SECULARISM NARRATIVES AND ARAB AMERICAN FICTION

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Danielle Aberle Haque

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Danielle Haque, PhD

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"Secularism Narratives and Arab American Fiction" focuses on contemporary fiction's challenge to the liberal political construction of minority religious practices and community life as incompatible with modernity, progress, and secularism. U.S. secularism is not simply the absence of religion from the public sphere, but is underwritten by a particularly U.S. Protestant conception of religion that has historically shaped assumptions about what it means to be both religious and secular in the United States. Looking to Mohja Kahf, Rabih Alameddine, Ninar Esber, Mouir Fatmi, and Hasan Elahi, I explore immigrant narratives that work outside religious/secular binaries; rather than operating unequivocally within the terms of religious categorizations, contemporary writers often recast those terms and respond to the secularism narrative by scrambling the terms of the religious/secular binary through lived, embodied religious experience. These works dispute the dominant United States narrative of secularism and its claim to be universal and progressive; rather, they reveal how prohibitory secularism enforces an exclusionary citizenry through racialized immigration policies, Islamaphobic political rhetoric and popular culture, and the promotion of specific economic forms and ideologies worldwide. I argue that secularism is entangled with global ideologies of human rights, but also with the particularly United States legal discourses of privacy and property. Moreover, by elucidating the relationship between generic forms and the secular conventions that inform them, I uncover how these texts work to restructure and resist secular narratives of modernization and, by doing so, create the potential for more inclusive secularisms.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Danielle Haque earned a BA in English from Santa Clara University. Before beginning her Ph.D. in English at Cornell University, she earned an MDiv from Yale Divinity School, and an MA in English and Comparative Literature from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

DEDICATION

To Marcus, in honor of our friendship and our wager.

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INTRODUCTION

Secularism and Muslim and Arab American Fiction

A dream between us
fogging what we want to see . . .
A prison, but then everywhere else is a prison . . .
Who ain't a slave, asks Ishmael.
The worse form of government except for all the others, etc . . .
To wipe the glass window with a muddy rag,
enclosing us within the house upon the Malibu hills.
What girds one's bearing against attention?
What will send the nerves to their first apprehensions?
A picture now.
A tremble.
A night full of furor.
-Khalid Mattawa, "Toqueville" (46)

Khalid Mattawa's 2010 collection of poetry, *Toqueville,* begins with the question: "Will answers be found/ like seeds/ planted among rows of song?" (2) Mattawa commences his book by questioning the ethical role of the poet as aesthetic witness to atrocity and translator of history. The title poem of the volume roams widely from the horrific violence in Sierra Leone, to Vietnamese sweatshops, to child pornography, to CIA operatives explaining their trade craft. Fellow poet Phillip Metres calls the 26 page poem a "tour-de-force globalist polyphonic collage" in which the poet "recreates the poet's role as global Tocqueville" and "linger[s] on the dark abyss of global connectedness, of its profound alienation, without any Friedmanesque elation" (Metres). The poet of "Toqueville" no longer has the privilege of distance that Toqueville, the famous foreign observer of the United States, once had; instead, the poet is implicated in the United States' domestic and foreign policy, in its empire and in the crush of globalization. This implication crops up repeatedly in the poem, in a multitude of different voices: "And I realized I was one of them," and "You've got to admit that we're all white people now," and finally a voice asks, "Who is talking now? Which 'we' are you inserting yourself into now?" (41, 43, 44).

What is the place, the poem asks, of story-telling, of witness and of lyric, in the midst of all this horror? A Sierra Leone man who was forced to kill his own child says, "I am one of the stories now, one of the signs" (40). The question, "which 'we' are you inserting yourself into now" accuses the poet of appropriating stories and voices through the act of writing, just as the poem transforms the Sierra Leone man into an allegory for human depravity. "How do you belong when you just observe?" asks one voice, and another replies, "You make observation your home" (38).

I begin with Mattawa's poetry because he asks what it means to use art – including literary forms that emerge from the hegemonic culture - to address questions of globalization and empire, and explores the consequences of making "observation your home." Every section of the poem, while extending outward globally to touch on a myriad of themes, eventually circles back to the politics and promises of the United States. The very forms of the poems in the book, from the lyric of the first poem and the collage of "Toqueville" to the "Power Point" series, partake of the Western cultural tradition, as well as the narration of progressive civilization, that the poem critiques. My dissertation, "Secularism Narratives and Arab American Fiction," attends to questions of the relationship between aesthetics and empire from the vantage point of one of the key Western narratives that Mattawa's volume implicitly critiques: the progressive story of secularism that works in tandem with the miscarried promises of freedom, democracy, and free enterprise that Mattawa addresses. The authors and artists I consider also employ Western literary forms, and through the process of writing, performing, and producing art, transform them, and consequently, create transformative conceptions of secularism.

The liberal democratic sphere has long been defined as the endpoint of the forward march of modernity – a progressive journey always advancing towards more perfect manifestations of

modern civilization and the values it produces. As Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pelligrini write in their introduction to *Secularisms:*

> Specifically, secularism is central to the Enlightenment narrative in which reason progressively frees itself from the bonds of religion and in so doing liberates humanity. This narrative poses religion as a regressive force in the world, one that in its dogmatism is not amenable to change, dialogue, or nonviolent conflict resolution. This Enlightenment narrative separates secularism from religion and through this separation claims that secularism, like reason, is universal (in contrast to the particularities of religion). However, this narrative also places secularism in a particular historical tradition, one that is located in Europe and grows out of Christianity (2).

It is thus taken as an article of faith that secularism is central to modernity, that it enables progress towards universalism, and that it represents development or emancipation. The secularization narrative works by creating a dichotomy between rationality and irrationality, progress and traditionalism. Recent scholarship on the secularization thesis challenges the received view that secularism indicates a neutral, non-historical, non-political, abstract principle.[1] Whatever the secular might mean – and there are many competing definitions – it is not merely the absence of religion. Rather, secularism and religion are mutually constitutive: secularism makes claims about the meaning of religion and what constitutes proper religious subjectivity in the modern world.

[1]For an example of the shift in scholarship on secularism, see Charles Taylor's groundbreaking work, *A Secular Age (*Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007. Print). For examples of critical responses to Taylor's work, see Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pelligrini's edited volume: *Secularisms.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2008. Print. Additionally, see Michael Warner's, Jonathan VanAntwerpen's, and Craig J. Calhoun's edited volume: *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2010. Print.

But what exactly constitutes proper religious subjectivity in the modern, secular world? The general concept of secularism at play in Western societies defines religion as a set of propositions in which an individual subject believes or acquiesces. This emphasis on individual belief is rooted in Protestant ideologies of faith and practice that developed in tandem with the Reformation and Counter-Reformation.[2] Therefore, as Talal Asad writes, "Where faith had once been a virtue, it now acquired an epistemological sense. Faith became a way of knowing supernatural objects, paralleled to the knowledge of nature (the *real* world) that reason and observation provided" (38-39). For Charles Taylor, this shift opens the horizon of possible beliefs, as "the process of disenchantment involves a change in sensibility; one is open to different things," and "we tend to think of our differences from our remote forebears in terms of different *beliefs*, whereas there is something much more puzzling involved here" ("Western Secularity", 40). According to Taylor, the differences between our ancestors as well as those not participating in the "secular age" is more than a difference of belief, it is a difference of *experience*. It may even be a difference in ontology that entails distinctive ways of being in the world, although Taylor certainly does not suggest this conclusion. Nonetheless, within secular societies, faith is considered a way of knowing and not experiencing, and religion is ascribing to a set of (sometimes) codified beliefs that are recognizable as only one set amongst many possible beliefs, all of which stem from the individual subject.

[2] Western secularism's emergence from and dependence upon a specific strain of Protestant thought has been established by numerous scholars. For example, Jakobsen and Pelligrini state: "Recognizing the co-origination of secularism and market-reformed Protestantism unmasks the national and religious particularities that have come to pass as a universal secular. This secularism was linked at its origins to a particular religion and a particular location, and it was maintained through a particular set of practices" (*Secularisms*, 3). Furthermore, as Tracy Fessenden argues: "Evacuating religious authority from its institutional locations, the Reformation generated its presence 'everywhere,' not least in secular guise – an outcome, it further bears reminding, given as 'truth' or 'freedom' in the measure that the Reformation frames its program as liberation from the errors and superstitions of Rome. In this sense Protestantism's emancipation from Catholicism both provides the blueprint for, and sets the limits of, secularism's emancipation from 'religion' itself" (*Culture and Redemption*, 4).

Religious subjects thus seem easy to define. Religious identity, particularly with regard to certain sects of Judaism and Christianity, and certain Islamic practices, is often publically visible, for example in the dress of the Hassidim or the Amish. Religious identity can be marked by one's name, bodily markings, habits, or religiously coded attire. The corporeal or affective dimensions of secularity, however, are seen as unmarked. Implicit to the concept of secular self-understanding is that it is disembodied; it has its roots in philosophical rationalism, not in the body, in an approach to life, not the shaping of life itself. Scholars have begun to question these assumptions and assign corporeal disciplines to secularism. For example, Nilüfer Göle points to secular material culture and bodily habitus, and looks at the ways in which public, secular spaces like the French classroom condition bodies, in this case the enforcement of French state ideologies through coerced dress, namely the banning of headscarves (248). In many ways these disciplines complement the Protestant ethos that informs them, as with compulsory heterosexuality and the gendering of public and private spheres. But could it be the experience of secular society, not one's individual beliefs, that in fact creates secular subjects? If this is the case, than no matter one's personal beliefs, living in a secular society means being habituated (or coerced) into secular subjectivity.

Göle writes, "Secularism is about state politics, lawmaking, and constitutional principles, but foremost it permeates and establishes the rhythm of the phenomenology of everyday life practices" (254). Furthermore, "The powers of the secular can be traced in its capacity to develop a set of disciplinary practices, both corporeal and spatial, that are inseparable from the formations of the secular self" (254). My dissertation underscores the material conditions of Charles Taylor's immanent frame; these phenomenological conditions shape the forms that freedom, community, religion and the individual can take. According to Göle, the changing

conditions of belief that Taylor outlines are firmly rooted in bodily practice and conceptualizations of space, and, I would add, the narrative frameworks that produce and reproduce these disciplinary practices. Thus the study of secularism has been taken up by scholars as a lens to examine how religious values are naturalized as secular and civic values through cultural production, as well as how secularism is embodied in, as Göle writes, "people's agencies and imaginaries" (254).

There are of course many ways that literature is tied to matters of religion. Scholars such as Tracy Fessenden have explained that link by describing how canonical U.S. literature naturalizes Christian values as secular, while containing, suppressing, or excluding other forms of religious expression.[3] And others like John McClure have understood contemporary literature as an expression of postsecular philosophies.[4] These critics thereby understand literature in terms of its relationship to the religious and secular values encoded in its language. My work expands upon these frameworks by asking how literature enables us to imagine alternative secularisms through literary forms.

"Secularism Narratives and Arab American Fiction" enters the debate by examining artistic endeavors that provide counter narratives to the seemingly endless and irresolvable process of secularization. I analyze two novels by Arab American authors, in addition to a range of digital, visual, and performance art, that grapple with the shortcomings of secular forms of freedom. United States secularism is underwritten by a Protestant ethos in which religion is consigned to the private sphere, and religious subjectivities that do not adhere to this model are considered anti-modern. As a result, the ways in which secularism and religion frame

[3] See: Fessenden, Tracy. *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2007. Print.
[4] See: McClure, John A. *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007. Print.

contemporary debates in the United States creates an impasse between acceptable forms of religiosity and those that are dangerous to the body politic. The works I look at employ formal devices to undo the religion-secular binary and open up new configurations for debate. They critique what I term prohibitory secularism - a form of secularism that does not just limit religious expression in the public sphere, but defines what religious expression can be - therefore excluding minority religious communities from full political and cultural participation. I demarcate prohibitory secularism rather than using the more general secularism, because these artistic projects are responding to the particular political project of United States secularism. While my project aims to develop a healthy critique of certain assumptions contained in dominant, prohibitory accounts of the secular, I don't argue that we should discard that concept in its entirety. Rather, I look to literature to envision how it may be enlarged and reconstellated.

Mohja Kahf and Rabih Alameddine, as Arab American authors who write in English and who engage with Islam in their work, give diverse outlooks on Muslim American experiences of secularity in the United States. Nouri Gana writes about the experience of "writing while Muslim, writing while Arab," in which "the immigration lawmaking trajectory ….under laid as it is by the geopolitics of suspicion and the all-out war on terror, produces the conditions of possibility of racing Islam and Islamplyfying race while politicizing Muslims and Arabs alike – conferring on them, by virtue of their religious and cultural affiliations or differentials, a capacious political significance where the stakes are high" (1577). By situating Muslim and Arab American literature within larger conversations about secularism and exceptionalism, I hope to present new perspectives on the place of Muslim and Arab American literature in the politics of the nation state.

Literature that critiques secular narratives and/or includes positive portrayals of Islam in the U.S. underscores the relationship between U.S. nationalism and its Protestant foundations. It demonstrates how the influence of this relationship extends beyond Muslims to a range of communities, laws, cultural practices, and domestic and foreign policies, as well as how it continues to inform contemporary thinking. Islam has become a touchstone for thinking and writing about secularism in many fields, particularly post 9/11 – including anthropology, ethnography, political science, sociology, and activism – which demonstrates the longstanding linkage between secularism and Orientalism in the global and U.S. contexts, but also entails a flattening out of difference. Kahf and Alameddine's texts, and the art of Ninar Esber, Mounir Fatmi, and Hasan Elahi, controvert contemporary politics that connect debates about secularism and modernity solely to incommensurability with Islam; rather, they point to broader networks between empire, globalization, and secularization by drawing on a variety of literary influences and tying together myriad histories of exclusion. Analyzing these works with regard to secular narratives reveals how contemporary secular rhetoric draws upon a supposed inherent contradiction with Islam. Yet it also reveals how secular rhetoric draws upon a long standing discourse rooted in Protestantism, and thus work on secularism and U.S. literature can and should extend outward to include scholarship on other kinds of religious and minority communities, keeping in mind the way in which contemporary arguments about religious freedom in the U.S. are framed in terms of a cultural clash with Islam.

Finally, these texts and art are examples of ways in which "writing while Muslim, writing while Arab" in the U.S. can mean partaking in established literary traditions such as the immigrant *bildungsroman,* AIDS narratives, and diaries, and building upon them; "creating while Muslim, creating while Arab" can mean challenging preconceived notions of what it is to

be an "American" writer or a "religious" or "secular" artist. Arab American literature is by no means a new phenomenon, yet in the last few decades there has been a concerted effort by scholars and writers to critically address Arab American literature as a category. Part of that process has involved delineating the boundaries of the category and forming the canon, including gathering works by diverse authors into anthologies.[5] These anthologies play an essential role in making Arab American literature visible and accessible to a wider reading public, as well as doing the work of legitimizing Arab American literature as part of the U.S. literary tradition. Indeed, recent scholarship on Arab American writing addresses familiar themes of immigration, exile, feminism, and post-colonialism, but also debate the parameters of the designation "Arab American".[6] Other scholars, such as Wail Hassan, Nouri Gana, and Layla Maleh, chose to make wider connections between Arab American writers, Arab Anglophone writers from different national contexts, and writers in diaspora. [7] My dissertation builds upon both of these scholarly strains. I designate Kahf and Alameddine as taking part in and transforming the U.S. literary tradition; at the same time, I claim that both use transnational literary forms, are part of diasporic writing communities, and engage with secular narratives that are distinctly U.S., but have global reach. The art of Esber, Fatmi, and Elahi connects with the work of Kahf and Alameddine

[5] For examples of contemporary anthologies, see: Orfalea, Gregory, and Sharif Elmusa. *Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab American Poetry*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988. Print. Kadi, Joanna. *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists*. Boston, MA: South End Press, 1994. Print. Akash, Munīr, and Khaled Mattawa. *Post-gibran Anthology of New Arab American Writing*. West Bethesda, Md: Kitab, 1999. Print. Kaldas, Pauline, and Khaled Mattawa. *Dinarzad's Children: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Fiction*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2004. Print. Atefat-Peckham, Susan, and Lisa Suhair Majaj. *Talking Through the Door: An Anthology of Contemporary Middle Eastern American Writing.* Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2014. 2014.

[6] For an example see: Salaita, Steven. *Modern Arab American Fiction: A Reader's Guide*. Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 2011. Print. And: Salaita, Steven. *Arab American Literary Fictions, Cultures, and Politics*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Print.

[7] Hassan, Waïl S. *Immigrant Narratives: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab American and Arab British Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Print. Maleh, Layla. *Arab Voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009. Print. Gana, Nouri. *The Edinburgh Companion to the Arab Novel in English: The Politics of Anglo Arab and Arab American Literature and Culture*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013. Internet resource.

because it engages with transnational literary forms, transforming them through performance, visual art, and social media. However, analyzing their art also further demonstrates the global reach of the U.S. secular paradigm and underscores connections between Arab American writers and writers and artists in diaspora and the new aesthetic traditions and potential secularisms they are creating.

Many scholars who write about the relationship between secularism and literature have begun using the term postsecular as a categorical term to designate the works they write about. Manav Ratti describes the postsecular as a paradox "to find a non-secular secularism, a non-religious religion" (xx). Ratti asks "how can the need for faith, awe, wonder, and transcendence find expression and significance without the political and ideological constraints of nationalism, secularism, and religion?" (xx). He writes about "postsecular affirmative values" such as "love, friendship, community, art, literature, music, nature, the migrant's eye-view, hybridity, and 'newness," and his interest in how "writers write *through* religion by invoking its great signifiers and great ethics, and then translate and secularize them within the contingency – and urgency – of material and historical circumstance" (xxiii). Postsecularism thus relates to literary form "as a marker of impossibility and possibility in capturing that which might be resistant to representation – such as a kind of 'postsecular belief' for which there might not be an easy creative or critical vocabulary mediating between the secular and the religious" (18). In turn, John McClure writes that "certain features are constant across the field of postsecular texts. The partial conversions of postsecular fiction do not deliver those who experience them from worldliness into well-ordered systems of religious belief. Instead, they tend to strand those who experience them in the ideologically mixed and confusing middle zones of the conventional conversion narrative" (4). This fiction's "most characteristic strategies and claims," he writes,

"are its plots of partial conversion, its project of ontological disruption, its efforts to reassert and to weaken religious conceptions of reality, and its attempts to imagine a new, religiously inflected, form of progressive politics" (4). What McClure's and Manav's definitions of postsecular literature have in common is that the novels they write about critique secularism and institutional religion, promote progressive politics, do not advocate a return to the religious, and have a modicum of respect for faith, so long as it does not represent institutionalized belief systems. These examples of postsecular literature only validate religion that is flexible and suitably progressive; they detail a liberal subject formation that is not too far afield from the secular thesis, only modified by an approach to religious multiplicity that is akin to multiculturalism. They include all of the religious signifiers with none of the religiosity.

The turn towards the postsecular as an analytic must indicate more than the critique of secular narratives of progression if it is to offer up new political and cultural possibilities. It must look to artistic production that attempts to salvage secularism as an inclusive model for a multiplicity of practices to co-exist, not in diluted forms, and not apolitically. One of the primary reasons I do not invoke the term postsecular with regard to the works in my dissertation is that these works do not necessarily take religion's great signifiers and ethics and "translate" or "secularize" them. For example, while the protagonist of Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* does experience an ontological disruption due to the circumstances of her life, she never abandons the orthodoxy of her Muslim faith. Rather than translate or secularize Muslim signifiers and ethics, she validates them. Although she imagines religiously inflected forms of progressive politics, they are based on theological interpretations of Islamic history and theology. The women's rights she asserts, for instance, abortion and wife initiated divorce, are always there within the history of the faith. Likewise, although it is unclear if the protagonist of

Rabih Alameddine's *Koolaids: The Art of War* considers himself a practicing Muslim, what is apparent is that many of his characters have unwavering faith, and that the book's critique of institutional religion does not mean its inevitable dismantling. Mounir Fatmi, one of the artists whose work I analyze in my third chapter, uses sacred forms that enable the audience to imagine the transformation of secularism as a dialogic process that includes Muslims globally. Instead of translating or secularizing sacred forms, Fatmi decontexualizes them in order to create new meanings. The works included in my dissertation exhibit the need to restructure secularism from a political project and a cultural narrative that excludes Muslims and non-Westerners into an inclusive secularism that allows for religious and cultural particularities to co-exist.[8]

All of these texts can be read together productively, despite and even because of their generic differences, as all use artistic forms to reflect a sense of human limitation and historical causation. These texts are not calling for some kind of re-enchantment, or suggesting a weakened hybridity, or postsecularism, but are actually reformulating secularism to include themselves and their communities. In contrast to prohibitory secularism, I define inclusive secularism as a form of secularism that has the space for communities to creatively solve the problems caused by prohibitory secularism. As Ratti writes:

[8]Although unbiased inclusivity would appear to be the original goal of United States' political secularism, its foundational ethics prevents that from actually being the case. Thus the value (and implementation) of nondiscriminatory religious freedom is squandered because the way in which that freedom is conceptualized cannot incorporate difference. As Tracy Fessenden writes, "Far from being a neutral matrix, then, the secular sphere as constituted in American politics, culture, and jurisprudence has long been more permeable to some religious interventions than to others. The co-implication of secularism and Reformed Christianity has meant, for example, that Christian religious polemic could remain compatible with America's vaunted history of religious liberty and toleration by being cast in strictly secular terms. Thus at various points in American history, Muslims, Catholics, or Mormons could be construed as enemies of republican institutions, Jews as a racial or economic threat, and Native American ritual practice as an affront to environmental or drug policy, all without apparent violence to cherished notions of religious freedom" (*Culture and Redemption*, 4). The question is whether or not the potential value of religious freedom can be recuperated through secularism itself (and its reformation) or if new political and cultural models are needed.

> ….what fascinates me is that on one hand there are powerful modes of living together in spite of the divides of religion and nation: indigenous, personal modes that can be marked by fellowship, community, open-mindedness, and an acceptance and embracing of others. On the other hand, political systems, concepts, and forms of organization – such as state concepts like multiculturalism and secularism – fall short of recognizing and organizing "the people." What can we make of this difference between individual practices of good will toward others and state-sanctioned, political ideas about how we should relate to one another? (xviii)

I ask how literature can offer up not only critiques, but alternatives, to "political ideas about how we should relate to one another," and if the community and individual values Ratti finds so inspiring can in fact influence political structures. So, for example, while Kahf illuminates the limits of secularism, she also sees its potential, and her novel ultimately envisions the secular context as a place in which to foster the *umma* - the global, transnational community to which every Muslim belongs. I suggest that aspects of these texts, for example, forms of religious community like the *umma* as represented by Kahf, could become starting points for discussions on how to rethink secularism from a Muslim American perspective.

As Vincent Pecora writes, what is significant is "that the static and totalizing concept of secularism – connoting an already achieved and reliably reproducible intellectual standpoint – be supplanted with a dynamic understanding of secularization, that is, with a process that has remained, at least up to the present, in some ambiguous relationship with religious tradition, neither translation and transformation, or radical overturning or forgetting" (208). A considerable question is whether a political ideology like secularism (no matter how dynamic an understanding we have of it) that is so marred by its own history can or should be maintained in

a different form. I do not attempt to answer this question, rather I argue that the authors and artists I analyze are not imagining a world "post" secularism – they have not created entirely new political systems – but are working within the realm of United States secularism's ideals of religious freedom, as troubled as that particular ideology may be. The inclusively imagined secularism of *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf,* for example, emerges from the ideals of U.S. secularism; it depends upon the secular promise of religious freedom to imagine alternative enactments of that freedom. Secularism can only be thought of as in relationship with its religious foundations, and also with the various religions it encounters, absorbs, or excludes. Postsecularism does not adequately express the concerns of Muslim American writers who are not reimaging their religion, but are reimaging how they can practice it within the specificity of the United States secular context.

In a similar vein, these authors and artists are working with forms that emerge from the Western literary tradition, for instance, Kahf's use of the *bildungsroman*. In her analysis of Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy,* Maria Helena Lima writes, "I cannot help but continue to wonder what dangers lie in the form itself, given its central historical role in determining our notions of human identity. Since humanism's unstated goal ...was to constitute a "center of humanity"... what is the Bildungsroman genre, recognizably one of the main carriers of humanist ideology, indeed helping to reproduce?" (859). I argue that Kahf, much like Lima eventually argues about Kincaid, transforms the genre. Similarly, Alameddine reworks genres with his convergence of Western postmodern forms with classical Arabic poetic forms. Therefore, I argue, the forms these authors and artists use – namely the *bildungsroman*, the postmodern novel, specific performance and visual art forms, and digital art –are tied to secularism as an aesthetic ideology, and furthermore, the transformation of Western literary forms by these authors and artists can

contribute expressive perspectives to the larger post-colonial project of refashioning secularism to be more inclusive.

Related to the issue of racing Islam and "Islamplyfing" race in the United States is the issue of classifying Muslim (whether Arab American or otherwise) American literature, and the equally problematic factors of generic conventions and marketing niches. Shalal-Esa writes that Kahf "would prefer to see [her] book categorized with other coming-of-age stories, not just Arab or Muslim-American fiction" (Shalal-Esa). At the same time, Kahf believes in the pedagogical and literary potentialities of the category "Muslim American literature," as she writes:

> Is there such a thing as Muslim American literature (MAL)? I argue that there is: It begins with the Muslims of the Black Arts Movement (1965–75). *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* is one of its iconic texts; it includes American Sufi writing, secular ethnic novels, writing by immigrant and second-generation Muslims, and religious American Muslim literature. Many of the works I would put into this category can and do also get read in other categories, such as African American, Arab American, and South Asian literature, "Third World" women's writing, diasporic Muslim literature in English, and so forth. While the place of these works in other categories cannot be denied, something is gained in reading them together as part of an American Muslim cultural landscape. Like Jewish American literature by the 1930s, Muslim American literature is in a formative stage. It will be interesting to see how it develops (and who will be its Philip Roth!) ("Teaching Diasporic Literature: Muslim American Literature as an Emerging Field," 163).

In Kahf's view, Muslim American literature is a homespun creation tied to, but by no means limited by, the genres of immigrant and diasporic writing.[9] She allows for the possibility of an organic Muslim American fiction with room for a multitude of cultural influences which is not solely defined by the religious persuasion of its authors or the religiosity of their writing.[10] Her essay has a hopeful tone, one that discourages an authenticity litmus test or the use of ethnic literature as a marketing niche.

However, by using the term "secular ethnic novels" she makes a distinction between works that are inherently "religious" and "secular", but in the brief essay the distinction remains unexplored. Her secular/religious dichotomy is further complicated by her comparison of Muslim literature's development with Jewish American literature (a contentious term in its own right) as she is in danger of making the designation "Muslim" solely an ethnic or cultural value that can be measured. Yet the comparison stands, as fraught as both terms may be, because both carry significant social and political weight. In the United States "Muslim" has never been a label with exclusively religious meanings. In his article on immigration and citizenship law and post-9/11 policies, Moustafa Bayoumi argues that the United States government's policies "turns Islam into a racial category" (275). But despite the racialization of Islam, or perhaps to spite it, Muslim Americans from a variety of backgrounds are insisting on the plurality of meanings for Muslims in public, political, and cultural spheres. As Sarah Eltantawi writes: "For American

[9] Kahf includes four tentative categorizations: Prophets of Dissent, Multi-Ethnic Multitudes, New American Transcendentalists, and New Pilgrims. (Kahf, "Teaching Diasporic Literature", 167).

[10] However, being Muslim is a factor: "My criteria for Muslim American literature are a flexible combination of three factors: Muslim authorship. Including this factor, however vague or tenuous, prevents widening the scope to the point of meaninglessness, rather than simply including any work about Muslims by an author with no biographical connection to the slightest sliver of Muslim identity (such as Robert Ferrigno with his recent dystopian novel about a fanatical Muslim takeover of America). It is a cultural, not religious, notion of Muslim that is relevant. A "lapsed Muslim" author, as one poet on my roster called himself, is still a Muslim author for my purposes. I am not interested in levels of commitment or practice, but in literary Muslimness." (Kahf, "Teaching Diasporic Literature", 167).

Muslims, these times are exciting ones in which the boundaries of what it means to be a Muslim – in terms of identity, specific forms of practice or non-practice, sectarian affiliation or non-affiliation, and attitudes about major social issues, including gender roles – is expanding before our eyes" (156). She goes on to say, "We live in a time where an unbeliever of Muslim heritage feels the need to call herself or himself a Muslim, in the way Sartre said, 'In the face of anti-Semitism, I am a Jew" (156). Acknowledging or creating a genre of Muslim literature, as Kahf uses the term, can be one way of answering Eltantawi's call to combat anti-Muslim sentiment through identification and visibility. However, as Kahf's careful criteria demonstrate, avoiding the pitfalls of identity politics when defining or designing new literary canons can be tricky, as can negotiating marketing strategies that paint an individual author as representative of an entire religion, culture, or community.

I am not going to debate the relationship between ethnic United States literatures (or even the possible meanings of ethnic here) and the emerging category of Muslim American literature, although I think it is a fruitful topic ripe with teaching and scholarly potential. In terms of Kahf's writing I am more interested in how she uses the terms Muslim and ethnic with respect to her own literature and what her novel shares with more traditional secular narratives as well as the long history of the ethnic *bildungsroman* in the United States. There is a moment in Randa Jarrar's short story "Lost in Freakin' Yonkers" that speaks directly to the linkage I am outlining. The young, female protagonist narrates, "I walk three miles to the college's library, look up 'Arab' and 'American' and 'Women' and 'Fiction' on the computer, find nothing, then go into the girls' room and weep into cheap toilet paper, wondering what I am supposed to be doing now. Defeated, I read *Beloved"* (52). In writing this moment in the bathroom stall, Jarrar captures both the absence of Arab American women voices from the public sphere as well as the

powerful influence of the African American women writers that precede and inspire her. In his introduction to the volume that contains Jarrar's story, Mattawa writes, "Keeping their silence for a long time, Arab American storytellers have learned a great deal from their African American, Asian American, and Latina sisters, the American Shahrazads who have sustained the integrity of their communities through their stories, letting the outside world into their world and providing a sense of community for their kin" (*Dinarzad's Children,* xiv). Mattawa's lineage – from African American, Asian American, and Latina/o storytellers to Arab American ones – charts a slightly different trajectory than Kahf's Muslim American one. Yet both locate Muslim and Arab American literature firmly within the United States literary tradition in terms of influence and kinship, and the relationship between Muslim and Arab American literature, secularism, and other ethnic American literatures is an important area for scholarship.[11]

Writing post 9/11, Mattawa likens Arab American writing to coming out: "The stories in this anthology are in a sense a double coming out" (xiii). He writes about how the "silence could not be kept for long," as "even before the September 11 events brought the American public's attention to the existence of an Arab American community, Arab American writers had presented their stories to the public" (xiii). He goes on to talk about the historical events that were "turning points not only for the community but also for the larger American public's awareness of this community's existence," as "Arab Americans could not try to engage the world and remain anonymous" and "Even those who wished to remain in the shadows were sought out" (xiii). Shadows, anonymity, silence, and public awareness – the language of coming out and the public

[11] For example, as debates about secularism have taken off since 9/11, it would be productive to look at communities that have borne the brunt of 9/11 stigmatization concurrently; namely, Arab and Muslim Americans and Latina/os, all of whom are under increased scrutiny post 9/11. Additionally, while neither Mattawa nor Kahf mention American Indians, I believe that American Indian literature could also be a generative junction for scholarship. Particular points of connection might be land and community ethics, for example the way in which secularism structures the ways in which we can actually live and relate to one another in community, and how secularism structures our relationship to our very environment.

sphere are potent reminders of the shame and stigmatization Muslim and Arab Americans endure in the United States, one shared by GLBT communities and shaped by secular notions of public and private. Alameddine accentuates the correlation between Muslim and Arabs in the United States and gay men in particular, which points to another literary and cultural indebtedness that I explore in my chapter on *Koolaids.* The metaphor of coming out for Arab American writers post 9/11 and its allusion to GLBT coming out allows us to think about how secularism structures what is private (sexuality, religion) while policing it publically. Alameddine's work, as it deals with the AIDS epidemic as well as Arab immigrants in the United States, also invites us to consider how secularism calls for the regulation of certain kinds of bodies (undocumented, or even unhealthy). In my conclusion, I analyze a digital art piece by Hasan Elahi, who manipulates notions of public and private in his work; his piece draws attention to the relationship between assimilation and privacy, and demonstrates how difference must not only be interiorized (another connection between immigrant and GLBT identities) but is now commoditized and monitored through the internet. Alameddine, Elahi, and Kahf all point to the role of secularism as a technology of assimilation in terms of immigration, but also, in various ways in each case, in terms of sexuality, religion, and consumerism.

In conclusion, my dissertation contests the universalizing ambitions inherent to many definitions of secularism, which take for granted that varied secularisms share the same goals. Instead, through the works I analyze, I make an argument for the particularity of the United States context, in which regulatory secularism and religious rhetoric co-mingle in the political and cultural spheres. Secular values in the United States are conceptualized such that religious rhetoric fits seamlessly into the national dialogue; United States secularism is unique for the

specific ways in which certain religious rhetoric determines the political conversation, which is part and parcel of how secularism defines appropriate religious practice.

In my first and second chapters, I contend that Western feminist and GLBT rights discourses often use secularism narratives to endorse neo-colonial ideologies, thus limiting permissible ethnic, gendered, and sexual embodiments. Chapter one examines Mohja Kahf's American coming of age novel, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf.* Although the *bildungsroman* conventionally plots an individual's modernization in line with the nation, Kahf uses the formal strategies of the *bildungsroman* to contest the moral superiority of secular feminism and to assert an Islamic feminism that works in tandem with United States identity. The novel points to the ways in which the *bildungsroman* as an immigration assimilation genre has traditionally been part of the technology of secularism. She situates her protagonist's ultimate independence from the family fold, patriarchal Islam, and mainstream United States society in explicitly gendered and religious acts of claiming control over her body. Ultimately, I argue that the text offers up an imaginative reworking of secularism through the protagonist's vision of the *umma*, which she sees as unlimited, transnational, and experiential.

Building upon my analysis of feminist rights and secularism, my second chapter argues that Western GLBT international rights discourses posit modern sexual identity formation as part of the secularization process, and as impossible outside of secular political and cultural conditions. I argue that Alameddine uses the figure of the refugee in combination with postmodern literary forms and the traditional Arabic form of the *mu'arada* to critique how both secularism and religion work as structures of affect that naturalize certain identities and regulate others. I look to the relationship between secular discourses, GLBT rights, and gendered and racialized representation of Muslims – both imposed and self-asserted – in the United States, to

address the question about what kinds of agencies, and indeed what kinds of bodies, are considered to bear universal significance. Finally, I draw together my previous arguments about narrative and identity to consider how *Koolaids* can be read as endorsing the potential in both secular and religious moral thought to create more inclusive secularism(s). The novel demonstrates how Muslim and Arab American experiences of secularity can transform and challenge our understanding of the American secularism, both in terms of its limitations and its possibilities. *Koolaids* calls for a reexamination of the canonical works of secularism, including the works it cites and reveres, in order to deconstruct the naturalization of Protestant values and practices as *American*. Furthermore, through the use of an Arabic literary form and Muslim allegory in a decidedly American novel, *Koolaids* expands and deepens our conception of what kinds of forms and voices constitute American literature.

In my third chapter I expand my scope beyond the borders of the United States to consider how contemporary artists are confronting nation-based secularisms and notions of public and private spheres. Yet the works in this piece are responding to and in conversation with the post 9/11 United States secular context. I take up the question of interpretive practices by analyzing the work of two artists, Ninar Esber and Mounir Fatmi, and examine theories of secular affect and secular reading practices in order to think about the ways these artists challenge our conceptions of public and private spheres. I begin by discussing how museum cultures and academic discourses define art, arguing that these definitions perpetuate a model of stewardship and make claims for universal ideas about culture, religion and humanity that eclipse cultural and religious difference. I contend that Western, secular definitions of art intersect with modern interpretive practices. They "secularize" art, but also link artists and their works to religion in ways that essentialize artists' subject matter and the publics they address, and also

glosses over artistic political critiques. I then analyze works by Esber and Fatmi that adapt literary forms, including sacred texts, arguing that these works challenge modern, secular interpretive practices through form. Finally, in my conclusion I extend the question of the secular public sphere to emerging debates about surveillance and privacy. I consider Hasan Elahi's online project *Tracking Transcience: The Orwell Project* which raises questions about the public address of art, but also comments on governmental and commercial monitoring that are accepted features of contemporary social life.

My dissertation is a call to think about "religious" and "secular" as intersecting political and cultural formations, not simply in terms of the politics that attach to secular systems and religious institutions, or the literary and artistic production that both shapes and is shaped by these formations, but also in the constitution of religion and secular as analytic categories with deep roots in United States culture and history. While I set out to critique the secularism thesis and its exclusive claims on civilization and progress, I am wary of the wholesale dismissal of secularism as a viable political and cultural configuration. I question the notion that secularism is necessary for the resolution of religious conflict and the only means for peaceful co-existence. Yet I recognize secularism as a salient feature of United States identity that is embodied in everyday practices and influences how Americans imagine themselves as belonging to and acting within both local and global contexts. The novels and art that I explore reject the paradigm of prohibitory secularism that seeks to spread its economic and political ideologies globally while restricting its membership locally. They challenge the contemporary notion of postsecular literature, which takes a weakened, hybridized, liberal spirituality as its starting point. At the same time, these texts locate the promise of freedom in a more inclusively imagined secularism by refashioning the meaning and context of disciplinary practices and the public sphere.

Secularism is part and parcel of the story we tell about the United States' evolution into a modern, democratic nation, and I propose that these novels write themselves into the historical plot while envisioning a different destination. Because the secularization process and its incumbent values are produced through narrative, it makes sense to rework those stories through fiction, giving expression to forms of secularism that are not yet tangible, but may be possible. I propose that reading these texts together reveals how their approaches, generic and otherwise, to these issues differ, but also shows how they are linked by a broader project to find potential in secularism by recasting it as inclusive.

CHAPTER ONE

Gender, Islam and U.S. Secularism in Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*

"Liar," is how Khadra Shamy addresses the highway sign telling her "The People of Indiana Welcome You" (1). Thus begins Mohja Kahf's 2006 novel, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, a coming of age story in which a young girl immigrates from Syria with her family to the U.S. The sentiment of inhospitality is echoed later in the book, when Khadra's mosque and community center are vandalized: "Toilet paper was everywhere. Markings in white spray paint were blazoned across the windowpanes of the clubhouse....FUCK YOU, RAGHEADS. DIE. They were signed: KKK 100% USA" (82). The U.S.'s hostility towards Muslims arises again and again in the novel, as when Khadra contemplates the unsolved murder of her friend Zuhura; "Maybe we don't belong here," she thinks to herself, as she stands at Zuhura's graveside (97). Khadra is constantly grappling with the paradox of religious freedom in the U.S.: a secular society that claims to protect its pluralistic religious communities, while at the same time constraining those communities by strictly defining what constitutes appropriate religious practice within a secular society. Essentially a narrative about growing into one's religious beliefs, the text counters the myth of the U.S. as melting pot and challenges the framework of secular freedom and its promise of rights for religious minorities. The novel's distinctiveness lies in its plot development and form; Khadra's eventual life choices upend the anticipated movement of the U.S. immigrant coming of age story.

The novel is deeply engaged with issues of religious formation as well as informed dissent, and a kind of faithful self-formation. In this chapter, I examine Kahf's adaptation of the *bildungsroman* and analyze her novel in terms of its location within the field of contemporary writing about Muslim women in the U.S. The immigrant bildungsroman in which the protagonist learns to "make it" in America has a long history in U.S. literature, and the genre plays a

significant role in producing familiarity with secularism for contemporary Western audiences. I ask whether Kahf rewrites these old themes as new valorizations of the gutsy Muslim heroine who defies religion and tradition to embrace secular modernity. I argue that Kahf is using a major literary form that has been used historically to enact secularism and assimilation and undoes the form itself in order to critique secular discourses. I then consider how the text engages two types of U.S. political secularisms as outlined by feminist theologian Kathleen Sands – strong form exceptionalism and weak-form exceptionalism – and draw out the connection between these political forms and secular feminism. Finally, I argue that the text illuminates the limits of secularism, but also highlights its potential to be inclusive, as the novel ultimately envisions the secular context as a place in which to foster the *umma* - the global, transnational community to which every Muslim belongs.

The progressive narrative of secularization has been used repeatedly to police Muslim women; thus, there is a sense of urgency in Kahf's writing, as she looks to the myriad ways the secularization narrative shapes the practice of Islam in the U.S. The idea that Islamic practice and belief are incompatible with being American ("100% USA"), or with secularism in general, comes from both outside and within Khadra's family and religious community, and a large part of that inconsistency is connected to gender and women's rights. Muslim women are often portrayed in U.S. media in one of two ways: women who modernize and assimilate, and often publicly critique patriarchal Islam; or as observant women with no agency, rights, or loyalty to the nation. The U.S. media (and often academia) turn to the former as examples of the triumph of Western humanism and the latter as images of the backwardness of Islamic "traditionalism."

Narratives that take up the subject of gender and Islam have become popular in the post

9/11 U.S. as an audience eager for information about Islam has developed. Much of this literature, however, falls into prescribed and familiar representations of Samuel Huntington's ideological "clash of civilizations" and of an oppressive, backwards Islam. Muslim women become objects of discursive enquiry, trapped by patriarchal Islam but longing for the autonomy offered by Western, secular feminism. These paternalistic and politicized tropes are not limited to books about Muslim women, but are prevalent in "insider" memoirs and exposés such as Irshad Manji's *The Trouble with Islam* or Ayaan Hirsi Ali's *Infidel*.[12] Dora Ahmad writes that these late twentieth century texts "cannily appropriate central tenets of twentieth-century feminism and civil rights: the personal as political; the importance of speaking for oneself" and thus "these heroines are made over to look like us precisely so that we can take for granted what we are rescuing them into" (109). And, presumably, what we are rescuing them *out of*: patriarchal Islam and the oppressive cultural practices of their countries of origin. This gives the reading audience critical distance from the narrative; they can identify with the desire for individual freedom, yet remain safely distanced from similar issues that confront women in the U.S. While critiquing the narratives themselves, Ahmad sees a larger context which assumes that liberal secular humanism is the ultimate goal, and that "Underneath an inconvenient and irritating layer of culture – a culture separated from the messy imbrications that characterize contemporary world politics – lies a free liberal subject waiting to emerge into unproblematic selfhood" (109). The narratives she describes have a great deal in common with the novel of formation or *bildungsroman* in which the protagonist experiences conflict between self-determination and the demands of the larger society. The comparison works precisely because

[12] For an insightful critique of Manji's and Hirsi Ali's work, see: Lalami, Laila. "Books & the Arts - the Caged Virgin: an Emancipation Proclamation for Women and Islam." *The Nation*. 282.24 (2006): 23. Print.

underneath the aggravating cultural differences Ahmad describes is the sense that these are universal stories of development.

How does Kahf's novel, particularly because it evokes a narrative tradition that revolves around the self-cultivation and eventual socialization of its protagonists, avoid the trap of the "oppressed Muslim woman" and the assumption that superficial multiculturalism can reveal a common experience of selfhood? In part, because of the reading practices Ahmad implicates, it cannot. The image of the oppressed Muslim woman is so dominant in the U.S. media that essentially any text about Muslim women is read with this trope as its backdrop. The realities of an U.S. reading public hungry to identify itself with a feisty female protagonist bent on self-determination, as well as publishing houses intent on marketing texts by exploiting the image of the veil, complicates the reception and experience of novels such as Kahf's.[13] Kahf, however, does not only seek to normalize Muslims to a non-Muslim audience, she also addresses the realities and concerns of many American Muslims through her characters' struggles with practice, belief, and acculturation. She does so though a literary form fraught with connections to the development of the modern nation state and the liberal secular subject. Nevertheless, it is also a form that represents a sense of order in a world in crisis in which communities are changing. The form itself serves as a response to the exploitation of the memoir and novels of formation that cast Muslim women as pitiable victims who can (with help and backbone) grow into their

[13]"Veiling" often has a negative connotation in the media and is used generically to refer to a wide variety of practices – from the head scarf to the covering of the face and wearing of gloves - yet because of the predominance of the term in my sources it is the term I use here. For a more thorough discussion of the veil, see: Alvi, Sajida S, Homa Hoodfar, and Sheila McDonough. *The Muslim Veil in North America: Issues and Debates*. Toronto, ON: Women's Press, 2003. Print.

own women insofar as Kahf reconfigures the plot and protagonist to depart from well-worn stereotypes of Muslim women. [14]

The rhetorical thrust inherent to the form of the *bildungsroman* shapes the narrative. The form dictates a linear conception of development in which a white, male, Western, bourgeois subject performs a coherent self-made possible through a universal conception of selfhood and rights. This linear progression to enlightenment parallels and incorporates the secularism narrative. The *bildungsroman* has traditionally plotted an individual's modernization, as Franco Moretti reminds us, "when we remember that the *Bildungsroman* – the symbolic form that more than any other has portrayed and promoted modern socialization – is also the *most contradictory* of modern symbolic forms, we realize that in our world socialization itself consists first of all in the *interiorization of contradiction*" (10). In *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* the inevitable interiorization of contradiction renders reconciliation between the protagonist and mainstream society eternally incomplete. However, the interaction between mainstream and marginal society is not alone at the center of the narrative; rather, it is joined by the interaction between marginal and mainstream Islams. And the seemingly insurmountable conflict between Islam and the individual, a trope played out in the numerous accounts Ahmad critiques, is revealed to be an artificial divide. The protagonist's assertion of female Muslim individuality and agency serves as a counterweight to mainstream U.S. views of Muslims, as well as to the kinds of Islam that

[14] Kahf is not unique in using the form of the *bildungsroman* to write a feminist critique, indeed the "female *bildungsroman*" has a long and storied tradition. For a more comprehensive theoretical treatment and a history of criticism of the female *bildungsroman*, see: Lazarro-Weis, Carol. "The Female *Bildungsroman*: Calling it into Question." *NWSA Journal* 2.1 (Winter 1990): 16-34. Print. Morgon, Ellen. "Humanbecomming: Form & Focus in the Neo-Feminist Novel." *Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives*. Ed. Susan Koppelman Cornillon. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University, 1972. Print. White, Barbara. *Growing up Female: Adolescent Girlhood in American Fiction.* Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1985. Print.

Khadra finds spiritually restrictive, offering a counter-narrative to both U.S. and inter-Muslim discourses.

The *bildungsroman* does more than map the individual's journey; rather, the individual comes to represent the universal subject in relationship with a particular mode of governance. That relationship is decidedly secular, wherein abstract secularism is the backdrop for the citizen-subject's relationship to wider society and/or the state. The form seems ideal for asserting the rights of the marginalized into the national fold, as Joseph Slaughter argues: "The genre provides the normative literary technology by which social outsiders narrate affirmative claims for inclusion in the franchise of the nation-state, the story form of incorporation through which the historically marginalized individual is capacitated as a citizen-subject'" (1402).[15] However, the form is capable of critiquing the very status quo to which the protagonist appeals, "as the canonical genre of human rights incorporation, the *Bildungsroman* has the dual capacity to articulate claims of inclusion in the rights regime and to criticize those norms and their inegalitarian implementation" (Slaughter, 1411). Indeed, even as Kahf's narrative questions the animating myth about what it means to be an American, and the democratic rights and individual freedoms promised by that myth, her characters assert their place in the American story and lay claim to the rights denied them by racist, sexist, anti-Islam, and anti-immigrant ideologies.

[15] Slaughter's insight will sound familiar to readers of scholarship on African-American and Latina/o *bildungsroman*, as well as the female novel of formation. Indeed, Kahf's novel follows in the wake of these re-workings of the genre, including the process of racial awakening, as Claudine Raynaud describes it: "Coming of age – reaching the age of 'maturity' or 'discretion' – is variously a process, a moment, or a scene akin to the structural 'scenes of instruction' inherent in African American narratives.'" (106). Tobias Boes writes, "Given the explosion of Bildungsroman writing in post-colonial and minority literatures of the late twentieth century, other critics have begun to reconceptualize the modernist era as a period of transition from metropolitan, nationalist discourses to post-colonial and post-imperial ones" (240). In addition to African American, Latina/o, and feminist *bildungsroman,* post-colonial and multi-ethnic *bildungsroman,* particularly works that reflect upon nationalist discourses, are also sites of production exchange for considering *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf.*

The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf uses the formal strategies of the *bildungsroman* to challenge the claims to moral superiority of secular feminism and its definition of women's rights by situating Khadra's ultimate independence from her family fold, patriarchal Islam, and mainstream U.S. society in explicitly gendered acts of claiming control over her body; namely, through an abortion, the offer of a wife-initiated divorce from her husband, and her eventual choice to retain her veil. The narrative does not present these acts as requiring a Western, secular horizon to ensure their possibility and success. Instead, Khadra narrates an historical Islam in which women venture into the world to make their own way by emphasizing the roles of women throughout Islamic history and the voices of the women who surround her. Yet the text does follow narrative patterns of a progressive movement toward political, religious, and personal enlightenment. In addition, Khadra, as an Muslim American, is shown to be deeply connected to the U.S. milieu, and her own journey to autonomy would not be possible without her cultural context. The process of enlightenment, and indeed it is a process in the novel, is cultivated through Khadra's specific experience within the U.S., but it is ultimately posed as universally possible given the right conditions. In her case, Islam provides the means of resistance and transformation for Khadra. At first, Khadra believes in the Enlightenment mantra that Western philosophy invented individual freedom, but later comes to realize that many of the ideals she dismisses as Western and innately imperialist – including natural rights, women's rights, and even the desire for a direct personal relationship with the Divine – exist in historically and culturally divergent forms in Islam.

Khadra's own view of religion changes as she grows up and encounters different religious practices and passes through various stages in her religious development. Born in

Syria, but raised in Indiana with her two brothers, Eyad and Jihad, Khadra's entire life centers on her religious commitments. Her father, Wajdy, is the chapter coordinator for the Dawah Center, a Muslim non-profit outreach center. Khadra's day-to-day life is rooted in religious education and work and is deeply informed by her experience of community. As with any child raised in a profoundly religious home, she is initiated into the rituals, prayers, practices and beliefs of her community as interpreted by her parents. At the core of the text is an unwavering reverence towards devotion and faith, although Khadra's devotion often causes internal and external conflict and leads her to question how one can live religiously in a secular state. But the text is working with multiple understandings of what it means to be secular and religious within various national, familial, and cultural contexts, and Khadra's own understanding of Islam functions in relationship with these various modes.

Above all, the text critiques two forms of political secularism that have been explained as peculiar to the U.S. legal and political systems: strong-form and weak-form exceptionalism. Within the U.S., exceptionalist secularism depends upon the notion of secularism as an abstract, universally recognizable category distinguished by the absence of religion. The secular in this case is merely what is not religion, and secularization is the historical withdrawal of religion from the public sphere, rather than a narrative underpinned by a European, Protestant, and Enlightenment ethos. As Kathleen Sands writes, in exceptionalism, religion is "construed as a unique category; clearly bound off from the rest of culture and populated with individual religions that are somehow coherently connected to each other" (310). Religion, in this formation, is therefore understood in the same vein as the secular: as a universally recognizable category in which all religions share some common conditions. Yet, despite its disavowal of any ideological origins, Sands states that exceptionalism is deeply influenced by Protestant notions of

faith, "for example, the idea that religion is more about interior faith than public works, that religion begins in the heart or the conscience of the individual rather than in the life of the community, that religion cannot be coerced without ceasing to be religious" (311). Sands' definition of U.S. exceptionalism works against the dominant definition of the secular as unshaped by religion. Rather, a particular Protestant understanding of religion is naturalized as universal in U.S. culture through centuries of political and culture discourse.

At the core of the U.S. exceptionalist view of religion is the division between private belief and public affect, a disjuncture which Khadra experiences as contradictory to the teachings of her family and community. Khadra questions the understanding of faith that Sands describes as inherent to exceptionalism, as throughout the novel, she resists the distinction drawn by the mainstream U.S. between Islam as her interior faith and Islam as her public and communal practice. Khadra's viewpoint is in direct contrast to the forms of exceptionalism she encounters as a citizen of the U.S. Her experience of political and cultural exclusion reflects Sands' definition of exceptionalism, particularly "strong-form" exceptionalism, as limiting religiously informed participation in the political sphere. Strong-form exceptionalism stresses the limitation of religion in public life and the separation of church and state in order to protect religion from the state, but also vice versa. Sands argues that religious freedoms therefore apply to the "religious individual, not the religious community," thus "when separatist exceptionalists identify a viewpoint as religious, it warrants the exclusion of that viewpoint from law, policy, and even public conversation (311). In the U.S., in the form of public conversation, Islam becomes Political Islam. Any activism on behalf of Muslim causes or social justice for Muslims becomes suspect. During college, when Khadra begins to deeply question her obligations as a Muslim American, her father Wajdy tells her, "Faith requires political, social, and economic

actualization . . . Others may see it as politicizing religion, but we see Islamic activism simply as service. Service of humanity, to please God" (235). For Wajdy and Khadra, Islam is not a private affair – prayers to be said five times a day in private before returning to the secular public sphere– but the defining feature of being in the world, and, significantly, acting in the world.

Wajdy believes that Islam demands political, social, and economic action on behalf of Muslims as a group, not in order to politicize Islam but to fulfill a communal obligation that transcends the private sphere and the individual, thus challenging an U.S. culture that focuses on individual rights. The freedom of individual Muslims to worship as they please privately does not necessarily extend to religious communities living as they see fit. As Sands writes, when the "laws or policies of the state directly contradict the religious commitments of individuals, free exercise is vigorously defended," but it is "defended more as a right to individual expression from public norms than a right to exert influence in creating and changing those norms" (311). When Khadra expresses an interest in Sufism during a college course on Islam, her Uncle Kuldip argues that Westerners like to focus on radical Muslims because Westerners value individual expression that departs from the norm, in this case dominant Sunni Islam, but only to distract from the need for social justice for a global Muslim collective. As Uncle Kuldip points out, "Westerners like to focus on the heretics and deviants in Islam;" they are concerned with the religious individual because they "cannot stomach the activist Islam that seeks to redress injustices committed against Muslim lands" (233). Thus while the idea of one individual challenging dominant Islamic beliefs is reassuring to Westerners, the idea that Islam could create or change Western dominant, normative culture causes social panic.

Uncle Kuldip limits his social realm to other Muslims, but for Wajdy, faith coincides with the political sphere beyond commitment to other Muslims, as it also means responsible

engagement with the polity of the land: "In a kuffar land, it meant developing ways to help Muslims live by shariah while being good citizens" (235). After becoming an U.S. citizen, Wajdy says that because of the "Islamic qualities" of "law and order, cleanliness, democracy, freedom to work and honestly seek the provision of the Lord . . . freedom to practice religion . . . America is like Islam without the Muslims" (144). He can, in a sense, be read as endorsing a kind of "weak-form" exceptionalism. Sands defines weak-form exceptionalism as, like strong-form, regarding religion as a unique category, however, "religious freedom is thought to accrue not only to individuals but to religious communities. To label something as religious, then, does not warrant its exclusion for public life; on the contrary, religion warrants special voice, and perhaps special authority, in the public sphere" (312). Weak-form exceptionalism thus recognizes religious communities as part and parcel of the civic landscape in ways that strong-form exceptionalism does not. For Wajdy, as a U.S. Muslim citizen, part of his Islamic duty is to help his religious community members be good civic members as well, just as weak-form exceptionalism dictates. Sands' criticism of weak-form exceptionalism is that it does not monitor religious expression in the public sphere without prejudice; rather, it favors the expression of the majority who then use this form to insist on policies that reflects the majority's morality. Thus a civic voice like Wajdy's cannot be heard in the political realm because majority held religious views not only dominate the conversation but determine its parameters.

The novel underscores the ways in which both strong and weak forms of exceptionalism exclude U.S. Muslims. It condemns the mistreatment of Muslims globally and historically, as evidenced in the constant chatter of the characters about various political situations around the globe, from the oppression of the Cham in Cambodia to the Iranian revolution. The majority of Muslim characters bemoan their absence from the public, political conversation *as* Muslims.

Zuhura, for example, is an outspoken Kenyan American university student and activist involved with the Campus Muslim Council. When Zuhura is murdered, her community believes "it was religious bigotry" related to her "vocal espousal of Muslim causes on campus, it was political" (95). But the local papers attribute her unsolved murder to racism or anti-immigrant crime. *The Indianapolis Freeman* calls Zuhura "a young black woman", while *The Indianapolis Star* "pretended like race wasn't there at all, calling Zuhura a 'foreign woman' and 'an IU international student'" (95). Repeatedly in the novel, Muslim identity in the public sphere is either elided completely or collapsed into racial, ethnic, or national identities.

Surprisingly, given that Zuhura is stripped and raped, and her *hijab* shredded, gender is ignored by the media reports, and it is not mentioned by any of the main characters as playing a part in the crime. The text does, however, gesture to secular feminism's ignorance of the plight of Muslim American women in terms of anything but oppression by Muslim men, as *The Indianapolis News* article "treated it like just some random crime, giving it one tiny paragraph in the back pages. The front-page news was about a march. A photo that showed a group of white women yelling, 'Take Back the Night!'" (95). The shredded *hijab*, juxtaposed with white women marching in a Take Back the Night event, creates a striking image of the kinds of women secular feminism is uncomfortable protecting. Gender is ignored until, of course, the media gets word of Zuhura's fiancé being a prime suspect, then the headlines read: "*Murder Possible Honor Killing – Middle Eastern Connection*" with a "sidebar on the 'oppression of women in Islam'" (97). Zuhura's father is an Anglo American from Nebraska and her mother is from Kenya, but the headline insists upon the commonplace conflation of the Middle East and Islam and the portrayal of Islam as an inherently violent, misogynist religion. The relationship between

Zuhura's activist life, untimely death, and intra-community expectations for women is only raised implicitly by the text. This is reflected in the whispers about the freedoms her parents allowed her and in young Khadra's subsequent adoption of a stringent interpretation of Islam.

As she enters adolescence, Khadra begins what she later calls her "black scarf" phase during which she wanted to spread "pure, revolutionary Islam in the world" (150). Kahf describes the "black scarf" phase with gentle derision and an indulgence for the misguided passions of teenagers, but with an eye to the dangers of prejudice, misogyny, and isolationism inherent in unexamined fundamentalist ideologies. By ascribing the phase to Khadra's philosophical explorations in adolescence and having her later shed those beliefs as she matures, Kahf emphasizes the juvenile and uncritical nature of such beliefs. Young Khadra dismisses her parents' "moderate Islamic revival movement" and her brother's "yearning-for-traditional-Islam phase," as well as his subsequent "Islamic modernism phase," and her own later "neo-classical Islam phase" (153). She later ascribes the donning of *pakols* by her college peers to a similar kind of growing pain: "Some CMC boys in their first flush of Islamic movement geopolitical awareness had taken to wearing the rolled Afghan caps. Sort of the guy equivalent to the black-scarf thing" (202). In one sense, this mocking of different interpretations of Islam as "phases" can be read as only leaving room for Khadra's final interpretation of Islam at the end of the novel. Yet as these "phases" come through the voice of the teenaged Khadra, the door is left open for her later struggles and consequent transformation – one that allows for a multitude of lived experiences and Islam(s), even the ones she critiques in adulthood.

But while in the throes of her black scarf phase, it is the secular U.S. against which Khadra rails, along with the Muslims who adjust their own practice to fit neatly into the secular public sphere. A reoccurring motif in the novel is the pressure and threat of assimilation. For

Khadra, "assimilated Muslims" are irresolute creatures who have "failed to preserve their identity," are emptied of cultural content, and unmoored from their heritage (184). Adolescent Khadra's critique of assimilation responds to exceptionalism in two contradictory ways. First, religious identity for Khadra has little to do with personal faith and everything to do with one's national or ethnic origins, which she links to religious authenticity. When a group of friends she encounters while on *Haj* insist on her "Americanness," she retorts: "I'm Arab. I told you. I'm Arab. Just like you" (178). They are shocked when this "American" girl refuses to take off her *hijab* and join their drug use, and she is shocked that Muslim Arabs would indulge in anything so "un-Islamic." In her adolescent naiveté, Khadra associates an essentialist Arab heritage with Muslim legitimacy. Consequently while Khadra unconsciously rejects the notion that faith is merely an interior, private affair, thus countering the exceptionalist definition of appropriate religious spheres, she also rejects the idea that private faith informs the shape of public practice for individuals and groups. She repeatedly touts the "Islamic Lifestyle" and she even criticizes a couple making *Haj*, saying, "why weren't they practicing Islam? Which she could tell they weren't, by the way they dressed" (160). At this point in Khadra's development, the "Islamic Lifestyle" dictates a particular mode of behavior that must be adhered to globally and without variation, without regard to cultural context, tradition, or personal beliefs. Exceptionalism defines religion in one very specific way, and although Khadra's definition is different, her definition is just as exclusive.

Ultimately, for Khadra, assimilated Muslims are those who relegate religion to the private sphere as a personal belief system. However, Khadra associates assimilation with weakening or absence of religion in the very mode of exceptionalist discourse, thus creating her own prohibitive religious framework. U.S. culture, then, is the absence of religious culture, as the

secular is the unmarked category through which the religious is defined. Eventually, both her association of ethnic origin, public practice, and authenticity, and her belief that "secular" U.S. culture is incompatible with "true" Islam are challenged as the novel progresses, thus debunking exceptionalism's premise of separate public and private spheres, while complicating her own views on the interiority and exteriority of faith.

"America," for Khadra's mother Ebtehaj, corresponds to the secular sphere that deadens or expels religion, and although the entire family becomes citizens, this is the definition of "America" to which Ebtehaj clings. When Khadra and her brother, Eyad arrive home late one evening, their panicked mother screams at them, "We are not Americans!" (67). Khadra explains who the Americans are:

> The Americans were the white people who surrounded them, a crashing sea of unbelief in which the Dawah Center bobbed, a brave boat. (There were black people who were Americans, but that was different.) You had your nice Americans and your nasty Americans. And then there was the majority of Americans; the best that could be said about them was that they were ignorant (67).

She then goes through a litany of what Americans do: cuss, smoke, drink, do drugs, fornicate, commit adultery, have broken families, divorce, and abandon their children and elderly. They "led shallow, wasteful, materialistic lives" and "Americans believed the individual was more important than the family, and money was more important than anything" (68). She internalizes the stereotype of the individualistic American, and, although she revisits the significance of individualism in religious life in adulthood, Khadra never fully examines or sheds her view of the "typical American."

In the novel the U.S. is racialized as white and Islam as non-white. The racialization of

Islam in the U.S. plays out in the novel in multiple instances of prejudice Khadra endures and witnesses, and also in her own assumptions about what it means to be Muslim and what it means to be American. The "black people who were Americans" are "different," and although Khadra includes non-Muslim African American culture under the umbrella of her larger definition of American culture, she also recognizes a long history of slavery and racial prejudice that marginalizes African-Americans. Whiteness, the West, and non-Muslim are inextricably intertwined in Khadra's childhood imagination. She is later shocked to meet white Albanian Americans on *Haj* – she has known white American converts in her youth, but had never considered white European Muslims a possibility. Khadra's viewpoint reflects both her own upbringing and the racialization of Islam by the U.S. media and government in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. The text, however, is careful not to associate Islam only with Arabs. In the first thirty pages readers are introduced to Muslims that are Cham, Sudanese, Syrian, African-American, and Kenyan, as well as white American converts. The text's insistence upon the racial and ethnic diversity of Islam is almost farcically overdone. Even so, Kahf critiques the racism within Muslim communities, particularly Arab prejudice against Africans and African-Americans. She also questions their quiet distrust of the motives of Anglo American converts as well as their doubts about the ability of converts to live the "Islamic Lifestyle" without adopting the customs of Arabic-speaking cultures. The doggedness with which the text presents the amalgamation of ethnicities and Islamic cultures that the American milieu produces serves to emphasize the later importance of the *umma*, a concept to which I will return.

Nonetheless, as a child and teenager, Khadra's definition of Americans is as monolithic and limited as many of her non-Muslim neighbors' understanding of what it means to be

Muslim. America, in Khadra's view, could never mix with Islam. She shows her inability to envision an American Islam through her description of the experience of the earliest Arab American immigrants who came over and formed communities beginning in the 1870s: "But slowly, over generations, they had mixed American things in with real Islam" (184). "Real Islam" is something Khadra believes is tangible, and "American things" are a corrupting influence. Her mother reinforces this belief, saying, "Our biggest fear was always losing you … Losing our children to America. Having you not keep Islam one hundred percent" (384). As though the very landscape of the U.S. is inhospitable to Islam, Khadra's mother imagines America as a rapacious monolith eager to absorb her children. And Islam is construed as a concept as quantifiable as secularism; as though something is either Islam or not, just as in dominant liberal political thought society and government must be entirely secular or they are not secular at all.

When Khadra's African American childhood friend Hanifa begins to display "unIslamic" behavior, she attributes it to Hanifa's African American heritage. Khadra goes to Hanifa's house to confront her about her absence from school and finds her "stretched out on the sectional sofa," wearing shorts, and "listening to music. UnIslamic music" (129). "Well," Khadra reasons, "she was related to non-Muslims, wasn't she? She was related to this music, to Lionel Ritchie, to some old non-Muslim grandmother in Alabama. She could just up and leave this life she had where Khadra was her friend, where you abided by the Total Islamic Lifestyle, and go off somewhere else. Be some other person. Leave Khadra in the lurch" (129). She yells at Hanifa, "You're going astray, you know. Soon you'll be just like any American. You're going to hell, you know" (129).

Khadra's experience with her childhood friend casts light on the intra-community prejudices limiting the *umma* in the U.S. It also underscores the racist legacy of the U.S. that their common religious identity struggles to overcome. Hanifa's authenticity is questionable to Khadra because Hanifa is related in some deeper way – ineffable to a child – to U.S. history itself. While Khadra imagines herself and her family as able to resist acculturation and to exist outside of U.S. cultural norms, she imagines Hanifa as somehow born from and forever fettered to the U.S. and its racial categories. Hanifa's history –her *Americanness* – is decidedly un-Islamic. The text acknowledges that many Muslim American spaces privilege Muslims from immigrant families, particularly from Arabic-speaking nations, as more authentically Muslim. Racialized divisions exist within immigrant Muslim communities themselves, exemplified by Eyad's parents discouraging him from marrying a Sudanese woman. His parents give a litany of reasons: because his wife must be a native Arabic speaker (she was), because she was older than him (but not enough to matter), but ultimately because she was "black as coal" (139). Later in the novel, when Khadra finds out that Hanifa was pregnant as a teenager, she regrets that her quick judgment led to the end of their friendship, when clearly Hanifa was a young woman in need of understanding and the kind of compassion Khadra comes to associate with Islam. But for the young Khadra, Islam is an inheritance as much as a faith. Her perspective is one that the exclusionist secularization narrative rejects because faith must be a conscious choice, but that Khadra maintains, although her views become more elastic as she experiences different embodiments of Islam in her life.

Of all the characters in the novel, Khadra's college friend Joy most accurately represents the transformation of second and third generation Muslims to secular exceptionalism, which

Khadra initially critiques as assimilation. Joy is a third generation Syrian American, and "Joy's family album was part of the American landscape in a way that Khadra did not think it was possible for her family ever to be" (184). Joy, with her mixed Syrian Christian and Muslim family, mystifies Khadra, who has never encountered such a mixture of faiths, cultures, and practices. Khadra and her brother had "never seen Arab folk like this: women called Rose who mangled Arabic with an American accent and played Arabic music on American guitars, and men who looked like Hoosier farmers in denim overalls" (191). Eyad is suspicious of the family's authenticity as Muslims and Syrians: "The Muslims who lived in that northern Indiana town were the assimilated kind, second- and third-generation Americans descended from turn-of-the-century Arab immigrants. They failed to preserve their identity – they'd caved" (184). Khadra finds Joy's family familiar because of their shared Syrian heritage, but also threatening because this familiarity is jumbled with Indiana culture. Again, Khadra and Eyad link Islam to a purified cultural and ethnic inheritance that authenticates and preserves it – a heritage absent from America and by extension excluding African Americans like Hanifa or third-generation immigrants like Joy. Islamic identity that is tainted by U.S. culture is drained of legitimacy. At this point in the narrative, Khadra and Eyad are unable to distinguish the linkages they are making between ethnic, cultural, or national identity, and Islam itself. Therefore they are unable to reconcile their reductionist definition of Islam with the lives of their friends Hanifa and Joy, or even with their own American identities.

Khadra objects to joining her friend Joy at a study session in a "Sushi Bar", and she berates her friend for entering because she misunderstands what the word "bar" connotes in the restaurant's name: "It seemed to Khadra that her friend was just an assimilated Muslim, plain and simple" (185). Assimilating, for Khadra, is the height of cultural and religious betrayal. She

accuses Joy of being a "McMuslim" saying: "It means you believe by default in the typical American lifestyle of self-indulgence, waste, and global oppression" (186). Even at this point in the novel, Khadra's self-satisfying separatism begins to unravel, when she meets Joy's Syrian Christian grandmother Litfy, and asks herself "What other homes of similar sweetness and joy had they passed by all these years, insisting as they did on their separateness and specialness, then?" (189). As an "assimilated Muslim", Joy also comes to represent one version of feminist secularism in the narrative. She is in some ways a cardboard character, without depth or nuance, against whom Khadra can measure her own purity, but Joy also pushes Khadra to question the normative status of women in Islam within her own community.

It is because of the evolving nature of her friendships with women such as Joy, and also because of the frustration she feels at having her efforts constantly dismissed by male members of the Muslim Student Association, that Khadra pushes more forcefully against the structures of the patriarchal Islam of her family and community. Just a few years earlier she had been escorted home by two *matawwa* policemen during *Haj* when she attempted to pray in a mosque (women are not permitted to pray in mosques in Saudi Arabia). During college Khadra gets married, and as she settles into married life she begins to find her community overly restrictive, particularly because her new husband Juma demands that she change her lifestyle and uses Islam to justify himself. When she becomes pregnant soon after their marriage, she feels stifled by his treatment of her and resents the life he and her family have laid out for her, as embodied in her pregnancy: "It was a growth, invading her body, reaching out its tentacles, even up her throat. It was a possibility, one she could not entertain. It would lock her into a life, a very specific kind of life with Juma, that she was no longer certain she wanted. She knelt on the tiles with a wet rag mopping up the vomit. Seven times, once with Ajax powder" (247). Her reaction to the

pregnancy echoes the one her mother has after the discovery of Zuhura's violated body, when a terrified and grieving Ebtehaj conflates Khadra's body with Zuhura's. She insists that Khadra is filthy and must bathe, trying desperately to wash off the contaminating violence of U.S. culture. Only now the impurity is the violation of Khadra's will, which she connects to God's will: "Where was it, this will of hers, this misshapen self . . . You have to have a self to even start on a journey to God. To cultivate your nafs whom God invites to enter the Garden at the end of Surat al-Fajr . . . her self was a meager thing, scuttling behind a toilet, what she hadn't given over of it to Mama, to Juma" (248). Rather than envisioning the virgin body or the pregnant woman as sacred in and of itself as her mother does, Khadra sees cultivation of the self through God as the highest virtue. She feels she must clean away this invasion of her will by other people's plans for her life, symbolized by her loss of control through pregnancy. And by linking her will directly to God's will, she claims its sacredness above and beyond the mere expectations of her community and family.

After she has an abortion – horrifying her family, community, and husband, although completely within the realm of Islamic law - she offers Juma a *khulu'*. He refuses this wife-initiated divorce out of pride, and thus Khadra declares of herself that the "Dawah Center poster girl had fallen" (251). Marriage is not the dénouement of the novel; rather divorce is the beginning of Khadra's independence. Even if Juma rejects the offer of *khulu'*, the very fact of its offer and her willingness to mark herself publicly in this way emphasizes her assertion of sovereignty over her own body and destiny. Although abortion within the first one hundred and twenty days of conception is permitted by *shariah*, her family is angry and censorious, and the only person who will accompany her to the clinic is Joy who is "horrified by abortion" (249).

The woman who had met constantly with Khadra's moral disapproval proves to be a staunch ally. In the car on the way home from the clinic Khadra initiates a conversation about the life cycle of the bug. She asks Joy, "'Do you know what entomologists call the body of the bug in its different stages of life . . . an instar. . . . Know what they call the adult instar- the mature bug?" (250). Joy demurs but Khadra continues, "An 'imagine.' Yeah. Like, you and I are the 'imagines' of the human species" (250). Her newfound self-dominion is explicitly tied to her decision to have an abortion.

Abortion is not merely portrayed as her right as an U.S. citizen (one her doctor and school clinic refused to acknowledge) and as a Muslim woman, but abortion for Khadra is a spiritually embodied act. It allows her to be "an imagine" and to continue to imagine a future for herself. She is able to recover her meager self from its scuttling behind the toilet and transform her body into the next stage of life. Her brother Eyad tells her that God will punish her by not allowing her to have children later when she wants them, but Joy tells her "God is not such an asshole" and then adds "*alhamduliliah*" (250). Joy's "*alhamduliliah,"* meaning "praise be to God," alleviates the ostensibly flippant tone of her advice to Khadra, and emphasizes the genuine reverence in her words. God, she is telling Khadra, can be trusted, but may look very different than the God you were raised to venerate. It is in this moment of familial rejection and cultural free-fall that Khadra's security in her beliefs begins to dissipate.

It is during her period of rediscovery, or recovery, of self and will that Khadra begins to seriously reflect upon the constructed religious identities imposed upon her both by the larger U.S. society and from within her own community. In turn, she negotiates various secular feminist ideologies in order to counter the image of Muslim women as victims of an oppressive religion and as participants in a monolithic culture. Her world expands, and she begins to encounter a

series of friendly antagonists who offer up arguments that flatly represent secularism (her Iraqi boyfriend Chrif), feminism (her Pakistani friend Seemi), and religious universalism (as embodied by a series of teachers and poets). Building upon Khadra's unexamined experiences of sexism in her past, Kahf uses these encounters to explore the relationship between women, religion, and the public sphere, and much of that relationship turns on her portrayal of veiling. The birth, so to speak, of Khadra as an emancipated individual is not represented as a universal experience, but is located in the highly gendered acts of abortion, the offer of a wife-initiated, heterosexual divorce, and veiling. Within Kahf's novel, veiling and unveiling become narrative strategies; not as in the tired metaphorical sense of lifting the veil on hidden ways of life, but as a way to explore the cultural and religious choices Muslim American women make against a naturalized secular background that insists on pressing a monolithic identity upon them.

The question of the veil has been discussed exhaustively in the media and by Muslim activists and scholars. Homa Hoodfar underscores the changing meaning of veiling in various historical and cultural contexts. In Western culture, the meaning of the veil has remained "static and unchanging", while in Muslim cultures the "veil's function and social significance have varied tremendously, particularly during times of rapid social change" (421). While the veil has been "a mechanism in the service of patriarchy, a means of regulating and controlling women's lives, women have used the same social instrument to free themselves from the bonds of patriarchy" (Hoodfar, 421). After all, Hoodfar writes, "Muslim women, like all other women, are social actors, employing, reforming, and changing existing social institutions, often creatively, to their own ends" (421).

Nevertheless, in the Western imagination, the image of the veil is inextricably linked to

Islam itself, and one finds women peeking out from under veils on book covers about Islam and magazine and newspaper articles about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the War on Terror.[16]

It is not my intention to comprehensively revisit political debates over the veil. However, conversations about Islam and gender in the West often center on references to the veil, and thus many authors who write about women and Islam in the U.S. find themselves confronted with questions about veiling, by the non-Muslim public. Some authors such as Kahf choose to explore individual beliefs about the meaning of the veil, inter-community pressures to veil, and the political implications of veiling in the U.S., or the desire to remain under the radar by not veiling.

The West's obsession with veiling practices and the use of secular feminist rhetoric to condemn everything from the building of mosques to the citizenship/naturalization of women who wear the burqa produces an ugly binary in which Islamic feminism has no place and one kind of secular feminism is used to support racist and anti-immigrant ideologies that often further radicalize fundamentalist populations and ultimately fail to protect women. Minoo Moallem writes of the disconnect between universal secularism and gendered religious identity through her own experiences of being viewed as a representative "Muslim woman": "The failure of secularism to protect me either in the media or on the campus brings to mind the importance of 'civilizational and counter-civilizational thinking' that constantly mobilizes and dichotomizes

[16] Andrea Shalal-Esa addresses the politics of publishing that pigeonhole Muslim and Arab American writers through the editing, publishing, and even design processes. She relates a story of Kahf's disapproval of her publishing company's decision to post a cover design on its website that "showed her Muslim-American character in a midriff and cut off her eyes, exactly the sort of exoticized Orientalist cover that Kahf has sought to avoid by writing a clause about cover control into her contract" (Shalal-Esa). The "publishing house hemmed and hawed" but it "eventually commissioned another cover, albeit one that still focused on a single woman with a hijab – one that omits the sense of community Kahf had wanted" (Shalal-Esa). Even when publishing a novel that combats Islamaphobia and Orientalizing representations of Muslim women, Kahf must contend with market forces that boost the bottom line by trading on images of veiled women.

both secular and religious universalistic and fundamentalist impulses" (54). These impulses are "sometimes spatial (West/Islam), sometimes temporal (modern/archaic), and sometimes moral (evil/good), and they have become hegemonic since the Enlightenment" (Moallem, 54). And as Hoodfar and Moallem point out, dichotomous thinking is not the purview of the West, as both authors underscore that fundamentalist Islamic movements often use identical (but inverted) binaries of West/Islam and evil/good. Colonial subjugation and economic and demographic dislocations have made what was once a conservative cultural idea into a popular religious ideal.

Tracy Fessenden makes the essential link between forms of colonialism and neo-imperialism, and the discourse of human, and more explicitly, women's rights. She contends that secularism, with its masked Protestant foundation, is portrayed as the inevitable outcome of human history and the march toward modernity and civilization. When myth and mysticism are replaced by rational thought (even rational Christian thought), the only outcome can be the advancement of human dignity and freedoms. The association of secularism and freedom "confers a special moral standing on those who share both secularism and its particular Protestant genealogy, fueling imperial projects from nineteenth century colonial to contemporary international interventions" (Fessenden, 139). Fessenden argues that the evidence for this "special moral standing is frequently given in appeals to the treatment of women: the presumed freedom of women in secularized contexts and the presumed oppression of women in religious contexts is regularly invoked . . . to underwrite a hierarchy of progress that places supposedly backward religions at one end of the civilizing scale and democratic freedoms at the other" (139). Debates about the unique ethical status conferred upon secularism are often played out on women's bodies. Kahf comments on this process by peppering her novel with references to contemporaneous domestic and foreign policies. She calls into question the U.S.'s "special moral

standing" on issues of human rights, and by extension its claim to superiority with regard to women's rights.

The rhetoric of rights is used globally to justify military occupation, anti-Muslim policies, and the exclusion of certain types of Muslim women (generally *hijab* wearing in some form or another) from the rights of citizenship in the West. The Bush administration's connection of the invasion of Afghanistan to the pursuit of women's rights, the vitriolic opposition to the building of a Muslim community/cultural center near the site of 9/11, and the vehemently anti-Islam rhetoric coming out of Europe in the last several years all contrast Western enlightenment, *vis-á-vis* secularism, with Muslim backwardness, in which women must look to the West to enforce their natural and universal rights. These kinds of progress narratives mask their inherent racism by touting secularism's rationality and universalism. By attaching feminism to the progress narrative, feminists who insist that women's rights can only be achieved through secular means and in the secular sphere reproduce the exclusionary rhetoric of imperialism. It is not as though gendered bodily disciplines disappear, but they are either whitewashed, unexamined, or correspond to the "goals" of secularism. Observant Muslim women who wear *hijab*, however, cannot be whitewashed or absorbed in the progress narrative. They are visibly marked as Muslim because of their head coverings, and *hijab* in general is read *as* an identity, or even as a symbol of anti-Americanism.

In *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, Khadra's friend Seemi repeats the same rhetoric of secular progress when she claims that religions try "to control women's bodies" whereas secularism delivers women from patriarchal control. Seemi emigrated to the U.S. from Pakistan and calls herself an agnostic (361). She serves as a stock character used to draw out the contradictions within Khadra's own ethical systems. The two women constantly debate, as when

they fight over attending a protest in support of Salman Rushdie. While Khadra purports to be against the *fatwa* on his life, she finds his work distasteful and seems to support limitations on free expression as she is "sick of Western publishers getting away with anything they want to put out about Muslims" and "I'm kind of glad someone's standing up to them" (332). It is an uncomfortable moment in the text for any reader who thinks that Khadra is proceeding nicely on the way to becoming a modern feminist. For example, she defends conservative Islam to Seemi, who declares that these are exactly the type of Muslims that would prevent Seemi and her Hindu boyfriend Veejay from being together. But Khadra insists that she is not defending their views, only their right to have them. She decides that she is "humanizing" fundamentalist Muslims by defending their right to have a voice and to believe and live as they see fit, but she condemns Rushdie and his publishers for the same. The last part of the novel draws out these kinds of inconsistencies in Khadra's moral logic. She humanizes the seemingly unredeemable fundamentalists and refuses to believe that the only freedoms worth having are defined by and distributed by the West. At the same time, she draws on her experiences in the U.S. and as a member of the Islamic American community in order to create her own not entirely coherent belief system. And that system, in part, is embodied by her relationship to *hijab*.

Kahf balances the claims of secular feminism with Khadra's own Islamic feminism. Rather than casting Islam as antifeminist or feminism as inherently anti-Islam, Kahf questions whether assimilation is the price of emancipation, and whether emancipation is homogenous or can allow for difference. She gives voice to intra-community resistance against patriarchal Islam, but also makes room for perspectives on gender that destabilize some of the foundational tenets of secular feminism. With regard to *hijab*, a recurrent motif for the women in the novel, Aunt Khadija says, "Imagine being made to stand naked in front of a whole bunch of people . . .

That's how it was for black women back in slavery times. Up on the auction block. Covering is a strong thing" (25). Aunt Khadija strips away the notion that uncovering is always, universally liberating, revealing deeply held cultural assumptions about the gendered meaning of clothing and display in public spaces. Furthermore, the text argues against the notion that hijab is not "American" by including African American characters such as Aunt Khadija who wear hijab and who narrate the long historical relationship between Islam and African Americans. Also included are characters whose family histories represent a Muslim presence that dates back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. *Hijab*, or Islam for that matter, is only an import insofar as Christianity, or Judaism, or secularism, are imports –all of which developed distinctly American meanings. To discount the Americanness of Islamic practice in the U.S., the text suggests, is to pose Muslims as eternal outsiders to American culture and to write Muslims out of the American narrative.

Veiling, always a contentious issue, isn't stripped of its complexity; rather, Kahf offers it up as an intricate and dense issue, as deeply rooted in cultural attitudes and historical tradition as in religious feeling. In the beginning of the novel, Khadra joyfully recounts the choosing of fabrics for her first *hijab*, and her father's handiwork in creating them for her. Wearing *hijab* is intimately tied to nostalgia, her father's love, and passage from childhood into adulthood. Veiling is a "sign of the heritage" but it is also an affect and an embodiment, as when she unveils she realizes "her body would not forget its caress" (312). She removes her scarf for the first time when visiting her Téta in Syria, while picking cherries in the Ghuta orchard. She pauses in the setting sun "in a position like the first stand of prayer" and compares the experience to "*kashf*, the unveiling of light" (309). As a child veiling represents maturity and family connection, but in adulthood unveiling becomes prayer: "She opened her eyes, and she knew deep in the place of

yaqin that this was all right, a blessing on her shoulders. *Alhamdu, alhamdulilah*. The sunlight on her head was a gift from God. Gratitude filled her. *Sami allahu liman hamadah*. Here was an exposure, her soul an unmarked sheet shadowing into distinct shapes under the fluid" (309). In the context of exposure, the unmarked sheet evokes the mechanics of photography. Yet it also conjures imagery of the unmarked virgin – Khadra's soul, if not her body – or even the scandal of unmarked conjugal sheets that were supposed to be stained with virginal blood. The light on her bare head suggests the process of taking a photo: exposing the film to light, and creating a latent image that later emerges as it is enlarged, submerged in developing agents, and hung to dry.

It is significant that the Al Ghuta orchid is where Naziq al-Abid famously hid after taking up arms in the Syrian Revolt against the Mandate, linking Khadra to a renowned female activist, and again emphasizing the legacy of women activists in Islam. [17] The cherry orchard also suggests a literary heritage: Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* immediately comes to mind, as does the moment in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, when "Janie saw her life like a great tree in leaf with the things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone. Dawn and doom was in the branches" (12). As *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* often refers to African American history, as well as the experiences of African American Muslims with immigrant Muslim communities, it makes sense that the cherry trees that surround Khadra in Syria would evoke the novel's literary ties to a distinctly African American text, and to the knotty symbolism of Janie's pear tree. All of these literary, cultural, and historical elicitations combine in one singular gesture of exposure by Kharda; yet exposure, like photography, is about

[17] Naziq al-Abid was a "Syrian pioneer for independence and women's rights. She began writing in the Damascus press under a male pseudonym. She criticized the Ottoman Empire and wrote on various topics related to women such as suffrage, divorce rights, and civil marriage. In 1919, she founded the first women NGO in Syria called Noor al-Fayha (The Light of Damascus)" ("Naziq al-Abid").

process. Just as Janie circles back repeatedly to the allegorical pear tree, Khadra returns to the motif of revelation in order to make sense of her own "dawn and doom." Khadra goes on to speak of the "development of the soul in its darkroom" that is preceded by exposure to the light (309). She is captured through the act of exposure, but she only develops through her return to the darkness. Unveiling here does not signify ultimate freedom or casting off tradition, and the veil itself does not denote only the modesty or piety of the wearer; rather, both are the actions of embodied faith.

Khadra's unveiling is set in Syria instead of the U.S., with her beloved Téta and her friends in an isolated orchard, rather than in a politically marked public space. Thus the moment avoids the association of unveiling with political freedom. Instead, the moment embodies Khadra's spiritual return to Islam after being rejected by her family and community due to her divorce and abortion. It is this rejection that causes her to question her previously solid understanding of what it means to be Muslim, and she bares herself to God, not to a public eager to witness it. Unveiling does not indicate comfortable assimilation in accord with mainstream U.S. ideas about veiling. In the airplane on her return flight to the U.S. Khadra drapes her head in tangerine silk. The silk "moved and slipped about her face and touched her cheek, like the hand of a lover" (313). Khadra does not describe the act of veiling as donning an oppressive garment, but like feeling the intimate touch of a familiar lover. Khadra's veil works variously as a shield, an identity marker, an incarnation of faith that connects her to family and community, and even a burden, and it can never be contained by one definition.

While her unveiling is a spiritual act, her veiling becomes a political one. Veiling cannot escape political connotations in a culture in which Muslim women are read as professing religion in the public sphere through dress that has been racialized and politicized by the body politic.

After all, is religion really a matter of individual choice if Islam itself becomes an ethnic category or is racialized, and if it cannot be relegated to the private sphere? Is it the public nature of the hijab or minarets that seemingly makes them so incompatible with secularism? Samaa Abdurraqib links visible markers such as the *hijab* to readable allegiances when worn in the context of the U.S.: "The veil thus becomes the visual repository for the Muslim identity that is being preserved, and veiling shifts from being construed as somewhat normal behavior into an action that proclaims identity and (sometimes) allegiances" (54). Indeed, upon re-entering the U.S., Khadra "wanted them to know at Customs, at the reentry checkpoint, she wanted them to know at O'Hare, that she was coming in under one of the many signs of the heritage" (313). Khadra's act of veiling serves to identify her allegiances, but at the same time, for Khadra it is an act that is essential for the U.S. context and has the deeply American connotation of religious freedom. Nonetheless, because no political act for Khadra is empty of spiritual content, "she wanted her heart to remember, in the dappled ruffle and rustle of veiling and unveiling, *How precious is the heritage!* A treasure fire cannot eat" (313). Veiling is not emptied of its spiritual and cultural meaning for Khadra because it is politicized; rather, by embracing the spiritual as a political act, she has fully absorbed the earlier lessons of her father who encouraged her to live her religion in every sphere of her life.

The text's overt defense of women who choose to veil appropriates secular feminist rhetoric to its own end – the operative word being choice and a woman's right to sovereignty over her body. The choice to veil has different implications in the U.S. than in many European countries, or when compared to the less heavily weighted symbolic act of veiling in predominantly Islamic countries where the practice is commonplace. Yet I would argue that Kahf is determined to write veiling into U.S. history rather than denote it as a refusal to

assimilate. Veiling is not an anti-secular act; in fact, it embraces the version of secularism the text eventually endorses, a secularism that endorses a multitude of religious embodiments in the public sphere.

Khadra comes to value the ways in which growing up American has fashioned her individual spirituality as well as her understanding of religious community. Khadra's struggle, as she matures, is between the value of individualism which she absorbed from U.S. culture and the pull of her family's and community's expectations. The narrative seems the most strained when Khadra attempts to balance the individual freedoms she values (for example, her decision to have an abortion after she is married and divorce her husband, although these are also linked to her spirituality they are partially possible because of her situation in the U.S., as well as her choice to move temporarily to Syria and live alone in Philadelphia) with the obligations of the community life she also clearly values. She concludes not only that America is able to coexist with Islam but also that her faith is indelibly shaped by her constant negotiations of the secular spaces of American life. She does not blindly accept the secularism narrative that excludes Islam from its modernity and her from its history, and admits to liking those Muslims who "stood up to America":

> Like the people in the south of Lebanon, or the Palestinians who said 'fuck you' to America and Israel even though they were getting stomped on . . . Saying, hunh – we don't care how you do things over there, we do things our own way. You ain't the Masters of the Universe. You can't come and make us. Wanna piece of this? You had to love them for trying, because it was so obviously a losing battle, after *perestroika* and *glasnost* and, God help us, the impending McDonaldization of the globe (349-350).

Her inventory moves quickly from a list of oppressed peoples, to snatches of defiant language – "Wanna a piece of this?" –to policy language like *perestroika*. She links the reform movements that preceded the dissolution of the USSR to globalization, as represented by the international expansion of McDonald's with its standardized products and its promotion of bloated consumerism. Yet she realizes as she returns from her trip to Syria, "at last that it was in the American crucible where her character had been forged, for good or ill....She was on her shariah to America. Toto, we're not in Damascus anymore, Khadra whispered, as the wheels hit the ground. Homeland America, *bismillah*" (313).

The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf raises questions about the incompatibility of being truly Muslim and truly "American" at the same time but does not attempt a simplistic answer. Khadra's final realization that the U.S. context shaped her religious development is countered with her lingering feelings of exclusion from the mainstream U.S. and her many encounters with prejudice, her anger at the government's neo-imperialist policies abroad and racism at home, her limited knowledge and unexamined stereotypes of U.S. subcultures outside of Islam, and her reactive rejection of American identity at various points in the narrative. The juxtaposition of Khadra's ambivalence about American identity and the marginalization of African American Muslims in her own community speaks to the privileging of immigrant Muslim identity as authentic.[18] During a childhood argument, Khadra's friend Hakim says, "Then how many Dawah

[18] In her book *American Muslim Women: Negotiating Race, Class, and Gender within the Ummah,* Jamillah Karim notes that "America's legacy of racial inequality frames not only race relations in the American *ummah* but also its ethnic makeup," and that to "be Muslim in America, therefore, means to claim a faith tradition marked by both African American and immigrant struggles" (4). South Asian and Arabic immigrant families, like the kind represented by Khadra's family, are often held up as "model minorities" for their achievements in higher education and professional employment, in contrast to struggling or "problem minority" African American communities. Karim argues that immigrant identity is privileged over American identity in two related ways. First, "American Muslim identity translates into a *convert* Muslim identity, whereas immigrant identity translates into a *multigenerational* Muslim identity" (41). Second, "American Muslim identity translates into 'American Islam,' a version of Islam that, in the view of many immigrants, can never be as authentic as the Islam practiced in the countries from which they came" (41). Both of these privileged identities are linked to the notion that Islam and

Center officers are black? How many immigrants do you know who've married African Americans?" (137). Khadra tried to counter but fails: "This was the Dawah Center line. No racism in Islam. Meaning, none is allowed; a commendable ideal. But it was also a smokescreen of denial that retarded any real attempt to deal with the prejudices that existed among Muslims" (137). Ideals of authenticity structure allowable practice and behavior within the community. Which is why Tayiba's Anglo American father eventually changes his name to Yusuf, because "'Joe Thoreau' just did not seem like a proper Muslim name" (29). The brief but benign story of Joe's acculturation – from the name change, to getting rid of his dog, to growing a beard "like decent folk" – foreshadows more sinister cultural pressures, for example, the marginalization of Shias by the majority Sunni Dawah Center, Khadra's linkage of Hanifa's African American heritage to her fall from grace, the Dawah Center's unspoken racism, and the sexism Khadra encounters in Saudi Arabia and in college. Insofar as their own cultural and religious practices are threatening to the mainstream U.S., the community has its own sense of what threatens order.

At the end of the novel, the narrative begins to pile character upon character – a gay Latino Muslim, Khadra's youngest brother Jihad's Mormon fiancé, Khadra's childhood friend who has come out as a lesbian, secular Muslims, progressive Muslims, conservative Muslims, polygamous Muslims, Muslim women in rap groups, Muslim men in mixed religion rock bands, Muslim women who race in NASCAR, Muslim poets and renegades and extremists. Muslims of every ethnicity, sexual persuasion, race and nationality appear. The effect is comical, as though

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Western values are inherently incompatible, and "while many have demonstrated that this false dichotomy emerged as part of colonial and anticolonial struggles between Europeans and Muslims, it continues to inform the notion that one cannot be truly Muslim and truly American at the same time" (41).

Kahf is sitting at her keyboard, trying to imagine every possible Muslim stereotype in the U.S. The goal is provocation, of course, to challenge the assumptions made by non-Muslim American readers, but also to defy the sensibilities of Muslim American readers who may think, "these people are not authentic Muslims." They are "lost Muslims" in the words of Ebtehaj and Wajdy. They do not "practice proper Islam," and are "lost to America," just as Ebtehaj always feared for her own children. But Khadra experiences a connection to every Muslim; a connection that transcends national boundaries, political affiliation, and sectarianism. Her vision of the *umma* is informed by her vision of universal religion and secularism, as she thinks "If all paths lead to God, this one also leads to God" (422). She takes seriously its call to social justice and the global Islamic community. She believes in the potential of secularism – but only when the *umma* is lived out in reality.

Karen Armstrong writes that in Muhammad's time "the tribe had been the basic unit of society; the *umma*, however, was a community which was based on religion rather than kinship" (154). The "unity of the *umma* was to reflect the divine unity, which Muslims were also commanded to build in their own personal lives. No tie of blood, no old tribal allegiance, must stand in the way or be allowed to split the unity of the *umma* into warring camps" (Armstrong, 155). Of course no human community has ever managed to make its utopian ideals an earthly reality. Interpretations of the *umma*, like any theological concept, vary throughout history and in different cultural contexts. For instance, Talal Asad distinguishes the classical theological *umma* from its use in Arab nationalist rhetoric: "Of course the word *umma* does also have the sense of 'a people' – and 'a community'- in the Qur'an. But the members of every community imagine it to have a particular character, and relate to one another by virtue of it. The crucial point therefore is not that it is imagined but that what is imagined predicates distinctive modes of being

and acting" (197). Asad adapts Benedict Anderson's theory of "imagined communities" in order to uncouple the *umma* from its use in Islamist and nationalist political movements, in addition to distancing the theological concept from comparisons to the modern nation state. He also highlights the modes of embodied behavior and relating that an imagined community engenders, not the indefinable form such a community takes. For the *umma* is not an entirely malleable concept, and it is certainly not a blank symbolic state onto which just any vision of community or rallying cry can be projected. As Asad writes: "The *ummatu-l-muslimīn* (the Islamic *umma)* is ideologically not 'a society' onto which *state*, *economy,* and *religion* can be mapped. It is neither limited nor sovereign. . . . It can and eventually should embrace all of humanity. It is therefore a mistake to regard it as an 'archaic' (because 'religious') community that predates the modern nation" (197-198).

Asad's description of the *umma* works well with Khadra's nascent understanding of what it means to her. Since it is not limited, she can imagine it as a transnational community, not one bounded to ethnicity, or tied to culture, or even secular time. It is not sovereign, given that there is no governance and no official hierarchy. It is, however, experiential. As an imagined community its tangibility is manifested through affect, through the expressed feeling and experience of association, just as Khadra is inspired by her bonds to community and exhausted by its limited imagination. Khadra's vision of the transnational Muslim community explicitly critiques its tendency to divide and exclude along national, ethnic, cultural, racial, and gendered lines. Her childish expectations of religious authenticity in Saudi Arabia are dashed, and as she grows older she becomes more ambivalent about how to self-identify: "Going overseas was what enabled her to see that she was irrevocably American, in some way she couldn't pin down. Yet even now, she never thinks of herself as American, not really. When she says 'Americans,'

'Americans do this or think that,' she means someone else" (391). Her ambivalence about her own Americanness reveals divisions within the American *umma* that are linked to issues of authenticity, race, and acculturation.

In her essay about Turkish and French secularism, Nilufur Göle writes that "Muslim migrants are called to (re)think about their religion and faith from the vantage point of their experiences as European citizens. Similarly, European secularism is refashioned in confrontation with issues raised by Muslims" (253). I propose that the same is true for American secularism and American Muslim communities, and part and parcel of that rethinking and refashioning is taking place through the literary. Göle uses the example of the veil, as women's movement from private to public spaces such as the university and political realm make the veil a visible and potent symbol whose meaning "needs to be readjusted, given its meanings in the past and its contemporary appropriations by new profiles of Muslim women" (257). The eponymous tangerine scarf of the novel's title is an apt totem for the refashioning of meaning that Khadra's choices embody. Khadra's experience as a member of an immigrant family, a growing multi-cultural faith community, and a secular American public, enables her to refashion the meaning and context of the disciplinary practices that shape her life and practice, and in doing so, refashion their meaning in the public, secular sphere.

I argue that Khadra's developing vision of the *umma* also represents a kind of self-fashioning. The narrative proposes that not only can the secular and the *umma* co-exist, but the *umma* can inform one's understanding of the secular, and the secular has the potential to foster the *umma.* Khadra sees this potential in secularist culture as it occurs within the context of the American crucible. Not in a strong-form exceptionalism that excludes Muslims from the public conversation or the political sphere, or even the weak-form exceptionalism, which by virtue of its

assumptions, favors majority held (and historically "American") religious values. Rather, Khadra seeks an almost utopian secularism that draws on a multitude of religious and non-religious voices, that allows persons to practice their faith without judgment (within, of course, the limits of her ethical code), and recognizes the injustices perpetrated upon Muslims globally by the U.S., often in the name of the values used to suppress, colonize, and discriminate. It is a secularism that recognizes religion as a universal category, and that adapts the idea of private, individual faith from secularist narratives, while including the aspect of community, public worship, and connection that secularism excludes from the public sphere. It is here that Khadra departs from the secularism(s) she critiques, adapts, and translates: in her celebration of the *umma*. *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* enters the contemporary literary fray among a host of novels and memoirs that feed into Orientalist fantasies about Muslim women, and demands room for a novel about a strong, compelling young woman who challenges both patriarchal Islam and secular notions of emancipation. For Khadra the *umma*, with all of its flaws and inconsistencies, represents optimism. In this way the novel forces us to ask how Khadra's vision of the *umma* can help us imagine a more inclusive secularism; not a naïve hopefulness based on an uncritical essentializing or atomizing notion of humanity, but a rejection of cynicism and separatism.

CHAPTER TWO

Secularism and the Apocalypse: Rabih Alameddine's *Koolaids*

I. The Four Horsemen

"Death comes in many shapes and sizes," begins Rabih Alameddine's 1998 novel *Koolaids*, "but it always comes. No one escapes the little tag on the big toe" (1). What follows is a shocking, expletive laden revision of the exchange between the four horsemen of the apocalypse in *The Book of Revelation* chapter 6, verses 1-8: The rider on the red horse says, "This good and faithful servant is ready. He knoweth war." The rider on the black horse says, "This good and faithful servant is ready. He knoweth plague." The rider on the pale horse says, "This good and faithful servant is ready. He knoweth death" (1). Finally the rider on the white horse says, "Fuck this good and faithful servant. He is a non-Christian homosexual, for God's sake. You brought me all the way out here for a fucking fag, a heathen. I didn't die for this dingbat's sins" (1). The figure on the white horse is Christ triumphant, and in the first scene all of the novel's major themes – war, disease, and death – coalesce into Christ's sweeping rejection of the Druze artist Mohammed, who lies in his hospital bed, dying of an AIDS related illness. [19] Riding throughout the entire novel, the four horsemen blaze a trail through a disjointed narrative only to loop back towards the beginning, bearing down on Mohammed's death.

Koolaids takes place largely in the imagination of Mohammed, but it is also set in Beirut and San Francisco, among other locations. It is at once temporally static as it captures the last thoughts of the dying Mohammed, and chronologically sporadic as it shuffles through the last decades of the twentieth century. The reader cycles through the dreams, hallucinations, memories, and pronouncements of Mohammed as he dies. Form itself is unstable, as we read

[19] The Druze are a *Shia* Muslim ethno religious group.

snippets from new reports, emails and letters, first person monologues and short plays. Sections of the novel are rewritten again and again – the four horsemen, for example, appear five times in the novel. Each time the white rider's final words illuminate the preceding and ensuing narrative. Secular time always progresses forward, but Alameddine disrupts narrative conventions by muddying chronology. He frames the novel through sacramental time – using the eschatological figures of the apocalypse to orient time simultaneously towards past revelations and future prophecies. The novel also shifts perspectives, often giving the narrative floor to minor characters or characters who only appear once, and who speak from a variety of locations and time periods. Although many episodes give specific dates, even more do not. Thus the novel moves back and forth from one Lebanese war or period of civil unrest to the next, blurring the historical narrative and giving the reader the unsettling feeling that violence is continuous and unresolved.

Alameddine's work needs to be read in conjunction with the plethora of English language works written by Lebanese American authors in exile emerging post-Civil War, including recent works by Patricia Sarrafian Ward and Rawi Hage.[20] Scholars and critics of Lebanese diasporic literature have addressed how these emergent Anglophone authors have "broadened and complicated the notion of Lebanon" (Salem, 771). I argue that works such as *Koolaids*, which take exile as their starting point, also broaden and complicate the notion of a transnational United States. Laura Doyle writes of transnationalism, "There is much talk of resistance and counterproduction but….in the main there is still a dearth of theory about the radical, involuntary interconnectedness of subjects who live in history and together shape, suffer, enjoy and resist its forces" (3). Doyle insists that as part of our thinking about transnationalism "it makes sense for

[20] See: Ward, Patricia S. *The Bullet Collection*. Saint Paul, Minn: Graywolf Press, 2003. Print; and Hage, Rawi. *De Niro's Game*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2006. Print.

us to describe those relations that cripple, sustain, propel, and define bodies as they continually reorient toward each other within and across national borders, and so create nations in the process" (21). I read *Koolaids* with Doyle's philosophy of regional and inter-corporeal transnationalism in mind – as a novel that portrays the push and pull of bodies across borders by economic and political forces. *Koolaids* generates a transnational literary form that makes claims for universal religious and sexual freedom within what I call an inclusive secularism as opposed to a prohibitory one.

What does a decidedly postmodern tale about AIDS and war have to do with secularism? Because secularism is itself a narrative, it tells the story of a turn from the cosmological to the scientific, bringing with it new forms of agency. The story of secularism is self-congratulatory, ignoring the imbrications of science and religion that make up its core. It is also, as I have noted in the previous chapter, a story whose plot has a forward momentum and whose rising action is the universal spread of abstract principles without regard for the bodies and spaces it covers. For, as Talal Asad reminds us, "representations of 'the secular' and 'the religious' in modern and modernizing states mediate people's identities, help shape their adequacy, and guarantee their experiences" (*Formations*, 8). Secularism does not mediate, shape, and guarantee without regard to actual bodies; identity, adequacy, and experience are all regulated through an endless prism of contingencies, including but not limited to gender, race, class, national origin, sexuality, health, ethnicity, and religion. It is the systematic and exclusionary social processes of mediating, shaping, and guaranteeing that come under scrutiny in *Koolaids.* Devastatingly critical of both institutional religion and secular society, *Koolaids* demonstrates how literature can both disrupt and create secular and religious meanings through literary forms such as *mu'arada* and the postmodern novel.

In this chapter I consider identity, adequacy, and experience as they emerge through the character of the refugee, Mohammed, and as embedded in both the form and representation of storytelling. Asad uses the word adequacy to indicate how "backwards" countries and cultures measure up to the standards of so-called modernity. But I also am using adequacy to talk about the anxiety of influence in a novel that borrows heavily from Western sources and must counter Orientalist expectations of what storytelling should do, and the ultimate inadequacy of writing to the task of shaping identity and conveying experience. I highlight linkages between fractured time in the novel and secular understandings of sexuality and identity formation, arguing that the disjointed chronology of *Koolaids* disrupts linear coming out narratives and instead posits a more fluid, less structured relationship between time and identity. A character's sexuality as it represented at one point in time in the novel may overlap with or contradict other moments in the novel in ways that complicate ideologies of progressive identity formation (in the sense that we understand characters to be developing towards some kind of fixed identity, and that a final coming out, so to speak, could ultimately define them). Instead, the hyper-surreal settings and unruly chronology suggests that closets are everywhere and nowhere, at once inexorable and dynamic, oppressive and even cathartic.

In his chapter on Alameddine's oeuvre, Wail Hassan writes that Alameddine's "fiction queers Orientalism by, first, laying bare the discriminatory and often violent processes by which all identities (sexual, social, national, cultural, religious, and so forth) are formed; second, staging storytelling as an epistemology that reveals the ideological constructedness of all cultural knowledge; and third, demonstrating the limits as well as the potentials of cultural translation as both impossible and inevitable" (200). Although ultimately my reading of *Koolaids* is less cynical than Hassan's, I agree with his assertion that Alameddine's novel imagines narrative as

epistemological and raises questions about the impossibility of cultural translation. Hassan believes that through these challenges to constructed knowledge and identity Alameddine "queers Orientalism," and I question whether the concept of "queering" can apply to secularism as represented in the novel. In other words, as Thea Gold asks in response to recent scholarship asking whether critique is secular, "Is queer secular?" (629).[21]

The presumption Gold articulates is that queer people can only truly be free under secular conditions. Gold ultimately concludes, "The very question 'Is queer secular' thus assumes a binary division into secular and religious that is a false dichotomy" (629). The question itself reinforces the very binaries "queer" is meant to erode, and *Koolaids* – from the erosion of Mohammed's health, to the erosion of the state of Lebanon – is nothing if not a book about disintegrating realities. What would it mean for a novel to "queer" secularism (when queer is usually assumed to be inherently secular) except to point out the failures of secular states to protect and enhance the lives of queer people? *Koolaids* estranges the established meaning of secularism through its parody of secular states, allowing readers to recognize the hidden contours of the secular narrative that shape our relationships to concepts such as freedom. It participates in "queering" only insofar as it presents a multitude of queer faithful, atheist, agnostic, and searching individuals from across political and cultural spectrums in order to underscore the inconsistencies of secular and religious thought. It does so by mocking the religious pieties of secular rhetoric and juxtaposing the secular religiosity of early reactions to the AIDS epidemic with sectarian violence in Lebanon. Interspersed are critiques and revisions of religious justifications for violence from the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, the Quran, and the Bhagavad Gita. The irreverent mix of sacred and profane reveals the secular to be just as

[21] See Asad, Talal, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, and Saba Mahmood, *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009. Print.

incongruous and doctrinaire as religion. At the same time, by drawing parallels between the devout in Lebanon of various religious affiliations with gay men dying of AIDS in San Francisco with a range of religious and spiritual practices, *Koolaids* shows that the exclusionary tactics of institutionalized religion do not diminish the actions of ethical faithful people or devalue the solace that faith can provide.

Nilufur Göle asserts that, "Western secularity cannot be separated from its claim for a higher form of civilization, its impact in shaping and stigmatizing a certain understanding of religion (as backward), its role in spreading models of secular governance to different parts of the world, and, last, but not least, its permeation of material culture in norms of secularity and private-public distinctions" (244). Göle is writing specifically about secularism in relationship to veiling laws in France and Turkey, but her questions are also pertinent to the United States context: "How can one go beyond the limits of the local, particular qualifications and religious boundaries and address critiques of the 'common' knowledge of secularism? The question is, who has access to the 'universal' – what kind of agencies are considered to bear a universal significance?" (245). Finally, she asks, "How does a Muslim experience of secularity transform and question our understanding of the secular age?" (245). Literature by and about Muslim Americans is already doing the work of transformation; rooted in the personal and the local, books like *Koolaids* challenge the universalism at work in the "common" knowledge of secularism by portraying alternative (and common in both the sense of shared and prevalent) experiences of secularism. *Koolaids* critiques promises of universal rights inherent to common understandings of secularism, but it does not abandon the appeal of the universal. Instead, it asks its readers to reconsider how the universal can be made inclusive, all the while underscoring the impossibility of such a task by undermining the assumed universality of narrated experience.

Using the four horsemen as a framing device, I first introduce the main themes of the novel and analyze the connections *Koolaids* makes between the Lebanese Civil War and the early AIDS epidemic in the United States. I then explore form and its relationship to time, narrative, and identity in the novel. Crucial to my argument is Alameddine's use of the Arabic literary convention of *mu'arada. Mu'arada* is traditionally imitation of poetic form, but can also be parody. Early twentieth century neoclassical poets, for example, demonstrated their mastery of poetic forms by imitating the language, meter, and style of medieval Arabic poets. However, *Koolaids* repurposes the form of the *mu'arada* through active engagement with the themes of the original, whether it is the stories of Julio Cortazár or the poetry of Rumi. Alameddine combines his use of the *mu'arada* with postmodern literary techniques such as fabulism, pastiche, and historiographic metafiction in playful homage to the masters of postmodern literature, and also as a way of rewriting master narratives and challenging dogmatic certitudes. I argue that Alameddine uses the figure of the refugee in combination with postmodern literary forms and *mu'arada* to critique how both secularism and religion work as structures of affect in order to naturalize certain identities and regulate others. Next I look to the relationship among secular discourses, GLBT rights, and gendered and racialized representation of Muslims – both imposed and self-asserted – in the United States, to address the question about what kinds of agencies, and indeed what kinds of bodies, are considered to bear universal significance. Finally, I draw together my previous arguments about narrative and identity to consider how *Koolaids* can be read as endorsing the potential in both secular and religious moral thought to create more inclusive secularism(s). *Koolaids* suggest that while a universal epistemology, experience, and narration may be impossible, questing for universal inclusivity should not be.

II. The Red Horseman: War and the Refugee

Mohammed's revision of Revelation that begins the novel is - we find out later - the abbreviated beginning of his unfinished novel. Or, at least, it might be. It may also be reality, a dream, a hallucination, or Mohammed's final vision before his death. Whatever it is: it is Mohammed's story. As the "irascible rider on the white horse leads the other three lemmings away," the story is interrupted by Mohammed's immediate pain: "The hospital bed hurts my back" (1). In one brief episode Alameddine merges the thematic core of the novel with its form: a fragmentary novel, an altered sacred text, and movement in time and place. The title Revelation comes from the very first word of St. John the Divine's text, *apokalypsis*. As an ancient prophecy Revelation transports the reader simultaneously back to its first millennium origin and forward into an unknowable point in the future. Revelation recalls St. John's exile on the island of Patmos where, as the story goes, he went to escape persecution. It also propels the reader into the coming apocalypse. Finally, it evokes the act of writing. By beginning with the end times *Koolaids* declares itself an apocalyptic text, filled with hallucinatory visions and dreams indistinguishable from reality, but always and ultimately concerned with the impossibility of narration. Like Revelation itself the passage evokes many things: Christian history, religiously justified homophobia, Mohammed's death, and the physicality of the hospital room. Mohammed is the prophetic voice of the novel, and this, in conjunction with his single name, makes him an unlikely allegory for the Prophet Mohammed. Like the Prophet Mohammed, who was exiled to Medina, Mohammed is in exile: in San Francisco, which is another unlikely corollary – this time for Medina, the second holiest city in Islam.

Alameddine was himself a refugee from the Lebanese Civil war, and *Koolaids* is permeated with a sense of dislocation as Mohammed attempts to inscribe the brutalities of war in

Lebanon upon his experience of exile in the United States. Salah Hassan calls Lebanon an "unstated state" which "refers to a condition of a state that is no longer a state, a state that has little or no sovereignty, a state that is bereft of the means to uphold or impose the rule of law in its territory or at its borders through the mechanism of force" (1622). Hassan reminds us that one of the many consequences of the unstated state is the stateless subject, including migrants, refugees, and exiles. The novel's two main characters, Mohammad and the Muslim student Samir, are both refugees who struggle with the fracturing of national and familial bonds as they flee sectarian violence at home. The novel repeatedly ties the condition of statelessness to the inability to narrate experience. The Beirut militia *Die Rosenkavaliers* encapsulates the inability to express coherent identity in the chaos of state violence, as they "came into our world suddenly, killed tons of people, and disappeared just as suddenly as they appeared. I still have no idea who they were, what party they belonged to, or what they were fighting for" (45). Although capable of the permanence of killing "tons of people" *Die Rosenkavaliers* is incapable of the solidity of narration, of an enduring story of their motivation. If narration creates permanence through its very utterance, creates stated-ness so to speak, than *Koolaids* denies that intransience at every turn.

It is "particularly through the refugee," Hassan argues, that one "encounters a significant alternative to the nation-state as the model for structuring global political order and defining subjectivity in general" (1622). Hannah Arendt makes the point that stateless people lose their human rights when they are deprived of their legal status as national citizens, thus the right to have rights is at the core of her argument about polity.[22] Not only does the exile lose access to rights, but as Hassan points out, nationality itself is intrinsically associated with "defining

[22] See Hannah Arendt. *The Origins of Totalitarianism.* 1951. New York: Harcourt, 1968. Print.

subjectivity," thus the exile also loses something of his or her human condition. Nationalism is not only an institutional phenomenon that affects the construction of political communities, but also a defining feature of a subject's ability to narrate his or her own existence. This is particularly true in the United States, but also true of being a gay man in Lebanon, as Mohammed writes, "In America, I fit, but I do not belong. In Lebanon, I belong, but I do not fit" (40). Lebanon, as an unstated state, renders even the most powerful characters unable to assert their identity without fear of reprisal or death from the government, the military, Lebanon's neighbors, enemies, and even allies. Queerness, as an often-unstated state of being itself in the novel, links the unstated-ness of Lebanon to the unstated-ness of queerness.

Hassan writes that "flights into exile potentially constitute new beginnings liberated from the political nightmare of an unstated state," yet Mohammed and Samir must contend with the racial and sexual hierarchies of their new home (1626). For both Mohammed and Samir the flight into exile represented not only freedom from the violence of war torn Lebanon but also the autonomy to occupy a sexual identity supposedly abhorred in their home culture. In the United States, the two refugees find their theoretical American self-determination hemmed in by different kinds of violence, including homophobia, xenophobia, anti-Muslim sentiment, AIDS hysteria, and the appropriation and mass-marketing of AIDS stories through art and film.

In *Koolaids* the people of the "unstated state" of Lebanon struggle to narrate their experiences. In the first episode that takes place in Lebanon, Samir's mother writes a 1976 diary entry about the shelling of her apartment building. "The only thing I remember about those seconds was the look in Samir's eyes," she writes at one point, and later: "I felt my control slipping. . . .I don't recall much of what happened for the twelve hours before we were able to drive her to the hospital" (5-7). Twenty years later she writes another diary entry about the

Israeli bombing of Lebanon: "How long can this go on? How many more ambulances?" (209). In the two hundred pages between the two diary entries Lebanon is bombed repeatedly "by foreign invaders – Americans, Israelis, Syrians – or domestic militias – Phalangist, Shiite, Palestinian, and others" (Wail Hassan, 207). In the interim almost all of Mohammed's friends die of AIDS related illnesses. The text circles back to the diary with its images of "a mother with a dead baby on her breast, a child with no face sitting on her father's lap" broadcast on the television for all to see and none to remember, just as Samir's mother labors to remember and narrate her own experiences of bombings. Meanwhile, Mohammed struggles and fails to state his experience of AIDS, saying that "I have never been able to write anything because I don't trust my writing" (18). His best friend Scott thinks that, "Only Danielle Steel could write a book about the ravages of the AIDS epidemic and get away with it" (18). The inability to narrate springs not from the trauma of experience, but from the speaker's condition of statelessness: from the unnamed victims of sectarian violence that cycle through international news, just another speechless and distant spectacle for viewers, to the AIDS stories that television whitewashes and sanitizes. The "unstated" victims of war in Lebanon and AIDS in the United States seem at a loss to state much of anything for themselves even as their stories are co-opted by the media or the sentimental films that Scott and Mohammed come to abhor. "Do you think this gratuitous sentimental scene is enough to clinch a movie deal," Mohammed asks of his parody of *The Longtime Companion* and *Philadelphia* called *The Waltons Do AIDS.*

Steven Salaita writes that *Koolaids* is "a text in which the concept of Lebanon is made to travel along with the diasporic Lebanese characters, who provide a different type of American consciousness, one based on the interaction of memories and contemporary realities" (80). Salaita describes the novel as accurately embodying Saree Makdisi's theory about political

upheaval in Lebanon, as Makdisi believes that "the people of Lebanon . . . had to try to carry on their daily lives and social interactions while at the same time following each new development in that other reality called *the war* – and, between those two parallel realities, meaning and signification got cut off" (277). For Salaita, the ontological and temporal uncertainties of the novel's form reflect Lebanon's reality. I would add that they also reflect the realities of living during the AIDS epidemic of the 1970s and 80s, which in turn created its own parallel reality. What is vital then is the connection between the incommunicability of the unstated state of being in Lebanon and the way that this "concept" creates and interacts with a "different type of American consciousness," one that in turn reflects another unstated state of being: being gay and HIV positive in the U.S. While Salaita finds that the form is rooted in the reality-making of the Lebanese war, he also writes that the war "has been inscribed into the American polity because it was part of the consciousness of writers who migrated to the United States and expressed that consciousness in writing, thus rendering the civil war a participant in American social discourse" (84). In the instance of *Koolaids*, Alameddine inscribes the Lebanese war onto the discourse around AIDS patients – not only through the relationship between death and sex, but through the ways in which representation can actually cause the erasure of the victims of war and disease.

III. The Pale Horseman: Death and the Story

"Time. Time is what I need right now," Mohammed tells us immediately after the first appearance of the four horsemen, "I can't think straight anymore. I should not have said that. I try never saying the word *straight*" (1). Though the passage is written in English, Mohammed tells us that "I can't speak English anymore either. Really. I can't think in English. It's back to my roots. I now think and dream only in Arabic" (1). As we read his stream of consciousness

over the next two pages, while Mohammed drifts through memories of his language acquisition as a child to his struggles to speak English to his hospital visitor, it dawns upon us that we must be reading a translation of his thoughts from Arabic to English. Wail Hassan writes that one of the major themes of the book is that "the failure to communicate is a failure to translate" (209), and here is a vivid example of how that equation works in the novel. Mohammed is telling us a story in which he cannot remember the order of events ("James was here the other day. Or was it today? I can't think straight. Time gets confusing") and during which he recounts his failure to communicate ("I tell him, but he doesn't understand me. I must have said it in French") (2). The scene relates his inability to translate to his inability to locate himself in time, connecting temporal and lingual slippages as imperfect narrations. The complexity of the episode – the breakdown of communication, repetition of phrases, emergence of childhood memories, and temporal uncertainty – confuses a clear understanding of what it means to occupy time and place. *Straight* narration, Mohammed is telling us, is impossible.

Deliberately calling attention to the artifice of narrative is of course nothing new, and in the following scene Alameddine hammers the point by citing Robert Coover's playful postmodern novel *Spanking the Maid.* Kurt, the flaky boyfriend of Mohammad's best friend Scott, scoops up one of Scott's books and asks what it is about. "Spanking the maid, of course," Scott explains. *Spanking the Maid* reiterates its beginning scene over and over: a man wakes from an ever-changing dream, his maid arrives in his bedroom and fails to perfect her work, the man chastises her, and so on. Scott was right, it is about spanking the maid, in the same way that *Koolaids* is a novel about AIDS. But *Spanking the Maid* is also about the cyclical nature of narrative, and its early placement in *Koolaids* indicates that this too will be a cyclical story, with numerous starts and stops and changes that ultimately circle back to the beginning. It

acknowledges and mocks an abstract ideal of storytelling: a perfect narration that never occurs, just as the maid forgets her soap and her mop.

Scott then proceeds to read a selection from Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler*: "Long novels written today are perhaps a contradiction: the dimension of time has been shattered, we cannot love or think except in fragments of time each of which goes off along its own trajectory and immediately disappears. We can discover the continuity of time only in the novels of the period when time no longer stopped and did not yet seem to have exploded, a period that lasted no more than a hundred years" (4). Again, Calvino's novel has numerous beginnings, and its themes – the related acts of reading and writing, the subjectivity of meaning – are introduced in this very short scene through citation rather than exposition. Yet it is not merely citation: it is an engaged citation, one that takes on the meaning of the text even as it imitates. For example, the quote sets up the ruptured style of *Koolaids,* acknowledging that its nonlinear timeline and unfinished storylines are features of a post modern literary heritage. However, by citing Calvino, the text also directly confronts the question of influence through a form that at this point seems decidedly Western: postmodern pastiche. *Koolaids* calls attention to pastiche by incorporating different genres (emails, letters, journalism, first person narration, etc.) and by including authors known for using the form. Even so, at the end of the passage Scott asks Kurt if he is following. "Not really," Kurt says, "Are you ready to go to the movie?" (4). Two weeks, Mohammed thinks, is how long this relationship can last. The Calvino quote references the nineteenth century novel; its inclusion in *Koolaid* references the postmodern novel, but the couple goes off to see a film. Attention spans are waning. The narrative methods of Calvino and Coover, even as they are imitated, are going the way of the nineteenth century novel and Kurt and Scott's soon to be defunct relationship.

Later in the novel, Mohammed debates Julio Cortázar over a cup of *mate*, a drink, he points out, enjoyed by Argentinians and Lebanese. He borrows quotes from Cortazár's *Rayuela*, translated into English, putting them directly into Cortázar's mouth without reference to the novel, rendering them into a debate about war and AIDS. In *Rayuela,* the quotes are originally spoken by characters who are philosophizing about life and death, all while a baby lies dead nearby unbeknownst to its mother. Understanding the scene in *Koolaids* necessitates familiarity with the source novel, nonetheless it is more than a mere citation. By writing himself into the scene, Mohammed turns the absurd musings by characters too self-involved to inform the mother about her child's death into equally absurd musings that ignore the horror of AIDS deaths. Mohammed is at once the interlocutor and the disregarded dead child. Advocating for the chaos created by war and disease, Cortázar says, "And these crises that most people think of as terrible, as absurd, I personally think they serve to show us the real absurdity, the absurdity of an ordered and calm world" (106-107). What is a dead child or a mother's grief when compared to man's potential for philosophical reflection, which would be impossible in a calm and ordered world.

Alameddine rewrites the scene in the form of the original debates, but this time erases the boundary between the author and his characters. Cortazár debates, with the words of his fictional characters, the fictional author Mohammed, who ultimately critiques and defeats him, "Poor Julio. I try not to do this to him, but he's just too easy" (107). Like *Rayuela*, one can "hopscotch" through *Koolaids*; it cites the novel in both theme and form. It also raises the question of influence by citing novels like *Rayuela* and *If on a winter's night a traveler* that explicitly invoke other texts, styles, and genres, all while musing on the impossibility of authorial originality. If straight narration is impossible, so too are attempts to map the channels of influence.

Traditionally, poems written in the form of *mu'arada* do not riff on the original in the way that *Koolaids* does. Scholar and memoirist Sasson Somekh writes that as a rule, "the intertextuality employed by the writer of *mu'arada* is of a linear nature: the modern poet does not attempt to produce a new meaning through allusion to an older text; rather he reproduces the same semantic purport by reshuffling phraseological components of the old poem" (52). However, contemporary Arab writers are modifying the form. In her extensive study of Iraqi poet Badr Shakir al-Sayyāb, Terri De Young considers how al-Sayyāb reworks the classical genre. She writes that the form has "no parallel in Western literature" and that in its traditional definition it is merely a "poem composed in the same rhyme and meter as a previously written poem" (131). Yet this stringent definition means that the question of intention - "so important when dealing with practices that thematize influence, as *mu'ārada* does – is (perhaps deliberately) left obscure" (131). It means that "any suggestion of a dialectical exchange between the two parties involved in the *mu'ārada* is consistently disregarded in favor of subsuming and containing the relationship within a model of interpersonal restructuring or reordering of the instantiated words" (132). Alemaddine's careful citation yet radical revision of Cortazár, for example, would fall outside the realm of traditional definitions of *mu'ārada.* Because Alameddine uses citation to indicate his own influences as well as to parody the cacophony of removed academic, artistic, and media voices that drown out actual AIDS patients and their narratives, his citation pays homage not only the form and style of Cortazár, but also extends the meaning of Cortazár's text beyond the world of *Rayuela.*

Yet De Young contends that not only are contemporary poets reworking the form, but also that these dialectical exchanges have always been present within the tradition. Arguing for what she calls a Bloomian reading of the form as used by al-Sayyāb, De Young draws on Harold

Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*. She challenges those who might question the "applicability of Bloom's theories" to classical Arabic literature to look at the literature about the practice of *mu'arada* because it represents it as "being both ubiquitous through the entire history of classical Arabic literature and thoroughly grounded in relationships of tension and conflict" (133). Conflict and tension are not a modern literary innovation, but a part of the literary history of *mu'ārada* that is obscured by modern critics who "deny it any relevance to the modern modes of literary production" and who deem it "at best the products of a lesser poetic talent, one unable to innovate on its own" (136). She points to al-Sayyāb's poetry as an example of how *mu'ārada* can be challenging rather than simply contrasting a "valorized past with [a] degenerate present," as his work contains "practices that in fact invite subversion, contestation, and even direct challenge to their hegemonic power" (131). The Bloomarian anxiety of influence that she cites shapes the historical production of *mu'arada* from its classical beginnings to the contemporary manifestations that more explicitly address anxieties about literary influences.

De Young gives an insightful literary history of the practice of *mu'arada*, but I take up her study where it intersects with Alameddine's: contemporary criticism and the question of influence. *Mu'arada* is a "literary form that flaunts the fact that its author has been influenced," and De Young believes that in modernist and contemporary Arabic criticism "'influence' has become a very problematic term" (135). Instead, she writes, the terms "'innovative' and 'original' have been situated as central touchstones of quality in the evaluative vocabulary of Arabic literary criticism" (135). Therefore, De Young writes, to "label a literary practice as not 'open to innovation' is implicitly to deny it any relevance to the modern modes of literary production" (136). The difference between al-Sayyāb's work and his predecessors, De Young argues, is his level of engagement with the original text. Rather than merely imitate style and

theme, his work comments and expands upon the meaning of its source. She sees his use of the form as variously resisting "the impositions of a Western literary discursive apparatus" by selecting the authors he imitates with no regard for the values imposed by the Western canon, and also as inhabiting Homi Bhabba's "hybrid text" which offers up "new avenues for expression (or self-construction) to its practitioners virtually in direct proportion to its ability to confound the expectations inherent in the narcissistic gaze of the colonizing other" (149). *Koolaids* addresses hybrid migrant identity as a paradigm of globalized, neo-liberal anxiety through the characters of Mohammed and Samir as exiles that alternately do and do not "fit" or "belong" in the United States and Lebanon. While their hybrid identities create anxiety wherever they go, they also produce interior anxieties about what they have absorbed from the West and how it enhances, alienates, and alters their Lebanese identities. Through Mohammed's immersions into and modifications of Western sources, *Koolaids* literalizes this anxiety through literary borrowings, making the anxiety of influence a palpable part of Mohammed's reflections on his own creative process and on his own death.

Mu'arada means opposition or protest but is most often read as homage. This reading, as De Young argues using an anecdote about the poet Imru' al Quis, elides the fact that "thematic engagement was emphatically a possible, it not necessary, element of the rhetorical strategy" (134). Citation can be seen as protest because it foregrounds "the competitive dimension inherent in the form" (134). Alameddine's uses of citation are not merely jockeying for literary position, but protest against Western literary influences, categories, and canons. Alameddine's version of *mu'arada* encompasses both its linguistic meaning as protest and its historical legacy as homage. There is a certain amount of fidelity to the original text, and definitely a celebration of the authors cited and respect for their literary innovations. Yet *Koolaids* protests against many

of the forms it imitates even while imitating, and opposes many of the authors it cites in the midst of citation. Like al-Sayyāb's poetry, it is an "eclectic appropriation" of source material (148). It is the combination of citation of literary precedence, imitation of style, and reworking of meaning, that leads me to want to call *Koolaids* an improvisation on the form of *mu'arada*. It is not a clear leap to make, one might more easily make a case for postmodern pastiche, mostly because very little of the novel is in verse and *mu'arada* is conceived of as a purely poetic form. However, the literary implications for identifying *Koolaids* as *mu'arada* are threefold.

First, I am making a claim that *Koolaids* is representative of a transnational literary form, not merely because it cites and imitates Western and Arabic literary genres, but because it addresses the anxiety of influence from various angles. By drawing upon Western sources, commenting and altering them, and juxtaposing them with texts from around the globe, *Koolaids* draws attention to the colonizing influence of Western literary practices and canonical values on Arabic letters. *Koolaids* also addresses the more insidious cultural influences of Western imperialism and consumerism through Mohammed's writing; at one point he writes: "We all had what some would call a European complex. We wanted so hard to be European . . . There were those who mimicked everything European;" at the same time, "Another manifestation was the complete opposite. Many hated Europeans with a passion. Some tried to revive Arabism. Islamic Fundamentalism was on the rise. They kidnapped Westerners" (29). When Mohammed writes, "In America, I fit but I do not belong. In Lebanon, I belong, but I do not fit," he is writing about his own identity, but he could also be writing about the novel itself, the one he is narrating as well as the one of which he is a part (81). The novel itself, because it is in English and not Arabic and satirizes both Arabic and Western literary forms, does and does not belong or fit anywhere. Rather than sycophantic mimicry or outright rejection, *Koolaids* is the hybrid text

that "confounds expectations inherent in the narcissistic gaze of the colonizing other" by, as Wail Hassan writes, queering Orientalism, as well as underscoring the complicated, often conflicted, experience of artistic influence on exile narration.

Second, *Koolaids* draws together two literary traditions that are often interpreted as having only a unidirectional influence, and demonstrates the preoccupation of both Western and Arabic writers with literary heritage. By doing so, *Koolaids* expands upon De Young's reading of *mu'arada* as a genre with the potential to include more than mere mimicry of form. It also indicates that *mu'arada* can incorporate texts from outside the Arabic literary tradition. Additionally, it means that critics should conceive of *mu'arada* as a form that can be written in languages besides Arabic. Mohammed describes his own book: "I wanted to write an endless book of time. It would have no beginning and no end. It would not flow in order. The tenses would make no sense. A book whose first page is almost identical to the last, and all the pages in between are jumbled with an interminable story. A book which would make both Kant and Jung proud" (118). He is unable to do it, however, because "I would have been copying the master. Borges did it before me" (118). Mohammed does not finish this book, but Alameddine does. In a meta-textual moment, Mohammed is implicitly declaring all of *Koolaids* a citation of Borges. Its jumbled temporality, its circularity, its hopscotch narration (which cites Cortazár as well as Borges), are insistences of *mu'arada* making up one novel-length *mu'arada.*

Third, unlike the postmodern literary forms that *Koolaids* also cites, associating the novel with *mu'arada* addresses the religious elements of the text. Postmodernism, as difficult as it is to define, seems decidedly secular, as does its literary forms. This is not to say that the Arabic literary tradition does not participate in these modernist and postmodernist forms, but that *mu'arada* has a rich historical association with religious writing. De Young proposes that the

"best evidence for a Bloomian reading of Arabic *mu'arada* can be found in . . . . those treatises that deal with attempts to demonstrate the sacred status of the Koran as a scriptural miracle, one containing the verbatim words of God as they were revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, and thus confirming his claims to be a truly inspired prophetic messenger to mankind" (133). Furthermore, De Young writes:

> One of the proofs that these treatises repeatedly point to as a demonstration of their contention is the fact that the Koran itself challenges 'both men and jinn' to compose something similar to its words, yet no one who took up that challenge was ever able to convince a significant proportion of the available audience that what he had produced truly equaled or surpassed the Koran's characteristic brand of eloquence. These works on the inimitability (*i'jāz)* of the Koran – and there are many – consistently refer to the unsuccessful imitation of the scripture as *mu'aradas*. Thus they are led to discuss the dynamics of the production of *mu'aradas* among poets – in order to give a context for their discussion of the relationship between the Koran and its *mu'aradas* (133).

Mu'arada has a long history of engagement with religious texts, most notably the Qur'an, as De Young points out, and also an associated anecdotal history of the inadequacy of written imitation – not just (and obviously) of the sacred nature of the text but of its intrinsic beauty. The Qur'an is believed to be the word of God or the representation of the word of God – and is thus believed to be as perfect in form as in content.

Koolaids' engagement with sacred texts works towards a different end: it reveals the violence inherent in various sacred texts by either revising or appropriating their language. At points in the novel Mohammed offers commentary on his retellings of Scripture, for example after paraphrasing the story of Sodom and Gomorrah he writes, "Let's get this straight, and I do

mean straight. God tells us men fucking men is a terrible thing, but a father offering his two daughters, vestal virgins no less, to a horde of horny buggers is heroic. Now that's straight" (64). He concludes, "God destroys the faggots with fire and brimstone," before turning his attention to the dying, suffering Scott, who simply says, "The catheter hurts" (64-65). Traditionally, poets use the *mu'arada* not to attempt to replicate the perfect content of the Qur'an, which while open to interpretation is unassailable, but its form. Here and elsewhere, Mohammed not only repurposes the language of the Qur'an, he challenges its flawless substance. Earlier I note that straight narration in the novel is associated with the violence of binary and civilizational narratives. *Koolaids* does not equivocate with Scriptural interpretation, as many feminist and queer theologians and religious activists and scholars do, but with Scripture itself. Mohammed's writing evokes the *mu'arada* because of his relationship to a distinct literary heritage that intersects with Islamic cultural production, while, in the tradition of the postmodern authors he cites such as Borges and Calvino, he transforms the form (as, of course, does Alameddine).

At the same time *Koolaids* critiques religious institutions, it also invokes the sacred in order to convey precisely what *mu'arada* traditionally works to express: the poverty of language when it comes to communicating what is beautiful, sacred, and meaningful in the world. That what is sacred in *Koolaids* is often contrary to the Scriptures and religious edicts it cites is embodied in the juxtaposition between God "destroying the faggots" and Scott's painful words. In one simple statement, "the catheter hurts," Scott exposes how the violence of the story of Sodom bears upon contemporary, suffering humans. It at once enrages and elicits empathy from the reader. Here, Scott is sacred and so is his pain. Parallel moments occur to victims of violence in Lebanon; they too are sacred victims of supposedly religious warfare. The framing device of the constantly shifting horsemen scenes are one way in which *Koolaids* addresses the

paradox of religiously inspired brutality and moments of such fragile humanity that words cannot translate their inviolability.

Wail Hassan interprets the revisions of the horsemen scene as Mohammed's unfinished novel about AIDS. Of the scenes, Wail Hassan writes that they are "an ongoing parody of religious traditions that justify prejudice and violence" and that "the theme of the failure of writing gestures toward the impossibility to communicate fully – to translate – the horrific effects of war and AIDS, as well as the tragicomic absurdities they reveal" (208). Salaita interprets *Koolaids* as an "example of pastiche" and as ultimately "articulat(ing) an implied humanism" (72). I agree with Hassan's interpretation of the four horsemen as parody of religious dogma and as representing the failure to ever truly communicate horrible violence and human suffering. I also agree with Salaita's claim about the novel being an example of pastiche and as perhaps endorsing a type of humanism, albeit one that Salaita never defines. But I think that both critics fail to grant the generosity of spirit that motivates the novel, particularly of characters such as Scott and Samir but even that of the cynical Mohammed, for flawed humanity. *Koolaids* speaks to the inadequacy of writing to convey horrific experiences, as Wail Hassan points out, but also the difficultly of conveying beauty. Translation does not just fail to communicate the negative, but we are also unable to translate – as Mohammed tells us over and over about his writing and his art – what is good and significant about being human.

Koolaids mocks religious institutions and parodies sacred texts; it takes down religious fundamentalists in all their pious guises. When the Christian town of Damour is devastated, Mohammed writes: "In one fell swoop, Damour no longer existed. They killed the people. Bloodied corpses, with open eyes, were left everywhere . . . . Then they burned the town and the surrounding citrus groves. Damour was no more. Expunged. Obliterated. I never thought

humans could do that" (119). It echoes Mohammed's paraphrasing of Sodom and Gomorrah: "So here we have the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. . . He turns a disobedient wife into salt. But he asks us to idolize drunks who sleep with their daughters or offer them to a horny, unruly mob" (64). As I have argued, his pared down, reinterpreted version of Lot lays bare the absurd moral of the story; but when juxtaposed with the Sodom and Gomorrah-like destruction of Damour, the humor is drained: "I never thought a *human* could do that" (119, italics mine). The lessons of our holy books can be fundamentally destructive. They can result in unspeakable horror. Yet human goodness, potential, and inexpressible beauty can also be found in sacred texts and the actions of the faithful.

One example is the encounter between the five-year-old Makram and his Grandma Salwa in Lebanon. Makram's father is Christian and his mother is Muslim. The scene itself is unmoored from time; it arrives in the narrative without context or introduction to the characters. Grandma Salwa is troubled by violence committed by Lebanese Christians, and she removes Makram's gold cross and tells him, "You wear this when you are proud of it. These days, it is nothing to be proud of. We have to keep it safe until you can be proud of it again" (22). Deeply moved, Makram's Muslim mother reacts, "I saw her walk towards us like a queen, but she was crying. She kissed Grandma Salwa and told her she loved her. She took off her gold chain, which said Allah in Arabic, and took my cross from my grandmother. My dad gave her his cross. He carried me and said, 'One day soon we can be proud of wearing them again'" (22). Shame blends with optimism as they exchange necklaces. Moments like these provide counterpoints to religious parody, for in *Koolaids* nothing is ever as simple as religion is all good or all bad. Rather, the potential for spiritual beauty is something "we have to keep safe until we can be proud of it again."

When drawn out and read side by side, many of the chronologically scattered scenes in the novel relate to one another through the kinds of eschatological time or spiritual themes that Grandma's cross and Mother's *Allah* necklace symbolize. For example, in the following four scenes certain theological concepts only emerge when the episodes are put side by side. In the first scene, Mohammed finds out he is HIV positive and goes to a Roman Catholic priest to ask for absolution, which he knows he cannot receive because he is Muslim. He recounts this story in the midst of another scene, while listening to *Bete Aber Auch Dabei*: "Yet pray, even while/ in the midst of keeping watch!/ In thy great guilt/ beg the Judge for patience,/ and He shall free thee from sin/ and make thee cleansed" (46). The Church denies him absolution because he is not baptized, but it is purity of the idea that attracts Mohammed: he wants desperately to be freed, not of sin, but of death. As he listens to the music, he thinks: "That voice is heavenly. I would stay alive for that voice….It is divine. I can't understand why my mind is disappearing . . . She is talking directly to God" (45-46). Then, towards the end of the novel Mohammed confesses to having killed Scott: "He told me to kill him. He had said if it ever got rough, he didn't want to go on….I killed him" (210). Finally, the second time the four horsemen appear the white horseman says, "This good and faithful servant killed his best friend. Let him suffer" (53).

Because of the chaotic temporality of the book, Mohammed vacillates between accepting and resisting death in different sections of the book. When the song ends he says, "I want to die" (47). He wants absolution because he fears death; on the next page he desires the freedom that death entails. He writes his own judgment into the mouths of the white horseman, "let him suffer," but later suggests that he did the right thing. Taken out of context and read together, the four scenes – Mohammed listening to the sung mass in German on his deathbed, telling a story about visiting a Roman Catholic priest upon learning his HIV status, confessing Scott's murder,

and the second appearance of the four horsemen – indicate moral and spiritual depth beyond merely critiquing religious or secular morality. Together the scenes broach the theological concepts of judgment, sin, forgiveness, and our ethical obligations to others. In this case, Mohammed's duty to give Scott a merciful death, Mohammed's residual guilt over Scott's death, feelings of regret and readiness for his own death, and the mystical beauty he still manages to find expressed in art.

It is impossible to parse out exactly what all these episodes mean overall given that each one could mean something different when paired with different episodes than the ones I have chosen. This is especially true because interrelated scenes are deliberately separated through narrative time and space, and through physical pages. For example, the Christian trope of "cleanliness" appears again in a hateful letter written by a fundamentalist to his stepson who is dying of AIDS. The stepson's boyfriend sends a return letter "telling him both he and Christopher had converted to Islam. As Mohammadans, God would be waiting for them with open arms, but with better presents" (112). The letter enrages the parents and amuses the reader, but it does so by playing up Islam as even more objectionable than AIDS.

Pointing out moments of spiritual longing, confusion, or generosity is not to say that any religion or philosophy emerges unscathed. As Wail Hassan points out, "the novel also ridicules the elaborate justifications for war and fratricidal violence found in the *Bhagavad Gita*. . . . . the philosophical discourse on the meaning of *dharma* in Hinduism is treated in the same way as the 'straight' Abrahamic religions: reduced to absurdity" (207). That is to say: nothing is sacred. Nonetheless, in the midst of derision is always the genuine human need for connection and meaning. For instance, the *Bhagavad Gita* shows up when Mohammed rewrites a play four times featuring Arjuna, Krsna, Eleanor Roosevelt, Krishnamurti, Tom Cruise and an assortment

of rotating characters. Each time Arjuna asks a variation of the same question: "What is the purpose of life….I wish someone could explain the purpose of life to me"; "I just want to understand… Why me, O God, why me?"; "You don't hear me. In an ordered world, you would hear me…I wish someone would just tell me what it's all about"; and finally, "My head hurts" (38-39, 84, 136, 168). In the midst of critique – usually in scenes that involve the exposure of absurd moral rationalizations, revision of sacred texts, or the incorporation of prayer – *Koolaids* makes its most raw appeals to the Divine for guidance, absolution, and peace.

In this section, I made the connection between the narrative form of *Koolaids*, its occupation with influence, and its literary religious heritage. In the following section I extend the connection to the realm of the secular, asking how secularism narratives shape sexual and gender identity with respect to post-colonial theories of subjectivity. I relate the existential questions emerging in scenes preoccupied with religion in the United States and Lebanon to secular hierarchies of identity. Finally, I broaden my search for human potentialities beyond the religious to the vexed and vexing nexus of religion, secularism, and freedom in the novel.

IV. The Black Horseman: Secularism, Sex, and Sickness

The third time the four horsemen appear, they follow a gruesome description of the debilitating AIDS related illness of Mohammad's friend Juan in addition to a journalistic litany of violent exchanges between Hizballah, the South Lebanese Army, and Israel. While Juan's illness causes him to shake and drool uncontrollably; the militia, Mohammad explains, are afflicted with a different virus, called *Ya Rabbi Tegi Fi Aino,* or "Oh God, I hope this gets him in the eye" – a "Egyptian virus first discovered in June of 1967….those infected with the virus are

known to close their eyes, and fire, hoping to hit something" (97).[23] The four horsemen approach and the first three chant from Surah 81 of the Quran:

> When the sun shall be darkened, When the stars shall be thrown down, When the mountains shall be set moving, When the pregnant camels shall be neglected, When the savage beasts shall be mustered, When the seas shall be set boiling, When the souls shall be coupled, When the buried infant shall be asked for what sin she was slain, When the scrolls shall be unrolled, When the heaven shall be stripped off, When Hell shall be set blazing, When Paradise shall be brought nigh, Then shall a soul know what it has produced (98).

The Surah in its entirety prophesizes the end of the world, and verse 14 (then shall a soul know what it has produced) emphasizes the responsibility of each soul for collapse of the world. The white horseman responds, "You guys are reading from the wrong fucking book, you idiots. You're not allowed to read from that book when you are with me…..We're in America now. Who cares about stupid camels anyway?" (99).

These three scenes are a hodgepodge of styles and perspectives. The first is a satirical account of Juan's condition, the second a commentary on historical justifications for the escalating violence in Lebanon, the third a revision of a sacred text. All contain an element of prophecy – the first gestures to the reader's fear of AIDS, the second prophesizes the inevitability of ongoing war in Lebanon, the third shows both the overlap and divide between Christian and Muslim eschatologies. All merge the trauma of disease and war with the violence of public storytelling. Finally, these scenes position Mohammed's prophetic voice against the United States in several ways. First, the lack of response to AIDS in the United States leaves

[23] References the Six Day War when Israel occupied the West Bank, Gaza, Sinai, and the Golan Heights.

characters like Juan vulnerable and stigmatized. Don't worry, Mohammed reassures the reader after describing Juan's degeneration, it won't happen to you. Mohammed's reassurance underscores how the act of storytelling determines the course of an outbreak – that the public story of AIDS as a disease of homosexuals and degenerates anointed AIDS first victims as unworthy and charted its course to global epidemic. Second, within the critique of sectarian violence in Lebanon is a critique of the failure of the United State to respond. Here, and repeatedly through the novel, the United States is blasted for its biased media coverage, endorsement of violent leaders, and shifting allegiances. Through storytelling, Alameddine underscores the power that stories have: how they shape the path of an epidemic and a nation, and determine who is saved and who is sacrificed to both war and disease. The storytellers themselves control whose voices and perspectives are represented.

The rejection of Qur'anic prophecy as the wrong book - because we are in America - by the white horseman, locates the rift between Christianity and Islam firmly on United States soil. The geography is ironic because Lebanon is the region of the Middle East with the largest Christian population, and the novel narrates its war involving acts of religiously motivated violence. Yet instead of Lebanon, the horseman represents the United States as the nexus of the clash of civilizations; its democratic freedoms are set up against the backward traditionalism of Islam. In the United States, this schema is complicated by racialized politics that paint the Middle East and Arabs as violent and anti-modern and repressive to women and gays, yet fails to deliver on the promise of equality. Alameddine therefore positions his critique of institutional religion alongside a critique of the secular values that supposedly ensure religious and sexual freedom. United States' beliefs about religion, morality, and the public sphere are attached to

sexuality and its regulation – and the regulation of sexuality is tied to both the maintenance of Christian authority and the power of the secular state.

Repeatedly in the novel, characters are categorized in the United States according to intersecting sexual, racial, gendered, and religious hierarchies. As the two major characters are Lebanese refugees in the United States, their experiences cast the intersecting hierarchies experienced by Arab Americans in stark relief. The historical and legal trajectory of Arab American immigration and citizenship is complicated, made even more so by the geopolitics of suspicion, the Gulf Wars, and the post 9/11 war on terror – all of which contribute to the racializing of Islam and the politicizing of Muslims and Arabs. No matter their religious affiliation, and *Koolaids* is packed with Middle Eastern characters of every religious persuasion and national origin, all are uniformly coded as Muslim in the United States. During the civil war in Lebanon, the answer you give during interrogation at a checkpoint can determine whether you live or die – and the novel recounts a multitude of episodes revolving around the trauma of checkpoints and interrogation. Yet to be gay, Arab, and Muslim in United States, is to court just as much danger. United States religious pluralism, Alameddine suggests, is selectively tolerant, as is United States liberalism.

Religion, race, gender and sexuality are inextricably linked for Samir and Mohammed in the United States and in Lebanon. Both are exoticized for their "Arabness" within the San Francisco gay cultural scene, and their so-called Arabness paradoxically feminizes them within the United States context and also marks their masculinity as threatening. They do not escape racial positioning amongst the Lebanese either, as Mohammed is recognized by a fellow Lebanese who describes him, "He was dark, looked like an Arab. In Lebanon, that's a curse" (101). After the Oklahoma bombing Mohammed remarks that televisions are strewn with

images of Middle Eastern men. The first suspects in the United States media and public are nebulous specters of Arab terrorism, although the culprit was ultimately a right wing white American man. Finally, both Samir and Mohammed are exclusively labeled as gay although both identify in a variety of ways at different points in the novel. Mohammed is asked by a museum trustee, "You're a gay artist, aren't you?" (54). Disgusted, he doesn't respond. Yet as with the Lebanese checkpoint, questions like this can mean life or death, as one's answer determines, among other things, whether one has access to work, health care, and freedom of movement.

In *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance*, Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pelligrini tackle the issue of "how it has come to pass that Christian theological pronouncements have become so institutionalized in the official life of the nation that they can be taken for just good old American values" (3). Jakobsen and Pelligrini write about the "yoked assumptions" that "American public life requires absolute values and these values are based on religion" (4). Yet as they point out, while religion is seen as the "natural and appropriate basis for public policies concerning sex" it is not necessarily considered to be so for other ethical questions" (5). Secularization, they argue, "has not so much meant the *retreat* of religion from the public sphere as its *reinvention"* and "this reinvention is accomplished through a conflation of religion and morality, in which morality is assumed to be the essence of religion and, conversely, moral proclamation can be a means of invoking religion without directly naming it" (21). Literalist religious interpretations of morality, seen repeatedly in *Koolaids* as potentially destructive forces, survive the shift from the religious to the secular, becoming the foundation of secular values in the United States. But they are no longer "religious" values despite their Protestant origins; they are secular values that have supposedly shaken off their religious genesis

and now represent "American" values. American secular values – with their Protestant inheritance - underwrite all of the laws and policies that maintain United States cultural, social, political, legal, and economic norms; but in the case of sexual regulation religion is more often called upon to justify policy than in cases involving social and economic justice, the death penalty, immigration reform, etc.

"Sexual regulations are not just about sex," Pelligrini and Jakobsen point out, "By regulating sex, the state attempts to regulate family life and American social relations more broadly. Through myriad regulations the state actually defines what counts as family" (7). Family, then, "solves the sex problem" because it "is supposed to domesticate sexuality without its participants having entirely to give up on the American discourse of freedom" (7). Yet "promises of 'freedom' and 'privacy' – promises supposedly made to every American by virtue of being a citizen – are actually held out as rewards, not rights, and only to those who belong to the right kind of family" (9). Indeed the characters of *Koolaids* – including Mohammed, Scott, Kurt, Joe, Christopher, Samir, and many others – encounter obstacles to their own family-making and their abilities to decide their own fates when AIDS related illnesses result in dementia, disability, and death.

Secular values, however, do not only reflect one interpretation of Western sexual morality, particularly when applied to cultures beyond hegemonic United States cultures, both internal and external to United States national borders. Joseph Massad argues that while the premodern West attacked the world of Islam's alleged sexual licentiousness, the modern West attacks its alleged *repression* of sexual freedoms. He critiques the "internationalization of Western sexual ontology" by human rights activists purporting to be working on behalf of gays and lesbians globally. "The universalist moment here," Massad writes, "is the assimilationalist

moment which guarantees that the sexual subjectivity of the Western purveyors of international lesbian and gay politics itself is universal while its racial/national/class constitution is carried out through a repudiation of the subjectivities of those unfit to defend themselves by the fittest subjectivity of them all" (40). Western gay and lesbian identities thus are viewed as culturally universal, thus different sexual subjectivities must not only assimilate to Western norms, but must also assimilate to its racial, gendered, national, and economic hierarchies.

The categories of gay and lesbian, Massad argues, are not universal. His work examines how Western ideas that "functioned for much of the century on the Arab intellectual scene and international human rights activism [came] to define in the 1980s not only Arab nationalist responses, but also and especially Islamacist ones, and what implications these would have for the sexual desire and practices of contemporary Arabs" (48). Fundamentalist Islamacists impose and then reject Western understandings of homosexuality upon people who may or may not identify as such, re-categorizing long standing Muslim cultural practices as anti-Islamic.[24]

Moreover, the history of secularist discourse in the United States around issues of sex and morality produces normative sexual subjectivities and casts other forms of sexual subjectivity that emerge in diasporic or immigrant communities as non-normative. Varying forms of sexual subjectivity are seen as entirely definable within the hetero/homo binary – it is just that those

[24] Massad argues that, "Instead of emulating the West, as the Gay International insists, the Islamists insist that Arabs emulate their Muslim ancestors. The fact that much of Islamist discourse on sex and sexuality is an emulation of Western Christian fundamentalisms and Orientalist contructions of the Arab and Islamic past escapes the notice of both the Islamists and the Gay Internationals. Thus, the Gay International and the Islamists both agree that deviance/gayness has much to do with civilization. For the Gay International, transforming sexual practices into identities through the universalizing of gayness and gaining 'rights' for those who identify (or more precisely, are identified by the Gay International) with it becomes the mark of an ascending civilization, just as repressing those rights and restricting the circulation of gayness is a mark of backwardness and barbarism. For the Islamists, in turn, it is the spread and tolerance of sexual deviance that mark the decline of civilization, just as repressing, if not eliminating, it will ensure civilization's ascendance" (194-195). I further argue that Massad's "Gay International" and the contemporary human rights regimes his concept draws upon are intimately connected with secular narratives of progress and modernity that posit "queer" as a wholly secular subjectivity.

others *do not realize it yet* because they are behind on the secular clock. Molly McGarry argues that:

> In U.S. queer politics, claims for secularism are typically framed in liberal humanist terms of tolerance and social progressivism, which appear as naturalized nodes of opposition to right-wing religious rhetoric. The political spectrum that positions "religion" as always already at odds with queer subjects not only construes the idea of religious homosexuals (for example) as either oxymoronic or just moronic but also erases significant structures of belief that, at least in moments, sustain progressive politics. A certain understanding of American politics that produces the queer as the quintessentially secular subject shares a curiously similar conclusion with the history of sexuality as deployed in the American academy, one wrought from the thesis of a French thinker who traced a shift from European Roman Catholicism to scientific discourses of subjectivity (248).

Just as Gold concludes that to ask, "is queer secular" reifies binaries, McGarry notes that positioning secularism as the progressive and natural opposite to right-wing rhetoric excludes and belittles faithful queer people. This schema elides difference within religious communities and collapses all Christian religion into the United States conservative movement. Earlier I cited Jakobsen and Pelligrini's assertion that sexual regulation draws more readily on religious reasoning than other policy debates in the United States. Here, McGarry points out that aligning "queer" solely with liberal, secular politics and religion with conservatism blocks progressive theological arguments for social and economic justice.[25] Secularism and secular understandings

[25] I am not writing about fringe movements within or external to mainstream denominations, but about long standing theological teachings and practices. For example, the Catholic Church's anti death penalty, pro immigration reform, liberation theology, worker's movement, and green theology teachings; Islam's emphasis on social and economic justice; Quaker teachings on pacifism; and the Episcopalian Church's history of queer theological writings and

of queer subjectivity are seen as developing evolutionarily. Secular time marches forward, progressing always towards more perfect manifestations of modern civilization and the values it produces, namely freedom and equality. Such values are problematically couched in terms of liberal tolerance.

Here is the double bind of several characters in Almeddine's novel: the queer is the quintessentially modern secular subject, which does not allow for the complicated interrelationship of religion, desire, and embodiment. And secularism itself controls the definition of what it means to be religious and practice religion appropriately within U.S. society. Thus one can never be a religious queer or queerly religious. For example, when Samir's father comes to America and cheats on his wife, adultery is seen as a function of his "different culture," one that is seen as inherently more patriarchal than United States culture and thus his adultery is culturally acceptable, even expected (123). Conversely, Samir's friend Karim's frequenting of gay bars but refusal to come out is seen as a feature of religious and cultural self-hatred. If Karim does not identify openly as gay within the confines of Western understandings of what that entails, then he must be imbued with self-loathing stemming from the same Muslim, patriarchal norms that liberate Samir's father. Samir's great-uncle, a 93 year old, happily married man who writes about his fantasies about sex with men is a subject for pity for a life supposedly left unfulfilled – his happiness notwithstanding. Characters such as Mohammed's father have imbibed homophobic Islamicist rhetoric to the extent that he rejects Mohammed after an art review calls Mohammed a "gay artist" (39). Conversely, Samir's mother, the model of faithfulness in the novel, is devastated over Samir's AIDS diagnosis. The suggestion is that the

practices. These are only a handful of examples of theologies, teachings, histories, and practices that do not get play on major media outlets, are not cited as rationale in political debates, and are virtually invisible in the public sphere.

father's refusal to abide his gay son is rooted in secular, not Muslim, understandings of sexuality, where the mother's Muslim spirit of compassion prevents her from rejecting her son.

Museum directors and trustees who profit from "gay artists" particularly after their AIDS diagnoses, and who attempt to market Mohammed as a producer of Lebanese or ethnic art, embody intersecting racial, national, sexual, and class hierarchies and economies. "I do not want to be considered a Lebanese," Mohammed writes, "But that is not up to me. Would people think of me as a painter or a Lebanese painter? That is not up to me" (244). Market, not aesthetic, values fuel Mohammed's categorization; his managers capitalize on trends for multi-cultural or ethnic art. Additionally, when a museum trustee asks Mohammed what made Keith Haring into a "superstar artist," Mohammed replies, "The AIDS diagnosis" (55). After a one-night stand accuses Mohammed of concealing his HIV positive status, he has HIV+ tattooed onto his chest. *ArtNews* asks Mohammed to "pose for a close up photo of my chest with the tattoo. They thought it was an artistic statement. I did. The picture made the cover" (177). Gallery owners, art media, buyers, and curators fetishize artists according to the hip ethnicity of the pop moment, but also, devastatingly, according to their HIV positive status, the latest trendy, "radical" art accessory. The AIDS diagnosis becomes a mass-market signifier of resistance, even exclusivity, and thus is commodifiable.

Mohammed lambasts the way the United States profits from bodies infected by AIDS, the money made by "doctors, pharmacists, and various medical personnel…psychotherapists and alternative healing practitioners… books published, the stories in the media. War profiteers" (167). After cataloguing ways to make money from AIDS, Mohammed goes on in the next paragraph to calculate the cost of war: "Has anybody ever tried to figure what the daily profit was? They did in Beirut. . . .In one night alone, an estimated ten thousand shells had poured

down on the city. The cost estimate was about fifteen million dollars for one night. That is for one night of a war which started in 1975" (167). The Lebanese Civil War, he says, is a "registered trademark of Martin Marietta," while AIDS "should be a trademark of Burroughs Wellcome" (167).[26] *Koolaids* explicitly draws parallels between pharmaceutical companies and the military industrial complex that profit from people's sickness, suffering, and death. Yet it also makes explicit the more subtle relationship between cultural consumerism and AIDS. Additionally, while art world elites bandy about talk of the libratory thrust of the United States art scene, they blithely ignore the United States' participation in global racial, religious, and economic oppression. Economic justice is not part of the universalizing gesture, because it implicates America's self-narration as liberator.

Scenes of non-identification – refusal to comply with the categories of either Lebanon or the United States– are always paired with scenes of bombings in Beirut and disease in San Francisco. It is at these moments of conflation, where the violence of war meets the violence of identity, that Alameddine both critiques U.S. secularism and finds within it the potential for solidarity among marginalized communities. Through the characters of Samir, Mohammed, Karim and others, Alameddine subverts the notion that modern sexual identities such as homosexuality are unique to the secularization process and the belief that such identities can only flourish within a secular state. And because U.S. secularism is produced through narrative –it is

[26] Martin Marietta is an American chemicals, aerospace, and electronics company that later merged with Lockheed Corporation to form Lockheed Martin, a defense, advanced technology, and security company. The company "receives more than 80 percent of its revenue from the U.S. government, mostly the Pentagon . . . it is the largest federal contractor and the largest weapons producer in the world" (Mattawa, Philip. "Lockheed Martin: Corporate Rap Sheet." *Corporate Research Project.* 18 Sept. 2010. Web. 21 May 2013. www.corp-research.org/lockheed-martin) Also see: Hartung, William D. *Prophets of War: Lockheed Martin and the Making of the Military-Industrial Complex.* New York: Nation Books, 2010. Print. Burroughs Wellcome is the pharmaceutical company that created the AIDS drug AZT and garnered controversy by charging astronomical sums for a course of the drug (See: O'Reilly. "The Inside Story of the AIDS Drug." *CNNMoney.com.* 5 Nov. 1990. Web. 21 May 2013. http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune_archive/1990/11/05/74308/)

the story we tell ourselves about our own journey to modernity and the story we tell to urge others to catch up with us – Alameddine uses storytelling, full of citations and disjunctions, to suggest a different ending.

IV. The White Horseman: Art and Redemption

Near the end of the novel, the character Mohammad takes up the ultimate project of *mu'arada:* he rewrites the entire book in one scene. Instead of the Prophet Mohammed, the protagonist becomes an allegory for Jesus. He is an HIV positive violinist named Ali who leaves the United States for Beirut in order to make peace with his father. Instead, his father has him kidnapped, telling him that maybe if he dies, people will forget about his homosexuality. In a moment of high melodrama underscored by Mohammed, the father has his son tied naked to a bed and stabs him to death. Carrying his bloodied corpse into the streets, the father creates a messiah – the crowd idolizes him "as the progenitor of a genius." Ali's mother, echoing the pieta, cradles the body. The bloodiness of the scene suggests the Koolaid of the title: the red drink of Jonestown that represents the religious and cultural indoctrination Mohammed constantly rejects. And with the sacrifice of Ali, the blood symbolizes the Christian sacrament of communion. But instead of the sacramental wine, here we have AIDS infected blood, and we have the blood of the exile, the refugee who attempts to make peace with home through return, and is rejected. This scene echoes Mohammed's continual rejection by the rider of the white horse. The passage makes a link between Muslim and Christian allegory as the historical Ali was also a martyr – assassinated by the people he trusted. Indeed, Mohammed inserts himself into the revision of the novel, saying, "As the protagonist, I would be able to say, Father, why have you forsaken me?" Father takes on a multitude of meanings: God the father, the nation as

father – both Lebanon and the United States, and Mohammed's own father, with whom he never reconciles.

By calling himself the protagonist, Mohammed reveals self-consciousness about his own role as storyteller within the narrative of *Koolaids*. And by rewriting the novel as a Christian allegory with a Muslim protagonist, Mohammed subverts the mythological clash of civilizations – the division between Islam and Christianity touted on all sides. Ali's father sacrifices his son in order to cover his own shame and to bring about his own glory – just as a multitude of characters are sacrificed to the political machinery of Lebanon, Syria and Israel throughout the course of the novel; just as Mohammed and his friends are sacrificed to the machinations of the Regan administration.

Through Ali's murder in Beirut, Mohammed attempts to give meaning to his own death from AIDS in San Francisco. *Koolaids* illuminates the relationship between religion, morality, and sex as they come together in the context of U.S. public life, and demonstrates how sexuality is often seen, as Pelligrini and Jakobsen point out, as the indicator of an "individual's – and even a nation's – overall morality" (5). Earlier I cited Göle's question about "what kind of agencies are considered to bear a universal significance?" (245). Through his narration, Mohammed demands that his own diseased and stateless body bears universal significance for the discourses that produce and limit freedom; through his literary meanderings he asserts that his very condition troubles assumptions about U.S. secularism and its promise of rights - religion and its promise of deliverance.

Eventually, Mohammed merges John chapter 1, verse 1 with the Qur'an, saying, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was Mohammed, peace be upon him." *Koolaids* inhabits the long tradition of *mu'arada* by imitating sacred and literary

forms, but reworks traditional literary and historical accounts through the figure of the refugee. Technologies of assimilation, in Mohammed's case these include the San Francisco gay scene and the United States art market, pressure the refugee to conform. Compatriots and family from the homeland can question the refugee's ability to remain culturally authentic. Yet Mohammed is a figure who personifies the form of *mu'arada*; he never merely imitates or conforms to the cultural forms he uses to express himself, rather, he transforms them, confounding discourses of assimilation and authenticity. *Mu'arada* thus becomes the formal enactment of exile within the narrative structure of the novel.

It cannot be without significance that Mohammed is an artist. As such, he is caught in the representational binds that Western secularism wants to encode. That is: the contemporary artist can only critique Islam from the perspective of the secular, outside of devotion. Mohammed challenges prohibitory secularism, as does the novel project of *Koolaids*, which shows both the complicities of form with secular aims, and also the means by which such secularism can be revealed – their veils rent, as it were. *Koolaids* signals the link between the politics of display and storytelling by using the trope of art as a descriptor of how narratives of inclusion and exclusion are framed. As *Koolaids* emphasizes again and again, interpretive frameworks condition the reception and consumption of art. For Mohammed, this includes the racialized Western framework of gender and sexuality that undermine his masculinity as Arab and as gay, while at the same time aligning him with the contentious masculinity of terrorists. *Koolaids* points to the preoccupation of exhibition and publishing with creating or distinguishing religiosity and religious subjects – part of determining what is private and public means deciding what is religious and sacred. And those supposedly abstract spheres are constrained by gender

norms and racial categories: subversive sexualities, degenerating bodies dying of AIDS, even suicide bombers – these are not bodies that bear universal significance and they are not sacred.

Pelligrini and Jakobsen "wonder what new possibilities for thinking about, and achieving, sexual freedom might be gained by connecting sexual freedom to religious freedom" (16). Ultimately, they argue that sex "can be a site for the production of values" and they "turn to the rich varieties of gay and lesbian community formation and consider how sex, precisely because it is embedded in interpersonal relations, can help constitute new forms of social life and belonging" (17). *Koolaids*, intensely focused on gay men to the exclusion of any real consideration of women or LBT sexualities, narrates one version of post-colonial, Muslim, male immigrant sexuality that can add to the rich variety of community formation that Pelligrini and Jakobsen write about. The novel is a critique of the broad global reach of American secularism and the dissolution of the nation of Lebanon through international and sectarian violence; but it is also a localized plea for recognition for the people being sacrificed to war and indifference in Beirut and San Francisco. The novel demonstrates how Muslim and Arab American experiences of secularity can transform and challenge our understanding of the American secularism, both in terms of its limitations and its possibilities. *Koolaids* calls for a reexamination of the canonical works of secularism, including the works it cites and reveres, in order to deconstruct the naturalization of Protestant values and practices as American. Furthermore, through the use of an Arabic literary form and Muslim allegory in a decidedly American novel, *Koolaids* expands and deepens our conception of what kinds of forms and voices constitute American literature.

Mohammed is the wandering prophet of *Koolaids*: he is Salah Hassan's unstated refugee who "stands in opposition to the citizen of the nation-state and represents the figure of an unstated future, or a future without territorialized nation-states" (1622). From the position of

exile the character Mohammed is able to offer a critique of the way the presumed natural binary of religion/secular affects the lives of the Lebanese, whether at home, or, like the Phoenicians, off at sea. When his suitability as storyteller is questioned, because he is a refugee, because he has "AIDS dementia," Mohammed tells his critics, "Live with this suckers, for I am the Word" (77). The final scene of the novel suggests redemption through narrative, as the four horsemen arrive once more. "This good and faithful servant is ready," they agree, for he knows war, plague, and death. And the rider on the white horse says, "I love you, Mohammed." Finally, Mohammed is led away.

CHAPTER THREE

Curating Religion: Art, Performance, and Stewardship

I. Defining Religious Art

In 2009, the Yale Institute of Sacred Music and the Arts offered an exhibit entitled *Breaking the Veils: Women Artists from the Islamic World*. The ArtReach Foundation produced the exhibition in order to "break the stereotyping attached to women from the Islamic world" ("Breaking the Veils"). The audience envisioned by the exhibit is decidedly Western, because who else is doing the stereotyping that needs breaking? While the works of the 52 artists deal with subjects ranging from the occupation of Palestine to environmentalism, and most are abstract pieces, the emphasis of the title is on a particular kind of gendered representational Islam. It works under the assumption that veils need breaking, and the Western audience should bear witness to unveiling. In the introduction to the exhibit catalog, Wijdan Ali, the president of the Royal Society of Fine Arts in Amman writes, "The term Islamic [here] refers to a civilization that construes one of the richest and most prolific phases in the cultural history of humanity; and is used in its cultural and not religious sense" ("Breaking the Veils"). The "rich and prolific phase" is temporally ambiguous – the wording implies that perhaps this phase has ended. The emphasis on cultural as opposed to religious Islam only serves to make a monolithic cultural Islam the primary framework for interpretation. Artists from 21 different nations can hardly represent one cultural Islam, and even if they could, the tricky veiling metaphor brings religion to the forefront and positions Islam in conflict with the values of secular and Christian feminisms. These types of exhibits serve to mystify artists and their works, while regulating art's meaning within the public sphere and in regard to the marketplace. The distinctions drawn between religious and secular art are embedded in a broader framework of meaning underscored

by secular understandings of what religion is and where it belongs, and the relationship between religious content and the forms it can take.

While celebrating these artists and their works is laudable, I question the implication that the staging of their work liberates Muslim women. Implicit in the title and the exhibition notes is that it is supposedly the exhibition itself and not the creation of the art that is liberatory. The image of the breaking veil implies a hard and rigid Islam; the veil here hardly connotes the fluid complexities of Kahf's tangerine scarf. The framing of the exhibition is by no means unique in the United States. Even ArteEast's carefully curated 2009 *Tarjama /Translation* exhibition at the Queens Museum of Art was accompanied by a disclaimer by Iftikhar Dadi: "Readings engendered by *Tarjama/Translation* are not to be confused by the usual orientalist tropes in which much Western representation of the region remains mired, and which have unfortunately characterized even otherwise excellent recent exhibitions of contemporary art from the region . . .[the exhibit] strives as much as possible to avoid the tropes of veiling, harem, violence, terrorism, and the equation of an essentialized Islam with the region" (1). In telling us how *not* to interpret, the exhibition manages to loop back to the very interpretive framework it seeks to avoid. When exhibited in the United States, art and texts produced by non-Muslims from the Middle East, and Muslims from across the globe, no matter their content or form, are raced and politicized.

I begin with the *Breaking the Veils* exhibit to provide an example of the kinds of secular, interpretive frameworks that are upended by the works I consider in this chapter. I look at two artists –Ninar Esber and Mounir Fatmi- who structure their work as part of a critique of prohibitory secularism's will to power. Like Kahf and Alameddine, they too call attention to form as each transforms literary genres such as the novel and erotic literature into visual and

sound pieces that underscore the Orientalizing modality of narrative and critique secular understandings of the role of art. The artists I analyze in this chapter have four things in common: their art demonstrates cultural shifts at work in the practice and perception of Islam globally post 9/11; they experiment with religious and secular identity-construction; they draw from multiple and divergent literary and cultural sources; and they attempt to sidestep the process of institutionalization.

In my first section, I explore the ways in which secular institutions, including museum cultures and academic systems, define religious art and artists. I ask how these definitions perpetuate models of stewardship and how they intersect with modern interpretive practices. I describe how secular institutions in the United States not only secularize art, but also link particular artists and works with religion in ways that reproduce colonial epistemologies. Notions of authenticity are built into institutional stewardship models, as these institutions essentialize their subject matter as well as the publics they address. The homogenizing framework in which Islamic or Middle Eastern art is exhibited conflates geography and gendered cultural practices with religion, while racializaing religion. Ultimately, it ties religion to the United States secularism narrative while entangling it with the politics of gender and sexuality that this narrative generates in the United States.

Authenticity or subjectivity may not be the most useful conceptual frameworks for interpreting cultural narratives. Rather than reducing religion to a political metonymy, I advocate more community-oriented approaches that still draw heavily on individual participation or self-definition, and are not concerned with discerning who can represent religion or secularism with authenticity or purity. In my second section, I ask how one might turn from the ambiguous notion of the secular or religious subject and instead think about the publics addressed and

produced by texts, art, and performance. Doing so enables us to think through how these discourses are mediated, organized, and articulated by the very publics they create. How does art address its publics and whom do they include? What is the relationship between the form a work takes and the public it creates and addresses?

My final section looks at the work of Ninar Esber and Mounir Fatmi, both of whom use religious symbolism in their work to challenge authoritative narratives that dominate the Western secular, public sphere. Both use religious symbolism in their art not to transform the secularity of the public sphere into religiosity, but to critique the presumed neutrality of an imagined secular, public sphere, and to comment upon received ideas about what art is and what art should do, particularly art that contains religious imagery. Esber's work subverts patriarchal interpellations of Muslim women, criticizing both Western and fundamentalist Islamist paradigms. Esber merges sacred and profane literary traditions, inverting regulated gendered representations by associating women's bodies with the sacred tradition of naming God. Her public performances and digital archive focus on acts of translation and evocation; through narration she relinquishes stringent religious narratives that alienate women from their bodies and defies Orientalizing strategies of interpretation that limit Muslim women to the role of oppressed minority. Mounir Fatmi's work, in contrast, manipulates traditional forms of media such as the video cassette and the novel in order to comment on violent forms of public address such as suicide bombing and 9/11. I argue that Esber and Fatmi use literary and media forms to question how hegemonic narratives are sustained, whether they can be altered through aesthetic realms, and how publics experience them.

Much of the work on secularism has confined itself to the realm of the political and the legal; turning to the visual imaginary expands our understanding of how secularism shapes the

visual register and how artists challenge that visual regimentation. Furthermore, because the secularization narrative embeds opposition into the very foundation of religious studies, the field has difficulty accounting for the simultaneity and mutual constitution of religion and secularism. The artists and writers I examine in this chapter refuse this foundational opposition. Their sense of the secular is not opposed to, separate from, or outside of religious devotion, but rather seeks to engage it while producing the conditions of freedom.

II. Exhibiting the Sacred in Secular Spaces

> An inquiry or claim, once submitted by a religious leader or group *deemed to have standing by the museum*, should provide the framework for a dialogue between the museum and representatives of the religion regarding special treatment of the work of art. . . Decisions may be reached regarding the adoption of special stewardship responsibilities for sacred objects.
>
> -Report of the Association of Art Museum Directors Task Force on the Acquisition and Stewardship of Sacred Objects (emphasis mine)

How museums canonize and define art is an old debate, but it still resonates. As recently as 2006, the Association of Art Museum Directors (henceforth the AAMD) established a set of guidelines for dealing with sacred objects, particularly but not exclusively with regard to American Indian tribes. The "Report on the Stewardship and Acquisition of Sacred Objects" draws a distinction between works that merely "express religious ideas, values, and feelings" and "sacred works of art" which are "venerated objects created for use in ritual or ceremonial practice of a traditional religion" (AAMD Report). The report reminds directors that they must comply with the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act and encourages them to "consider cases where it may be important to go beyond the law and adopt special stewardship or interpretive responsibilities for sacred objects that are not covered by NAGPRA [Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act] and are not subject to specific national or international laws or treaties" (AAMD Report).

There are a multitude of problems with the guidelines. First, they assume universal understandings of the sacred and religion among all people, and in particular, all American Indian tribes.[27] They also assume an ontological division between sacred and profane objects within this universally designated American Indian culture, and by extension, all cultures. The guidelines imply that the members of each AAMD designated religion ("deemed to have standing by the museum") understands itself as a religion in a universally defined sense. Thus each religion must also have a corresponding understanding of the AAMD defined distinction between profane and sacred.

Talal Asad writes a brief genealogy of the concept of the sacred, and argues that "the sacred, constituted first by anthropologists and then taken over by theologians, became a universal quality hidden in things and an objective limit to mundane action" (33). The sacred "was at once a transcendent force that imposed itself on the subject and a space that must never, under threat of dire consequence, be violated – that is, profaned. . . . 'the sacred' came to be constituted as a mysterious, mythic thing, the focus of moral and administrative disciplines" (33). The AAMD appeal for respect and the guidelines for the acquisition, preservation, and interpretation of sacred objects point to the moral and administrative disciplines that define and govern the sacred. Asad believes that the idea of a transcendent, universal sacred developed within the discipline of comparative religion: "new theorizations of the sacred were connected with European encounters with the non-European world, in the enlightened space and time that witnessed the construction of 'religion' and 'nature' as universal categories" (35). Religion and nature were not only understood as universal categories, but as separate ones without overlap. Comparative religious scholars relegate religion, especially in its non-European, "exotic"

[27] But only federally recognized tribes, given the references to NAGPRA which only applies to "legal" tribes.

manifestations, to the realm of superstition in contrast to rational philosophy and science. As a universally definable system, religion and its subcategory, sacredness, can therefore be studied, indexed, and even safeguarded by objective scholars. The guidelines still operate under this Enlightenment understanding of the sacred, which justifies a model of stewardship, a concept to which I will return.

The taxonomy of sacredness remains slippery even within the guidelines, and the implication is that its definition should not be left up to the religious leaders or groups submitting claims. The report defines a difference between sacred objects, which can be both used in practice *and* exhibited as art, and religious art, whose mere exhibition is sufficient to communicate "ideas, values, and feelings." Religious art is thus art that has religious content but does not have a sacred form or use, or is not imbued with sacredness. Sacredness is vaguely related to practical use, but not in an everyday sense; the object must be designated for special, spiritual ritual, it cannot merely exist or be used for everyday practice. It is unclear whether the object is only sacred when used in a sacred ritual (and thus can be exhibited in its mundane off-time) or if it is sacred all the time given its use, or perhaps given its essential sacredness. Is sacredness conferred upon objects by humans, or by divinity, or are objects sacred in and of themselves? If my attempts to parse the assumptions made by the report seem circular and imprecise, it is only because the definitions at work in the report are hazy at best, as are the genealogies of 'the sacred' within the disciplines of comparative religion and anthropology that inform the report.

Finally, the report refers to a model of stewardship that is related to a long-standing reading of human stewardship in Genesis, in which humans are given the responsibility of caring

for and using God's creations.[28] It also echoes the federal stewardship model imposed upon American Indian tribes and other unincorporated territories, in which the federal government determines what property is, how it properly "belongs" to American Indians, and how it can hold it in trust for tribes. Stewardship implies the inability of specific religious persons or communities to responsibly care for their own sacred objects, or even in this context to define what is and is not sacred. Stewardship is allied with interpretation, as "the Report also encourages AAMD members to employ special sensitivity and professional judgment regarding the interpretation of sacred objects" (AAMD Report). After all, "Interpretation should be developed, if possible, in consultation with appropriate traditional religious leaders. In all cases, art museums should strive to represent and interpret all religious and sacred objects with respect and equity" (AAMD Report). Stewardship, representation, and interpretation are thus linked, and all are dictated by the guidelines of self-declared secular institutions, whose very designation as secular governs their interpretive practices.

While treating "all religious and sacred objects with respect and equity" is a valuable goal, the colonial epistemologies at play, coded in language of respect and equity, are troubling. The report replicates stereotypical ideas about how a collective American Indian consciousness envisions the world. It differentiates between traditional religious practice and what are merely "religious ideas, values and feelings." Thus in the report, interpretive and reading practices are pre-determined by secularism narratives. Inherent to this understanding of secular stewardship

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[28] "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them: male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.'" (Genesis 1:26-28). (New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition).

over religious and/or sacred art is the idea that secular interpretive practices have an essential, indisputable rationale that can determine what art is, what art does, and whether or not it is religious and/or sacred. These interpretive practices enable the AAMD to decide which American Indian objects, or any religious objects, are sacred. Thus these kinds of objects can be divorced from context and exhibited un-problematically as art objects in public, secular, institutional spaces.

What are the implications of linking certain art objects with religion so indiscriminately? How does it speak to a secular understanding of art's purpose? The Yale exhibit reflects the post- 9/11 interest in creating cross-cultural understanding between Islam, often represented by the Middle East, and the West. Jessica Winegar is critical of these types of exhibitions, writing that "when art is used to show Middle Easterners' humanity or to advance certain views of Islam, a very particular and politicized 'bridge of understanding' is created that obfuscates and perhaps refuses, other understandings which might be less comfortable to America's secular elites" (653). She argues that these exhibits rotate around two assumptions, namely "that art is a uniquely valuable and uncompromised agent of cross-cultural understanding; and that art constitutes the supreme evidence of a people's humanity, thereby bringing us all together" (652). Both assumptions speak to an understanding of art objects as having secular value: they help us to bridge cultures, reveal our common humanity, and reflect our core beliefs about what it means to be human. [29]

[29] Of course many examples of religious art also have these attributes (even if we are considering "religious" art as constituted by the secular) and religious art often explores what it means to be human, particularly in relation to concepts of Divinity. Winegar's point is that these "universal" secular assumptions about what art means shape Western interpretations of art and dictate what art is acceptable for exhibition. These assumptions also have a patronizing tone: a given group/ethnicity/religion/nation/etc. must produce art to these specifications in order to demonstrate their own humanity. The idea of a bridge that facilitates cultural understanding seems innocuous as a bridge usually goes in two directions. But in this schema the "bridge" enables Westerners to approach non-Western art and culture, but in return Western discourses only provide their interpretation of the art and the designation of

Winegar goes on to observe that "the secularist impulse in the desire to find art that shows the historical artistic achievement and modernity of Middle Eastern Muslims, along with the encouragement of certain kinds of art-making among them, actually ends up reproducing a religious framework such that their work is often interpreted with reference to Islam, whether or not there even exists a religious connection" (653). The Smithsonian, for example, tries to sidestep this problem by titling its permanent exhibition *Arts of the Islamic World*. Both the Yale exhibit and the Smithsonian use the term "Islamic World" which calls to mind not just a distant geographic region (omitting Islamic cultures in regions beyond the Middle East and North Africa, not to mention the United States), but another planet. Reminiscent of science fiction, the titles dislocate Muslims in time (akin to exhibits such as "The Medieval World") and, literally, space: they do not seem to occupy the same world as the audience.[30]

In her article about the exhibit for *Muslim Voices,* Rosemary Pennington writes: "What's striking about the collection . . . is the lack of overtly religious pieces. [Chief Curator Massumeh] Farhad is careful to state the art exhibited in the collection is from the 'Islamic World' and represents particular cultures, not the religion of Islam itself. . . 'We don't want this to be confused, let's say, with Hindu or Buddhist art because this is not religious art,' [Farhad] says. 'There are works that certainly refer to Islam but many of the other pieces don't'" (Pennington). Geographies, populations, cultures, and histories cannot be so easily parsed. Countries widely considered part of the "Islamic World," such as Pakistan and Afghanistan, include Buddhist and Hindu populations, art, architecture, and tradition. Regions associated with

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said art as *art*. It is not a cultural exchange so much as an opportunity to categorize and interpret art, and by extension, culture, on behalf of a less sophisticated other.

[30] Envisioning Muslims as inhabiting other worlds is not limited to unfortunate exhibition titles. Rather, Islam has a long history of appropriation in Western science fiction, from the corrupt Calormenes in C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia* to the Fremen in Frank Herbert's *Dune* series.

Hinduism, such as India, have long histories of Islamic art, architecture and tradition as well. Even in trying to avoid a correlation, the curator is forced to explain the naming process, thus circling back once again to the problems Winegar elaborates.

Winegar connects the kinds of art selected by private and public institutions with the political agenda of the United States government: "The so-called bridge of understanding that is to be built through what is termed 'exchange' will, it is hoped, encourage Muslims – especially the young – to have a positive view of the United States, and hence to take up new creative projects rather than arms . . . art is linked to the discourse of freedom in an incredibly unliberating moment" (656). The freedoms that these exhibits promote include the freedom to consume and the freedom to critique Islam, particularly its attitudes towards gender and sexuality. Politics affects not only the kinds of art chosen for these events but the selection and evaluation of the artists, and decisions about who can be representative of a constituency. These decisions reveal who Americans consider representative of a constituency and why. Thus Winegar compares the current interest in Middle Eastern art with the Latin American art boom,

> which ignored U.S. –born Latinos because they were seen as 'minorities' and thus not representative of exotic Latin American 'difference' . . . The contrasting preference for artists born in the Middle East but working in the U.S. might reflect an insistence on ultimate otherness, a refusal to incorporate Middle Easterners as 'minorities' in the American nation, or to valorize them as 'exotics' living elsewhere (despite the problems of these two terms) (654).

Whereas Latinos were considered *too* "American" to be included in Latin American art exhibitions, Middle-Eastern Americans or other Muslim Americans will never be *American* enough.

What makes some visual texts more readily open to non-religious interpretation or designation, while others are tied inextricably to religion? Why, for example, was the construction of new minarets banned in Switzerland in 2009, bolstered by the rhetoric of secular feminism in the media and propaganda posters? Because the architecture itself is seen as imbued with meaning (namely, Islamic) that apparently must be ousted from not only public discourse, but its skyline; yet overtly Christian architecture is absorbed into the history of the cultural-national public sphere. This example demonstrates that not all religions are private and public in the same way. Talal Asad asks how and why we can read the Christian Bible as literature and/or as religious simultaneously: "Is this text essentially 'religious' because it deals with the supernatural in which the Christian believes – either a text divinely revealed or a true record of divine inspiration? Or is it really 'literature' because it can be read by the atheist as a human work of art? Or is the text neither in itself, but simply a reading that is either religious or literary – or possibly, as for the modern Christian, both together?" (9). The religious quality of the book, Asad suggests, is located in the act of interpretation. But it is only through the development of certain "disciplines and sensibilities" that it has "become possible to bring a newly emerging concept of *literature* to the aid of religious sensibilities" (9). The modern religious sensibilities that permit us to read the Bible as literature, and to see its sacredness as embedded in reading practices and not emanating from its material property, are the same ones that can codify the sacredness of American Indian ritual objects and Tibetan Buddhist altars, while at the same time appropriating them as art objects worthy of study and display.

But the relationship between reading practices and religious meaning, Asad points out, is dependent upon the apparent modernity of the interpreter as well as the nature of the text. Some meanings, in other words, are more fixed than others. While the Bible's meaning relies on the

act of interpretation, Asad states that many Westerners view the Qur'anic text as having a static meaning, thus "the Qur'anic text will force Muslims to be guided by it" while "Christians and Jews are free to interpret the Bible as they please" (10-11). These assumptions "take up contradictory positions between text and reader," so in the case of the Qur'an the "religious *text* is held to be determinate, fixed in its sense, and having the power to bring about particular beliefs (that in turn give rise to particular behavior) among those exposed to it – rendering readers passive" (Asad 11). On the other hand, where the Bible is concerned the "religious *reader* is taken to be actively engaged in constructing the meaning of texts in accordance with changing social circumstances – so the texts are passive" (Asad 11). Asad ascribes the current discussion of the roots of "Islamic terrorism" in this distinction between text and reader, in which "a magical quality is attributed to Islamic religious texts, for they are said to be both essentially univocal (their meanings *cannot* be subject to dispute, just as 'fundamentalists' insist) and infectious (except in relation to the orientalist, who is, fortunately for him, immune to their dangerous power)" (11). Therefore it is not just that the text itself is univocal and infectious, but these qualities depend upon the capacity of the reader to actively engage the text or be passively influenced by it. Within this system, Muslim readers do not have this capacity, while secularized Western readers, no matter whether they pick up the Bible or the Qur'an, do. This schema ignores Western Christian fundamentalism because secularism narratives ignore them; they, like Muslims, are seen as not partaking in modern interpretive practices.

Due to the fact that in this schema correct interpretive practices are informed by secular categorizations, other kinds of reading practices can be incorrect. In her recent essay addressing the debate over the Danish cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad, Saba Mahmood observes that the debate centers on an "impasse between the liberal value of freedom of speech and a

religious taboo" (838). Yet she questions the "normative conceptions enfolded within this assessment about what constitutes religion and a proper religious subjectivity in the modern world." Mahmood contends that to "abide by the description that the Danish cartoons exemplify a clash between the principles of blasphemy and freedom of speech is to accept a set of prior judgments about what kind of injury or offence the cartoons caused and how such an injury might be addressed in a liberal democratic society" (838). Both the notions of blasphemy and freedom of speech are "grounded in juridical notions of rights and state sanction" and "presuppose a semiotic ideology in which signifiers are arbitrarily linked to concepts, their meaning open to people's reading in accord with a particular code they share between them" (841). This in turn "naturalizes a certain concept of a *religious* subject but also fails to attend to the affective and embodied practices through which a subject comes to relate to a particular sign – a relation founded not only on representation but also on what I will call attachment and cohabitation" (841-842). The framing of the debate by Western media operates in a paradigm that takes for granted not only universal assent to governmental definitions of freedom, but also dictates the very terms of the insult suffered. There is a direct connection between the paradigm Mahmood describes and my discussion of secular understandings of art: the cartoon is political art that is fundamentally misunderstood by Muslim protesters, thus the act of interpretation must be done *on behalf* of Muslim protesters to preserve religious freedom. In this case, as with the AAMD report or modern reading practices, expertise – whether interpretive or in the sense of stewardship – becomes a technology of secularism.

Mahmood writes that many Westerners were baffled by the angry reactions of some Muslims to the cartoons, and she finds that one source of the bafflement "emanates from the semiotic ideology that underpins [the Western] sense that religious symbols and icons are one

thing, and sacred figures, with all the devotional respect they might evoke, another. To confuse one with the other is to commit a category mistake and to fail to realize that signs and symbols are only arbitrarily linked to the abstractions that humans have come to revere and regard as sacred" (844). Muslim agitation over the cartoons is therefore the result of improper reading practices and "a product of a fundamental confusion about the materiality of a particular semiotic form that is only arbitrarily, not necessarily, linked to the abstract character of their religious beliefs" (844). What Mahmood is describing is a secular reading practice, but one that, in the U.S. at least, co-exists alongside a theology of religious phenomenology evocative of Paul Tillich's influential *Dynamics of Faith*. This is to say that signs have the simple semiotic relationship Mahmood outlines: they point to the abstraction they represent. But as Tillich points out, sacred symbols participate in the nature of the divinity towards which they gesture, materially engendering an encounter with the infinite. This concept has more in common with sacramental theology than secular rationalism, but both are very much alive within the U.S. cultural sphere.[31]

The connections I am making between the AAMD's stewardship of American Indian art and the U.S. media and political fray over Islam and Muslim Americans post 9/11 are rooted in this secularized distinction between abstract concepts and material reality. The secularization narrative creates and substantiates modern interpretive practices. As Mahmood writes, "the

[31] Just subject the object in question to a burn test: does burning the Christian Bible do more than enact disrespect? If so, is it because people are unable to understand the difference between a religious book ("ideas, values, and feelings") and a sacred object? What would the reaction to such an action be in the United States? How does sacramental religious phenomenology, in which objects like the Bible can participate in the divinity to which they gesture, intersect with secular reading practices in which they can merely point to abstract theological principles? How do interpretive practices that distinguish between malleable and fixed texts, as well as secular freedoms of religious practice, all resolve in U.S. public political and cultural life? The most straightforward answer is that they do not. Rather, there is an uneasy co-existence that results in multiple contradictions within politics, media, and cultural traditions that resist simple analysis.

dismay that Protestant Christian missionaries felt at the moral consequences that followed from native epistemological assumptions . . . has many resonances with the bafflement many liberals and progressives express at the scope and depth of Muslim reaction over the cartoons today" (844). Religion is seen as a "matter of choice" and once the "truth of such a conception of religion, and concomitant subjectivity, is conceded then it follows that wrongheaded natives and Muslims can perhaps be persuaded to adopt a different reading practice, one in which images, icons, and signs do not have any spiritual consequences in and of themselves but are only ascribed such a status through a set of human conventions" (845). The AAMD's gesture towards respect and dialogue, as well as moves by U.S. cultural institutions to "bridge cultures," only enact a culture of tolerance and multiculturalism, both of which are entrenched in the narrative of secularism, and which function as muted versions of neocolonialism.

If the politics and realities of exhibition are shaped by our expectations of modern interpretative practices; so too is the critical theory that scholars and art critics use to talk about exhibition and art, particularly art with religious connotations or themes. "Insomuch as the tradition of critical theory is infused with a suspicion, if not dismissal, of religion's metaphysical and epistemological commitments," Mahmood writes, "it would behoove us to think 'critically' about this dismissal: how are epistemology and critique related within this tradition?" (861-2).She goes on to ask the following: "Do distinct traditions of critique require a particular epistemology and ontological presupposition of the subject?" (862). Modern traditions of critique compel a particular epistemology and understanding of subjectivity at the expense of others, yet it is difficult to circumnavigate these discourses when discussing art in a Western context.

Religious subjectivity in particular is loaded with the "ontological presuppositions" Mahmood critiques. In the following section, I explore alternatives for framing questions of

religious subjectivity, epistemology, and ontology found in theories of publics and counterpublics. I want avoid creating a schematic wherein religion is to private as secular is to public while acknowledging that these kinds of correlations are key to the way the U.S. imagines the secular. The politics of exhibition, for example, point to a preoccupation with creating or distinguishing religiosity and religious subjects, even if curators aim to promote respect or to bridge cultures. Where public display is concerned certain cultures are indelibly tied to religion.[32] I also want to avoid labeling publics as secular or religious in nature. My aim is to emphasize that it is difficult to pinpoint what makes someone a religious or secular subject, and that the distinction is in and of itself a feature of secularism. There is no religious subject or buffered self without the backdrop of secularism. The very definition of religion is dependent upon and constitutive of secularism and vice-versa. This relationship dictates not only our participation in the secular public sphere, but our conception of what the public sphere entails and what it means to be a member of the public.

III. Going Public

Public and private are spatial concepts, and thus religious freedoms and privacy come to have spatial, in addition to legal and abstracted, values. Public address moves us from thinking about a singular spatialized or politicized public sphere that organizes secular or religious subjects, to the publics that participate in it. In his work on publics and counterpublics, Michael Warner states, "the way *the* public functions in the public sphere (as the people) is only possible because it is really a public of discourse. The peculiar character of *a* public is that it is a space of

[32] For example, the argument is often made that secular displays of the Ten Commandments in state courthouses can potentially represent the secular values of the public and supposedly be stripped of their religious affiliation if not their religious heritage. Yet same case could not be (or is not) made for other types of public religious display in the U.S.

discourse organized by discourse. It is self-creating and self-organized; and herein lies its power, as well as its elusive strangeness" (68-69). Public discourse, Warner insists, is "poetic world-making": "By this I mean not just that it is self-organizing, a kind of entity creation by its own discourse, or even that this space of circulation is taken to be a social entity, but that in order for this to happen all discourse of performance addressed to a public must characterize the world in which it attempts to circulate and it must attempt to realize that world through address" (113-114). The exhibition organized by Yale is only one example of the discourses that shape the public address of art. It is clear how the Yale exhibit characterizes the world and how it attempts to realize it. But what does it mean to be part of the public that views the Yale exhibit? In this section I establish connections between the public address of art, interpretive practices, and Warner's concept of the/a public and its dependence upon theories of a modern, secular imaginary.

Publics and *the* public are very different animals. Warner reminds us that *the* public is perceived as a disinterested universal public and participation involves a certain amount of self-abstraction. Warner states: "As the subjects of publicity – its hearers, speakers, viewers, and doers – we have a different relation to ourselves, a different affect, from that which we have in other contexts. No matter what particularities of culture, race, gender or class we bring to bear on public discourse, the moment of apprehending something as public is one in which we imagine, if imperfectly, indifference to those particularities, to ourselves" (160). Of course, this indifference to particularities only works insofar as the member of the public is already in line with the imagined constituency of the public itself: the modern Western subject. The assumption is that through self-abstraction we become mass subjects: "No matter what its character for the individual subjects who come to public discourse, however, the rhetorical contexts of publicity in

the modern Western nations must always mediate a self-relation different from that of personal life" (160). Self-abstraction, however, is not for everyone: "The bourgeois sphere has been structured from the outset by a logic of abstraction that provides privilege for unmarked identities: the male, the white, the middle class, the normal" (167). And thus individual character, identity, or status is either assumed to be in harmony with the character of the public (modern, Western, white, male) or negated (Muslim protesters of the Mohammad cartoon, for example, are not just misinterpreting, they are not properly self-abstracting).

Self-abstraction is directly related to the modern reading practices Mahmood and Asad delineate: in order to properly interpret art within this paradigm – secular, religious, sacred – one must abstract oneself from one's own world view and take on that of the secular public sphere. Yet this sphere, as I have consistently noted, despite its performance of abstract objectivity, is not free of religious influence or assumed notions of what constitutes a modern subject. The public Warner describes takes for granted self-abstraction, however "indifference" does not characterize racialized, gendered, or religious subjects' apprehension of themselves in public. In order to participate (as a public consumer of media, and in freedom of speech, for example, as it is understood in the U.S.) one must self-abstract, but through self-abstraction difference is keenly felt.

The "Report of the AAMD Task Force on the Stewardship and Acquisition of Sacred Objects" concludes that "a broad definition of 'sacred object,' if combined with the expectation that museums provide special treatment or consideration for such works, would create immensely difficult problems for art museums as secular institutions. Their mission is defined in terms of acquisition, preservation and interpretation of works of art for the benefit of *the general public*" (AAMD Task Force, emphasis mine). Who is the general public for these works?

Warner writes that "as the bourgeois public sphere paraded the spectacle of its disincorporation, it brought into being this minoritizing logic of domination" (167). Therefore publicness is "always able to encode itself through the themes of universality, openness, meritocracy, and access, all of which dehistoricize its self-understanding, guaranteeing at every step that difference will be enunciated as mere positivity, an ineluctable limit imposed by the particularities of the body, a positivity that cannot translate or neutralize itself prosthetically without ceasing to exist" (167). Just as one might assume that *Breaking the Veils* is not breaking any veils for Muslim women viewers, the AAMD Task Force would assume that the general public is made up of people who do not *believe* that (let alone experience) the objects on display are sacred. Which does not mean that members of the American Indian tribes to whom those objects originally belonged could not be among the audience members. What it does mean is that they must undergo a self-abstraction to shed their marked particularities in order to consider themselves members of this public.

One of my larger questions is how this definition of publics emerges from a secular context, and how alternate understandings of publics might be hijacked by the secular narrative. Warner thinks of the idea of publics as a global cultural phenomenon produced by the modern social imaginary, whose manifestations must be historically and culturally situated.[33] This conception of publics and the relations among strangers relies heavily on secular constructions of public life, discourse, and the modern social imaginary. Warner gestures to this reliance without spelling it out directly.

[33] For Warner, the "self-creating" public "can only produce a sense of belonging and activity if it is self-organized through discourse rather than through an external framework" and yet publics "have to be understood as mediated by cultural forms, even though some of those forms, such as polling, work by denying their own constitutive role as cultural forms. Publics do not address apart from the discourse that addresses them" (72). A public is a "relation among strangers" that "unites strangers through participation alone, at least in theory," and "in the context of a public . . . strangers can be treated as already belonging to our world. More: they *must* be. We are routinely oriented to them in common life. They are a normal feature of the social" (75).

The features of a public that Warner outlines all rely to a certain extent upon what Benedict Anderson called imagined communities: the way in which humans imagine themselves as part of nation-states and the rise of national consciousness. Anderson writes that the rise of vernacularization, the creation of print languages, and print-capitalism "made in possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways" (36). The creation of print languages laid the basis for a national consciousness by creating "unified fields of exchange," gave a "new fixity of language" which helped to build myths of antiquity, and created dominant " languages-of-power" (Anderson, 44-45). People began to think of themselves as a unified "public" being addressed in and speaking a unifying language with a shared history, temporality, and national consciousness. Charles Taylor picks up on these ideas when he writes about modern social imaginaries, the social imaginary being "the way people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations" (*Modern Social Imaginaries*, 23). The modern social imaginary, much like the imagined community, Warner's publics, and perhaps even the spirit of capitalism itself, takes on the sense of inevitability: "once we are installed in the modern social imaginary, it seems the only one possible, the only one that makes sense. After all, are we not all individuals? Do we not associate in society for our mutual benefit? How else to measure social life" (Taylor 17). The common understanding makes possible certain common practices, in much the same way Anderson might say common language makes possible common discourse and a sense of oneself as belonging to a "public," and a shared sense of legitimacy. Warner's theory of publics, then, relies on a secular legacy.

The public sphere and the publics that inhabit it are both material (as in, definite spaces occupied by actual people) and imagined. Becoming a member of a secular, Western public as Warner describes it requires more than self-abstraction; it demands espousal of modern interpretive practices that shape the world views of members of the public, the meaning of public address, and the potential shapes that publics can take. In the next section I analyze works by Ninar Esber and Mounir Fatmi that are forms of public address. Both use versions of public prayer in their work that invoke the Muslim tradition of the 99 names of God; Esber does so through vocal performance and Fatmi through installation art. Furthermore, both address the position of the contemporary Muslim subject in the public sphere as perceived by a Western audience. Esber startles her audience by confounding their expectations of Muslim women and propriety; she challenges perceptions of Muslim women and their sexuality by making the private, public. Fatmi uses imagery of suicide bombers and the Twin Towers in order to explore the public address of and response to terrorism. Both offer a critique of the Western notion of the public sphere as a space of, in Warner's words, "universality, openness, meritocracy, and access" (167). By using imagery that is at once intimate – women's bodies, prayer, suicide bombers before the explosion – and the focus of passionate public debate, these artists confront the assumed accessibility and impartiality of the global public sphere for Muslim people globally, and the interpretive practices that inform the reception of art by or about Muslims.

IV. The 99 Names of God: Reforming the Secular

Ninar Esber is a Lebanese visual and performance artist whose work is often about revelation. She uses what is considered private to uncover the nature of public-ness. Esber performs much of her work live, but part of the performance is the digital recording of her pieces in real time, which are in turn posted on the Internet. The live performance aspect of her work

gives her digital videos and video diary a particular context, but their presence on the Internet transforms context through the spatial and temporal dislocations made possible by their repeated play on the Web. Esber's pieces depend both on the performance in the moment and the Internet's extension of the moment. First performed in 2006 at the British Museum in London, her piece *The 99 Names of Delicious*, is posted on her webpage with very little interpretive framing in place (Esber, "*Biographie*"). We experience only her disembodied voice reciting words. She recites names for the vagina taken from 16th and 17th century Arabic erotic literature (Esber, "*Les 99 noms du Délicieux*").[34] She recites each word first in Arabic and then in English; there is no background noise or music, only her sharp enunciation of each word.

Some names are animals, like the wasp and the hedgehog, suggesting both the vagina's nature (it can sting and it can be prickly and unapproachable) and its physicality. Others give a sense of action, like the confronter, the surrenderer, the biter, the swallower, and the crusher. Others describe character, as in the greedy, the lustful, the generous, and the ambiguous. And, as the last word indicates, many of the words are contradictory, and all are ambiguous. The duelist, for example, could signify the dual nature of the vagina and gesture toward actual battle. The stretched could refer to the act or aftermath of childbirth or sex, or the ways we stretch the meanings of the female sex to accommodate cultural notions of women's bodies. Various names denote stereotypes of women: the vagina is the primitive, pointing to notions of women's non-modernity; it is the killjoy, the dry, the untamable, the seducer, and ultimately, the scapegoat. Names reveal cultural ideas of the proper place of the vagina: the secretive, the shy one, the hidden, and the silent. But the vagina is at once the armored one and also the helper; it is the

[34] To a U.S. listener, the piece immediately conjurers Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues*, first performed in 1996 in the U.S. and now performed across U.S. college campuses and globally as part of the V-day global activist initiative to stop violence against women and girls ("About V-day"). Yet there is no indication that Esber is familiar with the *Monologues* or that it influenced her work.

disturbing one and the hearth; it is the liberator as well as the free. It is the labyrinth and the temple.

The 99 names of Allah are described in the Qur'an and the *Sunnah* (as well as assorted *hadith*) and are known as *Asmaa al-Husna* (The Most Beautiful Names).[35] Much like Alameddine's use of the *mu'arada,* which implicitly evokes the sacred by using a form associated with religious poetry and the Qur'an, Esber explicitly invokes both traditional and mystical forms of prayer. By associating the tradition of naming God with female eroticism, Esber challenges the ways in which sexuality is seen as a property of individual subjectivity rather than part of publicly accessible religious culture, and thus asks how religion and the privatization of sexuality are related. Esber's piece also poses the question of how to read art that makes deliberate reference to religion without making claims about its or its creator's religiosity. She uses literature that Westerners might read as secular (erotic literature), thus subverting the West's concern with gender and Islam. *Delicious* juxtaposes the religious and the erotic and blurs the distinction between the sacred and the profane. The names of God are sacred in a way that transcends either the material manifestations of the sacred (an object or text) or normative understandings of semiotics (they do more than point to the abstraction they symbolize). The names of God can be taken in vain.

[35] For examples from the Qur'an, see the following *surah*: *Al-A'raf* 7:180, *Al-Isra* 17:110, *Ta-Ha* 20:8, and *Al-Hashr* 59:24. The published lists of names are not consistent from source to source, therefore there is disagreement over which names should be included on the complete list of 99 names. The names are often invoked in prayer and ritual. For instance, prayer beads called *Misbaha* (or *Tasbeeh* or *Sibha*), are used to perform *dhikr* ("remembrance of God"), including the 99 names of God (they often contain 99 or 33 beads, corresponding to the 99 Names of God). It is widely used in mystical *Sufi* practice. William C. Chittick states: "All the words of the Quran are God's words, but the most fundamental are His names. Islamic theology, both scholastic and mystical, is a great commentary upon the names of God, which reveal His nature to mankind" (122). He goes on: "There is another act of remembrance, taught explicitly by the Prophet to some of his companions and mentioned in numerous Quranic verses, and that is the 'remembrance' or 'invocation' (dhikr) of God's names….The remembrance of many different divine names is practiced by the Sufi orders" (127-128).

The public sphere, no matter which forms it takes, is a gendered sphere. Warner's notion of the bourgeois public sphere demands a logic of abstraction that, as I have noted, is not universally applied, particularly with regard to gender. What connotations does Esber's performance have in a digital context, particularly given its subject? What is the difference between the public Esber addresses and the publics her website potentially creates – she is, after all, in the moment of recorded performance, addressing a self-selected audience of art enthusiasts who made a deliberate choice to attend her performance, which is different than either consciously spending a few moments with her performance on the web or stumbling across it inadvertently. Do the kinds of gendered self-abstractions required by being part of a public, whether in the moment of performance as a member of the audience or sitting in front of a computer, unravel the intentionality of the performance itself and its exhibition online? I argue that Esber's piece transforms constructions of gender through the address and imagination of publics both in the moment of performance and the extension of that moment digitally. Furthermore, her use of a virtual exhibition space in addition to more traditional performances circumvents, or at least complicates, standard narratives of display.

Moreover, Esber's piece intersects with contemporary debates about the representation and circulation of imagery of Muslim women, as well as the role of the Internet globally in the lives of Muslim women who have access to it. Fereshteh Nouraie-Simone believes that the Internet is making it easier for Muslim women across the globe to dismantle gendered ideologies. In her introduction to *On Shifting Ground: Muslim Women in the Global Era*, she writes that "Internet technology affords writer and reader the freedom and safety of anonymity" which in turn "removes from online interactions any predetermined notions based on physical, gendered presence. It also liberates women to freely articulate repressed identity or forbidden

subjects" (xviii). She also claims that "the diffusion of diverse images of women in public – on the streets, on the television, on the stage – as well as of the voices of women – singing songs, writing on the Web, making their thoughts and feelings known – has profound cultural implications" (xviii). Those images, much like Esber's performance, upend stereotypes of Muslim women as solely oppressed subjects without agency. These phenomenon apply to both the women "who are seen and heard but also the women who see and hear them. The public act transfers to the private sphere, imprinting a new image or voice in the minds of those watching or listening, and breaking ground for others to follow" (xviii).[36] Warner writes that self- abstraction "from male bodies confirms masculinity" while self-abstraction "from female bodies denies femininity" (166). White hetero masculinity is the tacit, impartial subject position, much like the obscured Protestant ethos underlying Western secularism; the two paradigms work in tandem to create a gendered, secular public sphere. Esber's performance in the moment refuses self-abstraction and confirms feminine embodiment not through anonymity but through public display. However, because her performance is available online, it also speaks to the anonymity Nouraie-Simone values; in this case the anonymity of art consumption rather than production.

Undoubtedly, the Western concept of what art is and what it does is intrinsically linked with the reading practices I discussed earlier. I hear Esber's piece, for example, as art and not

[36] Of course, one should not over-emphasize the internet as a liberating agent. In his article on the Arab Spring, Brian T. Edwards writes that "putting the Internet in this privileged position, it seems to me, effaces or downplays the bravery and the spontaneous organization of Egyptian demonstrators by implicitly giving credit to the West for inventing technologies that created the wave of demonstrations in early 2011, from Casablanca to Damascus" (Edwards). At the same time he remarks, "Not to account for the role of the digital age, and of social media, however, would be wrong too" (Edwards). Analogously, the Internet is only a tool (and only one of many) that Muslim women use as a means of expression, revolution, and transformation. It is used to make public globally what is commonplace knowledge locally (for example, women participating in the public sphere as writers, singers, politicians, etc.). It is also used as a vehicle for public expressions and actions that are circumscribed locally. Conversely, it provides opportunities for content producers such as journalists, media outlets, and bloggers to reproduce stereotypes, and opens up the possibility of audiences re-inscribing stereotypes on what they consume and interpret online.

prayer. In U.S. public discourse, art is often spoken of as having universal, transcendental meaning that represents the values of civilization, progress, and ultimately, humanity. And of course, the art world and the Internet are mediated forums and part of the system of global capitalism. With this in mind, however, I am curious how Esber's piece might transcend the moment of performance and encounter the developing interpretive practices of the virtual – a world that is at once local and transnational. In her essay in *On Shifting Ground,* Meena Sharify-Funk writes that for contemporary Muslim women activists "the transnational has become a form of 'public space' that enables women to transcend their isolation and derive inspiration for actions from their own local realities. It is beyond the boundaries of the nation (not to mention the family and the tribe) and yet it is bounded in the same sense as the Internet: It is an open network constituted by those who actively participate in it and engage in dialogue" (251). For Sharify-Funk, the transnational and the Internet give women the opportunity to enter the public sphere from within a restricted private sphere, albeit inspired by that private sphere and their "local realities." She sees circulation as a dialogue from which many women were previously excluded.

Sharify-Funk and Esber are inserting women's voices into circulation without demanding self-abstraction. Sharify-Funk goes on to write that "in other words, it transcends the more limited statist national identity in order to explore, live, illustrate, and act on such an identity. Inherent in transnational identity is the wish for new frontiers and the desire to dwell in the 'space in between' – an interstitial space where one's identity may be local and at the same time beyond any specific locality" (251). Esber's disembodied voice, for example, becomes a circulated text, but is very much rooted in her body (given its cadence and timbre) and her

subject. The public she addresses, the world-making she envisions, does not demand that I abstract myself from my bodily particularities to include myself in her public.

While I am interested in the implications of the piece itself, I also wonder how the proliferation of performance through the form of digital art opens up the possibility of multiple interpretive frameworks. What kind of translations from live to digital must take place for Esber's piece to be intelligible? Which or what kinds of publics does it address in the moment of performance, and how does that public change when time and space are in the hands of the viewer? Esber's work, for example, is not divorced from the social landscape that produced it, including but not limited to contemporary anti-Muslim French policies and media representation that rely heavily on notions that Islam inherently represses women. A live performance in Paris, where she currently resides, challenges the idea that Islam oppresses women by publicly drawing upon a tradition of erotic literature in which the role of women is not uncomplicated. Such a performance points out cultural stereotypes of the female body that are both restrictive and celebratory by juxtaposing the female body with the Divine, using the tradition of the 99 names, and naming the vagina the temple. Yet the piece could also be interpreted as feeding into precisely those Western and fundamentalist Muslim stereotypes of women's sexuality that it intends to defy through the very act of naming; calling attention to stereotypes can paradoxically reify *and* disavow them simultaneously.

However, Esber uses English and Arabic, not English and French, which suggests that she is unmooring her work from the geography of France and from the longstanding colonial relationship between France and Lebanon. At the same time, using English underscores the global reach of the English language, gesturing towards another long history of colonialism and neo-colonialism. But I did not experience a live performance in Paris or London. The public at

the real time performance in an exhibition space is very different than the public I am a part of when I listen to it in my home. You may never see Esber perform her piece live, but after you put down this chapter you can go to her website and listen to her piece. You can even contact her through her website, as I did, to ask her about the availability of the piece online, and you might receive an enthusiastic reply as I did. I did not experience the piece at its moment of performance; my encounter with the piece through virtual and digital documentation demands translation. Digital media is a tool that enables the amplification of the artist's gesture and the multiplication of her presence. It interrogates the memory of the performance and endeavors to meet up with a particular moment in time through digital mediation.

Where Esber transforms erotic literature by merging it with devotional practice, Mourni Fatmi uses actual, physical texts to reflect upon the power of media. Fatmi is a Moroccan-born artist whose work is exhibited widely. Much of his work features elaborate calligraphy and often alludes to sacred texts and objects associated with Islam. One piece features circular saw blades bearing Qur'anic verses, while another, entitled *Brainteaser for a Moderate Muslim,* is a series of rubix cubes painted black and white to resemble the *Kaaba* in Mecca. Like Esber, Fatmi also references the 99 names in his piece *Face: 99 Names of God.* In the piece, each name is written on an individual card, inserted into a conference-style plastic badge, and hung evenly in rows on the wall.

In the Abrahamic tradition, as we have seen in Alameddine's appropriation of the Christian Bible and the Qur'an, the word is performative. Words have the power to create, transform, and incarnate. In the Qur'an, Allah's word comes to the Prophet Mohammed as a voice, instructing him to *iqra'* or "recite" – *iqra* is the root of the word Qur'an or the "reciting." There is an immediate connection between creation, language, and writing, as Jean Sulzberger

points out: "God says through His prophets, 'Be!' (*kun),* and this command and all that issues from it as first written in the Quran in *jazm*, the earliest Arabic script, and the progenitor of the famous Kufic script" (80). The aesthetic and devotional tradition of rendering the Qur'an in calligraphy is long-standing, and calligraphy is used to adorn architecture, manuscripts, sculpture, and paintings.[37] Calligraphy does not have a simple relationship between sign and signifier, but becomes a sacred art through its representation of revelation, for "after the Quranic revelation, Arabic script become the carrier of the revelation to the Muslim world" (Sulzberger, 80). Thus, as Titus Burckhardt writes, calligraphy "represents the visible body of the Divine Word" (116). Religious calligraphy, as a written expression of faith, is closely linked to the aesthetics of spiritual iteration that Esber's piece evokes. The very patterns of calligraphy speak to Esber's iteration as the "distended, arched, or rounded letters endlessly reproducing themselves in a harmonious order that is somehow felt, are symbolic of the order of nature which in always changing is always repeating itself" (Sulzberger, 80). Repetition, as with Esber's words, is part of the mystical effect of reading calligraphy. Esber's piece draws on the devotional practice of recitation, calling to mind both public, communal prayer and private invocation. Whereas Fatmi's piece conjures a history of public displays of elaborate, highly wrought calligraphic arts that he transforms through his stark, minimalist representation of God's names, insulated from one another by plastic, their connective meaning contracted. Stylized religious calligraphy in art and architecture is meant to inspire its viewers with piety and awe. In Fatmi's piece, the power generated by words in the Qur'an, in prayerful recitation, and in calligraphic expression, is diminished by their commercial packaging, ready for consumption.

[37] For a comprehensive history of Arabic calligraphy, see: Blair, Sheila. *Islamic Calligraphy*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006. Print.

Face: 99 Names of God reveals a disjunction between real-world practices and their sacred inception: words are powerful in the moment of utterance, but what do they mean when they are enclosed and displayed? The names of God clearly have a religious origin, but here they are, in plastic cases, ready to be picked up and worn. The names are at once isolated in their plastic cases and in community with each other on the wall. They symbolize membership in a particular community and religious discourse – many people "wear" these names after all – but the size and casing represent the nametag as an authoritarian symbol of identity. Because the cards are identical, one also senses regimentation and assimilation, suggesting criticism of a homogenized, global interpretation of Islam without respect for the diversity of its practitioners.

Nonetheless, the names are by no means completely severed from their sacred origins: gazing upon all the names at once can be a mystical, transcendent experience. It is overwhelming to see them side by side. Instead of reading each one, the viewer can reverently absorb the entire display. Winegar writes that "in the dominant framing of Middle Eastern arts in the U.S., Islam is seen as a stricture, something from which artists should undoubtedly want to free themselves, or at least find moderation within it. Art becomes a wholly secular tool of freedom from religious expression – not, for example, from foreign domination" (667). Esber and Fatmi do not frame their use of religious citation as an uncomplicated critique of religion; they are not breaking free from submission, and they are not lifting veils. Rather, by appropriating and transforming the 99 names of God, they question the interpretive practices of both mainstream Islam and Western secularism. They take a familiar religious symbol and make it unfamiliar, subverting its meaning and challenging our cultural reflexes. Fatmi's piece asks how homogenization renders the numinous tradition of calligraphy banal, while at the same time retaining something awe-inspiring in its effect. By associating women's genitals with the

Divine, Esber does not slur the tradition of the 99 names, rather, she elevates women to deific heights. Thus both pieces – the sonorous voice of Esber and the mesmerizing patterns of Fatmi's piece – reflect respect for the mystical and aesthetic traditions of Islam.

Fatmi's work teases out the layers of meaning embedded in our cultural symbols and questions the function of narrative in bestowing sacredness and profanity upon them. Two series in particular address the theme of terrorism, spectacle, and representation, the photograph series *Evolution or Death* and the installation project *Save Manhattan. Evolution or Death* is a series of photographs of people with books strapped to their midsections with duct tape, including the Qur'an. They open their shirts or jackets to reveal the books, which are connected to each other with wires, suggesting bombs. The people appear to be Caucasian and include women opening their coats and shirts to reveal their bras underneath, thus subverting the stereotype of the distinctly un-modern Muslim man as suicide bomber, and disassociating violence from racialized masculinity. The representation of suicide bombs as texts, or of texts as suicide bombs, raises questions about violence, circulation, and the archive.

Asad writes about the widespread assumption that the Qur'an's meaning is fixed and thus inevitably creates *Islamic* terrorism (as though terrorism can have a religious quality). Reading practices make this viewpoint possible: Muslims object to the Danish cartoons because they have faulty, non-modern reading practices, yet the Qur'an is dangerous because modern reading practices cannot apply unless modern people apply them. Both the readers and the text are read as resistant to modernity. In *Evolution or Death*, having the models open up their clothes to expose the Qur'an performs Western stereotypes of the Qur'an: its ideology is lurking underneath Muslim exteriors, no matter how enlightened they seem, and its resistance to modern interpretive practices renders the Qur'an an explosive text. At the same time, the work plays

with a paradox: danger does not seem to lie in reading the Qur'an alone, but in connecting it with other books. Additionally, most of the books are not religious texts but political or literary, or about cultural movements such as surrealism. Political and artistic movements, Fatmi suggests, can be just as earth-shattering as a bomb or the Qur'an. The title of the photographic series insinuates that evolution can be found in texts or art, but by representing texts as bombs, the artist attempts to circumnavigate the linkage of art and humanity. The wires linking the texts to each other evoke the transmission of ideas and intertextuality, and suggest the possibilities inherent in connecting and interpreting texts, giving all readers agency. Neither texts nor their readers are passive.

Save Manhattan is a series of installations depicting the Twin Towers. The first piece uses books, all written post 9/11 except for two copies of the Qur'an, which are used to cast a shadow that mimics the pre 9/11 skyline. The second piece uses VHS tapes, suggesting at once the media frenzy following 9/11, the famous Osama bin Laden tape, the capturing of images for posterity, and the restriction of memory in recorded time. Finally, the third piece consists of speakers which play loops of recorded city sounds, such as car horns and subways, along with sounds of violence such as cars crashing and explosions. The speakers are arranged so that they too cast a shadow that mimics the New York skyline complete with Twin Towers. The Twin Towers – much like a religious symbol – can evoke a passionate response in many viewers. They have become a symbol for American fortitude for some, a symbol of its reckless militarism for others. The World Trade Center is in many ways a sacred symbol. It is at once a temple of capitalism, which is often cited as the reason it was chosen for destruction, and also the site of the inexpressible loss of thousands of individuals whose lives and death resist this kind of critical allegory. The ground upon which it stood has become a pilgrimage site, involved in a

controversy over whether the building of a nearby Muslim community center and mosque would profane its memory.[38] *Save Manhattan* links the towers to the narratives that created and aggrandized its sacredness in the American collective imagination, and to the narratives used to justify U.S. military force and global empire. The books, tapes, and speakers all cast shadows of the towers, and these shadows suggest the lingering specter of 9/11 on global politics and individual lives. They reflect the disjunction between the reality of the event and its narration, calling to mind of course Plato's cave, the perfect American form whose shadowy presence obscures the fallout from the event. The tapes invoke the spectacle of media, the images of destruction played in a continuous loop until they became sacred visions, and the rhetorical process of framing and displaying the narrative of 9/11.

By having the two copies of the Qur'an create the silhouette of the Twin Towers in *Save Manhattan 01,* Fatmi establishes connections between the sacred book and the towers. The silhouette draws attention to the sacred status ascribed to both book and building; the towers as a financial Mecca, so to speak, and a site of rupture, and the Qur'an as the supposed inspiration for the terrorist act. Both the book and towers are at once menacing and sacrosanct. However, in *Save Manhattan 01,* connecting the towers does not demonstrate a one way bridge, for example, the simplistic notion that Islam leads to terrorism. Rather it imagines 9/11 as inaugurating an eternal connection between the two, one that suggests the potential of exchange while being fraught with the possibility of its own undoing through continued acts of violence by both the U.S. and terrorists.

[38] For information about the controversy, see: Rohrer, Finlo. "Is 'Ground Zero Mosque' Debate fanning the flames?" *BBC News.* 25 August 2010. Web. 3 June 2013. http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-11076846. For information about the Cordoba House itself (often referred to in the press as the "Ground Zero Mosque") see: "Cordoba House." *The Cordoba Initiative.* 2012. Web. 3 June 2013. http://www.cordobainitiative.org/cordobahouse/

Using books and VHS tapes to represent the skyline also suggests the continuity of grand narratives in shaping our response to events like 9/11, and the ways in which people use narrative to make sense of loss and to justify aggression. Whose story is 9/11 to tell? By representing the towers with Qur'ans and making Islam a part of the narrative process, Elahi challenges perceptions of authenticity. At the same time, the VHS tapes in *Save Manhattan 02* and coaxical cables in *Evolution or Death* hint at regression; these are, after all, technological remnants that have been replaced by digital technology. These archaic materials point to the rapid pace of consumer culture and mass media, in which one form of communication is quickly replaced by another, and by doing so asks what is being rendered obsolete and whether these rapid changes in form also somehow alter our relationship to the information they transmit. The VHS tapes also mark how forms of media contribute to the commercialization of tragedy. The piece forces the audience member to ask, what does it mean to be a member of a public that receives its information through mercantile forms? The VHS tapes and novels in Elahi's work symbolize the process of editing information for dispersal and consumption; they underscore technologies of stewardship and expertise in story-telling.

Winegar notes, "Generally event organizers do not seek out artistic uses of religion to advocate for freedom from things like military occupation. Thus, cultural production shaped by mainstream Islam is denied inclusion in the category of art. The important goal remains to highlight, through art, artistic approaches to Islam that make for an acceptable bridge of cultural understanding" (667). The aim of Western curators of Middle Eastern or Muslim art is to choose works that reflect Westerners' beliefs about Islam and the Middle East back to themselves. This does not include expressly religious art or explicit critiques of capitalism, neocolonialism, or Western military, economic, or military influence; it does include critiques of Islamic

fundamentalism. These kinds of exhibits create acceptable bridges of cultural understanding that Western audiences feel comfortable crossing. Secularism works here as a cultural attribute that serves to showcase the best that humanity has to offer. *Save Manhattan* and *Evolution or Death* work outside of the parameters of accepted frameworks for post 9/11 art: namely, unambiguous critiques of Muslim identified violence, fanaticism, and terrorism. Fatmi portrays suicide bombers and depicts the Twin Towers in way that do not explicitly critique the motives of those involved in terrorist acts, but rather juxtaposes fanaticism with symbols of the media and cultural artifacts, including texts, VHS tapes, and city soundscapes. His work is not an unproblematized critique of fundamentalism nor is it a celebration of destruction. It finds complicity in Western modes of cultural production and representation with the violence of terrorism.

Breaking the Veils reflects the post 9/11 interest in creating cross-cultural understandings between Islam, often represented uncritically as the Middle East, and the secular West. Such exhibitions attempt to mobilize the questionable values of multiculturalism for managing and translating immigrant and diasporic populations. The works I discuss in this chapter use both form itself and, in the case of Esber, digital exhibition to transform and challenge our understanding of secularism, both in terms of its limitations and its possibilities. Fatmi's work on media and textual terror comments on the interrelationship of mainstream and ethnicized economies through the lens of Orientalist media fantasies, the War on Terror, and the commodification of cultural and aesthetic products. Through his VHS towers, the realm of aesthetic production becomes a proxy for politics and vice versa. He questions the ways in which narratives of violence become vehicles for participation in the aesthetic economy, opportunities for identity construction and political expression through the marketing of cultural difference. All of these works evoke texts and the circulation of ideas, from Esber's borrowings

from erotic literature to Fatmi's use of physical books and tapes. All use exposure as statement, whether through the exposure of female eroticism or the exposure of open coats.

CONCLUSION

Hijacking Secularism

> Nearly 30 years ago, the federal courts had to place limits on New York City police surveillance to protect law-abiding citizens who happened to be politically engaged on civil rights and other issues. A motion filed in federal court last week by the lawyers in the Handschu case makes a strong case that the city has simply ignored these guidelines in its antiterrorism fight and is targeting Muslim groups because of their religious affiliation, not because they present any risk….According to court documents, the New York City police routinely selected Muslim groups for surveillance and infiltration, even when they did not sponsor unlawful or terrorist acts and were not accused of contributing to them….The motion charges the city with violating the Handschu agreement by systematically retaining records of conversations in public places that do not pertain to potential unlawful activity ("Spying on Law-Abiding Muslims").
>
> In a few months, the U.S. Air Force will deploy to Afghanistan what is essentially an all-seeing eye. Named after the ever-alert snake-haired monsters of Greek mythology, the "Gorgon Stare" system is a drone-based sensor with a vastly increased coverage area. Compared to current airborne video systems that provide warfighters with a view of perhaps several hundred square feet of ground, Gorgon Stare will allow operators to watch everything in a two-and-a-half-mile area (Kenyon).[39]

I begin with these two instances of enhanced surveillance techniques on Muslim populations to draw attention to surveillance technologies as socio-political disciplines inflected by secular values of appropriate modern religious practice. In this conclusion, I ask how these kinds of techniques are being critiqued and co-opted as tools of performance in social and artistic frameworks, and how one artist in particular – Hasan Elahi – is using digital information networks to comment upon the post 9/11 climate. I examine Hasan Elahi's web based piece

[39] The Gorgon Stare was developed by MAV 6. Its founder, Jay Harrison, describes the company, saying that Mav 6 "combines the innovation and agility of the commercial technology industry with the full-service capabilities and reliability of the large systems integrators. Edges are the new front lines of war. And all the people who fight on these fronts are edgefighters. General Blount and I committed to positioning Mav6 as a focal point for connecting edgefighters, national security people, technology people, and policy people, to design, source, fund, and deliver the very best innovations that America and the world have to offer to our edgefighters. Our goal was and continues to be to create the premier defense design company by harnessing the power of multi-disciplinary design thinking to rapidly deliver systems of capabilities – and not just new widgets – to edgefighters when and where they are needed most" (Harrison).

Tracking Transience and ask what is generated and circulated by art in the digital realm. I contend that Elahi's work articulates meaning through the form of public address itself: through the circulation of digital images. It addresses the public in a way that continually risks its own circulation as art and calls into question the conditions of artistic production. By using GPS in conjunction with Google maps, the piece becomes complicit with certain aspects of surveillance economies. At the same time, Elahi structures his work as part of a critique of prohibitory secularism's infiltration of its own self-declared private domain. He transforms literary genres such as the diary and surveillance technologies such as satellite photography in order to critique human rights violations as well as expand upon secular understandings of the role of art. The role of the internet and social media in revolutionary movements, for example in the Arab Spring and the Taksim square protests in Turkey, has in many ways been overstated. Yet social media cannot be ignored as both a regulatory tool and an organizational (and potentially revolutionary) tool. Elahi's piece requires the audience to ask whether the digital be transformative, and if so, in what ways?

Hasan Elahi is a Bangladeshi-born, American artist. He began the project *Tracking Transience: The Orwell Project* in response to his experience of being wrongly named in a terrorist watch list, being subjected to interrogations and polygraphs, and having to account for all of his movements before and after 9/11. After his innocence was determined, he decided to voluntarily track his movements online. His site includes tens of thousands of images stretching back for seven years. Elahi has documented nearly every waking hour of his life during that time. He posts copies of every debit card transaction, so you can see what he bought, where, and when. A GPS device in his pocket reports his real-time physical location on a map. In his editorial for *The New York Times* on the project, Elahi says:

> These images seem empty, and could be anywhere, but they're not; they are extremely specific records of my exact travels to particular places. There are 46,000 images on my site. I trust that the F.B.I. has seen all of them. Agents know where I've bought my duck-flavored paste, or kimchi, laundry detergent and chitlins; because I told them everything. I also provided screenshots of my financial data, communications records and transportation logs. Visitors to my site can cross-reference these records with my images in a way that's similar to how the F.B.I. cross-references the very same databases. I provided information from third parties (including my bank, phone company, etc.) who can verify that I was at the locations indicated, on the dates and times specified on my Web site (Elahi, "You Want to Track Me? Here You Go, F.B.I").

Obviously a commentary on surveillance, the project is ostensibly addressed to the U.S. government. His server logs show hits from the "Department of Homeland Security, the C.I.A., the National Reconnaissance Office and the Executive Office of the President" (Elahi). The project is also a comment on information as a commodity; in an interview with *Wired Magazine,* Elahi says, "It's economics," he says. "I flood the market" (Thompson). The market he is flooding is intelligence collection, and he floods it with information about himself.

Tracking Transience points to the difficultly of tracking time, even as the project records itself into perpetuity on the Internet. In the opening scene of *1984* the protagonist Winston begins writing a diary. It is fitting then that Elahi's piece should evoke the totalitarianism of *1984* and also be in the form of a diary, recording for Big Brother his every movement in time and space. Written ostensibly for the self the diary also addresses an unknown future audience. Online photographic diaries are of course quite different than a narrative written about oneself to oneself, or to a self that one imagines as different than oneself

in the moment, perhaps a self that is better suited to explicate the complexities of the narrative at hand. The online diary is written not for a future self but a potential and unknowable present audience; the audience is identifiable through user logs only *after* the diary has been accessed. A broad transformation of the diary genre, the online diary is penned for public consumption, depending, of course, upon its privacy settings, and even these can be less secure than the physical lock of a diary or a particularly shrewd hiding place. Yet the same rhetorical shaping takes place in the choice of framing and subject for both physical and digital diaries.

Surveillance as a thematic concern conditions the structure of the piece: the audience's position as spectator is identical to that of a surveillance operator; yet one who, without a serious commitment of time, will ultimately learn very little about Elahi, which is the point of flooding the viewer with information. As Elahi says of his website, "the interface I use is deliberately user-unfriendly. A lot of work is required to thread together the thousands of available points of information. By putting everything about me out there, I am simultaneously telling everything and nothing about my life" (Elahi). The piece is certainly humorous; it underscores the absurdity of Elahi's situation, and the thought of F.B.I. agents looking through images of the urinals Elahi uses is comical. Yet its comedy is related to ideology: the rhetorical clarity and self-evidence of the piece depends upon the viewer being in on the joke. The piece also critiques the reflexive humanizing drama of the media and its impulse to depict human rights actors as victims or perpetrators. Elahi uses the tools of documentary immediacy – the constant influx of "real" pictures - without the stock images of vulnerability familiar to purveyors of human rights narratives: women, children, elderly; the maimed, vulnerable, and dispossessed. The subject of the human rights violation – namely, Elahi – is not even shown. Instead, the spectator's desire for narrative is satisfied by a camera logic that explicitly mimics surveillance. Thus the piece

transforms the form of the human rights narrative; instead of a sympathetic member of the public, the viewer becomes a part of the GPS of human rights, locating and recognizing Elahi's position as victim, citizen, and activist, all while regulating his movements.

Tracking Transience does not show or capture action. Action is only implied by the bills showing that goods have been bought, or the train before it is boarded, or the urinal before (one fervently hopes) it is used. After viewing photograph after photograph, locations themselves began to seem as transient and shifting as time, and thumbnail after thumbnail of meals don't translate into the artist's experience in eating them. The posterity brought into being by the act of photographing and uploading is a questionable one: what is Elahi recording? I cannot draw out one photograph as I might one sentence of a diary, because you may never be able to find it. But Elahi's maps remind the user that the artist is an actual person and not a disembodied voice on the Internet. It mattered very much where he was located on 9/11, where he was going and where he had been; it mattered where he was from, and what the map of his life looked like.

Charles Taylor uses the metaphor of a map to explain his theory of the modern social imaginary: "The understanding implicit in practice stands to social theory in the same relation that my ability to get around a familiar environment stands to a (literal) map of this area. I am very well able to orient myself without ever having to adopt the standpoint of overview the map offers me. Similarly, for most of human history and for most of social life, we function through the grasp we have on the common repertory, without benefit of theoretical overview" (*Modern Social Imaginaries*, 26). He offers a theoretical overview with his metaphorical map, but does not indicate how the land we are actually standing upon and our relationship to it determines what the map looks like. Spatial narratives play a role in the development of the social imaginary, and it follows that spatial narratives play a role in our understanding of publics.

Moving back to Taylor's theoretical map, how do I orient myself given the ideological and physical maps Elahi provides? Do I relate to Elahi the persecuted artist, wrongly accused, who thumbs his nose at the authorities by mapping his every move for them? I cannot honestly put myself in league with the authorities, as I am somewhat indifferent to the particularities of what I am being shown (what airport, view, or café) and much more interested in the fact that I am being shown something at all. Elahi tracks his movements without punctual rhythms, and his maps are continuously shifting. But the flashing red arrow that indicates his location at any given moment roots him with reference to my position, and I read his times and dates with reference to my own experience of the simultaneous time we are experiencing. I can imagine myself as one among many, anywhere in the world, relating myself in time and space to Elahi's map. Do I only participate in the public address of Elahi's piece in the exact moment of access? Do I continue to be a part of this public when I no longer feel in sync with him in time? Elahi's project constructs his own meanings for private and public. He voluntarily and publicly deprives himself of the privacy the United State government violated (in private, no less) and questions the very concept of privacy in which many of our notions of human rights are enshrined.

In a culture that adores social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, in which many people record their every movement, upload photos of their vacations, homes, and families, and tell readers their likes, dislikes, and favorite breakfast cereals, Elahi's piece seems less subversive than aligned with our voluntary disintegration of the spheres of public and private. The scene Elahi *envisions* through his piece – oriented as it were to a "horizon of difference" - is a scene in which persons and citizens of the Muslim faith are not routinely harassed and deprived of their right to privacy. But the scene he *encounters* is one in which monitoring and surveillance, whether through the ubiquitous cameras on city streets and lights, or new facial

recognition software which enables people to search for photographs online without relying on tags, or the global project of Google Maps, are accepted as normal features of social life.

In previous chapters, I argued that Kahf explored the ways in which Muslim practice in the United States defied secular understandings of public and private, and that Alameddine's novel demanded public recognition for people – namely HIV positive gay men and the victims of sectarian violence in Lebanon- who are excluded from democratic promises of private religious and sexual freedom. I looked at the ways in which Esber merges female eroticism with public forms of prayer, and how Fatmi challenges public, dominant Western narratives of Islam and of 9/11. Elahi's piece demonstrates not a shift in the realms of secular private and public life – for, as we have seen with Alameddine, those excluded from the mainstream have always been regulated – but an exposure of those regulatory workings.

While interviewing Elahi on his satirical news program, comedian Stephen Colbert says: "So if somebody really wants to guard their privacy they should make it something no one wants by not having it anymore" ("Episode 62"). In response, Elahi points out that if 300 million U.S. citizens give up this kind of information, it will require 300 million employees to keep track of the "data flood" ("Episode 62"). With the revelation of PRISM we realize that government does not need 300 intelligence agents, it just needs algorithms to monitor our levels of "foreignness" or "threats."[40] During a keynote at the IFA in Berlin, Google CEO Eric Schmidt said of Google, "We can suggest what you should do next, what you care about. Imagine: We know where you are, we know what you like" (Schmidt). Surveillance here is linked to consumerism, and in fact

[40] "PRISM is a system the NSA uses to gain access to the private communications of users of nine popular Internet services. We know that access is governed by Section 702 of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, which was enacted in 2008. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper tacitly admitted PRISM's existence in a blog post last Thursday. A classified PowerPoint presentation leaked by Edward Snowden states that PRISM enables 'collection directly from the servers' of Microsoft, Yahoo, Google, Facebook and other online companies" (Lee).

to information that we already, like Elahi encouraged us to do, give up through our use of sites like Google and Facebook. In *Tracking Transcience,* humanity is not portrayed as a universal, shared condition, or even an ethical category encompassing all humans. It is not, as in Esber, embodied by the evocation of both physicality and transcendence. It is not, as in Fatmi, revealed in new ways through the decontextualization of dominant media narratives and sacred images. Rather, humanity is shown in habits of consumption, as much of what Elahi records are these habits, from the food he eats to the goods he purchases. It makes sense that if corporations like Google know what we do and what we want by scrutinizing our every move online, Elahi's digital performance piece on publicity and privacy should circle around his consumerism.

Elahi uses the online diary form because unlike a published book or serial, it allows for continuous, uninterrupted access to his life, unbound by the passage of years and unmoored from place despite his constant mapping. The Internet may be seemingly formless, or its form may be the screen its users manipulate. It can also however be read as a vehicle for national or secular values. The balance between the value of free expression and the right to privacy on the Internet is another ongoing debate playing out through Google, which is transforming our very notions of public and private. The very surveillance techniques Elahi is protesting through his project are perhaps pointing to the relationship between neo-liberalism, globalization, national security, and the dissolution of privacy. After all, Schmidt says the following about privacy concerns: "If you have something that you don't want anyone to know, maybe you shouldn't be doing it in the first place. If you really need that kind of privacy, the reality is that search engines - including Google - do retain this information for some time and it's important, for example, that we are all subject in the United States to the Patriot Act and it is possible that all that information could be made available to the authorities" (Metz). Of course, we recently found out, it has been.

Schmidt's words demonstrate that the very notion of the spheres of private and public as constituted through secularism narratives are disintegrating: every action outside the actual physical space of the home is open for public consumption. And the home itself –in marked contrast to the divisions between domestic and public that distinguish secularism – is open as well, be it on Google Street View, or the Internet searches one makes from the living room that are archived by Google and other search engines, and are available to the government upon request. The public indicated by *Tracking Transience* cannot operate unequivocally within the terms of secular/religious categorizations of public and private because it represents and critiques both the artificial division between public and private promised by the United States government and implicated by Elahi's own experience as a target of surveillance. Elahi's project, through publicness, aims to transform our understanding of the public sphere, but ends up underscoring the frightening changes the Internet is enabling through his very use of monitoring tools. The space of circulation for this project is a social entity that is simultaneously intimate and public, which reflects these changes. As Elahi says, "I've discovered the best way to protect your privacy is to give it away" (Thompson).

It is that willingness to give away our privacy that concerns Jill Lepore, as she writes about the dissolution of the rhetorical public self in the United States. She argues that "Secret government programs that pry into people's private affairs are bound up with ideas about secrecy and privacy that arose during the process by which the mysterious became secular" (33). She goes on to say that "something creepy happened when mystery became secular, secrecy became a technology, and privacy became a right. The inviolability of the self replaced the inscrutability of God" (35). When mystery becomes the province of governments and not religion, it becomes, as evidenced by the work of the authors and artists discussed in this dissertation, entangled in

secular technologies of assimilation, exclusion, and surveillance. Thus Elahi's piece turns on the notion of display. It asks happens what happens when citizens are deprived of both privacy *and* public-ness through secret detentions.

Tracking Transience: The Orwell Project uses a technological framework to comment on the changing conditions of privacy and publicity post-9/11. Elahi's diary of digital images and maps is a self-generated virtual surveillance system that mimics, parodies, and produces the commonality of public scrutiny for Muslim Americans. While Elahi's piece records his movements in specific moments in time, creating a map of his time, his digital archive also critiques what digital media, and theories of media, are capable of in this age of vast personal exposure and government surveillance. Similarly, by converting the written diary into photographic surveillance, Elahi injects the aesthetics of everyday reality into hyper-politicized discourses on Muslims. Each of the works included in my dissertation engage with the restrictions of prohibitory secularism – which promises religious freedom but is undermined by its foundational ideologies. All in some way also engage with exposure: when Khadra removes her veil in a secluded, private space in a public garden in Syria, her veil becomes a metaphor for the spiritual exposure of a believer's ravaged and precious self to the Divine. When she drapes it over her head upon her return to the United States it becomes a metaphor for her political awakening. Mohammed, through his art and storytelling, exposes the violent biases of institutional religion and the secular state, as well as the political machinations that led to the slaughter and displacement of thousands in Lebanon, and the death of thousands from AIDS. And each responds by using form – from Alameddine's subversion of the *mu'arada,* to Esber's co-mingling of ritual devotion with erotica, to Elahi's online diary – to dismantle the division between public and private, and set a new course for the secularization narrative.

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