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“Coerced and Irrational”: Challenging Representations of Muslim Women in  
the Context of the U.S. War on Terror

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## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

“Coerced and Irrational”: Challenging Representations of Muslim Women in the Context of the U.S. War on Terror

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Representations of Muslim women have been confined to a narrative of coercion and irrationality, where their words are often disregarded in favor of more common tropes and ethnic stereotypes. What often goes unnoticed is the way in which assumptions regarding the religion/secular divide in the United States contribute to the spread of these representations globally. The U.S., where religious overtones dominate political debates, is often aligned with secularism and its sister narratives modernity and progress while religion for Muslim identified subjects is made its opposite. This association with the past, with backwardness, had been detrimental for individuals who have tried to organize politically within this identity. Using Rey Chow’s theory of the ethnic stereotype to elaborate this further, it becomes easier to see how assumptions regarding religion permeate figures like the female suicide bomber, the controversial resignation of Brooklyn principal Debbie Almontaser, and the current drive to provide religious specific services to Arab Muslims in New York. This analysis helps to draw attention to this phenomenon as an issue for feminist activism.

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The climate toward Muslim communities in the United States remains hostile. We are now ten years from the events of 9/11 but the focus and surveillance on Arab Muslims remains stronger than ever. Recent debates have settled on finding American terror cells, pockets of radicalism that have erupted that fund or promote terrorist ideologies. If militarism in Afghanistan and Iraq were believed to prevent radicalism from coming to the United States, it would seem that pressure is building to locate the origins of “homegrown” terror. This tension has been most visible in the discussions around the events at Fort Hood Texas, the planned Islamic Cultural Center in Lower Manhattan, and the forced resignation of a Brooklyn principal of Yemeni heritage, and the most recent Congressional panel on the willingness of Muslim Americans to aid in the war on terror. In response to a national acceptance of the failure of the war on terror to keep violence geographically elsewhere, the move to focus on the spread of radicalism on U.S. soil has led to an increased scrutiny of immigrant groups that have previously gone unnoticed.

Muslim women were invoked in the earliest parts of the Afghanistan and Iraq war as oppressed subjects in need of American saving. Now as the U.S. national psyche has come to realize the failure of this project, questions remain as to how Muslim women fair as objects of these wars. As Lila Abu-Lughod has suggested, it is time to move beyond the either or discussion of whether “Muslim women” have or don’t have rights. Instead, we must look toward the ways in which “Muslim women’s rights” is a transformative, further othering women that are identified or self-identified as Muslim. While much has been done to displace a hierarchical transnational Western feminist version of human rights discourse, which rests on an assumption that Muslim women are oppressed and

victimized, domestic discourses about “Muslim women’s rights” or “Muslim Women” seem to revolve around American ethnic and religious figurations of Arab that regulate how Muslim identified subjects are represented. While the war on terror has increased the urgency of this discussion, it is not primarily a discourse about Arabs as terrorist that is intrinsic for this identity to stick, it is religion as a term of tension in American life that makes this contentious representation work, or stick.

The female suicide bomber is an important figure in the background of representations of Muslim women in the United States. This is not because she is actually representative of a U.S. Muslim subject but because she is a figure where tensions regarding gender, violence, and Islam have been elaborated. I will use representations of the female suicide bomber to discuss a longstanding anxiety in ‘secular’ societies with historical narratives about religion and violence. While it has been common to blame religion for war and persecution in per-modern times, this does not provide adequate complexity for discussing how religion and violence are contextualized in the present. In the case of the female suicide bomber, analysts have struggled to articulate a clear relationship (or lack of relationship) between her actions and the history of martyrdom in Islam. Theories of the male suicide bomber are more likely to blame Islam, due to a large body of work by Orientalist scholars, for this kind of behavior.

Many scholars have attempted to remedy this association of Islam with violence by downplaying the presence of violent discourses in Islamic jurisprudence and tradition. However, this has had an equally problematic effect, where there is a correct and incorrect interpretation of tradition, pushing religious subjects into two impossible and extreme positions. All of these representations of Islam allow the West to represent itself

as the modern and logical authority over violent and chaotic traditions. This places religious subjects and those who are associated with religion as backward and irrational. This relationship between religion and ethnicity is an important space to theorize because I believe it has important consequences for any organization trying to work with or organize around an Arab or Muslim identity.

As recent feminist studies have hoped to leave open a space for women to practice/perform a religious identity as an important ethical subject “self fashioning,” to borrow a term from Saba Mahmood, this still leaves the space of religion untheorized for the feminist/gender project. I will suggest that leaving religion untheorized in this manner does not help feminists to acquire a better understanding of Muslim identities but merely contributes to a kind of religious “bracketing” from public discussion and debate. If religion always leads to this kind of polarization between a good religious subject and a bad one, and if religion enables a dismissal of the subject as irrational, is it useful to try to generalize about a religious community or group? Are there other ways to discuss the collective aspects of religion without falling into this trap?

What does this kind of labeling mean on a transnational scale? I am concerned with the way these representations behave in New York City because it is what Sassen calls a “Global City,” a space where corporations and tremendous concentration of capital is concentrated. It is also a space where a tremendous amount of capital is put into foundations that provide aid and services to populations all over the world. I will argue this echoes the kind of narrative that has been applied to women in Egypt and the West Bank and those narratives have established a range of acceptable behavior for Muslim

women transnationally. As these narratives turn up and reoccur in the public imaginary, I would argue these narratives are reliant on “religion” as a source for their potency.

Constantly articulated as objects, Muslim women then need to be acted upon by American interests. In the global city, projects that aim to serve Arab immigrants must balance their conscription to further this nationalistic agenda, to make their community American they must weed out the “backward” and “unmodern” elements – and to justify their existence they inevitably reconstruct this problematic figure of the coerced Muslim woman, malleable and prone to manipulation. In the context of New York City, “Muslim women” as the project that Abu-Lughod questions, is reinvigorated and exported in the forms of policy briefs and international funds to other parts of the world.

This is only one of the technologies that preserve a conceptually dominant “West” intact over a feminized and subordinate “East.” However, it is not only Arab Americans and Muslim subjects who must suffer through the problematic religion as identity conundrum, but it is also a conceptualization that hinders competing representations of the body and its affects. What is inherent within religious discourses that make them so volatile and problematic for maintaining the “modern” hegemony of the West? In many ways, religious discourses acknowledge and give meaning to affects of the body where the modern renders them problematic. Elaine Scarry and Talal Asad, with differing opinions of the role of the secular, acknowledge the powerful creative power of religion acting with the body. I allude to this potential in the last part of this project as a place to interject into these problematic representations.

## Chapter 1: Representations of the Female Suicide Bomber

In August 2009, in the heat of American debates over the withdrawal of troops from Iraq, the New York Times featured an interview with a would-be female suicide bomber in their Sunday magazine. Much of the increasing violence was blamed on sectarian power struggles within the Iraqi community as opposed to conflicts between terrorist groups and U.S forces that had dominated the earlier years of the war. Attempts and completed attacks by suicide bombers against other Iraqis became even more prevalent during this period. While there had been considerable speculation as to why women rather than men volunteered for suicide operations, there had been little contact been very few opportunities to interview an intended female suicide bomber. Baida, an Iraqi prisoner in a detention center for women and her cellmate, Ranya, are carefully interviewed over a period of several months by two women, Alissa Rubin, a journalist, and an Iraqi translator, Anwar Ali.<sup>1</sup> The search for a gendered motivation for suicide terror was at the heart of what directed the flow of the story and both the journalist and the translator draw attention to themselves and their feelings toward the two prisoners throughout the article. The story juggles many of the dominant theories as to why women become involved in suicide operations while also trying to find unique insights from the words that the two prisoners provide.

From early on there seems to be gap between the narrative that Rubin provides and the details that are quoted from Baida. Rubin contextualizes the majority of the interview with examples of how Iraqi society is oppressive for women and uses this to find a clear causal relationship for the motivation to become a female suicide bomber.

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<sup>1</sup> Alissa J. Rubin is known for her frequent contributions to the NYT "At War" blog which covers news about Afghanistan and Iraq.

She suspects that in a country where she believes all other choices are controlled, volunteering for a suicide operation is a way to “control one’s destiny” and that it gives some women “a sense of being special.” Yet, as the story goes on Rubin has difficulty sustaining this hypothesis when Baida explains that her brothers, cousins, and father were all ‘mujahideen’ and making I.E.D.’s for suicide missions. She had also participated in these activities by going to the market to buy supplies and smuggle them into other areas. Baida’s statements do not indicate that she was forced into these activities but that she had decided the terms by which she would participate. She explains to both Rubin and Ali, how she justifies killing American forces and the Iraqi soldiers that are accompanying them, and relays some hesitation in the case of murdering other Muslims. Surprisingly, Rubin then proceeds to narrate these statements as Baida’s struggle to have control over her own life. “The group dynamic seemed designed to make participants feel as if they were freely choosing their destiny. That sense of freedom was an important component of their metamorphosis into suicide bombers. It was certainly important to Baida, who felt she controlled little in her life, to feel in control of her death.” Rubin is conflicted as to how to portray Baida – as it is not clear that she is a victim, a soldier, a religious zealot, or a monstrosity produced by Iraqi society.

The reporter continues describing Baida’s decision to become a suicide bomber as a kind of conversion to radicalism. “Her cell members announced their readiness for a suicide mission in front of others in the group, making a public commitment, signaling they had crossed an invisible border and embraced the idea of a certain kind of death that would also bring membership in a holy community.” The connection between the religious community and deciding to become a suicide bomber is reiterated over and

over, despite the comments from an Iraqi police detective who asserts that women become suicide bombers for a variety of reasons. Rubin brings up the ‘extreme’ religiosity of the community that Ranya comes from, citing the lack of televisions and the observance of obscure practices to point out a connection to radical Islam. Yet when Ranya admits to being victimized by her husband and her family, she is believed to not have been telling the truth. The translator makes this the subject of a strangely gendered follow up article.<sup>2</sup> While both women’s words are often present in the article they are contextualized by an assumption that Ranya and Baida are unwilling to confess their motivation to participate in suicide operations and are unable to adequately do so.

This article is not unusual in its propensity to waver between these extreme explanations for women’s agency in the context of war and violence. Women are not assumed to be active, or ‘agents,’ in violent conflict. Their connection with motherhood and family consistently produce them outside of the domain of war and conflict, while women are often disproportionately affected by violent conflict. As is evident from many attempts to produce a theory of female suicide bombers, the social sciences continue to wrestle with women as ‘agents’ of terrorism and women as victims of violence and warfare, where their role is largely imagined as passive and supportive<sup>3</sup>. In discussions of male suicide bombers, the major motivations have been assumed to be either political or

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<sup>2</sup> A related story New York Time’s blog, *At War*, featured comments by the earlier story’s translator. The segment entitled, “A Women to Woman talk with a Would-be Suicide Bomber,” highlights the ability of the translator to get new information from Ranya. Getting her to admit that she had some advance notice of the mission her family had volunteered her for is attributed to the translator’s ability to reason with her in a gendered way. She describes her technique of questioning as attached to her skills as a mother of a small child, not to her training as a social worker. Both stories make it clear that if we, as Americans or New Yorkers, are to understand this phenomenon we must first understand a generalized gendered oppression that Iraqi women face. The role of the United States, the international community, and other material concerns for the Iraqi community are either downplayed or ignored in relation to symbolic role of women in the Middle East.

<sup>3</sup> See Victor 2003, Skaine 2006, Pape 2005, Jacques & Taylor 2009, and Bloom 2007

religious (sometimes categorized together and other times separately), yet women are represented as coerced by a jihadist culture or male relatives to perform suicide operations. Her assumed motivation is not a motivation at all, but the internalization of another's will.

Before the occurrence of female suicide bombers in Iraq, they were part of the conflict in Sri Lanka and later in the Palestinian Territories. Beginning in 2002 with Wafa Idris, who killed herself and two Israelis in Jerusalem, the phenomenon happened more often with a spike between 2002 and 2005.<sup>4</sup> While Idris belonged to the mostly secular PLO, in 2004 Hamas sent its first female suicide bomber, Reem el Riyashi. Riyashi, unlike Idris had left photos of her and her children dressed in Hamas' party colors and holding weapons. Whereas Idris' political affiliations were murky or unknown, Riyashi's intentions seemed much clearer. While Idris' situation was met with shock and questioning, Riyashi's positioning with Hamas attracted more interest to determine a singular motivation for her action. Largely ignoring her taped manifesto, experts concluded that she had been strong-armed or motivated by money, more so than her male counterparts. As more women succeeded in completing suicide operations more theories were proposed, very few moving beyond the explanations of either victimization or coercion.

In the search for theories of women's participation suicide bombings, often the expectations of the role of women do not mesh well with the expectations of the label terrorist. Dorit Naaman, suggests that when the stereotypical gap between traditional feminine qualities and political, violent masculine actions. When commonly held

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<sup>4</sup> In 2008 the number of female suicide bombers spiked to 12 between January and April in Iraq.

### Ayat al-Akhras et son fiancé quelques semaines avant sa disparition



assumptions that many analysts initially relied on could not explain the phenomenon they began to search for a personal explanation. Naaman suggests that this attempt to explain the phenomenon exposes “how gendered the discussion around the female suicide bomber is. While dozens of male suicide bombers’ identities and life stories are hardly ever delved into, their reasons are assumed to be clear and grounded in both political and religious ideology. In contrast, a woman as a suicide bomber seems so oxymoronic that an individualized psychological explanation for the deviation must be found.” (Naaman 936) So while the popular media and terrorism analysts regard the phenomenon of the male suicide bomber as mundane, motivated by religion or politics, the female suicide bomber requires much research and attention, becoming much more of an object of study. Western media representations have capitalized on this tension by consistently contrasting a photo of the woman taken immediately before the attack, in political garb or holding weapons, with a school photo or a family scene so as to construct what Naaman calls an “unbridgeable gap.”

Many Western representations have reconciled this gap by representing them as victims of Islamic patriarchy. This explanation of women and terror as victims of patriarchy is obvious from the New York Times Interview with Baida. From the manner in which her story is narrated and contextualized, it is clear at times that Rubin wonders if Baida is a monster or a victim of Iraqi society. Ironically, while Rubins does point out that the American forces have killed many of Baida's family, she never acknowledges that an American presence in the region may have contributed to her desire to become a "martyr." This has been a consistent critique waged against Western feminists who have isolated gender oppression from other forms of oppression the women had consistently endured.<sup>5</sup> (Abu-Lughod 2010) Many analysts, sensitive to this gender critique, have now eliminated the category of personal motivation and replaced it with trauma.<sup>6</sup> However, it is still easy to see how trauma would more often attributed to women than men, when women's suicide operations are so carefully studied and narrated. Trauma is also consistent with an assumption, like the personal explanations discussed earlier, that women's motivations come from within and are emotional and irrational, while men's motivations are largely located outside in community political or religious discourses. In some cases, as in Jurgensmeyer's study of global religious violence, the motivation for suicide

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<sup>5</sup> Abu-Lughod remarks, "Critiques of the NGO world, such as the Sangtin Collective's (2006) critique of India or Shehabuddin's (2008) of Bangladesh, point to perennial problems with internal hierarchies, concentration of power among the middle- and upper-class/caste leaders, and jealousy about funding. Moreover, the same charges of professionalization, NGOization of women's struggles, time taken up with report writing and fundraising that favor elites, and the turn to routinized gender training instead of political struggle that have been made, as discussed below, about NGOs in Palestine (Jad 2005) apply in Egypt." As the Western capital combines with the educated elite of the Middle East, she suggests that grassroots movements become another industry, promoting middle class values and ignoring the plight of the poor.

<sup>6</sup> For a summary of this see "Female Terrorism: A Review" Jacques 2009.

bombing is found in sexual repression, but this seems to be a problem that he believes affects Muslim men en masse (Jurgensmeyer 202).<sup>7</sup>

In the Palestinian context, Naaman suggests that when female suicide bombers are ascribed symbolic role of brides of Palestine, this is an attempt to reintegrate her into a traditional feminine role upset by their nontraditional militant behavior. She suggests



when videotapes have been made indicating her intentions and implicating Arab leaders as weak in their response to the Palestinian situation, they have been largely ignored.

However, while Naaman is correct in pointing out that critiques of Arab leaders are not received favorably, this may be a tension that lies within the martyrdom as an Islamic practice. Naaman ends her article with commentary on the female suicide bomber Wafa Idris:

The politicians' narratives tend to frame the actions of women suicide bombers in ways that minimize and subvert the overt confrontation of gender politics present in the women's own narratives and actions. Ultimately, this co-optation renders the affront on gender politics ineffective, or effective only insofar as it serves the nationalist and patriarchal project. (951)

Naaman may be over-eager to blanket the female suicide bombers with a kind of reduced agency. Yet her discomfort with an association of women and martyrdom is partially a

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<sup>7</sup> Juergensmeyer believes that the logic of religious violence comes from the separation of men and women in religious societies. He believes this causes "relationships within one's own sex can develop to considerable intensities." (203) These strong bonds are what allow young men to confront death.

denial of a participation in a kind of culturally sanctioned violence. Representations of female suicide bombers are indeed intended to produce a range of political and emotional reactions. What the ‘true’ or ‘real intentions of these women are will forever remain a mystery, however their association with a long-standing tradition of martyrdom marks a clear division for Naaman and other feminists that would like to attribute to them a kind of simplistic female agency.<sup>8</sup>

Without first considering how the female suicide bombers are an affront to patriarchy, how might we understand martyrdom? Following Namaan, if we take suicide operations as performative, what are the intended effects or affects? The deployment of the word martyr is important on several different registers for those organizations that would like to take responsibility of the female suicide bombers attacks and while sometimes intended to contain a volatile tension regarding women and warfare, there are also other untended consequences. The term martyr has undergone a metamorphosis from its earliest meanings in Judaism, Christianity, and Early Islam into its current association with so called radical Islamic traditions. Meaning ‘witness’ in Judaic and Christian traditions a martyr had historically signified the boundary between a minority religion, and another more dominant religion or governing body that arose from their contact. However, in this sense, the martyr was on the receiving end of violence and this endurance of pain became powerful testimony for adhering to the minority religion. Some have suggested, in line with the tradition of martyrdom as performed by Jesus Christ, that it is a way to make religious beliefs visible and thus ‘real’, via the pain and

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<sup>8</sup> Namaan and Applebaum discuss the female suicide bomber as acting against a dominant culture of masculinity and suggest that she is using the voice of her position as martyr to critique gender relations. However, it is not clear how this challenges male dominated politics.

desecration of the corporeal body. The pain and trauma associated with this event is what makes these beliefs transmittable to the rest of the community.

Inheriting this tradition, martyrdom was conceptualized in this manner in the earliest parts of Islamic history. However, as Islam became a dominant religion, the status of martyrdom was given even to those who were not killed defending the religion but died serving Islam and God. This included soldiers and, for a period of about five hundred years, plague victims who did not flee conquered lands to avoid death. However, Islamic jurists struggled to determine who could be precisely described as a martyr and most verses deal only with treatment of those who live in the way of God.

And do not think those who have been killed in the way of Allah as dead; they are rather living with their Lord, well-provided for. Rejoicing in what their Lord has given them of His bounty, and they rejoice for those who stayed behind and did not join them, knowing that they have nothing to fear and that they shall not grieve (Qur'an 3:169-70).

This verse emphasizes the reward that God gives those that perform jihad and that the community should not mourn the death of a martyr.

The meaning of martyr transformed several times more as Muslims consulted the hadith to answer questions about martyrdom in more unique cases. Who could be precisely counted as a martyr changed several times more until Islamic jurists greatly came to an understanding that martyrdom should be reserved for those who die in battle. From this point, sectarian differences between martyrologies differ so greatly that it is impossible to derive one singular interpretation of martyrdom that all groups acknowledge. There is vast disagreement between who can become a martyr, the state of mind one must have before martyrdom, whether one who kills other Muslims can be a martyr, and the rewards the martyr will receive in heaven. It is important to note that the narratives surrounding martyrdom vary dramatically in populations that were affected by

Sufi expansion in which martyrs are immortalized in erotic poetry where they often perish from a unrequited love they have for God. Even the rewards for the martyr in the Qur'an insist upon the sensual pleasures that await them in heaven. It is ironic to imagine that these pleasures have been heavily identified with a masculine culture of battle and war and rewards for heroic behavior when the first martyr mentioned in the Qur'an was a woman.

It can be argued that while contemporary disputes between Muslim sects continue to dominate areas of the world, their interpretations of martyrdom have come to resemble each other more and more. As more Muslims rely on access to religious texts and interpretations in their local community and from sources like the internet, communiqués, and audio recorded sermons, there has been less emphasis on interpretations deriving from sectarian hadiths. Martyrdom reemerges during the 1950's as the practice by which an Islamic nation would again be made possible against an enemy of Western imperialism in the Middle East and Asia. Sayyid Qutb, considered by many to be the father of 'radical' Islam was careful to frame his execution for undercutting the legitimacy of the Egyptian state in the language of martyrdom. In these instances martyrdom was contextualized by its meaning based mostly in the Qu'ran, that like Muhammed, Islam is faced with a war with an otherwise godless world-system. The most tenuous mobilization of martyrdom is its use in Muslim on Muslim attacks, as in suicide attacks where the communities of the victims cannot be distinguished from each other.

The question of women as martyrs has been problematic, even more problematic than rationalizing the prohibition of suicide with suicide bombing. However, this would seem to be an issue arising from deciding the role of women in war rather than the

tradition of martyrdom, as the martyrology contains many instances where unconventional themes have been explored. In Sufi traditions there are many poems and stories about “martyrs” who die from their devotion to god, a kind of love sickness. There are many examples where this poetry details the love and desire between a masculine “martyr” and a masculine God. These tensions are often interpreted by the West as “ambivalence” toward suicide operations, overlooking the complexity of these narratives in favor of a more Orientalist narrative of chaos and barbarism. In “Dying to Win,” Robert Pape has drawn correlations between Palestinian martyrs and the Kamikaze pilots of WWII, suggesting that religion not necessarily be a factor in the decision to undertake a suicide attack. However, I am reluctant to isolate suicide bombing from the context of jihad and martyrdom, as only a military strategy. This reproduces a problematic binary between modern war and Holy war (religious war) that hierarchizes one over the other. Alongside, and following, the study of the Islamic world as the ‘Orient’ had been a trend to study Islam as apologetically. Just as Bernard Lewis was attempting to locate a point of origin for the political woes “Islamic societies” were experiencing in the present, a large contingent of scholars tried to explain Islamic revolutions or unrest, even the unwillingness to “accept democracy” by attempting to deny any involvement of Islam (as a religious discourse) in any of these scenarios. While I appreciate their attempts to undermine the overt racism in dominant portrayals of Islam, their projects have been problematic to the study of Islamic subjects in a variety of ways.

First, in attempts by those who have been referred to as apologists, explanations have been largely based on a “correct” reading of Islamic texts in classical Arabic. Largely blaming colonialism and occupation, they continually suggest that the

destruction and dissolution of many Islamic Universities and institutions of higher learning have created an intellectual void in the Middle East and elsewhere, which in turn prevented the appropriate and rigorous study of religious texts from an “authentic” and scholarly perspective. Without the kind of appropriate care and attention paid to these texts they have been overwhelmingly misunderstood and misinterpreted leading to the kind of religious violence that are popularly attributed to Islamic societies.

An excellent example of this kind of “apologism” was a response to the publishing of *The Satanic Verses* in the New York Times book review in 1988. A Harvard educated scholar of Islamic Studies writes that he is disappointed with Rushdie’s novel and that he has offended a large population of Muslims around the world. He carefully articulates the caricature of the Prophet Mohammed and the discussion of the companion of the prophet as offensive to Shiites whom he describes as particularly militant. The letter becomes problematic when he describes the nature of the ‘Muslim world:’ “The Muslim nations have not gone through the turmoils of the Enlightenment and they have seen no scientific revolution; their sensibilities are different. Often, a peaceful demonstration is not their way and we cannot change them overnight. The best thing is to avoid hitting their most sensitive chords (2).”

Second, this thesis revolves solely on Islam as a textual religion<sup>9</sup>, which although not unique to apologists, reinforces a problematic assumption that those who are not literate, in the most extreme cases, and those who are not trained in an understanding of classical Arabic, are completely ignorant of the workings of their own religion. This assumption leads to a third and unintended consequence of rendering a large population

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<sup>9</sup> Referring to Islam as a textual religion means that it is a tradition based on the reading and interpretation of a sacred text, like Christianity and Judaism.

that reads the Koran and Hadith in their local dialect ignorant, manipulated, and to echo a sentiment in other parts of this paper, coerced. However, the fundamental principle that has enabled these apologetic renderings of Islam as a religion and Islam as a culture to be so powerful are their groundings in some of the assumptions that ground secularism. Whereby, in order for modern societies to remain civilized and peaceful, there must be a separation of religion from politics.

While insinuating that religious texts can be somehow separated from political contexts and interpretations, they had been simultaneously rendering those who practiced religion outside of these “more authentic” interpretations hopelessly caught up in a “political” Islam that had been corrupted in developments of the present, of the modern. The modern is positioned in a fundamental contradiction, working with assumptions regarding the modern that arise over and over again in secular contexts while at the same time relying on it as a premise for promoting religion. The idea that there is a “good religion” and a “bad religion” appears constantly amid discussions of religious societies intermingled with a hegemonic modern that interferes with an ideal where religion and politics are kept separate.

In an effort to try and reenter these debates the approach moved toward discussing Islam as an ethical practice. Because ethics suggest that Islamic jurisprudence could work alongside or with other political forces, it could be engaged more as a discourse that could work with or complicate other discourses. While still heavily textual, its relationship to state crafting and governing could be seriously studied with political relevance. It was in this kind of environment that discourses regarding questions of the justification of religious violence came to be critically analyzed. James Turner Johnson

and John Esposito have both written about Islam and its relationship to war and peace. While the apologists had been concerned with producing an authentic Islam that was in line with the values of modernity, this study of religion was dominated by critical political theory. While their work had been constrained by limiting their scope only to texts which had been authorized by a sovereign leader, like a caliph, I think their work has important implications for the ways in which “religious violence” is normally characterized.

Particularly relevant is the way in which Johnson’s examination of ethics of war in Islamic traditions produces this discourse as similar and working in many ways alongside a “modern” or secular discussion of religious traditions. Notions like the appropriate use of force and the resort to violence in the West derive from Early Christian scholars like St. Augustine and remain very similar in spirit to the ethics taught in *International Relations and Military Strategy*. Thus, Johnson questions an innate conflict between the West and Islamic ethics and brings a careful consideration of what parts of Islamic jurisprudence have become relevant in the political climate of the Middle East and which have been buried in the past.

The “Holy War Idea,” as Johnson calls it, has been a barrier for discussing Islam as a political discourse and the Islamic state. Early articulations of the need to separate church and state cite religious war and the violence of the Inquisition as stemming from the mixing of the church and politics. However, Shaybani in *The Law of Nations* (a juridical interpretation that was intended to guide Islamic nations) divides the world into the dar-al-harb, or the domain of war and chaos, and the dar-al-islam, the domain of order and submission to God. This makes the unity of the state with Islam as a given way to

avoid violence. Western and Christian informed states have, even in the time of the early Christian church, questioned the compatibility of the church and civil society. This was not based on an assumption that this would cause unnecessary violence and tension, but that the city that Christians should be busy building should be the one that would inevitably come as a result of the eschaton. It was only later that the church became more involved in the construction of earthly society.

Just as the study of Islam has fluctuated between apologizing for Islam or demonizing Islam, often important Islamic figures defend the religion as its true form being only peaceful. While I understand that this is an attempt to assuage the public's fears about radical religious violence, I agree with Johnson that it does not help to understand religion as an important discourse among others in the milieu of a society. Therefore, I would like to take the time to discuss the treatment of violence in Islamic jurisprudence. However we must acknowledge that, unlike other traditions with supreme religious leaders who have the ultimate authority to rule on religious issues, there is no end to the practice of interpretation in Islam. Not only is there tremendous variety of interpretation by sect, there are debates about the need for a learned class of religious scholars, or if the individual is capable of interpreting their duties appropriately without a sanctioned opinion. While the most authority is given to the Qur'an and Hadith, unless explicitly outlined in these texts, other practices can always be contested and debated. Saba Mahmood describes this process in the "Politics of Piety" as the way different practices are authorized by the women in the Egyptian mosque movement. (Mahmood 2005)

In general, violence in these texts is never authorized on an interpersonal level, and only collective violence can be waged against another collective entity. In other words, violence is only sanctioned in the context of war, and really only against those that are not living under a Muslim authority. While many have translated this category as that of unbeliever, this translation is not adequate to capture the *dar-al-harb* which is really more closely related to uncivilized or chaotic territory. Also, the category of “unbeliever” does not take into account Muslims and non-Muslims living together in the *dar-al-islam* as long as those non-Muslims agreed to contribute to the *dar-al-islam*, either by paying a tax or by contributing some service for the greater good. Opinions have historically differed as to whether or not violence should be used defensively or offensively, but Islamists often cite these debates in the West as signifying a desire for world domination, an irrational and insatiable desire to convert the world to Islam.

While the individual is almost never permitted to participate in non-collective violence, there is one exception. If there is an attack on the *dar-al-islam*, and no time to call for a formal army to defend the community, then it becomes the duty of every man, woman, and child to take up arms and defend as best as they can in the interim<sup>10</sup>. This form of defensive jihad has been the way in which suicide operations have been justified, especially in the context of Palestinian/Israeli violence, as well as revolutionary warfare against “secular” rulers. There is never a clear case of when it is just to use violence in the Islamic context of jihad, and in recent scholarship it has been debated as to who should be able to authorize violence, the individual ordinary Muslim or the scholarly jurists.

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<sup>10</sup> See Shaybani’s *Siyar* (Khadduri 1987) for a discussion of the ethics of war between the *dar-al-harb* and the *dar-al-islam*.

This discussion of authorizing Islam is relevant for displacing the idea of coercion that is upheld by the West. It helps to situate these traditions and the use of violence in the context of Islam as squarely in the contested discursive domain of politics. While I am not suggesting that it is an improvement for the practice of Islam to be the responsibility of the individual, I am pointing out that it directly contradicts the kind of diminutive narrative of coercion that attempts to isolate the agency of Muslim women. Contextualizing “religious violence” outside of the particular Islamic milieu only mimics the assumption set forth by the Early Christian church to divide religious life and civil life, even if only symbolically.

Carefully managing the figure of the female suicide bomber helps militant groups to create an atmosphere of extreme circumstances and maintains a looming fear that anyone is a potential ‘terrorist’ which they hope will displace the advantage of more official state powers. Namaan’s hypothesis, that it is the primary objective of militant nationalist groups to integrate women back into a narrative of patriarchy so as to maintain the masculinity and the power of the nation may not be absolutely correct. In fact, in response to transnational discourses that continually link Islam and Arabs to patriarchy and backwardness (in conjunction with dominant feminist discourses) in many respects it is positive public relations for militant groups to construct women as equal to men.

In fact, while represented as diametrically opposed to each other in the west, Islam and modernity are relatively compatible discourses in many parts of the Middle East. In her study of Shi’i women in Beirut, Lara Deeb finds that modernity is a preoccupation for pious women. One of her subjects articulates this as a distinction between tradition and Islamic practice. She describes wearing the *hijab* as a ‘tradition’

that she had rebelled against in her youth. However, later understanding its meaning and the religious affect she feels it will create, she no longer rejects it as antithetical to modern ideals and values. “The struggle and shift she describes is characteristic of her generation, women who come of age in a Beirut where support for leftist politics political parties gradually shifted to participation in the Shi’i Islamic mobilization...the personal trajectories of many young Shi’i women mirrored that of the mobilization. As they adopted the hijab and lengthened their skirts, young women began completing their educations and participating in the community in unprecedented numbers.” (Deeb, 223)

Joining and participating in religious political movements is understood as a progressive and a modern practice. Increased participation of women in the public sphere is understood largely as symbolic of an increased ‘agency’ of women.

Beliefs in being modern and progressive have heavily influenced the production of Muslim feminism in Iran as well as the Shi’i women of Beirut. The way that they distinguish tradition from religiosity, involves reauthorizing those Islamic practices that had been practiced to match the political meanings that had arisen.

The dualistic notion of progress and the global political context in which it has emerged have consequences for faith and morality on the personal level, on people’s quotidian expressions and experiences of piety. These consequences are related to the notion of spiritual progress as a move “forward,” away from “tradition” and into a new kind of religiosity, one that involves conscious and conscientious commitment (Deeb 5)

Religiosity is discussed in tandem with modernity, with cultivating a modern and progressive self.

Again, in the case of the female suicide bomber, why does religion as part of her motive keep the narrator from assigning her political agency in popular representations? The religious secular divide has been blamed for dismissing political agency for pious

subjects. Simply defining the body of texts, practices, rituals, political allegiances, and presumed subjectivities that constitute the domain of religion is an enormous project, and one that will not be able to be fully recreated here. However, it is useful to try to touch upon some of the major criticisms of how the Western discourse has constructed the binary, how in fact religion is most often represented from the secular position of the binary. Although there are numerous scholars that work on the question of secularism, Talal Asad has written most effectively about how secular assumptions have enabled Orientalist readings of the Arab world and to relegate them to the realm of irrational and uncivilized.

For Talal Asad, Anthropology, is the discipline in charge of categorizing and defining religion, (where otherwise theology had been sufficient) and becomes obsessed with ritual's ability to produce a religious 'affect,' or a religious experience. Again, this religious subjectivity was defined as opposed to the values of modernity and progress and subsequently outside the domain of political. Concerned that this somewhat obscured understanding of religion obscured many important elements of religious practice, Asad began to question how the values of modernity had surfaced in the study of religion within Anthropology. In his famous essay 'Religion as an Anthropological Category,' Asad suggests that the assumptions around secularism have become so naturalized as to make it difficult to grasp directly. While secularism does not necessarily mean against religion or anti-religion but simply without religion, it marks a desire to separate religion from the rest of public life. Asad believes it to be a concept that brings together certain behaviors, knowledges and sensibilities in modern life. (Asad 1993 48) This division is problematic when it is not clear if a practice, language, or experience is essentially

religious. As sensibilities and theories of religion changed, the division between the secular and the religious changed as well, rearranging practices and the discourses authorizing religious practices continued to shift the boundary dividing them. Studying and categorizing religion was closely linked to the construction of a “modern”, and therefore if modernity is cast in positive terms, then conversely religion must be modernity’s ugly opposite.

Several times before the Reformation, the boundary between the religious and the secular was redrawn, but always the formal authority of the Church remained preeminent. In later centuries, with the triumphant rise of modern science, modern production, and the modern state, the churches would also be clear about the need to distinguish the religious from the secular, shifting, as they did so, the weight of religion more and more onto the moods and motivations of the individual believer. Discipline (intellectual and social) would, in this period, gradually abandon religious space, letting “belief,” “conscience,” and “sensibility” take its place. But theory would still be needed to define religion. (39)

As the ideal of secular life began to take hold in the Christian world, the practice of religion had to be pushed farther outside of the public sphere and differentiated from religious institutions and religious practice.

Yet, the result of this process that Asad wants to acknowledge is how religion subsequently became an object of study for secular disciplines. This association of secularism with modernity has enabled religion to fill out the imaginary of space of the unmodern or the private sphere. Universalizing definitions of religion have been influenced by the historical contexts that provided the conditions for their creation. Asad suggests that because so many of the social sciences and anthropology come to be in the context of a secular-modern West, the theories of religion that they have provided have inevitably been unable to describe other religions.

The attempt to understand Muslim traditions by insisting that in them religion and politics (two essences modern society tries to keep practically apart) are coupled must, in my view, lead to failure. At its most dubious, such attempts encourage us to

take up an a priori position in which religious discourse in the political arena is seen as a disguise for political power. (29)

Asad embeds a critique of anthropological theories of Islam within a critique of universalizing definitions of religion that keep it apart from power. Not only is religion seen as merely a vehicle for certain kinds of power to operate, but those subjects that identify with religion are read as unable to operate within the modern domains of power. They are opposed to scientific reason and logic, and I would go further to argue, they are understood as coerced by religious power.

Asad is curious about how religious discourses have been authorized, just as other discourses have been authorized by the institutions that regulate them. He follows Foucault's analysis of torture and confession in the Early Christian Church in order to discern the relationship between torture, religion, and the church. "Thus, not only is our understanding of judicial torture enlarged by seeing it as a kind of ritual, but our understanding of ritual, too, is extended by analyzing it as a kind of torture – a practice by which aspects of truth and subjectivity are powerfully constructed (89)." This inflection allows us to recognize the role that religion has played in the proliferation of knowledge's by situating it as a kind of disciplinary power that has become fruitful because of the struggle it produces.

My point, therefore, that while Foucault seems to concentrate his attention entirely on a "microcosm of solitude," these famous "steps of humility" are precisely enmeshed in social relationships, relationships that are not simply a setting but a means. In the dominant form of medieval monasticism (cenobitic, as opposed to eremitic) the technology of the self, which lies at the heart of the combat of chastity, is itself dependent on the institutional resources of organized community of life. (112)

This argument is essential to any renewed interest in the workings of power and religion, because as Asad suggests, it is not merely that religious doctrines and institutions

prescribe and wield power, but produce their ‘truths’ from the struggle between the doctrines and their enactment, the space of friction between their borders.

Mino Moallem does tremendous work on this problem, examining traditions of religion against liberal humanism within a context of feminism in Iran. She suggests that the division between Islam (religion) and secularism forecloses the possibility of articulating different kinds of truths. She is interested in talking about the way in which as “modernity (and secularism) merge the desire to construct new absolute, postponing the question of ethical responsibility in determining interdependence and autonomy for others.” (Moallem 324) The autonomy that is collapsed for Moallem forecloses the possibility of articulating feminism within Islam, and inevitably ends the possibility of questioning how fundamentalism and feminism are invested in producing a singularity of truth.

I criticize the ways in which both feminists and fundamentalists create discursive enclosures by claiming to have the truth and interrogate the ways in which truth is produced historically... in their attempts to address contemporary issues of identity, Western egalitarian feminists and Islamic fundamentalism begin from a similar sense of a global, rationalist, and universalist order. (166)

Moallem suggests that feminists and fundamentalists are both invested in producing the ultimate truth, and that this maintains a division between them. However, she carefully separates Islam and fundamentalism in order to acknowledge that there are possibilities for Islam and feminism to borrow from each other. There seems to be a denial on Moallem’s to see Islam as a political system or as the basis for political participation, but instead seems to conceptualize Islam as informing an individual ethical practice.

While Moallem continues to criticize the way in which feminism and Islam have been alienated, she wages her attack via the construction of religious identities. She

insists that the rush to attribute an ultimate and reductive identity to those who are feminists or Islamic fundamentalists helps to deny the way in which these subjects are complex, overlooking how they interpret and conceptualize their understanding of ethical issues. “Complicit with modernity, the two groups uphold absolute values and generate a transcendental ethic in a social world that produces moral subjects by forming, packaging, and protecting them. Subjects that are produced in this process by a particular regime of knowledge are considered and assumed to be coherent and recognizable (174).” Her criticism of the existence of subjects, which are absolute feminists or absolute fundamentalists, strikes at the heart of the kind of coercion that is interpreted around the female suicide bomber. If the woman is attributed religiosity, then it becomes easy to generalize about her life and her subjectivity. This becomes evident in the “unbridgeable gap” that Naaman describes where the woman’s seemingly secular appearance conflicts with the martyrology that is left after her death. The kind of transformation that religious language and religious labeling makes possible, helps to overshadow the complexity of the female suicide bombers interiority. While at times it seems that Moallem’s description of fundamentalism seems to reduce its discourse to a similar knowability, her critique of the labeling of religious subjectivity is extremely relevant.

How might we study the politics of religious women without resorting to problematic notions of the religious subject as “knowable” or hopelessly not modern, and therefore not political? Saba Mahmood’s case study of the piety movement in Egypt hopes to incorporate political subjectivity into the study of their daily lives. In her work she employs many disparate strategies to undermine many of the problematic binaries

that I have discussed so far. Closely examining the women's piety movement in Egypt, Mahmood begins her ethnography by carefully intervening into theoretical debates, like the ones brought up by Asad, that construct the religious subject as other to the civilized Western liberal subject, and explores the implications of Judith Butler's explanation of the role that norms play in the construction of the subject (23). Just as Mahmood affirms that these social norms, like Islamic practices and cultural conventions work to inhibit the subject's desires, she cites other theorists of power that understand these norms as a positive ethic that form the subject and allow her to move through the world. She feels, like Asad, that women must be able to navigate different power relations from a position within power, and that because power is that which forms the subject by working upon him or her, the way in which one understands agency being opened to unique positions and possibilities. Therefore, Mahmood explains these women's practices and insights as a compelling part of social and political transformation. Mahmood also suggests that what continues to emerge from this by this renewed participation in the Islamic revival is that, although they are situated in a patriarchal discourse, they still possess the ability to effect a form of gendered social change.

There are several observations about power and Islam that Mahmood makes central to the understanding of politics of the mosque movement. With the gathering of women in mosques in huge numbers for the first time, altering a historically male centered mosque culture, as well as Islamic pedagogy, and that within this space a new set of political forces have been set in motion that might allow women a new experience of subjectivity. Although these women are not mobilized into "political movements" that appeal to formal state politics or political parties their gathering has been so influential

that it has been increasingly targeted by state regulation and scrutiny. This transformation of women's lives through the production of largest intervention with this project is to insist that these women need not have an "innate desire for freedom, that we all somehow seek to assert our autonomy when allowed to do so, that human agency primarily consists of acts that challenge social norms and not those that uphold them, and so on (14)."

Mahmood's challenge to the "subject of freedom" questions the assumption that political agency can only be expressed by working against the movement of power. If women participate in Islamic discourses this does not necessarily make them anti-feminist or unable to change their social relations.

Mahmood makes an intervention into the idea that a socioreligious movement that sustains principles of female subordination poses a dilemma for feminist analysts. On the one hand, women are seen to assent their presence in previously male-defined spheres while, on the other hand, the very idioms that they use to enter these arenas are grounded in discourses that have historically secured their submission to male authority. However, Saba Mahmood rejects the urge to write these ethnographies searching for women's agency.

Traditional ethnographies are invested in the capacity to realize one's own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or in other obstacles (whether individual or collective). Thus the humanist desire for autonomy and self-expression constitutes the substrate, the slumbering ember that can spark to flame in the form of an act of resistance when conditions permit. (8)

Mahmood asks us to but aside liberal humanist consciousness and question freedom and liberty as innate desires, and hopes that this will allow the involvement of women who have been traditionally excluded as not fully realized subjects.

Both Asad and Mahmood are interested in the way that religious norms are inhabited, or lived with. Mahmood challenges a dominant discussion of norms as they

have been used by Judith Butler to present the paradox of subjectivation. In this scenario, the very processes and conditions that secure a subject's subordination are also the means by which she becomes a self-conscious identity and agent (17). Mahmood suggests that although Butler focuses on the consolidation and destabilization of norms, her discussion of agency tends to focus on those operations of power that resignify and subvert norms, and questions the validity of this notion outside of her project of radical democratic politics. She responds in kind with the question of how norms are conceptualized on the model of doing and undoing, consolidation and subversion and instead think about the variety of ways in which norms are lived and inhabited, aspired to, reached for, and consummated (23). This concept is central to an understanding of any of the mosque movement beyond the simple power/resistance binary which works to compartmentalize religious women as outside of the political and active domain.

What does this tell us about women who do not specifically claim a religious identity but may become identified with some religious concepts or religious ethics? Are there any ways to discuss religion working with a subject without attributing a religious identity to her? If we consider the critique that Moallem wages against Islamic fundamentalist identities, Mahmood's analysis suggests that even when women can be identified with religious movements they are not "knowable" and they must struggle to embody the tensions within their religious beliefs. For both Asad and Mahmood, the way in which texts and traditions are authorized are of the utmost importance for exploring the kind of political potential that religion (and Islam in particular) can have. Saba Mahmood takes up Islam as a discursive text in her study of the women of the Cairo mosque movement. In a careful analysis of the argumentative ways in which the mosque

participants try to embody an ideal Muslim subject, Mahmood questions commonly held assumptions about emancipatory politics and freedom that inform feminist projects. Whereas feminist emancipatory politics have traditionally represented religious traditions as having a flattening effect on the lives of women, and describing its effects in only negative terms, Mahmood utilizes its discursive nature to give the Islamic tradition a more textured character. While Mahmood's project is focused on the multitude of ways that the mosque women engage with Islamic traditions in their own lives, I find her project is helpful to explore some of the issues that arise around non-profits and NGO's that try to work within a Muslim identity.

While Mahmood alludes to the presence of secularism in the context of Egyptian state power, this is not a tension that is elaborated fully in her book. This may not have been an accidental omission either, because as she suggests earlier on in the project, the binary of religion and secular brings with it a particular focus on promoting or resisting a progressive (albeit Utopian) project of modernity where some of the inherent tensions within religion is avoided. However, it would be fair to suggest that there is something utopian about Mahmood's work, as it focuses on the mosque participants in a very insular way that prevents us to observe their engagement with complimentary or antagonistic discourses.

Mahmood's mosque participants experiences are heavily mediated by new spaces opened up by Islamic piety. An unprecedented participation in the Islamic revival gave rise to a desire for women to occupy the space of the mosque, which had been traditionally reserved for men. This new 'space' is of crucial importance to the argumentation that becomes part of the embodiment of Islamic ideals. These

communities of women were able to verbalize questions and develop ethics in tension with the opinions of other women. In conjunction with the arguments of Mino Moallem, this community relies heavily on the tension between religion and the secular that keeps the practice of Islam localized at the body and in private.

Many different scholars have attempted to reconcile the ways in which transnational feminist discourses have overshadowed the needs and desires of women at the local level. Mino Moallem in particular has been very critical in articulating how very often-international movements have advocated for women's rights in a way that mimics the language of colonialism. Specifically they utilize old binaries of the modern and progressive benevolent nature of the transnational movement against the barbaric and oppressive native or indigenous culture. In order to complicate these binaries, Moallem carefully describes how discourses like fundamentalism that are constantly used to demonize Arab Americans can be better understood as a "regime of truth," and a "by-product of the process of modernization and in dialogue with modernity (324)." Therefore in many ways fundamentalism is reactive to many of the dominant narratives of modernity.

The tension between transnational feminist discourses and local women's movements have been articulated by different scholars. Lara Deeb does tremendous work toward discussing the importance of balancing a transnational feminist framework with a local Muslim one. However she articulates these two discourses very differently from Mahmood or Moallem, suggesting that they are distinct and can be addressed as distinct. Deeb illustrates the cases of several women in Lebanon that work within a Muslim ethical practice/identity to address their needs toward transnational feminist discourses

like human rights. Deeb's analysis seems to be suggesting that women can navigate these two spaces separately, which I think is a misunderstanding of the way Mahmood constructs the piety movement. Deeb, while acknowledging that transnational feminism is problematic, fails to really address how the transnational feminist movement has acted quite violently to undermine and often demonize the piety movement – not simply displacing the piety movement.

The complex ways that Islamic discourses are authorized are often omitted from discussions of religious subjects. The politics of what counts as religion and what is accepted into secular domains is also problematized. The female suicide bombers of the New York Times interview are given an Islamic religious identity as they are narrated. Their manner of dress, the use of “sacred” language, and the religious practices of the neighborhoods that they come from are alluded to when describing both the extreme oppression they face and the violence inherent in their societies. Baida's ethical beliefs regarding martyrdom also help to mark her as a religiously knowable subject. However, the Palestinian suicide bombers religiosity is always in question. The “secular” photographs of women juxtaposed with their martyrdom tapes are extremely difficult for Western audiences to decipher, but within Islamic discourses there are other much more complicated debates that complicate martyrdom. If we ask the same question that Asad would like us to consider, what makes religion count as religion, we must ask ourselves what makes martyrdom in the case of the female suicide bombers count as martyrdom? What are the Islamic discourses that authorize these operations and how do they apply to women?

The Hadith complicates Qu’ranic interpretations of martyrdom, and the Hadith is complicated by different sects of Islam and the way in which they consider different interpretations to carry more weight against others. Since the 1950’s, the practice of martyrdom has been largely associated with nationalism, especially in the case of Iran where male and female martyrs were considered heroes of the nation. Martyrdom makes a transformation into a secular practice during this time, even while it still carried with it a clear overtones of God, heavenly rewards, and the consistent use of the word *shuheeda*, which occurs only in the context of the Qur’an. While I am not suggesting that martyrdom has a clear identity as religious or secular, I point to it has a clear instance of how religion comes to be disassociated from political action in the imaginary of the West. The ambivalence that is often attributed to Arab communities regarding the ethics of suicide bombing is not necessarily ambivalence. If women can be martyrs, and the Qu’ran is fairly clear that they can, and even if they do not fit the image of women who are heroes of battle, they do fit an image of women who do not fear death and instead of allowing death to come to them, they choose the manner in which to die. This understanding of “martyr agency” is consistently overlooked in the context of the West because, in the context of secularism – there is never agency in death.<sup>11</sup> Historical genealogies of martyrdom make it a manner by which to give a body to religious experience, to make the experience of religiosity “embodied.” While this historical definition did not entail necessarily killing others in the process, the imagery is still unmistakably present for the female suicide bomber.

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<sup>11</sup> Death in the context of battle, or military heroism may be an instance of agency in death. However, this is a lesser agency than killing the enemy and living to reap the rewards of this success.

Naaman draws attention to the symbolic gendered meaning of women and terror, and suggests that in psychoanalytic terms, “since women have no access to the symbolic realms of power, they are relegated to the imaginary, to the realm of the body, emotions, and the irrational. It is therefore not completely surprising that in a society lacking gender equality few women actually make it into fighting forces but dozens are accepted as potential suicide bombers.” (949) Religion is regarded here in the instrumental way that Asad criticizes, where the participation of women in the tradition of martyrdom is seen as masking the political desire of men to use women. Their choice of heroism in death does not work to undermine women’s identification as irrational. Instead they are understood as irrational in the context of giving up their lives to maintain the patriarchal order of their own society. While Naaman’s reading of the representations of female suicide bombers complicates ways in which personal trauma narratives are used repetitively to undermine her emotional stability and political agency, she returns to the same victim narrative where women are hopelessly searching for recognition by Arab men and must resort to violent deaths to accomplish this.

I do not wish to undermine the project of women, Muslim feminists in particular, who do try to illuminate the kind of gender oppression women in the region experience. I do question, however, when these analyses are produced by Western feminists the experience of gender oppression is frequently located in the woman’s own culture. In the Palestinian case, Arab men and Arab society and not Arab-Israeli conflict are blamed for victimizing women. Religion becomes merely another extension of Arab culture that can be used to silence women’s political projects and potential. The controversy and volatility around the female suicide bomber, her defiance of many gendered assumptions about

women and violence will continue to propel further elaboration regarding her motives for participating in suicide operations. However, I think ethical feminists should ultimately resist the impulse to find, impose, or subject agency from her.

Religion and religious imagery will continue to emerge in narratives about the female suicide bomber, because it is the obvious explanation in secular discourses to explain what the West considers to be “irrational” forms of violence. This is largely a neo-colonial move to connect the West with progress and rational sensibility and render other cultures in a passive state that require Western intervention and “saving.” The narrative of the female suicide bomber is a site where violence is marked as extreme and unconventional while other types of violence is normalized. It is also a narrative where the gender inequalities in the United States are made invisible and the Middle East is remade, in Orientalist terms, as steeped in the oppression of women.

In the next chapter, I would like to draw connections between the way in which the female suicide bomber is understood as coerced and irrational and moments where these same narratives arise around Muslim women in New York City. I would like to draw attention to the ways in which these labels hinge on religiosity, and then specifically on Islam.

## Chapter 2: Representations of Arab Women in New York

This tension regarding religious identities and Muslim women is not something that can be located in discourses regarding the Middle East. This representation is transnational, circulating between major cities in the “West” and the Middle East, and taken up by popular media, policy making institutions, and the growing number of transnational citizenry and political movements. While the dominant narrative of coercion and irrational can be identified easily in relationship to women and terror, especially the female suicide bomber, the way in which this tension is manifested for Muslim women in New York City is slightly more difficult to understand. If we understand the representations of the female suicide bomber that are formed well after her death, these assumptions follow the identity of Arab and Muslim women in the United States in complex ways and emerge as a result of increased attention on projects that focus on Arab and Muslim women.

Post 9/11 New York City can be characterized by increased detentions and deportations of Arab Americans. This is not unlike the detentions and internments of other migrant groups during the Second World War and the Vietnam War. However, the U.S. government focused its attention after 9/11 on migrants from certain countries as well as their religious affiliation. Mosques and other religious organizations became the primary focus of investigations, as these, in conjunction with “Arab” as a racial category, were believed to be the primary supporters of terrorism. Yet this level of profiling does not take into consideration several Americans and Europeans who have joined Militant Islamic groups to carry out attacks on Americans. On November 9, 2005 Muriel

Degaugue<sup>12</sup> ran into an Iraqi police patrol and detonated a bomb that killed five people and injured many others. Although her attack was one of many that year, her actions drew particular attention because she was of Belgian descent, and the first “European” woman to commit an act of suicide terrorism. The idea that someone not from the Middle East could be an agent of terrorism contradicts an American nationalist narrative that locates terrorism specifically in ethnic others. The possibility that one could be ‘converted’ to participate in militant Islamic groups undermines powerful assumptions about a highly progressive modern West and a backward Islamic East.

Debbie Almontaser is a Yemeni born educator and activist who had been part of many New York City initiatives to promote multiculturalism and understanding among Arab and non-Arab populations. In April 2005, ‘New Visions for Public Schools’ a non-profit organization funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation approached Debbie Almontaser with the idea of starting a dual-language (Arabic-English) public school. Almontaser had to seek a community partner to administer a \$400,000 grant for the project and two groups expressed interest in partnering: the Arab American Family Support Center<sup>13</sup> and the Brooklyn Cultural Center that runs an Islamic school called Al-Noor. Inevitably, she chooses the AAFSCNY already fully funded with public money and not affiliated with any religious groups. The Education Department approves the project in February of 2007 and the school is called the Khalil Gibran International Academy after the famous Lebanese poet and author. (This figurehead is important for important symbolic reasons that I will discuss later.)

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<sup>12</sup> See BBC News <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4491334.stm> and Mia Bloom “Female Suicide Bombers: A Global Trend” 2009

<sup>13</sup> Known from here on as AAFSCNY

The initial site for the school had been to share space with an existing performing arts high school in Park Slope, Brooklyn. However, after a surprisingly high public outcry over this move, the school was moved into a space in the Boerum Hill neighborhood. This site was actually much closer to the AAFSCNY and a large number of Yemeni, Moroccan, and other Middle Eastern migrants that could potentially send their children to the school. At around the same time Daniel Pipes, a columnist for the NY SUN who reports on issues of terrorism and Islamism, and a Ph.D in “medieval Middle Eastern studies” describes the school as a ticking time-bomb for radical Islamic recruitment. He is then asked to join the board of a grassroots organization that begins a campaign to delegitimize the school – focusing its efforts on Debbie Almontaser.<sup>14</sup>

The proximity of the school to the AAFSCNY led to a renewed scrutiny on the Arab-Muslim community. The New York Times reported that parents had been harassed while walking their children to the KGIA school. At the Annual Arab American Heritage Festival on July 15, 2007, an event planned by the Brooklyn Cultural Center and the AAFSCNY, Almontaser was approached while standing in front of a table for an Arab Women’s Arts organization and their T-shirts bearing the slogan “Intifada NYC.”<sup>15</sup> A representative of the stop the madrassah and a NY POST reporter approached her and asked to explain why she was linked to an organization that promotes violence (i.e. intifada). She answered the reporter by explaining that intifada is a word in Arabic that means, “shaking off.” The following day the POST’s headline read: Tees boldly declare “Intifada NYC” – apparently a call for a Gaza style uprising in the Big Apple.” Amidst a

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<sup>14</sup> For more on Daniel Pipes see <http://www.danielpipes.org/4836/stop-the-nyc-madrassa>

<sup>15</sup> [http://www.nypost.com/p/news/regional/city\\_principal\\_is\\_revoltin\\_g\\_UerzwvF7fcSQY8YOP1In4K](http://www.nypost.com/p/news/regional/city_principal_is_revoltin_g_UerzwvF7fcSQY8YOP1In4K)

huge public outcry the chief spokesman for the Education Department told Almontaser that she should issue a public apology. There had been a written apology circulated between Almontaser and the spokesman and Almontaser makes changes to the document. Newspapers published the spokesman's apology without her changes. A stream of bad press hounded the issue and the president of the United Federation of Teachers rebuked the apology saying that "intifada" is "something that ought to be denounced, not explained away." Finally, on August 10, 2007 she is forced to resign and Mayor Bloomberg comments on his radio show that Almontaser "is certainly not a terrorist," but not "all that media savvy maybe." He added that he appreciated her long time service to the school and the city.

The turn around from the NY POST article and Almontaser's resignation had been only four days. Without any real support from the Department of Education regarding the school and its mission, Almontaser was helpless against attacks by the "stop the madrassah" group. It was quite some time after Almontaser was forced to resign that community leaders formed a group to defend the school and Almontaser. It was not until October 16, 2007 that a group of New York Imams and Muslim leaders releases a statement. This small attempt is too late to save Almontaser's job but it does manage to save the school from be closed. While the Education Department thought it would avoid



**Almontaser before and after her "extremist hijab makeover"**

controversy by forcing Almontaser to resign, it did not avoid two lawsuits, one filed by Almontaser for wrongful termination and another from the stop the madrassah campaign to summon

information about the school's curriculum. The Board of Education supplied the documents to the campaign but the organization sued again saying that the documents were incomplete. Clearly, whatever radical and fundamentalist curriculum they were hoping to find, they could not find it.

What seems somewhat unique about this story is that it takes place in what is considered to be one of the largest and diverse multicultural communities in America. Brooklyn is the home to numerous non-profits and social justice organizations, many dealing specifically with cultural awareness and immigrant rights. Yet, very few were vocal in refuting her termination. Debbie Almontaser had been fielding accusations and attacks as early as when early school plans were voiced, and yet the Department of Education did little to denounce them as hate mongering and to defend the school plan based on the articulation of so-called American values, like democracy and education. It was only after she was ousted that the Department of Education publicly refuted that "radical Islam" would be informing the school's curriculum. In many ways, before her resignation Almontaser was asked to defend both the school and herself, as representative of Arab American culture. Almontaser not being charged with teaching students about Arab culture but defending it, leaving many asking the question – why is this multicultural school any different than the hundreds of culturally themed schools operated by the Department of Education, some that were even approved for funding on the same day as the KGIA.

The strategy and language of the groups opposed to KGIA was very similar to that of groups that suggested that President Obama's middle name (Hussein) alluded to an affiliation with radical Islam. The president's response was to reinforce that he was a

Christian, highlighting his attendance at a Christian church in Chicago. However, the “birthers,” the group that believes that Obama is not an American citizen, continually invoked his middle name. While Almontaser is not as significant as the president, she faced a similar situation where the stop the madrassah campaign often used her Arabic first name, Dhabah, to invoke a kind of confusion and suspicion around her. While Obama represents the supreme leadership of the nation, Almontaser’s role as a school principle links her with certain American ideals regarding democracy and education that have nationalistic implications, and she was not unaware of these nationalistic associations. One cannot help but notice that many of the decisions that were made while planning the school were done to avoid insinuation that Islam or religion would be part of the school. When Almontaser chose the AAFSCNY and not Al-Noor to administer her grant, this was a clear way to break a connection to the Arab-Muslim community in the area. Even the naming of the school, the Khalil-Gibran *International* School seemed to be an important move to downplay the cultural focus of the school, which would indeed be the teaching of Arabic language and culture.

As a prominent figure in the Arab Muslim community Almontaser could not deny her affiliation with Islam and unlike most other prominent Arab American state and city representatives she frequently wore the hijab. Just as representations of the female suicide bomber would often use a comparison between the woman as “secular” or “normal” against photos of her in her martyr video and photos, often holding a weapon and clothed in some type of symbolic dress<sup>16</sup>, the stop the madrassah campaign paid particularly close attention to the way Almontaser looked at public appearances and press conferences.

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<sup>16</sup> See Photo 1 – Almontaser’s photo on the cover of the New York Post and the comparison made by the popular blog *militant islam monitor* regarding her “jihadi makeover” [www.militantislammonitor.org/article/id/2901](http://www.militantislammonitor.org/article/id/2901)

Comparing the way she wore hijab to an obviously much earlier photo, anti-KGIA groups suggested that this was an attempt to hide how radical she really was, to hide her “true identity.” Yet in many ways, the Arab-Muslim community that had supported Almontaser was being alienated from the schools administration. It was only after Almontaser was asked to resign that she began to use an argument based on a kind of nationalist religious pluralism to justify the school’s existence. She assembled religious leaders from a variety of faiths to form a coalition in support of KGIA, and while prominent Christian and Jewish community leaders were talking to the New York Times about the injustice of Almontaser’s resignation, community Muslim leaders were nowhere to be found.

The ambiguity around the KGIA was problematic for Almontaser. Similar to recent discourses regarding the Lower-Manhattan Cultural Center, where early plans were clearly focused on being a Muslim center, changed its plans to reflect religious neutral language, Almontaser attempted to advocate for a space to promote understanding between the imaginary Middle East and the imaginary West without mentioning the real (perceived) issue of tension. What kind of space can be carved out of the educational and cultural imaginary of the city without clearly articulating what and who will be occupying that space? While it seems that the target enrollment of the KGIA had been the “average New York city” child, when enrollment was low Almontaser turned to local Arab community leaders to encourage their children to attend the school. The school had become a site of surveillance and humiliation for many of the students who were now linked to a school and principle, accused of practicing ‘radical Islam,’ and forced to explain themselves and their identity to non-Arab and non-Muslim students.

Sites of cultural understanding turned sites of surveillance are made possible by the narratives of secularism and sister narrative religious pluralism. It became difficult to Almontaser could not stand on both of these positions, advocating an affirmation of Arab Americans and their contribution to New York City while also signaling to secularism and its symbolic hegemony in national political projects. While as Janet Jakobsen and Anne Pellegrini have argued that secularism has been favorable to some prominent, they would argue Protestant, religious discourses – Islam remains outside of this purview. While gestures are often made to symbolically embrace all religions and nationalities in the public sphere, those subjected to these discourses are continually expected to perform their patriotism. When Almontaser was questioned about the word intifada, she responded with the proper Arabic dictionary-like meaning, and not the meaning appropriate for the war on terror, clearly cemented her identity in the eyes of the public. Even Mayor Bloomberg's response to her resignation was diminished, that she was "certainly not a terrorist" (making clear that although this was never why she was asked to resign this was of paramount concern) but "not media savvy", alluding to her inability to perform Americaness.

Ultimately it is discourses that construct Arabness as a distinct category among other U.S. ethnic groups that creates these racializing narratives. While Almontaser wanted deeply to create a school that celebrated an Arab identity, her version of Arabness became increasingly reliant on a secularized and exclusionary construction of Arabness that either purposely omitted many in her local community while failing to address why this project was so imminently needed. So eager to carve out a space in the public education system for Arabic culture, she failed to critically interrogate what that space

would be like, who it would serve, and what its political purpose would be. She was surprised when she was regularly confronted with questions regarding what the politics of the school were, and how she would address them. While Almontaser had been trained to be an educator, she had always worked to remediate cultural and religious conflicts among students and parents of Muslim backgrounds. In such situations she was never asked to avoid religion as she would be when working to create the KGIA.

Almontaser falls into a trap that Pellegrini and Jakobsen take up in their book, *Love the Sin*, where they argue that it is assumed that religion and politics should be separate and that religion must inevitably be separated from public life because of its innate volatility. If this is the case, and for religious and cultural minorities to gain their symbolic foothold on the American political scene, how will they be able to do this without articulating the traditions and ethics that they bring with them. Almontaser, either knowingly or unknowingly, names the school Khalil Gibran after the famous Christian Lebanese poet. Christian Arab Americans play a critical role in the historical development of Arab as a racial and cultural category in the U.S. While some were practicing Muslims the vast majority were Christian and this was not accidental. Moustafa Bayoumi has observed that in the past, a remarkable amount of past immigration policies have been based on whether or not the applicant appeared (physically racially white) assimilable or religiously assimilable. That these policies have been traditionally decided in the heat of the current political climate or by the (mostly racist) opinion of the judge to decide what makes someone white. The 1942 Naturalization Act had limited citizenship to “free white persons” without defining what makes a person white. In many cases for those coming from the Middle East, they needed

to prove that they were white – difficult when they came from countries that were squarely on the Asian Peninsula. In the case of Hassan, the judge ruled that because he was Muslim, he would not intermarry or assimilate with the population of the Christian Americans.

Christian Arab Americans have the most longstanding and well-established social networks in the United States, and have started many of the existing cultural and social services non-profits and centers. They were perhaps the first to try to establish what ‘Arab’ means in the context of American multiculturalism. In the context of Bayoumi’s work, Christian Arab values are developed under the context that whiteness was necessary for admission and long-term acceptance into the United States. And while the Naturalization Act had been overturned by 1952, the immigration policies that have been instituted after September 11, 2001 operate in a similar fashion to undermine the ability of Arab Muslims to gain access to the United States.

Several programs have been instituted after September 11, 2001 that have distinguished immigrants coming from the traditional Middle East to be singled out as potential terrorist threats, requiring specific registration and interviews upon entry into the U.S. While I am unclear as to how many are deported or detained because of this registration programs like NSEERS and US-VISIT, I am interested in how this process draws attention to Muslim as a category that while may have been distinguished from race in the past, behaves strangely similar to race.

The reason why this in particular is troubling is that, considering the broad geography of special registration, it makes descent or inheritability of Islam (and gender) the defining criterion...It has nothing to do with nationality (because the nations are allies) and legal barriers have been established to exclude as many Muslims as possible, and that fact consequently turns Islam into a racial category. (278)

In many cases over and over in past policies of immigration, the courts have highlighted the Christianity of Syrians and Armenians to grant them entrance into the United States. Thus, the main racial logic we are asked to follow is that Arab Americans are permitted into the U.S. but only if they perform whiteness. Whether or not this performance will be accepted is another story.

This is of paramount importance for Debbie Almontaser when we try to discern what made her the target for so much political scrutiny. Almontaser had failed at performing whiteness, and although she issued an apology, she would never be able to reconcile this mistake with her obvious performance of religion and Islam. While Bayoumi explains that it is imperative for many Arab Americans to disavow a Muslim identity to gain admission to the U.S., this was simply not possible for Almontaser, a devout Muslim who wore the hijab.

It was not until after Almontaser was asked to resign that she turned to the community to publicly support her project, a requirement not needed for the majority of language and culturally themed schools in New York. However, at that time she did not cite the support of the Arab or Muslim community, but many of the prominent Christian and Jewish organizations in Brooklyn. In the midst of these acts of racism and charges of ‘radical’ militantism in the KGIA, it seemed to become imperative for Almontaser to allow the curriculum of the school to be defined by the dominant religious and cultural groups of the community, and that her own voice and perspective would continually lend itself to this kind of racism.

I would suggest that this type of reactive politics, where a project is developed to educate the public about the “true” ethnic, actually lends itself to further racializing

Muslim women by highlighting and avoiding the discussion of Islam as system of practices and ethics that are protected under the rights of the United States government. It is this kind of reactive politics that plays into the secular representations of Islam as oppressive to women, where women that observe its traditions and practices are coerced and irrational, and that they are not able to produce and participate in their own political projects. Because secularism is the passive term to religion, the attempt to represent Islam as on par with other religions will not be effective for gaining access to a narrative of American exceptionalism, where the U.S. is the space of multiculturalism par excellence. There must be a nuanced understanding of how these projects are made highly visible (as well as how the women are made highly visible) in order to promote American exceptionalism and liberalism in the global city.

Religion is articulated as a discourse outside of public life and as Pellegrini and Jakobson, Asad, and others suggest – it is the keeping of these discourses separate that specifically makes the state unable to intervene on them. Pellegrini and Jacobsen have also suggested that it is the commonly held belief that sexuality should be decided by religion that makes those issues unable to be litigated by the state.

Because ‘Arab’ falls under the sign of Muslim, and in the American imaginary a Muslim identity falls under the domain of religion, this keeps political projects organized around these labels separated and difficult to litigate. Those who have put forth the effort to create space for the dissemination of an Arab ‘culture’ have been an effort to work within this paradigm – however as I have articulated earlier this approach is not viable because it merges Islam with the word religion. AAFSCNY is a way to deal to reconstruct Arab culture from reverse. This paralysis around issues of Muslim equality is the reason why

they are so often outside of the state purview. Non-governmental organizations receive funding for these groups – to study and enroll them but there isn't any way to regulate this.

If Almontaser had articulated her project within a Muslim framework she would have been dismissed as trying to bring religion (radical Islam or not) into the public schools which would have been clearly a violation of the so called separation of church and state. However, by focusing on the language of the school, because she focused on the word Arab, the word that is symbolic of culture and tradition, the word that denotes the more permanent and non-changeable race as opposed to the religious she signified an ideology or a choice in American life. However, as Bayoumi has so eloquently pointed out, Arab in the U.S. has had a tenuous relationship with being white. Where one may indeed identify with the Arabian Peninsula but must ultimately perform whiteness in order to become a citizen or assimilated. Against the backdrop of current war on terror and the infamous suicide bomber the Arab American community has a renewed struggle with this word. Earlier waves of Arab American migrants were called upon to establish, or reestablish, their whiteness. In Brooklyn this group still constitutes the middle class that provides the foundation of funding for many Arab cultural institutions and services.

The Bread and Roses Cultural Project is the arts and cultural division of a New York statewide health care union (SEIU Local 150). The union began in the late 1950's as a small group of mostly Jewish health care workers and has grown into a large union that represents many nurses as well as home health aids which are made of predominantly immigrant labor in NYC. The cultural project has had a long a rich history in New York City, even generating a large fundraising machine to create sister projects with other

union chapters around the nation. In recent years, the union has supported the creation of Gallery 1199, an artistic space reserved for the exhibitions that feature the art that the union feels represents groups of the labor market that are often over looked or unacknowledged as part of the New York labor force. The gallery boasts being the only “permanent union exhibition space in the country” which features mainly realist photography.

Over the past few years the project has focused on giving out cameras to different immigrant and labor groups and exhibiting the work in anthologies as well as Gallery 1199. In its spread to other states and unions, these photographic exhibitions had been shown during events where the union felt that laborers were rendered invisible, such as retirement homes or the hospitals. In one very contentious exhibition, the union exhibited photos of undocumented workers in the lobby of the local INS office. The photos captured some of the acts of violence these workers had been subjected to when trying to obtain work. Therefore the scope of the work grew tremendously over the last five to ten years and the funding for these projects grew.

In 2007, Bread and Roses approached the AAFSCNY to begin an Unseen America photography project with the women of the center’s BENL and ESL classes and began meeting with them on a weekly basis to learn about different techniques and the different functions of the cameras. The workshops would also be meetings where the women could view each others photos and share and discuss what they showed and the ways they see these objects are changed. The series of workshops culminated with a small exhibition held at the AAFSCNY where many of the photographs were framed in the center’s hallway for staff and clients to view. A few of the women who had taken the

photos were present for the exhibition, but many did not want to be seen by the community as having taken the photos and were absent for the exhibition, many signing the photographs ‘anonymous.’

This reluctance to be part of the exhibition may have been for a few different reasons. The flyer of the exhibition was a photograph of some of the women’s hands that had been decorated with henna for one of the other women’s spring weddings. The title of the event was “Unseen America”<sup>17</sup> however the Arabic title was written incorrectly underneath making it impossible to understand the theme of the event. The combination of the title and the photograph gave the sense of some big revelation that the world would have access to something that was not previously available before. Bread and Roses had not taken into account the racial and gendered meaning of their flyer for the women, making the event seem like an orientalist portrayal of their exotic eastern culture.



Anonymous

Also, the women of Bread and Roses seemed to be unfamiliar with the way in the women’s attitudes about photography were influenced by some Islamic and cultural motifs that problematize visual representations of humans and being an improper distraction from the moral projects of trying to feel the presence of god. Many of the women participating in the center’s activities did not believe in watching television or looking at photographs. They had already been extremely productive in the visual arts, but it was

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.nysm.nysed.gov/exhibits/special/2007/unseenamerica.cfm> and [http://www.sharidiamond.net/#/projects/unseen-america--arab-women-in-brooklyn-2008/1\\_NidalAlloubane](http://www.sharidiamond.net/#/projects/unseen-america--arab-women-in-brooklyn-2008/1_NidalAlloubane)

not the type of realist photography that served the political project of Bread and Roses. In fact, it did not seem that Bread and Roses had considered that the women in the center obscured their visibility from the public intentionally.<sup>18</sup> The manner in which they hid themselves in the photos allowed them to both remain anonymous and also to be seen.

As Edward Said first warned us in *Orientalism*, the figure of the ‘Arab’ in the west both functions to offer an ideal space where the Occident can project its desires outside of West while also disciplining the subjects of the Middle East. However distinct from the project that Said first laid out, programs focused on the population from the Middle East remain complicit in producing idealized or diminutive narratives about these subjects. Just as Said identifies the production of these narratives from both benevolent and hostile attempts to study the ‘Arab,’ Abu-Lughod recognizes a similar problematic at work in the study of Arab women’s rights. She insists that the project focuses on an either/or, where rights can be wholeheartedly bestowed or rejected, instead of studying the ways that discourses regarding human rights have been translated, taken up, debated, etc. She insists that this project better captures the complexities of the concept of human rights in different environments and avoids some of the objectifying paradigms that Said identifies.

However, it is important to study dominant assumptions about Arab women that creep into studies regarding human rights over and over again. Why is it so easy to overlook the political interests of women from the Middle East and fail to contextualize the way in which concepts like human rights are situated? How have the priorities of the,

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<sup>18</sup> The Bread and Roses exhibit was picked up by Women’s E-News. <http://womensenews.org/story/arts/080615/photos-probe-spectrum-female-muslim-identity> While this electronic news site has a rather modest readership, it translates stories like this one into Arabic, where it has been picked up by other Arabic language channels (Al-Jazeera).

sometimes benevolent, human rights activists come to displace those of the women being studied? What are the narratives and imaginaries that allow their agency (even symbolically) to be effaced? And as these narratives are identified, what are the commentary narratives that take them up and reinforce them? How are they strengthened and propelled by discourses that do not necessarily focus on 'Arab women' but have traditionally been deployed elsewhere?

The female suicide bomber is an excellent case study in this respect, because she is a figure that illuminates the tensions that are at the center of many converging but seemingly disparate discourses. She has been framed as a hero, monster, and victim in a continuous and circulating way. Each of these framings are embedded in metanarratives of gender, politics, violence, and, significantly, the secular and the modern. Yet the convergence of different disciplines, the social sciences and the emerging field of security studies, have frequently dismissed the political efficacy of the female suicide bomber.<sup>19</sup> Despite the many different contexts each of the women cited for seeking out 'martyrdom' or the subsequent written and video recordings woman left behind explaining their decisions, they were continually over written by the assumptions that (1) women are not violent and therefore must have been forced by other male family members to enter into suicide missions, (2) they must have been unstable, traumatized, or emotionally disturbed by events in their personal lives in order to take their own life as well as that of others, or (3) the female suicide bomber is caught up in the propaganda of Islamic fundamentalism and therefore lacks the propensity to think rationally about the consequences of her actions. Each of these is an absolute denial of the ability of the

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<sup>19</sup> See Naaman 2007, Jacques and Taylor 2008, and Bloom 2007

female suicide bomber to exercise martyrdom as a political choice and therefore render her hopelessly victimized and coerced.

However, as much as the female suicide bomber is a figure that represents, for many Americans, a kind of extreme violence and terror that is used to justify an international war on terror, it justifies a constant paranoia and suspicion of the persons from Middle East. Because, as I will point out later, continually rendering Islamic identified subjects as coerced and irrational justifies violence and the imposition of Western control both locally and internationally. The form it takes in New York City is that which Rey Chow calls the “ethnic stereotype,” whereby it is not whiteness that the ethnic minority is asked to mimic but a caricature of itself that must be performed in order to be accepted by the dominant society. While Chow articulates this stereotype in relationship to ways in which Chinese Americans are objectified, I am interested in the way in which a stereotype is produced for Arab/Muslim women, and particularly how secular depictions of religion as not modern have been instrumental in this particular stereotype.

Last, the relationship between secularism and gender that is so central to the production of this stereotype is in need of further illumination. How can feminist theories of knowledge production open a space for considering religion outside of the context of secularism? If we are to borrow from the work of Saba Mahmood, and recognize the critical engagement with a discursive tradition like Islam as a political project, how does this reinvigorate a space for religious feminism? In what ways do religious practices and organizations make possible new political formations and futures? How do these practices and beliefs help to organize different genders and sexual possibilities?

As the example of Debbie Almontaser strongly suggests, the situation of the Arab American/Muslim American figure is not merely one that rests on an epic battle between the assumptions of the war on terror informed discourses of Islamophobia and the more inclusive and liberal positioned notions of multiculturalism, but is contingent on the way in which Muslim or Arab identified groups are positioned with and against each other. Her attempt to negotiate a project on a loosely defined 'Arabness' had been framed by an imaginary of New York multiculturalism but was subsequently thrown into question when this identity, now associated with terrorism and coercion clashed with the idealized and nationalistic entanglements with the public school system even larger discourses of exceptionalism around democratic education. While a framework of multiculturalism provides the foundation for which Almontaser attempts to generate a space for Arab identity, the way in which this project becomes identified with her self solely, rests within what Rey Chow calls the ethnic stereotype.

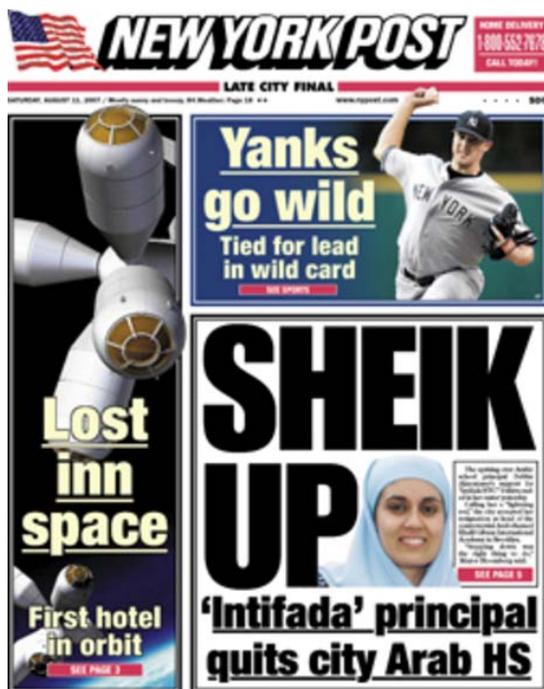
Chow suggests that there are "several levels of mimeticism working in an overlapping, overdetermined manner at all times," to constrain the relationship between the ethnic subject and the dominant culture. She explains that they operate in at least three distinct ways; (1) the historical practices of imperialism have presented the white man as the example of culture and the ethnic subject, although always required to perform the 'original,' is continually rendered a bad copy, (2) the process in the first level of mimesis is complicated by focusing on the colonized as an "indeterminate, internally divided subject," that is not longer polarized against the dominant culture. However, the second level of mimeticism while acknowledging the possibility for the ethnic subject to resist this subordination creates another level of mimeticism (3) where a new subjective

position is created for the ethnic that the ethnic person must come “to resemble what is recognizably ethnic (103-105).” This ethnic stereotype is an identity composed loosely of the general preconceived notions about the ethnic that must be performed in order to find a space in the dominant society.

While the ethnic stereotype significantly limits the way the ethnic subject can express herself in the dominant culture, Chow suggests that the third stage of this mimesis, which she calls coercive mimesis, captures the subject because of an overwhelming demand to solidify one’s position within the dominant society and thus

identity-be it civic, religious, institutional, or cultural-is the result not exactly only of an imposition of rules from the outside or only of a resistance against such an imposition; it is also the result of a kind of unconscious automatization, impersonation, or mimicking, in behavior as much as in psychology, of certain beliefs, practices, and rituals. It is such automatization, impersonation, and mimicry that in turn, give that identity its sense of legitimacy and security- and, ultimately, its sense of potentiality and empowerment. (110)

While the ethnic subject might want to resist the constraints of this identity this identity is



the precondition by which the subject becomes empowered to participate in the dominant culture. Just as the KGIA was an attempt by Almontaser to bring greater understanding to the New York City area about Arabic and Middle Eastern culture, the place from which this ‘culture’ was being described was one that relied on a caricature of ‘Arabness’ upon which these appeals could be made.

However, the ethnic stereotype that comes to light as a result of Almontaser's battle with the "stop the madrassah" campaign does not seem to be the result of her unwillingness to properly conform to the demands of such an identity. We can see through the way the school was named and articulated, an eagerness to create an 'Arab' multicultural identity that conforms to ideals and demands of modern education, however the way the program was articulated, in combination with the way that Almontaser performed an Arab identity was the source of too much tension for the public to really support. While the program was named after a Christian it was clear that Almontaser was a Muslim, and while it was clear to many that there needed to be a school that properly represented Arab culture within NYC multiculturalism, for many Arabness could not be articulated outside of Muslimness – a religion that has been rendered innately problematic by the war on terror.

In fact, Almontaser's willingness to present her culture for the pleasure of the city's purview puts her squarely in the space of the autobiographical confessional that Chow finds so troubling. Whereby coercive mimeticism suggests that the ethnic must perform the stereotype, ultimately when the ethnic renders their culture as visible for the dominant culture to consume, the possibility emerges for this stereotype to be rearticulated, or re-formed for better or for worse. Quickly, the school became an opportunity to weigh in on the central contradictions of Arab as a symbolic in the collection of multicultural identities. On the one hand there was a formation of "Arab" that had clearly been aligned with some of the hierarchical American immigration policies where, at least in relation to other ethnicities, they had enjoyed some privilege. This privilege had been what Almontaser had been relying on in her articulation of the

school's program. As she made this formation more and more explicit she made her project more and more visible, which also allowed Arab as an identity formation to be remade more in the framework of post Sept 11.

Of course, Islamophobia was not the only concern for Almontaser. She had also been under tremendous pressure to perform an Arab Muslim identity in a way that was compatible with the demands of a larger culture of piety. Her change in dress and her wider participation in public politics were not looked upon favorably by the Yemeni community that she relied on for support. In many ways the kind of narrative that she deployed for the school was such that no one, Pro-Arab or Anti-Arab, could identify with. This became much clearer as local Arab cultural groups further distanced themselves and she needed to reach farther from her core constituency to find support. As a last resort, realizing that her project would be hopelessly constrained by the language of religion, she began to rally the support of local Jewish and Christian religious leaders in a program to save the school. However this made her program appear more and more disjointed, because having already denied Islam as a cultural part of Arabness, her embrace of religion seemed disingenuous and also antithetical to the production of a public school.

What the Khalil Gibran school renders visible is precisely this vacillating reliance on two different formations of an Arab identity; one that relied heavily on the production of Arab Americans as conforming to a dominant white and Christian imaginary; the latter assumed Arab as synonymous with Muslim, which the image of the female suicide bomber helps us to understand, as dichotomously opposed to the teleological progressive project of democracy and education or more simply modernity. These two formations, or

the two polarities of this ethnic identity were not able to be reconciled adequately to produce one coherent argument for the public to really understand. And thus allowing an overarching fear of radical Islam and terrorism to permeate their opinion of the program. Rey Chow contextualizes the production of the ethnic stereotype and coercive mimeticism within the paradigm of a push for liberal multiculturalism. She reinforces that the organization of society as a collection of differences that these communities represent have been determined by the gaze of the dominant culture and that these differences can be used as a means of attacking others. So while liberal multiculturalism affirms some kind of difference, it is not clear what this difference is and how it will be deployed against other members of the ethnic group. Chow proposes that anti-racism be the central way to embrace difference instead of assuming, as is common in multiculturalism, that identity is “by choice and consent (134).”

However, the significance of these identities within New York City can be understood through the designation it has as “global city.” The global city is a metaphor for major cities that have a new strategic role beyond their history as centers for international trade and banking but functioning in four new ways:

First, as highly concentrated command points in the organization of the world economy; second, as key locations for finance and for specialized service firms, which have replaced manufacturing as the leading economic sectors; third, as sites of production, including the production of innovations, in these leading industries; and fourth, as markets for the products and innovations produced (Sassen 4).

And with this great influx of global capital concentrated in a small area tremendous changes take place to the urban geography. New York, as are London and Tokyo, the cities that Sassen discusses, major trading centers and that help to facilitate the flow of international capital through their markets and into other sectors of the economy and the rest of the world. However, these cities also have markedly different spaces because as

this large amount of resources has become concentrated in these cities, specialized services and the labor needed to support them have restructured the previous economic relationships that previously existed. Subsequently, there are some spatial formations that come along with being a global city, which are important for the way in which ethnic groups form communities. As corporations become more and more dominant there are greater opportunities for informal labor and seasonal labor, and this draws in a large migrant labor force. Along with this increased demand for immigrant labor is a continued and sustained patronage to migrant/ethnic neighborhoods by an extremely wealthy global class that spends money to demonstrate their good taste. Therefore, in this respect, the kind of multiculturalism Chow questions is linked tightly to the consumptive practices of an elite class.

Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the production of ethnic stereotypes is aided in some ways by consumption practices that would strongly influence the value embedded in the attributes of ethnic minorities. As capital flows into popular ethnic tropes that are favorable to this elite, how are other ethnic differences influenced? While Sassen largely articulates the consumption in immigrant neighborhoods as linked to the availability and maintenance of cheap goods and services, it is interesting to contemplate her theory in relationship to ethnic groups as a source of intellectual fodder for the organization of New York City as a multicultural ideal. Just as Sassen points out the global circulation of capital through New York City, she points out that the city has more non-profits and foundations that work on projects located in the metro area and around the world. She maintains that they occupy space in New York, which she points out is not economically practical, in order to position themselves near the circulation of capital.

While there are not a markedly high number of foundations and non-profits registered in New York City that focus specifically on Arab women or Muslim women, there are many smaller projects within larger programs that may have this focus. They have the ability to source funding internationally and position it in the regions and areas where they perceive it to be needed most. When these projects and programs are informed in the manner that Almontaser's program had been, there is a greater concern with how they contribute and reinforce a problematic ethnic stereotype that will render Arab-Muslim women outside of the imagined public and political space.

Inderpal Grewel has suggested that a kind of cosmopolitan multiculturalism was facilitated in the United States with the provision of sites that gave support to immigrants which then gave them access to a kind of "American-ness." However, this access is not absolute but works by granting ethnic subjects a place in a new consumer culture that gives new buying freedoms to gendered and racially marginalized subjects.

Multiculturalism has become one such technology in the United States as a state project, produced through the census, laws, and provisions governing immigration, and "protecting" minorities to create racialized and gendered subjects who see themselves as "American" at some points as different kinds of Americans at other times and places. However, it is not just the practices of the state that produce these subjects, but also strategies of self-identification and difference through practices of belonging to groups and communities, many of which are materialized within consumer culture's use of "choices" in the formation of both individual and collective identification. (200)

This kind of discourse, a multiculturalism based on choice is particularly dangerous for devout subjects and racially marked subjects who cannot "choose" the cultural identity they are marked with.

These multicultural sites are new opportunities for Arab identified subjects to be policed in New York City. They are centers of cultural cohesion and reiteration, where hierarchies of culture can be established within the community itself. They are able to

produce some subjects as compatible with American values and consumer culture while they are able to also justify newer and more focused attempts of surveillance at groups who can be made examples of American superiority. This endeavor works to serve the project of national pride in two ways, to support immigrant and ethnic groups that are seen as benevolent and akin to the nation while also weeding out and identifying groups that post a risk to this national health. Thus, there is an overabundance of non-profits that would serve Arab women while there are few who make their focus Arab men. Again, this is why the female suicide bomber becomes such a powerful narrative for debate. Arab women had been identified as a group that could be easily incorporated into this cultural interpolation as victims of their own culture. The female suicide bomber turns this representation upside down, marking her as a new potential threat, and renewing her status as an object of study and philanthropy.

As much as 'Arab' as an ethnic formation is constraining Muslim women's political representation, dominant discourses that are circulated in North America and West Europe about the appropriate role of religion in public life further enflame this representation. Religion, and more specifically religious identities, push the individual outside of the imagined realm of the political, and this marking doesn't seem to be characterized by a representation of religious figures as not having a force, but by not being capable of modern political reason. Religious space is characterized by a strong emotional affect, feelings of collective belonging, and associated with a past that refuses to deal with modern concerns. If ethnic minorities are asked to conform to ethnic stereotypes, how do conceptualizations of religions as inherently violent, coercive to

subjects imagined to be vulnerable, and irrational in relationship to what are perceived as competing scientific discourses, work to further constrain the ethnic.

For the female suicide bomber, it has been suggested on many accounts that while having been exposed to war and violence, she had been susceptible, her will had been compromised, and she had been coerced by others who wish for her to do harm. Religion, in this sense, becomes a tool that allows her to escape her situation and avoid the harsh 'reality' in which she lives or it is instrumental for bestowing herself or her family some form of divine favor. Very rarely is she discussed as her mission being for intrinsic religious belief alone, while men are often characterized as becoming suicide bombers because of a dual religious and political justification. While an intrinsic belief in religion is attributed to Muslim women in many other popular contexts, when it is combined with religion it is assumed that women are not able to perform this task. Why?

While I have focused somewhat solely on how an ethnic stereotype follows Arab Muslim women, it is important to illuminate how religion specifically figures into this stereotype and the ways in which this has arisen from encounters with interpreting religion in the context of an ideal of "secularism." Ann Pellegrini and Janet Jakobsen have asserted that this assumed divide and conflict between religious and secular interests does not implicate the entirety of religion on state crafting but the interests of specific forms of religion that come to dominate public debates. While their focus is mostly on the ways that religion comes to bear on sexual regulation within what is imagined to be the secular U.S. government, their thesis has relevance for the representations of Muslim women in New York.

On matters of religion, the United States has two conflicting self-understandings: that this is a nation of religious freedom and equality, and that this is a basically Christian

nation. Thus, in practice, life in the United States has proven to be much more like the situation in Britain than our national mythology implies. If tolerance marks a space of well-defined hierarchy like that between the Church of England and other religious faiths in Britain, what is the place of tolerance in a society that is supposedly based on the free and equal participation of all citizens? (47)

It is difficult to really interrogate what makes up the domain of the secular and the values of its imagined space, and whether it is really so distinct from the values of the religious that it seeks to distance itself from. Pellegrini and Jakobsen argue, along the lines of Asad, that religious difference is being left out and this process of authorizing religious traditions and beliefs is being replaced by an extreme right interpretation that the left has taken to represent all of religion.

Often Jakobsen and Pellegrini work from the premise that religious and the secular are two completely distinct domains of culture and community. Often working from the point at which religious life inhibits the practice of queers and sexual politics, it would often seem that even while Pellegrini and Jakobsen recognize the work of churches and religious organizations on issues such as gay marriage and ordaining gay and lesbian ministry they tend to revert to the secular as being a distinct discourse from the workings of religion. At times they have pointed out how secularism is connected to the dominant assumptions of Protestantism in the U.S., suggesting that secularism is imbued with religious values and interests that thwart the efforts for political recognition of freedoms of sexuality and queerness. And while I am sympathetic to the interference of Protestant values in the midst of sexual regulation, I am not sure that it is really Christianity that can be identified as the point of intersection for sexual regulation and state power. While Pellegrini and Jakobsen offer a very nuanced discussion of the tensions that follow the representation of religion for the practice of politics, I think it could be enhanced with a discussion of religious identity and authenticity.

In their article, “Obama’s Neo-New Deal: Religion, Secularism, and Sex in Political Debates Now,” many of the tensions around civil union and the somewhat ambivalence of the Obama administration around a robust solution to the issue of gay marriage are discussed. Pellegrini and Jakobsen boldly proclaim that

Whether you regard Obama's stated reasons for opposing same-sex marriage to be religiously sincere or politically expedient should not matter: from the perspective of the value of religious freedom, religious arguments for same-sex marriage or against, sincerely made or rhetorically staged, should not be binding in a country that claims not to establish religion and to allow a freedom of religious practice (or not) according to conscience. (1233)

This contradiction that they continually point out, whereby religion is consistently brought up around issues of sexuality is what they usually term “Christian secularism” as an interference in public life by what Jakobsen and Pellegrini believe are Protestant discourses.

While I am hesitant to make sexual regulation purely the domain of the Protestant, the relationship of Obama to these discourses is very telling. Pellegrini and Jakobsen make plain a question that many Americans seem to have with Obama and religion, which is where exactly does he fall? Similar to the problem Almontaser encounters with the public over her identity, the public does not seem to be sure that Obama is religious, and if religious, more specifically Christian. While he made clear to the American public that he had been Christian and attending a Chicago church for quite some time, Obama is still not quite part of symbolic domain of the religious. Firstly, he does not belong to the right-wing which is understood to be the party of religion (despite the overwhelming affiliation of the left with religion) and second he does not resemble the Christian imaginary having been the son of an African Muslim.

Obama is having difficulty conforming to an American religious identity, and his “religious authenticity” is perpetually in danger of being debated. The controversial group called “The Birth Movement” has continually demanded to see Obama’s birth certificate as proof of his American citizenship and similarly many require Obama to perform a kind of right-wing Christianity to prove his religious identity. As Pellegrini and Jakobsen have been so adept at pointing out, the political debate around religion and sex is a stagnant one that reduces the participation of other kinds of religious practices and religious difference.

Thus, it is this hindering of difference that does not seem congruent with a Christian secularism. If there is an interjection of religion into secular state practices as they suggest, why is this specifically a Christian phenomenon? In some ways they seem to suggest that homophobia and the regulation of sexuality are located solely in the presence of Christian values. Jasbir Puar has noted that the state has allied itself with homosexual subjects within a phenomenon she terms “homonationalism.”<sup>20</sup> For her this unity is based on the perceived threat of terrorism as the ultimate state enemy, which in turn has engendered new renderings of the compatibility of gay and lesbian movements and state power.

Returning to Pellegrini, is the problem they are attempting to describe the consequence of a privileging of the state to create a safe space for Christian values to regulate sexuality, or is it similar to the rendering of religious subjects I have discussed earlier in this paper, where the religious subjects become hopelessly rendered backward and handicapped from politics and the subsequent space made for the religious is a

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<sup>20</sup> See Puar 2007

symbolic “ghetto” where the objections to sexual reforms can remain dormant until they become useful and instrumental for political agendas. While I am not disagreeing with an overall problematic with understanding politics within a strict “religious and secular divide,” I am questioning the alignment of these divisions with a strictly Christian religious specter.

The modern and what constitutes the modern is too large a project to be reconciled within this a small project. However, it is important to query the relationship of the modern with the production of the secular state ideal. As inherited from the Enlightenment the modern is the bringing religion under the submission of state rule, and this causes us to assume that this is because there is something innately disruptive about religion to state power. Therefore, secularism is the environment where modern values and objectives could be fully realized. This forces us to assume that religion becomes, at least symbolically, the space where those behaviors, emotions, and practices that symbolically do not belong in the modern public (political) sphere? It should be obvious what kind of box this places the religious subjects into in regard to participation in public politics.

Lara Deeb’s ethnographic study of women in a pious community in Lebanon works to displace the association of religion with the “unmodern.” While I have suggested in the beginning of my essay that questions about democracy and the modern are deeply embedded in the narratives about Muslim women in NYC, they have global significance and impact. Deeb’s subjects are the Shi’i women of the Al-Dahiyya neighborhood in Beirut, Lebanon. While the women that she observed were concerned with the opposition between secularism and religiosity, this also strongly came to bear on

the struggle to define gender roles. “Rather than points of challenge or rejection, these are points of ambivalence and negotiation, though always in the context of power of Western discourses and the political stakes of being modern in the contemporary world (Deeb 5).”

The tradition of holy war that Johnson describes generates a fear that the spread of Islam by violent means is an innate form of Islamic religious practice. This continues to mark Muslim subjects as not only political agents, but as not assimilable to American life, much as Rey Chow has suggested. While Islamic opinions differ between the right of the individual to decide how to pursue Islamic values or the pursuit as the Islamic state as the only political option, this all has been debated in the context of bringing together a community that has been divided by sectarian violence and colonization. However the pervasive nature of religious violence, within which Islam is figured as a desiring machine that seeks to reproduce itself all over the world haunts the female suicide bomber and the project of Debbie Almontaser, whereby they are continually rendered unable to fully engage in political life because of their devotion to an Islamic practice.

### Chapter 3: Religious Affect and the Body

The obsession with the female suicide bomber and the surveillance of Muslim women, the production of these figures as objects that are in need of aid and monitoring, points out the constant anxiety the U.S. (as representative of the imaginary “West”) has regarding their political action. On the one hand, the number of projects that are aimed at “helping Muslim women” suggests there is something vulnerable about them. The constant allusion to coercion and manipulation is only part of this picture. In contrast with her male counterparts, the female suicide bomber is discussed in terms of trauma and mental illness. She has been altered and influenced by an environment of war and violence. What is the connection between these two extremes of representation, the martyr who represents violence and barbarism, and the victimized Muslim woman who pulls at the heart-strings of the West? What is the source of this kind of volatility, where these women can be represented as illogical and changeable?

While not mentioned explicitly, religious affect is central to these representations of coercion and irrationality. Religious discourses and modern discourses each represent the body differently and have provided their own contextualized meanings for the affects of the body. This is both because of how the modern body is believed to be constructed but also way that religion can interpret the emotions and feelings of the body of the individual into collective meanings. Asad mentions this in his discussion of the cultural meanings of pain. While Asad is trying to make a point about the way in which pain need not render the individual passive and non-agentic but may be an active relationship with the community. Where pain becomes collective pain to be experienced throughout the community, it becomes an opportunity to re-engage with the textual and emotive

demands of their tradition. He relies on Elaine Scarry's, *The Body in Pain*, where she argues that pain destroys one's reality and sense of self. However, Asad takes her project to be representative of a "secular" body and argues that pain need not destroy one's reality.

The kind of excess that pain creates for Scarry and Asad, along with the kind of excess that Chow suggests leaves open the interpellation of the ethnic identity, suggests that there is something open about the individual that makes these discourses part of the subject. This excess may be something that is within everyone and it may be this vulnerability that secular mandates seek to control. While there will always be the potential for religious affect to be utilized for collective violence it also has the potential to be mobilized for community building.

Although the separation of church and state means that there are spaces for religion to exist, it must conform to a religious cultural identity, something that is confined to the private, sometimes symbolized by the home and the family, ideally made passive to the political power of the nation or state. Almontaser was embedded in a performance of American democratic ideals, of which public education is thought to be a key part. Any show of her religious practice, in dress or language, lends itself to render her irrational to collective/coercive religious demands.

The female suicide bomber has another set of distinct problems whereby she evokes not only the possibility of religious violence but the belief that women cannot participate in political violence without the urging of male family members, debates around the female suicide bomber have left her a non-agent again, not solely because of coercion by male family members, or symbolic patriarchy in its worst form, but because she is represented as sensitive to trauma. These narratives all amplify the symbolic

vulnerability that these women are thought to have, making her the object of study and preoccupation of the social sciences. However, for New York City, and its internationally strong army of non-profits, NGOS and foundations, it is this same belief in her ability to be affected again, as the object of possible coercion to their collective demands.

The Arab American Family Support Center, being the most well-funded immigrant services center in New York City and the surrounding boroughs, finds itself often mediating between what it means to be Arab and Arab representation in New York City. With the constant flow of Yemeni, Sudanese, Egyptian, Algerian, and Moroccan migrants coming to the center for the processing of Medicare and Medicaid paperwork, from these and other interactions with their community, as well as from the input of the students at the centers literacy and BENL classes, the center works with other city agencies to try and address the needs of their community – or how they perceive these needs to be. Over the past few years there has been an increasingly large number of programs that have sought to make wellness care and preventative medical care more accessible to Arabic speaking clients. Surveys by many public health groups have suggested that this group is particularly less likely to seek out these kinds of services. This has lead to a spike in funding for programs that seek to facilitate better relations between those who interact with this community. However, as I have alluded to before, the way this group is studied, who counts as Arab American and who does not, is often very slippery which makes the project of generalizing about the needs of this community very tenuous.

On March 20, 2010, WNYC, New York's local NPR station featured the AAFSCNY in a story about the difficulty that immigrants often have with the medical

system. Although the story mostly features the “cultural” issues that doctors face when trying to treat patients, the director of the medical program at the AAFSCNY discusses these in terms of religious beliefs that she believes the hospital should honor – like leaving the yamulka on the head of a dying member of the Jewish community and helping a dying devout Muslim to face east. The story’s attention to a Yemeni client who says the act of giving birth on a special prayer rug has important religious overtones. This story marks an important intersection of medical and religious discourses and the way in which they imagine the body. The way in which religion mediates life and death is illuminated by Elaine Scarry as she attempted to articulate the way culture, religion, and medicine have an interest in representing pain.

When discussing the act of giving birth in the Bible, Scarry draws attention to the way in which the Old Testament lists the genealogy of generations have descended from Adam and Eve. She describes how this kind of listing is not really descriptive but triumphant. This celebration of reproduction The celebration of reproduction in the Old Testament is not only found in these lists but also in the importance of the first command that god gives to Adam and Eve (Be fruitful and multiply). Yet, as Scarry points out, many of these moments of birth that are narrated seem to carefully omit the body of the woman who is giving birth. It is alluded to, but it is never quite acknowledged and this is intended to draw our attention to God as the ultimate creator in these stories. The joy of these moments of creation is only attributed to God. “Man can only be created once, but once created, he can be endlessly modified; wounding the re-enacts this creation because it re-enacts the creation because it reenacts the power of alternation that has its first profound occurrence in creation.” (183) Therefore the pain associated with this

reproduction scene for the mother and the pain with which she experiences this creation, and for the witnesses to this event, give God a presence and the ability to emerge over and over again in the life of his people.

While Scarry's Biblical reference is Judeo-Christian it has important relevance to the situation of Halima at the AAFSCNY. The ritual of the prayer rug and kneeling link her to the proximity of God as both the mediator of pain and the creator of life. However, Talal Asad has made a strong criticism to this reading of pain and reproduction, because he considers Scarry to be falling prey to a secular bias that assumes the object of modern society to be the eradication of pain. While Asad believes that religion ought not be described as trying to exploit pain as a site of power, he suggests that the relationship between religion and power is means by which to live with pain. "...that one can live one's pain sanely or insanely, and (although ideas about insanity change) that the progressivist model of agency diverts attention away from our trying to understand how this is done in different traditions, because of the assumption that the agent always seeks to overcome pain conceived as object and as a state of passivity." Accusing Scarry of essentializing pain as an incapacitating event that renders one unable to act, Asad suggests that pain has the potential to be the basis of a productive and workable between the individual and their faith community, that this need not be the way in which human beings come to loose their creative potential. However I think the example that Asad uses to illustrate this point re-renders the same problematic that Scarry already describes whereby Asad's example of the "mother" and her relationship with her child, which is predicated on a shared pain, ignores the specific conditions that formulate this pain. What is at stake in this discussion from Asad is that living with pain – even after the creative

power that pain entails is relinquished to God, need not be giving up agency, as passive, but the potential of a larger temporal relationship with pain that becomes a collective communal relationship.

Scarry's representation of pain as a thought destroying event for the individual is still important for identifying a site where religion and the body seem to intersect. Scarry discusses how this structuring of pain and its avoidance become an important interest for the work of the medical provider, the state, the religious community, etc. How this pain at once comes to destroy reality for the subject and then reinvents the subject unto the production/creation of new worlds is of crucial importance. For the subjects of the WNYC story, the experience of pain was not only a major moment of disagreement for the patient and the doctor but a collision between strongly felt cultural and religious emotions and the assumptions of American medicine. The patient from Haiti and the women of the AAFSCNY who were reluctant to get mammograms both felt that the doctor's understanding of their body was not the one they were experiencing. That these two discourses come to be defined by pain is what interests both Asad and Scarry who are interested in how these intersections between the body and culture are lived and subsequently read as agentic or non-agentic. For Asad, it is the reading of this experience of pain as making one passive; meaning, for Asad, that one is unable to act on one's desires, as a troubling secular assumption.

...it is first of all a limit to the body's ability to act differently in the "real world" – the most immediate sign of this world – of the senses through which its materiality external and internal, is felt – and therefore it offers a kind of vindication of the secular – the idea of the "history making" and "self empowerment" can progressively replace pain by pleasure – or at any rate, by the search of what pleases one. (68)

For Asad this means that the pain in itself is not passive but the telos that is ascribed to pain is problematic – that if this body (in secular modern terms) should be active and self-

oriented in order to be agentic, then our understanding of agency is limited only to the pursuit of pleasure.

However, what I think Asad is missing the creative potential that Scarry reads into the moment of pain that is key to her discussion of torture. If torture can be used in such a way as to control the one tortured, if the experience of pain on the body of the victim and their world is ultimately destroyed, Scarry suggests that pain does not make the body of the victim passive but empties it of the ability to reformulate itself into its previous form. For Scarry world making originates not in the ability to forget one's materiality but in the temporal moments during the course of one's life where his/her materiality is created, and what is empowering for Scarry is not merely a new consideration of the way pain changes one's being but how the experience of pain is a moment where reality is remade. For the medical translators in New York City hospitals, the mechanism by which to change these experiences of pain is of primary concern. Mediating these experiences involves encouraging the patient to enter the world of medicine, and as Scarry suggests, to give up this past reality for a new one of x-rays and mammograms. However this renders the body passive, and as Asad suggests, the quiet body is the ideal body in the context of medicine. It is not surprising that the women at the AAFSCNY are reluctant to trade in their traditional practices for the medicalized ones.

While Scarry and Asad seem to disagree about the way in which pain can be inhabited, they seem to agree that the practice of religion is a way of making the body "active." While Scarry would like humans to consider the ways in which the body is 'created' through pain, Asad would suggest that this is a part of what makes religious practice so powerful – as it draws attention to the body as having the potential of being

shaped – “the power to shape itself for good or ill. Whether passive or active, the living body’s materiality is regarded as an essential means for cultivating what such traditions define as virtuous conduct and for discouraging what they consider as vice. The role of fear and hope, of felicity and pain, is central to such practices.” (Scarry 89) Therefore, if the body and its affects are an essential part of what makes religious practice possible, then what is omitted when the “secular body,” as Asad terms it, is assumed to be immobilized by pain and the experience of pain. While Scarry discusses this pain in the events that make the effects of power realized like in torture and control, Asad is interested in how the body and religion partner to make meaning of the sensations of the body, making the body an active participant in “world making.” While the secular body is intended to remain quiet and dormant which makes the mind active, the religious body is active and of critical importance.

Saba Mahmood talks about the manner by which the ethical practices of the Muslim body are constantly developing with new capacities in *The Politics of Piety*. She suggests that the practice of “transformation that is so important for feminist movements is problematized by the women’s attachment to patriarchal forms of life that, in turn, provide the necessary conditions for their subordination and their agency.” Just as patriarchy is a condition that makes feminism possible, patriarchy makes the transformation of women through the mosque movement possible. In other words, how can we understand the religious subject as not simply part of a reductive struggle of agency versus resistance but observe instead how the subject operates within a field of multiple agencies? The example Mahmood discusses is the way in which the women of the mosque movement discuss/understand the “virtue of shyness and modesty (al haya)”

(Mahmood 156) that the women understand to be essential for their daily life. While this virtue applies to both men and women the manner in which this virtue is applied to each sex is varied. The one woman in the group understands that the enactment of al haya is difficult to attain because she is not naturally shy. She decides she must ‘create’ shyness and that eventually shyness “imprints” itself on your inside. Mahmood warns us against reading this as a simple kind of relationship between a social norm and the internalization of this norm. She suggests,

... if we think of agency not simply as a synonym for resistance to social norms but as a modality of action, then this conversation raises some interesting questions about the kind of relationship established between the subject and the norm, between performative behavior and inward disposition. To begin with, what is striking here is that instead of innate human desires eliciting outward forms of conduct, it is the sequence of practices and actions one is engaged in that determine one’s desire and emotions. (157)

The experience and feelings of these virtues is of ultimate importance not the practice or performance of these norms.

I find resonances here with Scarry’s creative potential in the body and the embodiment of pious norms for the women of the mosque movement. While Scarry may be on the side of secular agency that Asad is so critical of, she draws attention to the way in which the experiences of bodily sensations become moments where the body can be remade and the production of a new world view can be possible. While this overwhelmingly challenges the idea that the religious subject, specifically Muslim women, are coerced and are incapable of reason, the ways in which the embodiment of norms produce a religious affect are problematic for secular politics. If the assumption of secular politics is one where the body must be subjugated to the higher order of moral reason of rational thinking, than how can one be “rational” while embodying religious virtues or behaving based on their relationship to the management of pain (or pleasure).

Is it only a life where pleasure is pursued and pain is avoided that makes one a reasonable subject? The embodiment of these norms and the context by which they arise are extremely problematic for the practice of medicine but also for the directive of nonprofit agencies and immigrant services that must look out for the health and wellbeing of their population. In order for their programs to become successful and to achieve intended results they must challenge this other body, the religious body.

Scholars have confronted the notion of the rational subject as a concept in western politics because it assumes a masculine body, which is able to subordinate the body in favor of the mind. Luce Irigaray critically examines the way in which dominant discourses, while proposing theories that claim to be gender neutral, actually represent the interests of the male body. In *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Irigaray discusses how psychoanalysis and philosophy assume a subject position from inside masculinity to describe women and yet woman as object as always managed to resist these objectifications.

The quest for the “object” becomes a game of Chinese boxes. Infinitely receding. The most amorphous with regard to ideas, the most obviously “thing,” if you like, the most opaque matter, opens upon a mirror all the purer in that it knows and is known to have no reflections. Except those which man has reflected there but which, in the movement of the concave speculum, pirouetting upon itself, will rapidly, deceptively, fade. (134)

The examination of different representations of the female suicide bomber is exemplary of the “game of Chinese boxes,” that Irigaray describes. The more that she is studied, the more the motivations for her actions becomes more illusive, the more studies are required to find an answer for ‘her.’ However, as we investigate this quest for her, as an object, the more this objectification falls into pieces, the more complexity she is thought to have.

In *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Irigaray suggests that is not merely a refusal to acknowledge the subject position of women that remains a problem, but a refusal to acknowledge the human body as the condition of life. If questions of ethics and subjectivity remain strictly in the mind, and women are disavowed as the material origin of male subjectivity, then women will always remain within a system of masculine representation. “In all his creations, all his works, man always seems to neglect thinking of himself as flesh. As one who has received his body as that primary home...which determines the possibility of his coming into the world and the potential opening of a horizon of thought, of poetry, of celebration, that also includes the god or gods (128).” Therefore, Irigaray would like to recognize the origin of our worlds in our materiality, and recognize it as the basis for other discourses. If the masculine binary must erase the body in order to constitute a self, it must also disregard the body of the woman from where it came.

How do we reclaim the body, female or male, that is lost? Does re-interpreting masculine discourse help to find what is essentially feminine? Irigaray warns us against trying to identify what is essentially female, because it will eventually come to signify the same problematic relation.

It is surely not a matter of interpreting the operation of discourse while remaining within the same type of utterance as the one that guarantees discursive coherence. This is moreover the danger of every statement... of every discussion about the question of woman. For to speak of or about woman may always boil down to, or be understood as, a recuperation of the feminine within a logic that maintains it in repression, censorship, nonrecognition (78).

As we unwind all the representations of woman, and the female suicide bomber in particular, our words become a space to resignify woman. The attempts to find a coherent theory for her motivation are equally problematic to the ones that signify her as martyr,

an Angel of Death, or a Bride of Palestine. Her image remains so contentious that it has been difficult for theorists to avoid representing her as a phenomenon or as the voice of another agency.

Elizabeth Grosz, for example, heralds the body as having a distinct materiality that while being inscribed by culture and history has limitations.

...the body, as much as the psyche or the subject, can be regarded as a cultural and historical product. They (theorists of the body) testify to the permeability or incompleteness of the notion of nature. Individually and collectively, they have affirmed that the body is a pliable entity where determinate form is provided not simply by biology but through the interaction of modes of psychical and physical inscription and the provision of a set of limiting biological codes. The body is constrained by its biological limits-limits incidentally, whose framework or “stretchability” we cannot yet know, we cannot presume, even if we must presume some limits. The body is not open to all whims, wishes, and hopes of the subject... (187)

It would seem that while Asad assumes that the mobilization of bodies under representations of pain and pleasure can be considered a positive formation, Grosz asks us to examine the same processes in reverse. What kind of violence is committed when the universal neutral (or the ‘implicitly white, male, youthful, heterosexual, middle-class) body is assumed for a range of bodies that have their own biological specificities?

While both theorists wish to approach the problematic ways in which the underlying assumptions of liberal discourses do violence to those specificities that are erased, and leave the solution to this problem fundamentally open, Asad seems to advocate the overarching representations that are assumed in religious traditions because he feels that they work to structure an ideal that will inevitably be in conflict and friction with real lived experience. On the other hand, Grosz would like to open up sexual politics in order to imagine a future where differences are proliferated and explored. For her the frictions between assumptions that foreclose difference are productive for an unknowable

political future. Asad, in contrast, seems to be interested in espousing various hidden assumptions and misrepresentations of Western knowledge production without a particular political project in mind. However, both point to the body as a site of unknowable qualities that various social formations have sought to write over in a number of ways. This site is an interesting point of entry for a study of the body and religion.

Then why is it important to resist the redundant drive to label the female suicide bomber as coerced and irrational? Essentially this conceptual move only serves to (1) wholeheartedly resignify the actions of women as being the internalization of the will of men (2) to undermine women's ability to attend to herself in the environment of patriarchy (3) and to assume a kind of essential agency to those who belong to the secular and foreclosing a critical position toward secular's alliance with modernity. This problematizes a search for the motive of the female suicide bomber, a search, which assumes a clear division between the mind, and the body, where the mind is the seat of rational behavior above the irrational anarchism of the body. This dichotomy has left women hopelessly relegated to the body and the private sphere because of their physical proximity to childbearing and for their symbolic association with emotion (Naaman 2007).

This already uncomfortable tension with the female suicide bomber is further complicated by the tension with death and dying, with discourses from the West and from Qur'anic sources condemning suicide, the suicide bomber is a monstrosity and a perversion.

In reading the *ars erotica* through the lens of Said's Orientalism, one deeply attentive to the imaginative geographies of the Orient and the Occident yet myopically resistant

to the omnipresent homoerotics of colonialism, we see perversion and primitivity coalesce in the figure of the queer terrorist: guided from above, subsumed to the will of a master, death seeking and death-defying, unable to comprehend rational structures of temporality and space, drunk with pleasure (Puar 75)

The figure of the suicide bomber is constantly being reimagined and contested because it defies tensions within modern notions of death, the body as whole and intact, and unwillingness to adhere to the rationality of a desire to live. This perversion, complete with the subject's submission to God, is propelled by the denial of the absolute pursuit of survival and self-preservation. Instead the suicide bomber uses their body as a partner in the development of their being, or in their becoming as Puar suggests. This problematizes religious, gender, and sexuality based identities, perpetuating the need for naming and objectifying of the female suicide bomber.

As Mahmood suggests “transgressing gender norms may not be a matter of transforming consciousness or affecting change in the signficatory system of gender, but might well require the retraining of sensibilities, affect, desire, and sentiment-those registers of corporeality that often escape the logic of representation and symbolic articulation. (193)” While the subjects that Mahmood studies are identified as, “pious,” and thus have a religious identity, she draws attention to the way in which these religiosities come to being at the level of the body. She attributes a kind of force to the body, which is not exactly like the volatility that Grosz suggests, but suggests that the body has some force. Could we assume that this force influences the way in which religious discourses are authorized, practiced, and reinforced? Can the way in which Muslim women respond and acknowledge religious affects influence political projects and movements?

As I have suggested before, secularism can often conceal the project of modernization, and the spaces that religion once occupied are considered neutralized in the context of secularism. However, the values that have come to be associated with modernity have often been articulated against religion, or what religion was believed to be. The question, “what is religion?” which plagues Asad, draws attention to how religion is reduced to smaller concepts and tropes that are often positioned against the secular. Religious identities play into this reduction of religion, which both serves to contain religion within the bodies of select subjects and populations, and also make secular the assumed identity for individuals that are decidedly ‘modern’ and ‘developed.’ The battle over the body of the suicide bomber is one that revolves around precisely this tension around who is and who is not religious or affected by religion. So religion in general, but more strongly in discussions around Islam, is assumed only to have power and to affect people who have a religious identity. In the case of Debbie Almontaser, her dress, name, and her association with the ethnic stereotype of Arab place her squarely within a religious identity. She can proclaim the most progressive and neoliberal agenda, but her religious identity will represent her contrary to her voice.

Who is affected by religious imagery and discourse? Returning to Pellegrini, is the problem of religion interfering with the state a symptom of a dominant Christianity lingering within American life, or is it similar to the rendering of religious subjects I have discussed earlier in this paper, where the religious subject becomes hopelessly rendered backward and removed from politics and the subsequent space made for the religious only a symbolic “ghetto” where the objections to sexual reforms can remain dormant until they become useful and instrumental for political agendas. While I am not

disagreeing with maintaining a conceptual division between religion and secularism, when these categories are considered natural or given, what values are associated with these domains? Unlike the thesis of *Love the Sin* where homophobia is a symptom of latent religion, what are the assumptions regarding religion that allow homophobia to take refuge within that space?

Pellegrini and Jakobsen problematize these divisions in their discussion of Hell House performances that have taken place in New York City and elsewhere. Hell House performances have been a serious approach to invoking the emotional relationship with fear and sin that is central to the mission of Evangelical Christians. The theatrical performance is in the format of a carnival haunted house where guests are led by a tour guide through scenes of grotesque and horror. Each scene depicts a particular sin that the actors are punished by and thus evokes a strong sense of fear that the choices they make will incur punishment from God. The performances were immensely popular in heavily Christian dominated areas of the country, and could be performed by local churches by ordering a DVD kit directly from the show's creator, Pastor Keenan.

The religious and the modern become problematized when the Pastor is asked to help produce a version for a New York City audience. While parodies of the show had been performed in Hollywood, this show would not be a parody but one that remains true to the intended message of the originals. The theater company in Brooklyn, Les Frères Corbusier, did not want to perform the original version as it would be "giving New York City audiences a glimpse into a social world that is otherwise completely foreign to them." Pellegrini points out that this is a highly problematic understanding of the

population of NYC, as populations of evangelicals are represented in the area. Thus, this seemed to resonate with the popular media and local critics. “Uniformly, the media made much of the fact that the production was a “faithful” and “sincere” presentation of a “real” Hell House (18).” Thus, because of the way it had been marketed to a ‘secular’ audience as an ‘authentic’ performance, the production seemed to be more about making a spectacle of the religious beliefs of the evangelical Christians and less about the quality of the performance.

The tension with this kind of performance for Pellegrini was the way in which it does not address the religious at all, but works as a kind of “sociological” or “anthropological” study of religious experience. This seems to blur the way in which, once this performance is created for a non-religious audience, the way in which it is religion is complicated. The Brooklyn audience had attended the show with the expectation to be scared or moved. However, the mechanism by which the audience is moved is by appealing to a religiously based sentiment and fear. While one need not identify herself as a devout subject to be moved one does have to subscribe to the kind of worldview that the Hell House performances are trying to evoke. While the theatre company wanted to evoke the kind of religious affect that the other productions had, they were not able to find these feelings and emotions in the average theatre going audience in Brooklyn.

However, if Christianity is heavily imbued in the secular as Pellegrini suggests, we would assume that some of the Brooklyn audience would be “affected.” Although the production intended to be “authentic” its performers were not interested in the production as an opportunity to commune with fellow Christians but to render the “culture” of that

part of America as entertainment for a secular constituency. While Pellegrini is fascinated by the way that the production of religious affect failed for the theatre company, I am much more fascinated by how secular affect was produced for the Brooklyn audience. Coaching her analysis of the *Les Frères* in the neutral language of the social sciences, she discusses the production as a failed experiment. Pellegrini points out that just because the audience was secular, does not mean that the audience was without morals or beliefs, but that these beliefs were hard to reach and hard to “affect.” Why?

As Pellegrini suggests it is not the purpose of many of these performances to ‘convert’ (a word I use hesitantly) new populations, but to reinforce unconscious beliefs that may still be inside the psyche of the audience. Yet again, if religion still plays so much of a role in present day politics, why weren’t more people moved by this performance. Is it really Christianity that is lingering in secular politics? Or is it something else? Why would an entire theatre of people that believe they are vehemently opposed to the mission of the Hell Houses fill a theatre to watch it? What kind of “authentic” experience are they longing to have? In part, an emotional one. Just as Pellegrini points out the “sociological” and “anthropological” tone of the performance reduces its intensity. Those that imagine themselves in the secular space of the city imagine religion as a kind of identity that they can experience, a kind of flavor in the multicultural setting of the global city.

Those who had come to see the Hell House had come for a spectacle, to see the behavior of a group that they feel nothing in common with, and intellectually superior to. Instead of dismissing these performances as a means to spread an ideology or to “convert” or coerce more of the masses to follow these mindless practices, perhaps we

can consider the ways in which religious affects reside both outside in the wider religious community as well as within the body of the religious subject. Conversion assumes that the subject is passive, that religious discourse washes over them, changing their identity. This is a troubling narrative for subjects that are believed to be predisposed to radical Islam, ethnically or racially, as this fundamentally compromises their place within the assumed neutral and objective space of New York City. At the same, this maneuver erases the vulnerability of 'dominant' or "neutral' subjects to this same religious affect, to the creative world making potential that Asad and Scarry allude to.

### Conclusion: Coercion and Conversion?

This project just begins to find the kind of structure that these different narratives provide for the construction of a religious identity for Muslim women in the U.S. Ethnic stereotypes and commonly held assumptions about religious identities question the feasibility of projects that organize around Arab or Muslim identities. These identities have come to rely on performing an identity that disavows a critical stance toward U.S. sponsored militarism and denouncing the Middle East as a major geographic location of oppression towards women. The kind of ethnic confessional that Chow describes continually haunts these women, and their testimonies are used either in service of the war on terror or for the perpetuation of an industry, oriented in the language of human rights, that exists to “save” Muslim women.

While this phenomenon of a dominant culture demonizing minority cultures is not necessarily unique to Muslim women/Arab women, the relationship of religion to this process is interesting. The demand for a kind of ethnic confessional has greatly contributed to a surveillance of the interiority of Arab/Muslim women. Women are then left with a serious of impossible positions. They can both be victims and denounce their culture as the source of their suffering, but in the case of Debbie Almontaser, one cannot articulate a space to value the contributions of this group and rest on a “model minority” narrative. The interiority of the Arab/Muslim can always be thrown into question because conversion/coercion make their identity ambiguous and narratives around religion and secularism help to produce their interiority as volatile, unpredictable, and irrational. While religions as a whole have been labeled irrational and backward within the context

of modernity, Islam in particular has been singled out as an exceptionally violent and problematic religion.

The phenomenon of the female suicide bomber is representative of a point of tension between gender, violence, and religion. While the way in which the female suicide bomber is rendered problematic the assumed role of women in war and conflict is often discussed by feminist scholars, policy makers, and social theorists, the role of religion is often ignored or inadequately discussed. Religion in these studies has largely been an instrument for other political forces, where the intensity and affective strength of religion is seen as representative of male agency. As a result, the religiosity and piety of women involved in violent conflict contributes to an overarching narrative of coercion and irrationality. In the case of women and Islam, the association with patriarchy reinforces a Western Orientalist image of women as hopelessly coerced by men, which is interpreted as a need for the West to intervene to protect them. As victims of patriarchy, and the discourses of Islam, representations of pious women are caught in a loop between victim and coerced subject.

Religious identity is the major vehicle that carries the label of coerced and irrational to Muslim women in the United States. The flow of this representation moves from the female suicide bomber to figures of American Muslim women. Religious identities, together with ethnic stereotypes, intensify the regulation of Arab and Muslim women within the public sphere. The example of Debbie Almontaser suggests that a Muslim religious identity invokes the binary of secularism, where secular subjects are identified as enlightened and modern, and religious subjects are considered backward, coerced and irrational. If the global city, of which New York City belongs, is the space

where capital is concentrated among a wealthy global elite. If New York is the headquarters of more non-profits and foundations than any other city in the world, discourses that represent Muslim women as victims take on a transnational significance. These religious identities are rejuvenated and reinvigorated in New York City before being recirculated through media and policy institutes to other parts of the world. The problematic binary between the modern secular and backward religious works to further marginalize these subjects.

What is at the heart of this dismissal of religion? It often comes with a denial of the power of religious affect, not only on religious subjects but its risk of affecting non-religious subjects. If secularism privileges the mind over the body, and enlists science and medicine to describe the body, how do discourses of pain and embodiment within Islam and other religions create conflict? As the WNYC story about the medical translators suggests, the body, or bodies, of religion shape the experience of the body differently. A relationship with pain and pleasure is regarded as irrational and coercive, as the mission of the secular is to eliminate the experiences of pain, and to maintain the silence of the body to preserve the reason of the mind. The dismissal of the affective potential of the body reproduces the representation of religion as irrational. Emphasizing the process by which religious discourses are embodied and authorized helps to disrupt the kind of mindless conversion and obedience to religion that is often projected.

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