslims. Giving their songs titles like “Prayer to the East,” “Eastern Sounds,” and “Abdullah's Delight,” African American Muslim musicians combined Islamic themes and messages of black protest in their recordings, while donning Islamic *kufis* and *thobes*, and incorporating Asian and Middle Eastern musical sounds and elements in their work.<sup>2</sup>

Yet in the blues and jazz, “Islam” had heretofore yet to be advanced within US cultural production as an *explicit* symbol of racial resistance, a positioning which would fundamentally change during the course of the politically turbulent 1960s. As film historian Donald Bogle writes, “In 1960, Negroes were quietly asking for their rights. By 1969, blacks were demanding them” (Bogle 2001: 195). Islam functioned as a major factor in this cultural and political shift, as the black militancy of the Nation of Islam captivated black America, while inspiring fear and loathing in white Americans. During this time, a distinctly Muslim American voice emerged in

the literary realm, first through the publication of Alex Haley's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* in 1965, and later through the poets, writers, and playwrights of the Black Arts Movement. Whereas the Islamic influences on the works of Muslim American blues and jazz artists were subtle, indicating their Muslim identities without actively promoting any sort of Islamic ideology or practice, the Islam of these literary expressions was bold and uncompromising, asserting the religion as integral to a black American cultural identity, which lay at the heart of the era's revolutionary zeitgeist.

*The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, written with the assistance of Alex Haley, was originally published in November 1965, and in the years since has become "the most popular autobiography of an African American in print," selling millions of copies in paperback in the USA alone (Doherty 2000: 29). At once "a political tract, a religious conversion narrative, and an underground commentary on twentieth-century American culture" (Rashid 1993: 61), the text is not only part of the American literary canon, but has become an iconographic fixture in American popular culture, in particular following director Spike Lee's film adaptation of the text in 1992. While speculation around its authorship and accuracy continues, the text is still widely viewed in the popular and US political imaginaries simultaneously as a black nationalist screed, decrying the evils of white supremacy and giving voice to the racial ideologies of the Nation of Islam (of which Malcolm was a member from 1952 to 1963), and as a tale of racial universalist triumph, due to Malcolm's renunciation of the NOI's racial ideologies following his pilgrimage to Mecca in 1964. Neither of these readings captures the full complexity of X's narrative, mainly due to their lack of attention to how his story reflects an African American Muslim – and thus a distinctly Muslim American – history and legacy. Beginning with Malcolm's father's participation in Marcus Garvey's Pan-Africanist Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) during his childhood in Nebraska, through his move to the Northern urban industrial centers of Detroit, Philadelphia, and New York, to his membership in the Nation of Islam and subsequent conversion to the teachings of Sunni Islam, the *Autobiography* is, beyond a personal narrative, a concise mapping of Islam's historical lineage in the twentieth-century USA. The early politics of black nationalism, the racial-religious doctrines of the NOI, the move towards Sunnism, and, finally, to X's distinctly Muslim American ideological positioning through his simultaneous and passionate commitments to a black nationalist politics and an ideology of Islamic universalism at the end of his life – these components reflect the trajectory of Islam's cultural presence in America, and reveal the interplay between race and religion in this formation.

This discursive intertwining of Islam's cultural significance with the struggles for racial justice of the 1960s and 1970s was further solidified through an engagement with the poets and writers of the Black Arts Movement, founded directly following Malcolm's X's assassination on February 21, 1965. During that time, poet and writer Amiri Baraka (author of *Blues People*, 1999) established Harlem's Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School, amongst heated debates by African American intellectuals and activists concerning the split between Malcolm and the Nation of Islam, and the most viable way forward for the black revolutionary struggle. Within the Black Arts "renaissance," Islam was portrayed as a staunchly black religion, its adaptation and inclusion in the realm of black cultural struggle viewed as a means of rejecting the white man's god. Merging with popular discourses of Afrocentrism, the religion became part of a critical vocabulary of black resistance, in which cultural and political struggle were considered one and the same. Baraka himself converted to Sunni Islam in 1968 (though he later renounced the faith in 1974, citing an ideological shift to the Marxism/Leninism). Islam, Baraka would say at one point, was a holistic spiritual framework through which black people could reclaim their true connections to the Divine, and art was vehicle to achieve this contact. "As you begin to

beat your way back through the symbols, getting close to what the source of Black art was,” Baraka stated in a 1968 interview, “you begin to see that it comes out of Islam” (Baraka 1994: 54).

In the Black Arts Movement and beyond, however, the voices of Muslim American expression were overwhelming male. Writing of Marvin X, a central poet in the Black Arts Movement, writer Mohja Kahf characterizes X and his peers (including Baraka) as “sexist as all get out, in the way that is common for men of (their) generation and his radicalism” (Kahf 2010). Indeed, the history of Muslim American culture and literature till this point was undeniably dominated by men, and in many cases rooted in patriarchal conceptions of gender and sexuality. It is important to note, however, that this is not due to the inactivity of Muslim women in the USA in the realms of cultural and literary production, but most likely the result of what Ula Taylor has called the “crisis of archival recognition” for African American women, in which black women’s stories and voices are historically devalued, and thus, she writes (citing Cheryl Harris), “overlooked, misheard, misinterpreted, misrepresented, and ultimately misappropriated” (Taylor 2008: 188). Indeed, the deeply masculinist character of the Nation of Islam and the politics of black nationalism functioned to sequester and silence the voices of black women, whom Elijah Muhammad saw as “the field to produce [the black] nation,” and thus instructed black men to “control and protect ... his crop” (Muhammad 1965: 58). In regards to the recounting of Muslim American women’s cultural and literary histories, it is arguable that such a devaluation of women has been further compounded by debates amongst scholars of Islam concerning women’s performance and artistic expression. To cite Sarah Weiss writing in regards to Muslim women and musical performance, the cultural expressions of Muslim women tend to be associated with a “relaxing of morals ... when women are involved in performance, it is common to assume that they themselves are not pious” (Weiss 2007: 88). Thus, in conjunction with the ideologies of black nationalism, such an association between art and immorality served to put Muslim American women “in their place” in the home, as mothers, and as supporters of men, who were to remain cloistered, closeted, and out of the public eye.

Despite this, within the context of the Black Arts Movement, black feminist poet and writer Sonia Sanchez, who joined the Nation of Islam in 1972, created work which illuminated the intersections between black nationalism, Islam, and black, Third World, and Islamic feminist ideologies. In her poetry, Sanchez stressed the importance of black women being committed to the advancement of a strong and unified black revolutionary struggle, and, like Baraka and Marvin X, viewed Islam as a spiritual and political framework through which to engage the struggle; in other words, Sanchez’s desire for black mobilization and empowerment led her to adopt Islam’s religious teachings. While she ultimately left the NOI in 1975 to embrace a Pan-Africanist feminist philosophy, she wrote prolifically during her years in the organization, creating prose and poetry that placed Muslim women at the center of black revolutionary struggles, as well as in the presence of the Divine, a juxtaposition clearly revealed in a poem from the 1974 volume *A Blues Book for Black Magical Women* (1973).

### **After 1965: immigration, diaspora, polyculturalism**

At the moment in which such distinctive Muslim American voices, rooted in the black experience and political protest, were emerging in the 1960s, large-scale shifts in immigration policy were also taking place, namely due to the passage of the 1965 Hart–Cellar Immigration and Nationality Act, which lifted quota restrictions previously placed upon many Asian and Arab countries. As a result of Hart–Cellar, the nation witnessed a dramatic increase in the

number of South Asians and Arabs living and working in the USA, a change which irrevocably changed the composition of Muslim America, and thus dramatically altered the trajectory of Muslim American identity, community, and cultural formation. Other factors also contributed to this shift from the mid-1960s through the 1970s, including (but not limited to) political turbulence in West Asia and North Africa; the steady waning of black nationalist and revolutionary political movements; the death of Elijah Muhammad in 1975 and the transition of the NOI's leadership to his son, Warith Deen Muhammad. Yet it was the aforementioned ever-growing numbers of South Asian and Arab Muslim immigrants, many of whom brought their own practices and interpretations of Islam, and eventually started their own mosques and organizations, that shifted broader understandings of Islam away from its presence in black communities. By the 1980s, the national conversation around "Islam" and "Muslims" had become almost entirely disassociated from issues of anti-racism and black political protest and was, instead, conflated with notions of Orientalized foreign threat, a development exacerbated by the 1979 Iranian hostage crisis and changing US relations with the Middle East. During these decades, certain tensions came to develop between black American and immigrant Muslims, as black Americans felt increasingly ostracized and ignored by their immigrant counterparts in the very mosques and organizations they had themselves built, as well as feeling that immigrant Muslims viewed black American practices and understandings of Islam as less authentic. Yet, as immigrants from the Islamic diaspora increasingly arrived, they also engaged, shared, and built community with black American Muslims, engendering distinctly polycultural manifestations of Islamic practice and artistic expression.

Of course, Muslims from South and West Asia had been present in the USA long before 1965.<sup>3</sup> However, in the realm of cultural and literary production it was not until the 1980s and 1990s – a period often called the "culture wars" in the USA, and in which "multiculturalism" emerged as a dominant rubric for understanding American identity – that writers emerging out of South Asian, West Asian, and North African Islamic diasporic traditions began to make their presence more strongly known in American literary and cultural fields. In the 1980s and 1990s, writers such as the Kashmiri American Agha Shahid Ali and Palestinian American Naomi Shihab Nye produced work infused with Islamic sensibilities that resonated forcefully within the multicultural rhetoric of those decades, while former Beat poet and white American convert to Islam Daniel Abd al-Hayy Moore drew upon his engagement with Islam's mystical Sufi tradition and his extensive travels through North Africa to produce works such as *The Ramadan Sonnets* and *Mecca–Medina Timewarp*, both published in the 1990s. It was also during this time that thirteenth-century Muslim poet and Sufi mystic Rumi became the most widely read poet in the USA, as a result of the release of translations of his writing by American poet and writer Coleman Barks. Indeed, this turn towards the "mystical" in Islam had begun in the mid- to late 1970s, as well-known rock bands such as the Doors and the Grateful Dead drew upon Islamic musical traditions and spiritual teachings in the realm of psychedelic rock, the latter releasing an album entitled *Blues for Allah* in 1975.

However, it was the rollback of civil rights gains during Ronald Reagan's presidency in the 1980s that ushered in a resurgence of black nationalist ideologies via the realm of hip hop. Rappers such as Chuck D of Public Enemy, Paris, Nas, and others touted their affiliations with black Muslim leaders such as Louis Farrakhan and expressed their respect for the teachings of Islam, while the release of Spike Lee's 1992 film biography of Malcolm X rendered the Muslim American leader a central icon of the hip hop generation. As with Islam's earlier incarnations, the religion's manifestations in the 1980s and 1990s hip-hop culture were rooted in anti-racist ideologies, both political and spiritual, yet many would argue that its portrayals were romanticized and repackaged for mass consumer consumption.



In addition, Islam's main presence in hip hop arrived through an organization that drew upon Islamic imagery but did not assert itself as a Muslim organization: the Five Percent Nation. The Five Percent was a group which preached the divinity of the Black Man, who the group's members called "Allah."<sup>4</sup> Even more so than the NOI, Five Percent views have been deemed heretical by mainstream Sunni Muslims, though the group has had the largest impact amongst hip hop artists themselves and the genre's terminology, symbols, and ideology. At the same time, while Five Percenters do not call themselves Muslims, preferring instead to be called Five Percenters or simply "Gods," the influence of Islam's symbols and terminology on the group is undeniable. From the late 1980s on, rappers who were members of (or affiliated) with the Five Percenters were extremely influential in the evolutions of rap music and hip hop culture, in terms of both commercial success and critical acclaim. Amongst these artists were Rakim Allah, Big Daddy Kane, Poor Righteous Teachers, Busta Rhymes, Leaders of the New School, Guru, Pete Rock, Mobb Deep, Queen Latifah, Erykah Badu, and members of the groups Wu Tang Clan and Digable Planets.

Yet despite such pockets of influence within popular and literary culture, Islam and Muslims for the most part remained largely "underground" throughout the 1980s and 1990s, as Soviet-style communism remained the nation's pre-eminent foe until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1990, and the nation engaged in heated debates over multiculturalism and national identity during the culture wars of the 1990s. Muslim American communities, both African American and immigrant, avoided public scrutiny, as the former strived to recalibrate and restructure their communities in the wake of 1970s political struggles, and the latter developed and strengthened their own communities, as well as attempting to assimilate and weave themselves into the fabric of American society.<sup>5</sup> Thus, while Orientalist notions shaped by global geopolitical contexts of militarism and empire certainly engendered cultural perceptions of Islam, Muslims within the USA remained for the most part under the radar. As a result of racial, ethnic, and class differences, many Muslims in the USA often had few interactions with those outside their own local and regional communities. These types of divisions did not only pertain to Muslim communities in the USA; as Susan Koshy has written, "ethnic particularism," as she calls it, was the outcome of the shifting structure of white supremacy in an age of "multiculturalism." Indeed, "Islam" as a presence continued to develop as it always had in the USA, under the auspices of a racist and white supremacist state, in which Muslims were viewed as perennial Others. Whether black American or immigrant, Muslims American communities during this time functioned within the nation's racial calculus in ways that would directly come to bear upon how they would express themselves through art and literature following the events of September 11, 2001.

### **The birth of "Muslim American" culture**

Elevate Culture, formed in 2012, calls itself "a group of young professional and college students with a passion for a North American Muslim culture that is in line with the Islamic spirit and that is the voice of positive art" ([www.creativemuslims.com](http://www.creativemuslims.com), 2013). A registered non-profit, the organization works to raise money to "support creative project ideas in the community by providing grants, networking opportunities with mentors, showcasing work, and providing an upbeat and positive forum to discuss topics related to North American Muslim culture" ([www.creativemuslims.com](http://www.creativemuslims.com), 2013). A glance at their website ([www.elevateculture.org](http://www.elevateculture.org)) reveals over a dozen projects visitors might donate funds to if they so desire, including an indie rock record, a fashion line, a graphic design firm, and a spoken word CD. In their statement of purpose, the group states that it has a "cultural imperative" to support North American Muslim artists,

inspired by their belief that “until Islam is made culturally relevant, Muslims cannot reach their full potential.”

Elevate Culture’s notion of the “cultural imperative” is borrowed from the work of Dr. Umar Faruq Abd-Allah, whose 2004 essay “Islam and the Cultural Imperative” has been widely circulated amongst young Muslim Americans in the post-9/11 years. In it, Abd-Allah advocates for the creation of “a sound Muslim American cultural identity,” and argues that Islam’s religious teaching “requires the creation of a successful indigenous Islamic culture in America and sets down sound parameters for its formation and growth” (Abd-Allah 2004: 3). Specifically, Abd-Allah chastises Islamic scholars and community leaders who have wholesale transplanted the mores and interpretations of Islam from their native lands, and labeled the arts – e.g. music, performance, theater, etc. – as *haram*, or forbidden by Islamic law. Likening Islam to a “crystal clear river,” which should “reflect the bedrock (indigenous culture)” over which it flows, Abd-Allah says that, beyond the building of mosques and institutions, the primary concern of Muslims in the USA “must be the constitution of a unified self, congenial and self-assured, culturally and Islamically literate, capable not just of being a productive citizen and contributor of society but a leader of the cultural vanguard in America” (Abd-Allah 2004: 10–11).

The words of Abd-Allah, and the aims of Elevate Culture, reflect the ways in which Muslim Americans have approached, and continue to approach, the work of cultural and artistic expression in the post-9/11 era. As this essay has demonstrated thus far, Muslims have long been an active and integral part of culture-making in the USA. However, the events of September 11, 2001 thrust Islam and Muslims into a national spotlight that has not yet ceased to shine, and often in an ugly and unflattering light. Characterizing Muslims and Islam through associations with terrorism and religious fundamentalism, images of the Islamic male terrorist and the oppressed, submissive Muslim woman have flooded the US media and popular culture, reinvigorating age-old Orientalist stereotypes for the contemporary era. Yet they also draw upon racist tropes used to depict black Americans, and the state surveillance and profiling of Muslim communities closely resemble those inflicted on black Americans both historically and in the present. As such, Muslim Americans of all races, ethnicities, and national origins have been pushed to articulate and define their identities, as well as seeking out points of commonality within their communities. In light of these racializing practices, the post-9/11 cultural and literary expressions of Muslim Americans have come to reflect not only the myriad of racial, ethnic, and cultural identities and histories encompassed by their communities, but also their shared experiences as a community under attack.

Yet it is this notion of “shared experience” that has led to difficulties. As shown here, poly-culturalism – the vibrant and non-essentialized contact between cultures and races – is at the heart of Islam’s presence in the USA, yet the polarizing racial landscape of the USA has rendered it difficult at times for Islam to flow as the crystal clear river Abd-Allah describes above. As such, processes of Muslim American cultural and identity formation have been fraught with tension, as religious leaders, often unaware of the histories of race and power which have shaped Islam’s presence in the USA, have issued opinions on the impermissibility of cultural expression. Furthermore, newer Muslim communities, also unaware of Islam’s legacies in black communities, have often decried the surveillance of Muslims and US aggression in the Middle East, while ignoring the ills of racism and poverty within the United States, which disproportionately affect communities of color. On the other hand, for many black American Muslims, as well as a younger generation of non-black Muslim Americans who have grown up with the ubiquitousness of popular culture, there is an urgent desire to forge a distinctly Muslim American culture, one which expresses their religious values, critiques the War on Terror, and allies them with broader artistic and activist communities.

In creating this culture, many young people have turned to the past to draw inspiration from the traditions of political activism and social justice struggles represented by Islam's longstanding role in black American cultural politics. Thus, it is important to understand a new generation of Muslim American writers, artists, musicians, actors, etc. not as a "new" phenomenon, but one whose emergence is contextualized by the ways in which Islam has become linked with issues of social justice and political protest due to its engagements with blackness. For example, on November 7, 2001, Palestinian American poet and New York native Suheir Hammad published "First Writing Since (Poem on Crisis of Terror)" in the online poetry journal *In Motion*, in which she emphasized the presence of Arabs and Muslims in the USA and expressed her pain over the attacks:

one more person ask me if i knew the hijackers.  
 one more motherfucker ask me what navy my brother is in.  
 one more person assume no arabs or muslims were killed. one more person  
 assume they know me, or that i represent a people.  
 or that a people represent an evil. or that evil is as simple as a  
 flag and words on a page ...  
 if there are any people on earth who understand how new york is  
 feeling right now, they are in the west bank and the gaza strip ...

(Hammad 2001)

Linking the pain of New Yorkers following the attacks to that of Palestinians struggling under Israeli occupation in the West Bank, Hammad conveys the rage, grief, and ambivalence of Muslims and Arabs, particularly women, in post-9/11 America. This poem was later discovered by hip hop mogul Russell Simmons, who asked her to perform her work on his *Def Poetry Jam* series on HBO in 2002 and join the series tour, on which Hammad performed for the next two years.

As Hammad's example demonstrates, the urban cultural milieus of hip hop and the spoken word scene have been natural outlets for the post-9/11 voices of Muslim American artists. Aligning themselves with working-class, people of color, and grassroots activist communities, spoken word artists such as Hammad, Puerto Rican American Muslim convert Liza Garza, Milwaukee-based slam poet Muhibb Dyer, Bay Area poets and rappers Amir Suliman and Baraka Blue, Atlanta-based Ms. Latifah, and many others utilized their work to critique the War on Terror, the conditions of urban America, and racial, gender, and class inequality, all the while speaking to the evolving realities of being Muslim in the post-9/11 USA. Like Amiri Baraka, Marvin X, and Sonia Sanchez before them, these poets and artists attempted to merge their artistic and political visions, emphasizing Islam's focus on justice, racial egalitarianism, and the importance of charity and good works. In the realm of hip hop, artists also advanced such principles, such as Washington, DC-based rappers Native Deen, and a number of artists who have emerged from or been associated with Bay Area hip-hop collective Remarkable Current, including its founder, DJ and producer Anas Canon (also known as belikeMuhammad), rappers and vocalists Tyson Amir and Kumasi, and Puerto Rican Muslim American duo Mujahideen Team, or M-Team, featuring brothers Hamza and Suliman Perez (a.k.a. Doc Zhivago). In addition, more well-known hip-hop artists such as Mos Def, Ali Shaheed Muhammad Q-Tip, Lupe Fiasco, Brother Ali, and Busta Rhymes have publicly proclaimed their identities as Muslims. In 2012, Mos Def officially changed his name to Yasiin Bey, and he has long been extremely critical of government policies in the War on Terror. In 2013, he participated in a four-minute film made by the human rights organization Reprieve and director Asif Kapadia

which featured Bey undergoing the procedure of force-feeding endured by inmates at Guantanamo Bay prison camp, who were at the time engaged in a hunger strike. Female rappers such as Mis Undastood and the UK's Poetic Pilgrimage have also been prominent in the Muslim hip-hop scene in the USA, though the longstanding marginalization of women continues to affect gender diversity. And while hip hop boasts the largest number of Muslim American artists, Indonesia-based singer Yuna plays her acoustic indie rock to large audiences, while country singer Kareem Salama and classically trained soprano Sumaiyya Ali are gaining fans both within the USA and beyond.

Links between Islam and black culture and identity have also been explored in literature and film. Novels such as Murad Kalam's *Night Journey* (2004), nonfiction works like Michael Muhammad Knight's *Blue-Eyed Devil*, the documentaries *New Muslim Cool* (dir. Jennifer Maytorena Taylor) and *Deen Tight* (dir. Mustafa Davis), and feature films *Bilal's Stand* (dir. Sultan Sharieff) and *Mooz-lum* (dir. Qasim Bashir) explore the complexities of Muslim American life for young men of color, and the intersections between black and Muslim American cultures. Cultural works have also explored other trajectories of political protest and rebellion; Knight's first novel, *The Taqwacores*, a fictional account of an Islamic punk rock scene in the USA published in 2004, spawned a real Islamic punk movement, which was the subject of an award-winning 2009 documentary titled *Taqwacore: The Birth of Punk Islam*. Black American Muslim women have also carved a niche in the publishing industry, crafting a new genre called "urban Islamic fiction." Titles such as Umm Jawayriyah's *The Size of a Mustard Seed*, Nadirah Angail's *What We Learned along the Way*, and Jatasha Sharif's *Khadijah's Life in Motion* offer fictional narratives featuring female black American Muslim protagonists navigating both their religious communities and urban landscapes, while Elle Muslimah's *The Real Muslim Wives of Philly* claims to provide "a rare view into the thoughts, family life, and intriguing practices such as plural marriage."

Since the 1970s, however, distinctive Muslim American identities have also developed and evolved out of "immigrant" Muslim communities across the country. Numerous first- and second-generation Muslims of South Asian, West Asian, and North African origin have come forward to tell their stories in the post-9/11 era, mainly in the literary realm. Many of the novels, short stories, poetry, and plays have much in common with Asian and Arab American immigrant literatures, exploring themes of generational conflict, cultural divisions, and the difficulties of assimilation. Novels such as Afghani American Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2004), Samina Ali's *Madras on Rainy Days* (2004), Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, Ali Yunis's *The Night Counter* (2010), Ayad Akhtar's *American Dervish* (2012), and Jennifer Zobair's *Painted Hands* (2013) offer Muslim American perspectives beyond the urban contexts detailed above, providing a glimpse into the ways Asian and Arab American Muslims in the USA have created lives in places like Bloomington, IN, Fremont, CA, and immigrant ethnic enclaves in the metropolitan centers of Milwaukee, New York, and Philadelphia. Other texts, such as H.M. Naqvi's *Homeboy* and Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (which was made into a feature film directed by Mira Nair in 2013), explore the effects of state profiling and surveillance practices, detailing the lives of young "immigrant" Muslim men, in this case both Pakistani, who must endure their labeling and interpellation as "terrorists" in various ways. On the stage, Pakistani American playwright Wajahat Ali's *The Domestic Crusaders*; the *Hijabi Monologues* project – a series of monologues exploring the realities of Muslim women who wear the *hijab*, or headscarf; and Rohina Malik's one-woman show *Unveiled* have garnered large audiences and critical acclaim. Beyond stereotypical media images as terrorists and fanatics, Muslims have also begun to appear on mainstream American television: NBC's situation comedy *Outsourced*, set in a call center in India, debuted in 2010 and features a number of

Muslim characters and actors, while comedian and media pundit Jon Stewart's popular satirical program *The Daily Show* regularly features commentary from actor and comedian Asif Mandvi, a Muslim American of Indian descent. In Canada, a prime time situation comedy, *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, ran from 2009 to 2012, and documented the quirky and comedic stories of a Muslim community in the fictional prairie town of Mercy, Saskatchewan.

Beyond the arenas of literature, music, and film, a Muslim American cultural ethos is also developing in the fields of fashion and art, as clothing retailers such as Shukr ("thankfulness" in Arabic) and Artizara offer modest, urban-inspired, and decidedly fashion-forward Islamic garments, while artists such as Australian-based Peter Gould merges vibrant and sleek graphics with Islamic visuals. Muslim American comedy is also on the rise; prominent comedian Dave Chappelle, who converted to Islam in 1998, began publicly discussing his faith in 2005, while a 2008 documentary, *Allah Made Me Funny*, follows Muslim American comedians Azhar Usman, Preacher Moss, and Mo Amer, who are, respectively, Indian American, African American, and Palestinian American. In 2013, comedian Dean Obeidallah appeared in television station Comedy Central's special *Axis of Evil*, as well as releasing a film detailing the lives of Muslim and Arab stand-up comedians entitled *The Muslims are Coming*.

A number of cities have emerged as centers of Muslim American cultural production, in particular Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, Dearborn, MI, and the San Francisco Bay Area. Two organizations, the Bay Area's Ta'leef Collective and Chicago's Inner-City Muslim Action Network (IMAN), have emerged as leading voices in, to return to the mission statement of Elevate Culture, making Islam "culturally relevant," and both connect their work to the history of Islam in the USA, specifically in relation to black America. Founded by Rami Nashashibi, IMAN "uses religion, art, and culture" to fight for social justice, and since 1997 has put on the largest Muslim cultural festival in the country, called "Takin' It to the Streets," which the organization describes as "a Muslim-led festival where artistic expression, spirituality, and urban creativity inspire social change." Featuring hip hop and spoken word artists, the event is one among many IMAN presents throughout the year, in which they draw upon the activist spirit of Islam in America while working within the urban and polycultural milieus in which Islam has long grown and thrived. In the Bay Area, the Ta'leef Collective identifies itself as an organization which "serves seekers actively interested in Islam and converts to the faith, assisting them in realizing a sustainable conversion to and practice of Islam, and a healthy, gradual integration into our greater Muslim community." While culture is not explicitly discussed in its mission statement, the group has used film, photography, and social media as integral components of its work. Filmmaker Mustafa Davis, the director of the documentary *Deen Tight*, mentioned above, is an integral part of Ta'leef and employs his skills as a filmmaker and photographer to showcase the diversity and richness of Muslim American communities, as well as calling upon Muslims themselves to express themselves through art.

Most of the artistic expressions described in the second section of this essay might be characterized as part of the "first wave" of Muslim American art and literature in the post-9/11 era, representing the ways in which a community under siege has responded to its predicament through creative expression. Yet, as this essay has shown, Islam has long been a presence within the USA, both in terms of Muslim communities themselves and as a distinctive register of art and culture. Forged at the intersections of race and religion, Islam in the arts in the USA is heterogeneous, diverse, and ever changing. Indeed, with the continued growth and development of groups such as Elevate Culture, IMAN, the Ta'leef Collective, and various others, one again sees how the notion of process comes to bear upon how Islam's meanings have shifted and evolved in recent decades. While many of the young writers, musicians, and artists discussed above have used their work to protest racist and Orientalist interpellations of themselves

and their communities, as newer and younger artists emerge one sees new sets of issues arising around how to enact the “cultural imperative” Abd-Allah speaks of on p. 328. Perhaps one of the most exciting developments in this evolution is the focus on issues of gender and sexuality within Muslim America, as Muslim American women take up Islamic feminism within a US context and challenge the polarizing binaries that have characterized their representations. In addition, queer Muslim communities have increasingly gained visibility; in 2007, New York-based director Parvez Sharma released the documentary *Jihad for Love*, featuring queer Muslims in Islamic countries, while the fluidity of gender and sexuality figure prominently in many works by first-time Muslim authors, such as Bushra Rehman’s *Corona* and the anthology *Love Insh’Allah: The Secret Love Lives of American Muslim Women*. As all these works demonstrate, “Islam” will continue to function as an intersectional and hybridized process of racial, class, gender, political, and religious formation in American artistic expressions, one that simultaneously reflects and challenges the multivalent histories that have characterized the rich, vibrant, and creative presence of Islam in the USA.

## Notes

- 1 Within the US Muslim community itself, the question of how to self-identity has been debated, with many arguing that whereas racial and ethnic identifiers (e.g. “African American,” “Asian American,” etc.) are aptly used as qualifiers for “American-ness,” a religious identity, such as Muslim, should function as the primary term, with American being used as the qualifying adjective. While I understand the importance of these distinctions, I suggest “Muslim American” is a more inclusive term that allows for the flexibility and fluidity of Muslim identities in the United States, as some of the artists and writers I discuss herein may not strongly self-identify as Muslim in terms of their religious and cultural practices.
- 2 This encounter between jazz and Islam reverberated beyond the lives of converts themselves. For example, saxophonist John Coltrane’s *A Love Supreme*, recorded in 1964 and often called the greatest jazz album of all time, was deeply shaped by Coltrane’s exposure to Ahmadiyya Islam through pianist Tyner, his wife Naima, and a drummer named Nasseridine, who played with Coltrane in Philadelphia in the 1950s and 1960s. In the album’s liner notes Coltrane writes, “Now and again through the unerring and merciful hand of God, I do perceive his ... OMNIPOTENCE ... HE IS GRACIOUS AND MERCIFUL.” These words directly echo the opening lines of every chapter in the Qur’an: *Bismillah al-Rahman al-Rahim*: “In the name of Allah, the gracious, the merciful.”
- 3 Some of these histories have been well documented, such as those of Bengali Muslim seamen in Harlem in the 1930s, Indian Muslim farm laborers on the West Coast, and Arab immigrants mainly from Syria and Lebanon in the Northwest and Midwest. For further reading, see GhaneaBassiri (2010), Gualtieri (2009), Haddad (1991), Smith (1999), Takaki (1998).
- 4 The basic premise of the organization is that 85 percent of people are without knowledge, 10 percent are bloodsuckers of the poor who have knowledge and power but use it to abuse the 85 percent, and 5 percent are the poor righteous teachers who preach the divinity of the black man who is God manifest and will save the 85 percent from destruction.
- 5 As stated above, following the death of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad in 1975, the Nation of Islam came under the leadership of Muhammad’s son, Warith Deen, who transitioned the organization towards the teachings of Sunni Islam and eventually renamed the group the American Society of Muslims. Another group, led by Muhammad disciple Louis Farrakhan, maintained the group’s racial separatist beliefs.

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