

Muslim International

SOHAIL DAULATZAI and JUNAID RANA *Series Editors*

WITH STONES
IN OUR HANDS

Writings on Muslims, Racism, and Empire

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Editors

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you are tired) and give practical suggestions (*eat something, go lie down*) for how to alleviate their discomfort or pain.

My assessment here: this child was scared. Her dreams were about what Dylan Rodriguez and others have called “carceral violence”—the “lived surfaces, institutional productions, coercive practices, and global statecraft” of the U.S. prison regime and how it produces the horizons of possibility of our quotidian lives.¹ Little S was scared of going to jail, of her family and loved ones being sent to jail. This fear preceded the 2016 election; it is a fear other small children have. Parents warn them that if they misbehave, the police will come get them. It is a fear many young Black and Brown children have, because people like them go to jail, so they must avert their eyes, speak softly, move carefully, so they might not be captured or, worse, killed. Throughout the course of the 2016 election and afterward, Trump conformed his notion of a Muslim registry from advocacy of Muslim internment² to a “complete” ban of Muslims entering the United States to a “partial” ban to an “extreme vetting” and “temporary halt” of immigration and travel from “high-risk” regions notable for terrorism. When the ban was finally implemented in January 2017, it was clear its intended effect was, inexorably, as a “Muslim bar”—a piece of statecraft that would continue to scare Muslim children while asleep or awake. “I think Islam hates us,” Trump told CNN’s Anderson Cooper during a March 10, 2016, interview. To Trump and his followers, “Islam” is alive, a sentient being that feels hate and acts upon it. Islam infects Muslims, planting hate in our hearts for America, for democracy, for “us.”

Will Trump put us in jail?

That night, I put my arms around her.

Is it OK to go to jail for being Muslim? I asked.

No, she replied.

Is it bad to be Muslim?

No, she replied.

Would you let them take me?

No, she replied.

Would I let them take you?

No, she replied.

What should we do if they try?

Fight them.

In my book *Being Muslim: A Cultural History of Women of Color in American Islam*,³ I introduce the concept of affective insurgency. I define affective

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Raising Muslim Girls Women-of-Color Legacies in American Islam

SYLVIA CHAN-MALLIK

During the 2016 U.S. presidential election, my youngest daughter had nightmares. Aged eight at the time, she would pad down the hall from her room to ours, always around midnight, her face glistening with tears as she opened our door.

Will Trump put us in jail? Will he put all the Muslims in jail?

This is my impudent child, the one who sneaks candy in her shirtsleeves, who never stops moving, who collects bruises all over her knees. She’s perfected the “Joisey accent” since we moved to New Jersey from California five years ago, when I began my job at Rutgers teaching American and women’s and gender studies. She can deliver the regional patois with a wicked, gap-toothed grin—*how ya doin’ daaww-face? I’m just mahv-e-lous dahling*—before flipping cartwheels across the room. We don’t have a television in the house, but Little S (as I’ll call her) is an empath and expert eavesdropper who noted the tension in her parents’ jaws and heard the harshness in our voices early on in the campaign when speaking Trump’s name. From these cues, from the snippets of NPR heard to and from school, the quick glances at the news headlines on the edges of her iPad screen, she became quickly aware of Donald Trump’s idea of a Muslim registry.

I dreamed Trump put us in jail. I don’t want to go to jail. I don’t want you or Daddy, or Nana, or my uncles and aunts, or anyone to go to jail.

I have various reactions to my children’s tears. They are not always sympathetic. I do not believe parents should always soothe, that they should act as arbiters between the world and their children’s emotional lives. There are some cases that are clear-cut—an injury, for example. But instead of telling them it will be OK, that they shouldn’t worry, I prefer to offer an honest assessment of what I believe they’re experiencing (*you are hungry,*

insurgency as how women of color in the United States have made Muslimness between Islam as lived religion and racial-religious form during the past century. Lived religion is a concept I borrow from religious studies scholars such as Robert Orsi and Meredith McGuire. Scholars of lived religion consider how religious meanings and actions are enacted and felt through the social environments of their practitioners' daily lives and acknowledge the presence of religion beyond holy texts and organized religious spaces and institutions. To put it another way, lived religion is not what religion is *supposed* to be but what it actually is in people's daily lives. So for Muslims, it is not that we should pray five times a day. It is how we plan our lives around prayers, or how we miss our prayers, or how we rationalize missing prayers, or how we call ourselves Muslim but do not pray at all, except sometimes on holidays. It is the bits of Christianity and Buddhism and New Age spirituality that merge with our Islam. It is our diets, our interactions with others, what we wear and why, the daily navigations being Muslim requires. "All religious ideas and impulses," writes Orsi, "are of the moment, invented, taken, borrowed, and improvised at the intersections of life."⁴

Being Muslim in the United States is always circumscribed by Islam's presence as a racial-religious form.⁵ By this I mean that Islam's alterity in the United States is articulated and premised upon domestic logics of race and racism as well as long-standing Orientalist conceptions of Islam as a religion inferior to and adversarial to Christianity. Racially, Muslims are culturally imagined as nonwhite, and Islam as antiwhite. These meanings are produced at once through Islam's history as a Black protest religion through groups like the Nation of Islam and figures such as Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali and have come to be bolstered and built upon through the figure of the Islamic terrorist as well as the oppressed Muslim woman, defined as the antithesis of the "free" white woman. Religiously, Muslims are viewed, as Sophia Rose Arjana argues, through the logic of monstrosity, as Islam is viewed in Western eyes as an ideology that interrupts "normative humanity, civilization, and modernity."⁶ In other words, Islam is a pathological belief system that exceeds race because of how it renders humans into monsters who follow "Islam" in lockstep, for example, if one Muslim is a terrorist, they all must be terrorists. In the United States, Islam's racial and religious forms collapse into one through the notion that Islam's religious pathologies produce Muslims as a nonwhite "race" that is collapsible and colludes with insurgent movements of Black radicalism and other nationalist movements of self-determination, as well as a signifier

of invasive racial contagion, as with Asian and Latinx immigrants at various moments in history. In the contemporary United States, Islam's racial-religious form is an amalgamation of who Muslims have been within the nation (e.g., Black, immigrants, "Islamic terrorists") and Orientalist conceptions of Islam as a monstrous religion that infects human souls.

What ties the racial and religious together in Islam's racial-religious forms is the notion of insurgency. In modern parlance, *insurgency* is a term generally employed in the context of warfare, specifically to refer to anti-state actors who rebel against authority through violence yet are not formally recognized as belligerent forces. More straightforwardly, insurgency connotes a revolt or uprising against established power. In regard to both Islam's racial and religious meanings in the United States' cultural imaginary, insurgency ties together Islam's various iterations as Black protest religion, immigrant ideology, and signifier of terrorism. Thus, because Islam and Muslims have continually been viewed and produced by state and cultural discourses as insurgents, being Muslim, I argue, is always insurgent, an act of insurgency. This insurgency occurs not only through acts of interpellation, in which individuals and communities are hailed into existence through, for example, government surveillance programs such as COINTELPRO or Countering Violent Extremism, but in the ways Muslim bodies in the United States position themselves as Muslim in relation to and against such programs and the logics that drive them.

Being Muslim situates insurgency as an affective and constant presence in the lives of U.S. Muslim women of color. I describe how Black Muslim women in the Ahmadiyya Movement in Islam in 1920s Chicago fashioned themselves and their daily lives as Muslims against logics of Black respectability politics and the cultural hegemony of the Black church in the post-Great Migration urban North; how women in the Nation of Islam experienced Islam as a form of liberation through domesticity in the racial and gendered shadows of the Cold War; how Muslim women were framed through exclusionary logics of second-wave feminism at the close of the 1970s; and how South Asian, Arab, Latinx, multiracial, and Black Muslim women have encountered and resisted state and cultural violence in the post-9/11 (and now Trump-era) United States. The contact zone between women's bodies and Islam as racial-religious form is where Muslimness is made. Whether during the War on Terror, the Black Power era, or the Cold War, or in the post-Great Migration North, simply to move through space and time, a Muslim woman is, I argue, and has always been, inescapably insurgent, always an act of rebellion and revolt enacted by women's bodies

against Islam's signifying presence as nonwhite, non-Christian, monstrous, deviant.

Yet the insurgency of being Muslim in the United States works in tandem with the fact that to be Muslim connotes a submission to God—a notion that is at times difficult to square with Western feminist notions of empowerment and agency. Scholars such as Carolyn Moxley Rouse and Amira Wadud have continually emphasized women's engagements of Islam as acts of "engaged surrender," in which their surrender and/or submission to Allah is enacted through political actions and a commitment to social change. In the United States, the arena of social change and activism that most closely aligns with the interests and strivings of Muslim women has been the work of women of color, specifically Black and Third World women. Such "surrender" occurs in understanding that insurgency—that is, resistance and rebellion against white supremacy, gender subjugation, dehumanization—is a religious imperative, fashioned through everyday spiritual practices, civic and community engagement, or political protest and activism. Throughout the last century, my work argues that U.S. Muslim women's engagements with Islam constitute a history of affective insurgency, in which Muslimness itself has been iterated and reiterated against its shifting racial and religious alterity in the national imaginary.

Affective insurgency shapes how I raise my daughters as U.S. Muslim women at the intersections of Islamic theology and the legacies of women-of-color feminist activism and politics in the United States, while always teaching and reminding them of the centrality of Blackness and Black people in histories of U.S. American Islam. Their identities are complex: I am a Chinese American convert to Islam, and my husband is a second-generation African American Muslim whose parents converted through the Ahmadiyya Movement in Islam in the mid-1960s, when the vast majority of the movement's members in the United States were Black. My own decision to become Muslim fifteen years ago, while not vehemently opposed by my family, was also not welcomed or understood. As such, while I remain close to them, I have necessarily partitioned our family's religious life as Muslims. As I have recounted elsewhere,⁷ my conversion to Islam was the result of my engagements with Muslim communities in the Bay Area following 9/11, which led to a fateful meeting with my future husband. In getting to know him and his upbringing on the north side of Milwaukee, I learned of the deep sectarian tensions within Islam and, in particular, of the persecution of Ahmadiyya communities in Pakistan, which directly impacts the lives of Ahmadi Muslims in the United States, as well as the presence

of anti-Muslim bias within Black American communities. Throughout his life, my husband has continually encountered the contempt of Sunni Muslims, who disparage (and have oftentimes threatened) the lives and well-being of Ahmadi Muslims both in the United States and abroad. He has also dealt with misunderstanding and scorn directed at Muslims by some Black Christians as well as constantly confronting a broader climate of anti-Muslim racism that has been exponentially amplified in the last fifteen years.

Thus, as I say, my daughters' identities are complex. My husband and I share an ecumenical approach to Islam, though we honor and acknowledge how his identity is deeply rooted in the Black American contexts in which Ahmadiyya Islam was practiced in the United States. We understand that our racial and ethnic histories shape our individual and our family's collective identities and practices of Islam. We are necessarily vigilant about the very real dangers that confront us because we are Muslim, Ahmadi, Black, and Asian, and strive to honor the specificities of our experiences. For me, this specificity lies not only in my identity as an Asian American but as an Asian American feminist who could only come to an understanding of Islam through the discourses and activism of women of color, specifically Black and Third World feminists. Pursuing my undergraduate studies at the University of California, Berkeley during the early 1990s, "women of color" was a category that emboldened me to pursue activist politics and taught me that praxis was not separable from intellectual work. Though I began in the English department, against the backdrop of the culture wars, the Los Angeles uprisings of 1992, and the first Iraq War, I quickly found my way into the classrooms of great women, such as African American literary scholar Barbara Christian and poet June Jordan and foundational thinkers of Asian American studies such as Elaine Kim and Sau-ling Wong. In their classes, I encountered writers like Audre Lorde and Alice Walker, Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga, Louise Erdrich and Leslie Marmon Silko, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and Janice Mirikitani. It was because I read these writers that I was impelled to organize around issues of immigrant rights, affirmative action, and sweatshop labor during my time at Berkeley. Because of their expansive voices and trenchant critiques, intersectional analysis was the baseline, and through it, I encountered Islam.

To encounter Islam in the United States through women-of-color politics is to read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and note the centrality of women in his life, to acknowledge and honor his legacy while also acknowledging his at times troubling gender politics as well as those of the Nation

of Islam. It is noting the gendered and racial Orientalism that long determined media and cultural representations of Muslim women as well as how anti-Black racism is part and parcel of the contemporary fear of Islam. It is both recognizing the strength of women such as Khadijah, Hagar, Aisha, Maryam, and Fatima in the Islamic tradition and noting the marginalization and dehumanization of women in some Muslim societies and communities. It is reading Amna Wadud's *Qur'an and Woman*, the first woman-centered reading of Islam's holy text, written by an African American Muslim woman, and perhaps the most well known Islamic feminist in the entire world, even while remembering that she herself does not identify as such.⁸ It is drawing upon Lorde and Jordan, as well as postcolonial feminists like Gayatri Spivak and Chandra Talpade Mohanty—alongside the work of Islamic feminists such as Fatima Mernissi, Riffat Hassan, and Leila Ahmed—to think through how U.S. Muslim women may challenge the violence that has come to circumscribe their everyday lives. It is recognizing the racism of Islamophobia, the anti-Blackness of non-Black Muslims, the imperialism of white feminism, and ubiquitous sexism. It is supporting and loving queer and transgender Muslims. It is praying in a side room, the back of the room, side by side, alone, and being aware of where you are, why, and how this came to be. To encounter Islam through women-of-color politics, to raise my Muslim daughters as women of color in the United States, is to teach them to fight—to fight at multiple fronts, against multiple forces, and with the legacies of Muslim women, of Black American Islam, and of the women whose voices and activism have shaped my and so many other women's understandings of Islam—always propelling them and pushing them forward.

You teach your Muslim daughter women-of-color politics so she may fight against the prisons in her dreams.

My older daughter, age ten, wants to be president. Or rather, she *had* wanted to be president, when Barack Obama was in office. Big S, as I'll call her, began stating her intention for the presidency at age four. "Brack Barna," she said, looked like Daddy, and the Obamas had daughters, just like us. The president is the boss of *everything*, she told us, and that would be a good job for her. She maintained her position, even as I would sometimes quietly tell her that Obama had ordered attacks that killed people, split up families through deportations, and refused to stand up for the people of Palestine. She would not do those things, she assured me, but she still wanted to be president. Big S is a persistent and unwaveringly determined

child, dogged where her sister is flighty, steady and focused where the younger one is erratic and whimsical. She would be the first Black Muslim female president, and she would change the world. During the 2016 election, Big S did not have bad dreams. Unlike her sister, she was unfazed by then candidate Trump's Muslim ban or his insults to women, the disabled, Mexicans, and so on. He would lose, she was sure, and though she understood her parents' aversion to Hillary Clinton (and our support of Bernie Sanders), she thought it would be cool to have a female president. Thus, following Trump's victory, she was not frightened or intimidated but angry and ready to fight. The presidency was a sham, she told us. How could this hateful man—this man who knew nothing about Islam and Muslims, who incited fear, who constantly lied, become president? We had to *do* something.

In some way, I was glad for her disillusionment. In a poignant piece published in the *Guardian* in February 2016, writer Kiese Laymon speaks of what it means for a Black girl to be president, that to be president of the United States is to evade questions of moral justice, to step into a battlefield of shoulds and should nots where she must "never take any responsibility for her role in domestic death and destruction," while pandering to white voters, rationalizing U.S. military violence, and "dealing] with the violent heteropatriarchy and anti-black racism heaped on her back without ever calling it heteropatriarchy or anti-black racism." For a Black Muslim girl to be president, I imagine, would require her to diminish Palestinian lives, to sanction surveillance and detention of her own communities, to narrate the history of American Islam as an immigrant success story, to denigrate Blackness, and to "never take any responsibility" for her actions—to refuse to surrender to imperatives of justice.

Big S is also a voracious reader. Her favorite author is Jacqueline Woodson, and her favorite book *Brown Girl Dreaming*. She adores the *One Crazy Summer* series by Rita Williams Garcia, which traces the lives of three young African American sisters who travel from Brooklyn to Oakland, California, in 1968 to find the mother who abandoned them and, on the way, encounter the Black Power movement, the Panthers, and all the social tumult of the era. She screamed with joy when I brought her to see Angela Davis at a campus lecture and proudly tells her friends at school that she once met Sonia Sanchez ("a famous poet") at her mom's work. She demanded we take her to see *Hidden Figures*—the film about three Black American women mathematicians who worked for NASA in the 1960s—on the first day it came out, though it was not yet playing in our town and

we had to drive an hour to the closest showing. Though she and her sister have been exposed to the same people, books, and stories, for whatever reason, Big S has known she is a woman of color from day one. Somehow, she knows that this is her history, that she is a part of it.

As a parent, my hope for Big S is reflection and self-care, that she may engage Islam as safety and solace from struggle. She storms through life, wanting to battle demons, already knowing she must fight any and all. I want her to encounter women-of-color politics and activism through Islam, to stop and breathe, to laugh and love, and to care for herself and those she loves. Affective insurgency, I teach her, is not only to fight that which diminishes you in the world but to replenish and nourish your soul for the hereafter. It is to know that Muslims begin every prayer with the words "Bismillah al-Rahman al-Rahim," "in the name of Allah the compassionate, the merciful." It is to struggle for compassion and mercy in all of our encounters with injustice, to tend to our souls, even when so many around you incite anger and fear. It is to know that, as Rabi'a Al'Adawiya—an eighth-century Sufi mystic and a female saint of Islam—wrote,

*I love God: I have no time left
In which to hate the devil.*

On the day following the 2016 election, Big S somberly walked into my office, wide awake, and laid a hand on my shoulder.

Mom, we're in big trouble, she told me.

I know, sweetheart, I replied.

What are we going to do? she asked.

Well, we fight, right?

Yes.

But what else?

What do you mean, Mom?

What else do we have to do as we're fighting? Because we will have to fight for a long time and sometimes we get tired?

We pray.

We pray.

We pray.

You must teach your burgeoning woman-of-color activist daughter Islam so she may pray and remember God, so that she may rest, knowing the fight will not, ever, end.

NOTES

1. Dylan Rodriguez, "I Would Wish Death on You: Race, Gender, and Immigration in the Globality of the U.S. Prison Regime," *The Scholar and Feminist Online* 6, no. 3 (2008).
2. When running for the Republican nomination for president in November 2015, Trump stated he would "absolutely" implement a Muslim registry. When pressed by a reporter about how this would differ from requiring Jews to register in Nazi Germany, Trump replied, "You tell me."
3. Sylvia Chan-Malik, *Being Muslim: A Cultural History of Women of Color in American Islam* (New York: New York University Press, 2018).
4. Robert Orsi, "Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religions," in *Lived Religions: Toward a History of Practice*, ed. David D. Hall (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 8.
5. My concept of "racial-religious form" builds on the work of Colleen Iye's "racial form" in regard to Asians in the United States. See Iye, *America's Asia: Racial Form and American Literature 1893-1945* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004).
6. Sophia Rose Arjuna, *Muslims in the Western Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 3.
7. Sylvia Chan-Malik, "Common Cause: On the Black-Immigrant Debate and Constructing the Muslim American," *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion* 2, no. 8 (2011): 1-39.
8. Wadud has clearly stated that instead of being called a feminist, she is "a pro-faith, pro-feminists Muslim woman." Armina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* (Oxford: OneWorld, 2006), 4.