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CAMBRIDGE COMPANIONS TO RELIGION
Cultural and Literary Production of Muslim America

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In December 2010, the New York Times ran an article on Muslim American artists in the San Francisco Bay Area entitled “Muslim American Artists Strive to Bridge a Chasm.” The piece featured a diverse range of writers, musicians, and visual artists, such as playwright Wajahat Ali, décor and event designer Khadija O’Connell, and members of the hip hop collective Remarkable Current, all of whom, reporter Thalia Gigerenzer wrote, were engaged in work of “reimagining one of the country’s most complicated compound identities: Muslim American.” Their efforts, Gigerenzer continued, were motivated by a desire to counter the racist and Orientalist stereotypes that had come to characterize Islam and Muslims in the years since 9/11, the ways in which, as Ali was quoted, “our narrative has been stolen from us.” The creation of distinctly Muslim American cultural forms, the article noted, would “expand understanding of their faith among non-Muslims as well as bridge American and Islamic traditions,” thus addressing “the chasm” between Islam and America, between Muslim Americans and practices of their faith. Said Javed Ali, founder of Ilume, a Muslim online news, arts, and culture magazine, “We’re at a point where Islam is really being defined in this country, and it’s going to be through the arts.” While Gigerenzer’s piece was a welcome alternative to narratives of anti-Muslim bias so pervasive in the media at the time, it also reinforced long-standing Orientalist notions of a vast gulf—the “chasm”—between “Islam” and the “United States,” between “Muslims” and “America,” as well as portraying the emergence of Muslim American artistic and cultural production as a wholly post-9/11 phenomenon. Yet,

2 Gigerenzer, “Muslim American Artists.”
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as various writers and scholars have noted, “Islam” has long influenced American culture, both in how Islamic and Arab cultures have shaped cultural production in the United States and in the ways Muslims in the United States have significantly contributed to the creation of art, music, literature, and other cultural forms. In other words, “Islam” and “Muslims” have in fact long been part of the cultural fabric of the United States, shaping various forms of cultural and literary production. What changed in the post-9/11 era was the unprecedented level of media, political, and cultural scrutiny upon Islamic practices and Muslim communities in the United States, a shift that ultimately led to the increasing categorization of cultural and literary production emerging from various Muslim communities in the United States as “Muslim American.”

Yet the post-9/11 “reimagining” of Muslim American cultural identities is not the result of a “chasm” between Islam and American but of a shift in what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called “the space of possibles”: those systems of logic that define the “universe of problems, references, intellectual benchmarks” within a cultural field. Bourdieu says, “When a new literary or artistic group makes its presence felt in the field of literary or artistic production” as with the new generation of Muslim American artists, “the whole problem is transformed.” Within the post-9/11 United States, Muslim Americans have necessarily and actively engaged, as other minoritized groups have done in the past, in cultural strategies of “claiming America,” of asserting a Muslim presence in the United States and highlighting the contributions of Muslims in the creation of American literary and cultural forms, in order to counter and resist racial-religious violence in political and public life. As a result, the “problem” of Muslim American culture and literature, if we follow Bourdieu, has become not whether Muslims in the United States

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6 For the purposes of my chapter, I employ the term “Muslim American” (as opposed to “American Muslim”) to signify the cultural and literary works in question and thus extend this usage to identify the cultural practitioners and the communities they serve. Within the U.S. Muslim community itself, the question of how to self-identify has been debated, with many arguing that whereas racial and ethnic identifiers (e.g. “Asian American,” “African 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 such distinctions, and might go so far as arguing that “American Muslim” more aptly captures the transnational nature of Muslim identity formation in the United States, I believe at this time that “Muslim American” is a more inclusive term that allows for the flexibility and fluidity of Muslim identities in the United States, as a number of artists and writers I discuss here might not strongly self-identify as Muslim.


8 Bourdieu, The Field, p. 32.
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are engaged in literary and cultural production (which, of course, they always have), but what the precise nature of “Muslim American” culture and literature might be. More questions then follow: What renders a song, a painting, a poem “Muslim American”? What are the category’s defining characteristics and features, and how do we determine its parameters of inclusion? What is the “universe of problems, references, and intellectual benchmarks” of this emergent field of cultural and artistic expression? In what follows, I explore these questions by offering a generalized overview of Muslim American cultural and literary production, first considering the racialized contexts out of which the artistic expressions of Muslims in the United States have emerged and evolved, then turning to a selective history of Muslim American culture and literature. In closing, I consider how these various forms of artistic expression have converged in the contemporary moment, and how the hypervisiblity of Islam and Muslims in the United States has resulted in an unprecedented diversity and range within Muslim artistic expression in the United States.

As with Islam itself in America, the cultural expressions of Muslims in the United States are rooted in the African American experience. From the Islamic influences on blues and jazz, to its constitutive presence in movements of Black nationalism and civil rights, to its current impact on contemporary hip hop culture, Muslim American cultural and literary production is inexorably entwined with the cultural politics of Blackness and the ways in which African Americans, both Muslim and non-Muslim, have incorporated elements of Islam into expressions of Black culture. As such, to declare that Muslim American artists and culture have only emerged in the years since 9/11 leaves out how African American Muslims have long engaged in artistic expressions that have sought to imagine and reimagine their complex compound identities as African Americans, Muslims, and Americans. At the same time, it is crucial to understand the space of African American Muslim cultural politics I refer to here as an infinitely heterogeneous one, forged through a process of racial and religious exchange between African American and immigrant Muslims, mainly from South and West Asia, and through Black engagement with the transnational flows of knowledge and capital through which Islamic ideologies and Muslim cultural practices have always reached the United States. As a result of Islam’s rootedness in Black America, even the artistic expressions of post-1965 waves of South Asian and Arab Muslim immigrants, which might initially seem far-removed or as existing discretely from the African American history of Islam, must
subsequently reckon with this racialized past through their inclusion in the field of Muslim American culture.

Thus, to acknowledge the racial and religious confluence at the heart of Muslim American culture constitutes a critical first step in understanding the space of possibilities of Muslim American literature and culture. Akin to historian Robin D. G. Kelley’s notion of polyculturalism, which he uses to discuss how “most black people in the Americas are products of a variety of different ‘cultures’ ... which live in and through us every day,” this syncretism provides insight into how Muslims in the United States have consistently negotiated their self-imaginings as simultaneously local, national, and transnational citizens. This is due to how, as Miriam Cooke has written, Islam’s “very material connection to Arabia, where it found its beginnings, provides unusual possibilities for constructing a territorialized transcultural identity.” Muslims, Cooke continues, “can think transnationally while continuing to live locally, recognizing themselves as citizens of the world while retaining deep connections with a specific place, whether it be of birth, of choice, or of compulsion.” As we will see in what follows, it is in this confluence that the “universe of problems, references, and intellectual benchmarks” of Muslim American artistic expressions is found.

**ISLAM AND THE BLUES**

In *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) writes that

> 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. As Jones infers, the blues were the cultural by-product of the transatlantic slave trade in the United States. 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 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 50 percent of slaves were born. Historian Sylviane Diouf estimates that of the roughly 400,000 African captives who were first transported to the United States, 15 to 20 percent were 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.” 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.”

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 because of the region’s traditional emphasis on string and wind instruments. Because southern plantation owners feared slave revolts and uprisings, 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 slaveholders’ balls, which allowed for the music’s migration across the Deep South, including Mississippi, the birthplace of the blues.

**JAZZ AND THE REEMERGENCE OF ISLAM IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY**

The blues traveled north at the start of the twentieth century, as Black migrants from the South flooded to northern industrial centers such as Chicago, Detroit, New York, Philadelphia 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 (MSTA), the Ahmadiyya Movement in Islam, and 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 that rejected the racist and oppressive ideologies of the plantation and the Christian church. Characterized by a spirit of internationalism, a refusal of white European supremacy, and the acknowledgment of the creativity of Black urban cultures, such Pan-Africanist and Islamically oriented ideologies were instrumental to the development of a Black cultural renaissance across the North, exemplified by the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and 1930s. Described by Jamaican American journalist J. A. Rogers in 1925 as “one part American and three parts American Negro ... the nobody’s child of the levee and the city slum,” jazz was the soundtrack of the times. Reaching the height of its popularity at the close of the First World War, the improvisational art form exuded, to cite Rogers once more, “a fresh joyousness” through which audiences found “a temporary forgetfulness ... a tonic for the strong and a poison for the weak.” 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 (Sulieman Saud), vocalist Dakota Staton (Aliyah Rabia), and bassist Ahmed Abdul-Malik (best known for his work with Thelonious Monk).

Almost all entered the religion through the Ahmadiyya movement, 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” [emphasis in original]. Founded by Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, the Ahmadiyya was a South Asia–based missionary movement that appealed to Black Americans because of its racially

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14 Rogers, “African Muslims and American Blues.”
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,” 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.” 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 that 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 into their work.

However, various Black Ahmadi Muslim musicians also soon learned that their membership in the ummah did not shield them from censure within their communities, in particular, their South Asian co-religionists. Aminah McCloud has written that “the subject of music was often a source of debate with the subcontinent Ahmads,” as many of the Indian missionaries of the movement “insisted on Indian customs and interpretations” of Islam and did not view African Americans as “having something to offer American Islam.” However, with relatively few immigrant Muslims (of both South Asian and Middle Eastern origin) in the United States, such religious opinions had little to no effect on the cultural work of African American Muslim jazz musicians at the

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19 Dizzy Gillespie, To Be, or Not... to Boy [Minneapolis, 2000 [1979]], p. 291.
20 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 Nasseridin, who played within 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 almost every chapter in the Qur’an: Bismillah al-Rahman al-Rahim: “In the name of Allah, the gracious, the merciful.”
time, who mostly worked with and played for Black and white peers and audiences. This dynamic would fundamentally change in the decades following the passage of the 1965 Hart-Celler Immigration and Nationality Act, as a dramatic increase in the number of South Asians and Arabs living and working in the United States irrevocably changed the composition of Muslim America and thus, dramatically altered the trajectory of Muslim American identity, community, and cultural formation.

BLACK NATIONALISM AND THE BIRTH OF MUSLIM AMERICAN LITERATURE

Islam was foundational to the development of American popular music, from the roots of the blues to the creative heights of jazz, and emanated almost entirely from the Black cultural imaginary. While adopted by musicians as either a spiritual or political refusal of white supremacy, "Islam" had heretofore yet to be advanced within U.S. cultural production as an explicit symbol of racial resistance, a positioning that 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. The decade moved from the traditional goal of cultural and academic assimilation to one of almost absolute separatism and the evolution of a Black cultural aesthetic."32 Islam functioned as a major factor in this cultural and political shift, as the Black separatism of the Nation of Islam captivated Black America, while inspiring fear and loathing in white Americans as, in the infamous words of a 1959 CBS News special hosted by Mike Wallace, "The Hate That Hate Produced." During this time, a distinctly Muslim American literary presence emerged, 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. These texts represented, in the words of writer and scholar Mohja Kahf, “the first set of writings in American literature to voice a cultural position identifiable as Muslim.”33 In other words, 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 United States
alone.24 At once “a political tract, a religious conversion narrative, and an
underground commentary on twentieth-century American culture,”25 the
text not only is 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 political U.S. 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
member from 1952 to 1963), and as a tale of religious and racial universalist
trust, due to Malcolm’s renunciation of the NOI’s racial ideologies fol-
lowing his pilgrimage to Mecca in 1964. Neither of these readings cap-
tures the full complexity of Malcolm X’s narrative, a consequence mainly
due to a lack of attention to how his story reflects an African American
Muslim — and thus a distinctly Muslim American — history and legacy. As
Samory Rashid noted in 1993, “an analysis of the Islamic aspects of his life
is essential to understanding Malcolm X … attempts to understand him
through the lens of America’s perennial racial debate trivialize his mes-
29–49: 30.
26 Samory Rashid, “The Islamic X Aspects of the Legacy of Malcolm X,” American
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 distinctive interplay between race and religion in this formation. As we see through the story of El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, to be both a fiery advocate of racial and class liberation and a committed Muslim can be part and parcel of the cultural politics of American Islam.

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 after Malcolm’s X’s assassination on February 21, 1965. During that time, poet and writer LeRoi Jones [author of Blues People, cited earlier] established Harlem’s Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School, amid heated debates of 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. According to Melani McAlister, the Autobiography’s publication that same year created “a sensation within the circles of young, increasingly radicalized men and women who had listened to Malcolm X’s speeches, and were now riveted by the story of his life.”37 In this context, McAlister continues, Jones/Baraka set out to create

a community based black popular theatre and to invent a form and language that would reach African American audiences with a message of black [post]nationalism … its founding was an inspiration to a new generation of poets and playwrights, [creating] a flowering of African American cultural production unlike anything since the Harlem Renaissance.38

Within the Black Arts “renaissance,” Islam was portrayed as a staunchly Black religion, its adaption 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 struggles were considered one and the same.

Baraka himself converted to Sunni Islam in 1968 (though he renounced the faith in 1974, citing an ideological shift to Marxism/
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Leninism]. Initially inspired by the political organization and strength
of the Nation of Islam, Baraka composed a short play before his conver-
sion in 1965 entitled A Black Mass, which adapted Elijah Muhammad's
story, "Yakub's History," in which the NOI leader explained how white
people had been created as a "race of devils" from the world's original
Black inhabitants six thousand years ago by a "big-headed" Black scien-
tist named Yakub. The play "turns the Nation's myth into a reinter-
pretation of the Faust story and a simultaneous meditation on the role
and function of art," in particular, challenging the notions of art for
art's sake, and instead emphasizing that all artistic expression should
and must work toward political ends. Islam, Baraka would say later, was
a holistic spiritual framework through which Black people could reclaim
their true connections to the Divine and that art was a 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. The close-
ness of man with natural evidence of Divinity is what art was about in
the beginning ... that's what art is supposed to be about: to collect that
Divinity, to show its existence, to praise it."30

One of Baraka's closest colleagues in the Black Arts Renaissance
was poet, playwright, and essayist Marvin X, best known for his
one-act plays Flowers for the Trashman (1965), and The Black Bird
(1969), the latter advancing explicitly Islamic themes. In 1968 he pub-
lished a book of poems entitled Fly to Allah, which melded themes of
Black anger, militancy, and masculinity with Islamic themes and im-
agery in lines such as "who killed uncle tom / who killed uncle sam /
Allah! / Fly to him / if you are from him."31 In the years since, Marvin
X—who has remained a Muslim—has continued to produce writings
reflecting the interplay between Black nationalism and Islamic con-
ceptions of justice, struggle, and equality. Calling him the "Father of
Muslim American Literature," scholar and writer Mohja Kahf says of
Marvin X, "While The Autobiography of Malcolm X is a touchstone of
Muslim American culture, Marvin X and other Muslims in BAM were
the emergence of a cultural expression of Black Power and Muslim
American identity ... what I see as the starting point of Muslim
American literature."32

9 McAlister, Epic Encounters, p. 105.
10 Imamu Amiri Baraka, Conversations with Amiri Baraka (Jackson, 1994), p. 54.
12 Kahf, "Islam: Portability and Exportability."
Kahf also characterizes Marvin X and his peers as "sexist as all get out, in the way that is common for men of his generation and his radicalism." Indeed, the history of Muslim American culture and literature as reflected is undeniably dominated by men, as well as, 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 United States 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 "subject to be overlooked, misheard, misinterpreted, misrepresented, and ultimately misappropriated." 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." 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 among scholars of Islam concerning women's performance and artistic expression. According to Sarah Weiss, writing in regard 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." Thus, in conjunction with the ideologies of both 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. They were to remain cloistered, cloistered, 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 that illuminated the intersections between Black nationalism, Islam, and Black, Third World, and Islamic feminist ideologies. In her poetry, Sanchez stressed the importance for Black women to be committed to the advancement of a strong and unified Black

Kahf, "Islam: Portability and Exportability.


revolutionary struggle, and like Baraka and Marvin X, she 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:

WE ARE M.U.S.L.I.M WOMEN!
dwellers in light
- New women created from the limbs
  Of Allah
  We are the shining ones
  Coming from dark ruins
  Created from the eye of Allah.
  And we speak only what we know
  And do not curse God
  And we keep our minds open to light
  And we do not curse God
  And we chant Alhumdullilah
  And do not curse God.  

FROM HIP HOP TO NEW MUSLIM COOL

As with the nation itself, the 1970s were a transformative decade for Islam and Muslims in the United States, in regard to both the racial, ethnic, and ideological composition of Muslim American communities and national attitudes concerning Islam and Muslims in the U.S. political and cultural imaginaries. These shifts were a result of a number of factors, including (but not limited to) political turbulence in West Asia and North Africa, specifically the ongoing oil crisis and the Iranian hostage crisis of 1979; 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 Mohammed; and the ever-growing numbers of Muslim immigrants from South Asia and the Middle East entering and subsequently living and working in

Sonia Sanchez, A Blues Book for Black Magical Women [Detroit, 1973].
the United States. Taken together, these political and social developments facilitated a fundamental shift in both Islam's cultural meanings and community presence in the United States, in particular the manner in which conceptions of Islam and Muslims became conflated with the notion of an orientalized foreign threat, a development that ultimately served to distance the religion from its long-standing presence and culture associations within Black communities in the United States.

Of course, Muslims from South and West Asia had long been present in the United States. However, in the realm of cultural and literary production, it was not until the 1980s and 1990s that writers emerging out of South Asian, West Asian, and North African Muslim diasporic traditions began to make their presence more strongly known in American literary and cultural fields. In the 1980s and 1990s, writers such as 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 United States, as a result of the release of the adaptation of his poetry by American poet and writer Coleman Barks.

At the same time, the steady rollback of civil rights gains enacted during Ronald Reagan’s presidency in the 1980s 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 in Black American communities, the religion's manifestations in the 1980s and 1990s hip hop culture were rooted in antiracist ideologies, both political and spiritual, as its main presence arrived through the Five Percenters, a movement that preached the divinity of the

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58 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. See the historical chapters in this volume and their further reading sections.
Black Man, whom the group's members called "Allah." Even more so than the NOI, Five Percent views have been deemed heretical by other Muslims, though the group has had the largest impact among hip hop artists themselves and the genre's terminology, symbols, and ideology. At the same time, while Five Percenters do not generally consider 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 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. Among 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. Despite such pockets of influence within popular and literary culture, however, Islam and Muslims for the most part remained largely "underground" throughout the 1980s and 1990s; as Soviet-style communism remained the nation's preeminent 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, mostly remained out of the public eye, as the former strived to recalibrate and restructure their communities in the wake of the 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.

This relative lack of visibility was forever altered on September 11, 2001, as "Muslim Americans" were abruptly thrust into the national spotlight, broadly characterized through associations with terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism. Images of the male Muslim terrorist and the oppressed and submissive Muslim woman flooded the U.S. media and popular culture, reinvigorating age-old Orientalist stereotypes for

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39 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 the 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.

40 As stated earlier, following the death of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad in 1975, the Nation of Islam came under the leadership of Muhammad's son, Warith Deen Mohammed, who transitioned the organization toward the teachings of Sunni Islam and eventually renamed the group the American Society of Muslims. Another group, led by Muhammad's disciple Louis Farrakhan, maintained the group's racial separatist beliefs.
the contemporary era. Under such difficult circumstances, Muslim Americans of all races, ethnicities, and national origins were forced to articulate and define their identities as Americans, as well as seeking out points of commonality within their communities. As a result, the post-9/11 cultural and literary expressions of Muslim Americans not only articulated myriad racial, ethnic, and cultural identities and histories encompassed by their communities but also recounted their shared experiences as a community under suspicion. The decade since 9/11 has witnessed a proliferation of voices “identifiable as Muslim,” due to both a heightened public interest in Islam and Muslims and the desire of Muslims in the United States to share their stories. Many of the expressions have taken up the traditions of political activism and social justice struggles represented by Islam’s long-standing role in Black American cultural politics. 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 United States 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 ...

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. Hammad has only reluctantly identified with the label Muslim though. The 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, with 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

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working-class, people-of-color, and grass-roots activist communities, spoken word artists such as Hammad, Bay Area female spoken word artists Calligraphy of Thought, Puerto Rican American Muslim convert Liza Garza, Milwaukee-based slam poet Muhhibb Dyer, Bay Area poets and rappers Amir Sulaiman and Baraka Blue, 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 United States. 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, for example, Washington, D.C.-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, rappers and vocalists Tyson Amir and Kumasi, and Puerto Rican Muslim American duo Mujahideen Team, or M-Team, featuring brothers Hamza and Suliman Perez (aka Doc Zhivago). In addition, well-known hip hop artists such as Yasiin Bey (formerly Mos Def), Ali Shaheed Muhammad, Q-Tip, Lupe Fiasco, and Busta Rhymes began more publicly proclaiming their identities as Muslims. The links between Islam and Black culture and identity have also been explored in Muslim American novelist Murad Kalam’s Night Journey (2004), as well as the writings of white American convert Michael Muhammad Knight, whose nonfiction works Blue-Eyed Devil and The Five Percenters: Islam, Hip Hop, and the Gods of New York, offer – as the subtitle to the former reads – an “odyssey through Islamic America.”

The realities of Islam in urban post-9/11 America have also begun to be more fully explored in American film and cinema. Rapper Hamza Perez’s life was the focus of 2009’s New Muslim Cool,42 a documentary directed by Bay Area-based filmmaker Jennifer Mayorena Taylor, which aired as part of PBS’s acclaimed POV documentary series. Perez and his brother Suliman are also featured in the 2010 documentary Deen Tight, directed by Mustafa Davis, which explores the phenomenon of hip hop in Muslim cultures, focusing on the struggles of Muslim hip hop artists trying to, in the film’s words “find a balance between their culture and their religion.” In 2011 two feature-length films exploring the lives of

41 See Su’ad Abdul Khabeer and Maytha Alhassen, Chapter 17 in this volume, for further discussion.
African American Muslim men, *Bilal's Stand* (dir. Sultan Sharieff) and *Mooz-lum* (dir. Qasim Bashir) also premiered in U.S. theaters. Michael Muhammad Knight's first novel, *The Taqwacores*, a fictional account of an Islamic punk rock scene in the United States 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* and was dramatized as *The Taqwacores* (dir. Eyad Zahra) in 2010. As these examples demonstrate, the aforementioned literary, musical, and cinematic expressions unearth an always-evolving, yet deeply rooted ethos of social, political, and cultural protest that has been at the heart of Muslim American identity and culture. As Hisham Aidi (citing postcolonial critic Robert Young) has written, "Islam is at the heart of an emerging global, anti-hegemonic culture ... that combines diasporic and local cultural elements, and blends Arab, Islamic, Black and Hispanic factors to generate 'a revolutionary Black, Asian and Hispanic globalization, with its own dynamic counter-modernity ... constructed in order to fight global imperialism.'" While such a categorization poses the danger of inaccurately constructing Islam as a romanticized mode of cultural resistance – when it should in fact be viewed as a complex, contradictory, and at times deeply conservative intermixture of cultural, political, and religious ideologies – Islam appears to continue to constitute a "galvanizing force" among working-class and people-of-color communities in the post-9/11 United States.

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 bear 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*, and Shaila Abdullah's *Saffron Dreams* (2010) offer Muslim American perspectives beyond the urban contexts detailed here, providing a glimpse into the ways Muslim immigrants to the United States have created communities in places like Bloomington, Fremont, and immigrant ethnic enclaves in the metropolitan centers of Ni.

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of New York and Philadelphia. Other texts, such as Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and H. M. Naqvi’s *Homeboy* 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* (mentioned in the introduction) and the *Hijabi Monologues* project— a series of monologues exploring the realities of Muslim women who wear the *hijab*, or headscarf— have garnered large audiences and critical acclaim, and continue to be staged in theaters across the United States. 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* has regularly featured commentary from actor and comedian Aasif Mandvi, a Muslim American of Indian descent. Beyond the arenas of literature, music, and film, a Muslim American cultural ethos has also been developing in the fields of fashion and art, as clothing retailers such as Shukr (“thankfulness” in Arabic) and Artizara (and many others) 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 other words, in the post-9/11 era, racial and religious confluence continues to be the hallmark of Muslim American cultural and literary production, as absolutely no hard and fast lines divide “immigrant,” from “African American,” Islam from America. While Islam’s cultural history in the United States is grounded in Black communities and culture, to look toward Muslim America’s future is to understand the new set of social, political, and cultural conditions shaping its contemporary formations, which are always, irrevocably, and simultaneously tied to domestic and transnational affiliations of race, ethnicity, class, nation, and religious identity. While Black Americans in the early to mid-twentieth century found the teachings of Noble Drew Ali, Elijah Muhammad, and Ahmadiyya missionaries in their transition to the
North following the Great Migration as a means to reverse decades of dehumanization engendered through the institution of slavery, young Muslim American artists and writers in the post-9/11 United States reveal how a new set of narratives – of 9/11, globalization, neoliberalism, feminism, gender and sexuality, transnational religious discourse, immigration, and multiracialism – are now an integral part of the past, present, and future of Islam in America.

Further Reading


cooke, miriam, and Bruce B. Lawrence, eds., Muslim Networks from Haji to Hip Hop, Islamic Civilization and Muslim Networks (Chapel Hill, 2005).


