

VOICELESS ICONS NO MORE:
THE SELF-REPRESENTATIONS OF
MUSLIM AMERICAN LIVES IN DIGITAL MEDIA

by

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Voiceless Icons No More: The Self-Representations of Muslim American Lives in Digital Media

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With the proposed travel bans in the U.S., niqab bans in Canadian cities, fears over terrorism, attacks on veiled women, and concerns about refugees, Muslim Americans have become prominent icons of larger political issues in North American society. While the images of Muslims have dominated public spaces, the complex lives and significant concerns of Muslim Americans have often gone untold. This study focuses on the creative work that Muslim American youth are producing and circulating through digital media spaces and mobile technologies.

The projects discussed in this study include: the Places You'll Pray photo series, which documents public prayer locations; the visual representation of the Salafi Feminist blogger; a collection of self-portraits from women who wear the niqab face veil; the artistic projects created in response to the murder of three Muslim college students in Chapel Hill, NC; and the Mipsterz Islamic fashion video.

Through an analysis of these cases, this dissertation examines how Muslim American youth create innovative projects that engage with aesthetic styles and affects to shift assumptions about their lives and dis-articulate the feelings of foreignness and fear that often adhere to their bodies. These projects are an effort for Muslims, who have been marginalized from traditional political spaces, to assert the equality and value of their lives. Without over-idealizing the progressive potential of emerging media spaces, this study examines how digital media provide the flexible space and creative tools to produce and circulate these representations.

Using digital media to create and distribute artistic projects is not political activism in and of itself, but rather it serves as a way for Muslim youth to formulate and articulate their own subjectivity as political actors and to connect with others in preparation for wider social action. Through this creative work, Muslim youth acquire a sense of their agency and ability to intercede in political spaces. Furthermore, these Muslim creators are not trying to assimilate into an American way of life, but rather assert that they can determine for themselves how they will be Muslim and American, along with numerous other markers.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In preparation for the 2017 Women’s March in Washington DC and numerous other cities, artist Shepard Fairey created a series of three images, titled “We the People,” which were printed in *The Washington Post* and made available online to download for free. Resembling the style of Fairey’s famous Barack Obama “HOPE” poster, these colorful graphic images were incorporated into the various signs, carried in the marches. From the beginning, one image dominated the public spaces: a graphic representation of a young Muslim American woman, wearing an American flag hijab. Fairey based this graphic image off a 2007 photograph of Munira Ahmed, a 32-year-old native of New York City. Professional photographer Ridwan Adhami, a Muslim and Syrian American, took this initial picture of Ahmed for use in a Muslim magazine (see figure 1). Fairey selected this photo from several similar images of Muslim women wearing American flag hijabs because he thought that Ahmed looked like a “normal” person. Fairey explains, “a lot of the other pictures look like models posing, and [this] picture spoke to what was happening a lot more than the others did.”¹

As people flocked to airports in the days after the first proposal of the “Muslim travel ban,” this graphic image of Munira Ahmed traveled with the protestors on signs, T-shirts, flyers and stickers. People quickly posted the image to social media accounts to demonstrate support for immigrants and religious minorities in the U.S. The use of this image in progressive circles is notable since the concerns of religious minorities, and Muslim women in particular, have rarely

¹ Christina Cauterucci, “A Q-and-A With the Muslim Woman Whose Face Has Become a Symbol of Trump Resistance,” *Slate*, January 25, 2017, http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2017/01/25/a_q_a_with_the_muslim_woman_whose_face_has_become_a_symbol_of_trump_resistance.html (accessed January 29, 2018).

been discussed in the same breath as issues around race, class, gender and sexuality. While the focus on intersecting forms of oppression has been foundational to feminist activism for the last several decades, concerns about the unequal treatment of Muslim women have largely been neglected in Western feminist circles. When they are not ignored, Muslim women are often silenced and objectified as victims of Muslim men. Recently, the racist rhetoric against Muslims and refugees within the right wing has become so blatant that some progressive groups are finally considering the oppression that Muslims face. The 2017 Women's March, for instance, prominently featured Muslim women in the list of those fighting for justice. In addition, Linda Sarsour, a Muslim and Arab American activist, was one of the main organizers of the march.

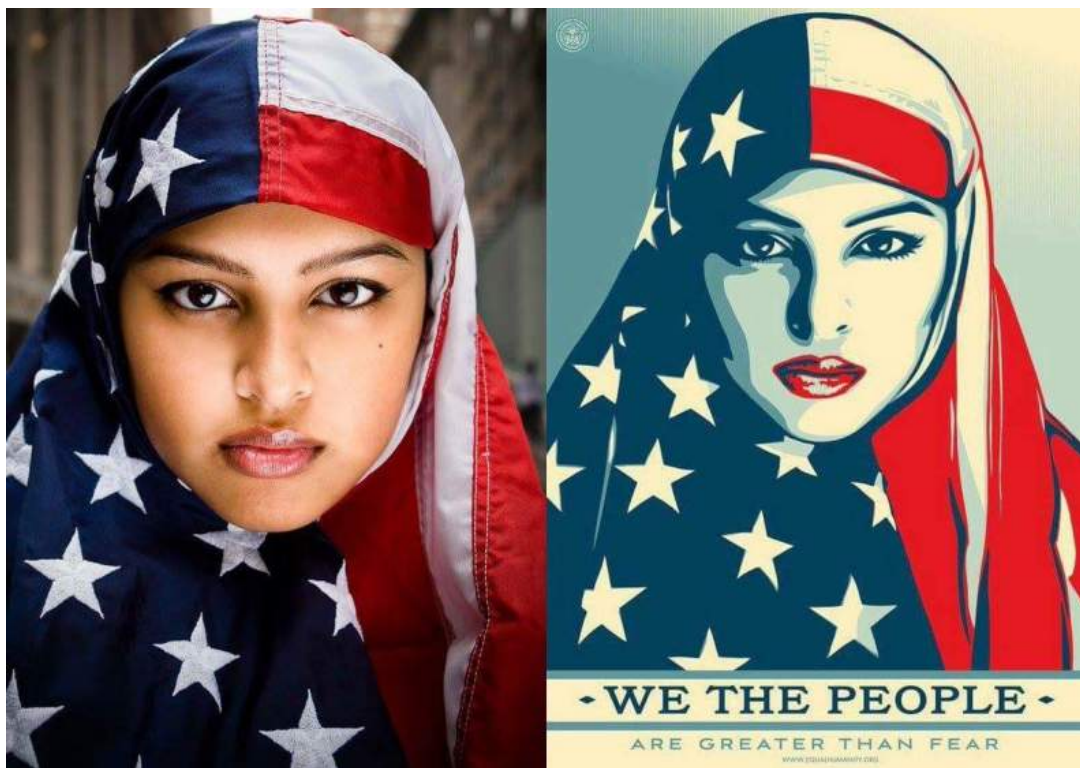


Figure 1: The original photo (left) that inspired the We the People poster (right)

While images such as this one of a Muslim woman in a hijab are more visible in activism against the Trump Administration, it is imperative that Muslim women are not reduced to one-dimensional icons of larger political struggles. With the use of these images, there is a tendency

for activists to take on the approach of speaking for Muslim women and attempting to save them. Additionally, when this image is used in various locales, the original intention of the image is lost. In an interview with *Slate*, Ahmed explains that she doesn't normally wear the hijab, but she thinks that the image displays the deep connection between her faith and her national identity. She states, "What's most apparent and symbolic in the image, no matter who's looking at it, is that this is a Muslim woman and an American woman and she is both of these things and she is not compromising either."² Ahmed cannot separate her identity as an American, born and raised in this country, from her religious faith.

Unfortunately, without this explanation from Ahmed, this image has the tendency to reduce Muslim women to the symbols of the headscarf and the American flag, two highly loaded icons of larger political struggles. In an article, "I'm a Muslim Woman, Not a Prop," Melody Moezzi writes about her frustration of seeing Muslim women reduced to a piece of fabric, the headscarf, which a majority of Muslim women don't even wear. She explains, "Images of presumably patriotic Muslim American women turning flags into headscarves imply that we are easily identifiable by a piece of fabric, *which we are not!*"³ She also argues that Muslim women don't need to prove their patriotism in order to be seen as American, "Certainly, Muslim American women are no less American than our non-Muslim counterparts. But other Americans need not literally drape their heads in the flag to prove their Americanness."⁴ Additionally, Moezzi points to the diversity of Muslim women, which is not represented in this overly

² *Ibid.*

³ Melody Moezzi, "I'm A Muslim Woman, Not a Prop," *Huffington Post*, January 26, 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/melody-moezzi/im-a-muslim-woman-not-a-prop_b_14416434.html (accessed March 6, 2018).

⁴ *Ibid.*

simplified image. Instead of turning Muslim women into props or icons of Islam and American patriotism, Moezzi wants Muslim women to be seen for their complexities.

Many of the problematic aspects of how this image has been used revolve around the fact that Munira Ahmed was not given control over her own image. Very little of Ahmed's personal experiences and social context traveled with the image as it circulated. This iconic image perfectly illustrates how the voices of Muslim Americans have been silenced in North American society and their experiences have been misrepresented while progressives attempt to speak for Muslims and rescue them from the presumed backwardness of their religion.

Presenting an unapologetic portrayal of Muslim American lives

Although this image of a Muslim woman in an American flag hijab has become a prominent icon in the struggle against the racism and xenophobia of this current era, Muslim Americans produce their own innovative artwork, photography, videos, music and fashion styles to represent their multifaceted experiences. With 60% of Muslim Americans under the age of 40 and Muslims coming from a wide array of backgrounds in terms of ethnicity, race, class, beliefs and practices, the younger generations of Muslims are producing a huge diversity of expressions.⁵ Digital media provide the space, flexibility and creative tools to produce and circulate these representations in ways that were impossible before. Before going into detail about the various creative projects that I analyzed for this study, this introductory chapter will situate these projects within the current political situation for Muslim Americans; the wider media context of the acceleration, ubiquity and accessibility of new media forms; and the longer

⁵ "U.S. Muslims Concerned About Their Place in Society, but Continue to Believe in the American Dream," *Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life*, July 26, 2017, <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/07/26/findings-from-pew-research-centers-2017-survey-of-us-muslims/> (accessed January 31, 2018).

Western history of visually portraying Muslims in a subhuman manner. All of the creators in this study are responding to the various challenges and contentious issues within these contexts.

In the midst of this social context, a study of Muslim Americans could go in several different directions. It could focus on how mainstream media like films, TV shows and the news portray Muslims. These studies have been done successfully in the past and are significant for documenting persistent stereotypes along with some positive changes.⁶ Most notably, Jack Shaheen spent the majority of his career documenting the overwhelmingly negative portrayals of Muslims and Arabs in Western films.⁷ Additionally, research could examine specific political issues that Muslims face in Western countries, such as the rights to wear religious clothing or practice in public, policies against Sharia law, protests against the building of mosques, or the surveillance and policing of Muslim bodies.⁸ While some of these issues come up in this research, these political topics are not the focus of this work.

Rather than look at how mainstream media represent Islam or how public policies impact Muslims, this research focuses on how young Muslims in the U.S. and Canada turn to digital media spaces and mobile technologies to create and circulate artistic forms of self-representation. In the face of a constant torrent of media portrayals that misrepresents their lives and political policies that limit their freedoms, these young Muslims are telling and distributing their own stories. Through a discussion of the various creative projects, this study explores how the sensory realm of photography, performance, sculpture, dance, fashion, film, graphic design and music

⁶ See, for instance: Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin, *Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representation After 9/11* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2011); and Evelyn Alsultany, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation After 9/11* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

⁷ Jack G. Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (New York: Olive Branch Press, 2001).

⁸ See, for example: Joan Wallach Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2007); Nadia Marzouki, *Islam, an American Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017); and John R. Bowen, *Why the French Don't Like Headscarves: Islam, the State, and Public Space* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

provides the space to work through these issues of representation and to articulate the complexities of what it means to be a Muslim American.

This study does not focus on a particular media technology, like the smart phone, or a certain digital space, like Twitter. Instead, I am interested in how young Muslim Americans engage with a variety of digital sites, mobile technologies, forms of mediation, and aesthetic styles in their creative work. Depending on the message they want to send out, the form that it takes and the intended audience, the creators search for the most effective channel to distribute their work, including non-digital channels. As I will discuss more when I present my argument in the next chapter, I find assemblage theory to be the most useful approach to account for the overlaps and interconnections of this current media moment. The Muslim creators in this study illustrate how they easily move between various forms of mediation. This flow between media spaces illustrates what is distinct about this media moment: there is not a clear separation between media forms or technologies, but rather assemblages—relationships between various social actors—are constantly being formed and reformed. The young Muslims may create artistic forms of representation in offline spaces, such as fashion styles, sculpture or spoken word performances, but then they promote and distribute videos and images of these projects through digital spaces.

Through an analysis of these various creative projects, this research explores the political potential of artistic work, especially in this moment when there are more and more media spaces for expression. For Muslim Americans, who have been marginalized from most political spaces and dehumanized in the mainstream media, this creative work, distributed through various media channels, can be a form of political action to assert the humanity and value of Muslim lives. In a *New York Times* column, Hector Tobar argues that art is an essential political tool for those who

are persecuted and marginalized. Art is even more important in difficult times, Tobar asserts, because it reminds people of the value of those who are oppressed. He powerfully states, “But when a people see their humanity denied, art is a defense of that humanity.”⁹ He elaborates on how creative projects can share the stories of immigrants and minorities with other Americans, “When we feel powerless to stop the hatred and injustice directed at our people, we should remember art’s potential to enlighten the uninformed and to slowly eat away at prejudice.” It is through storytelling and creatively sharing experiences that negative impressions of minority groups like Muslims and immigrants can gradually shift.

Along with analyzing these projects in this written dissertation, I developed a website where I curate a collection of examples of how Muslim Americans are doing this creative work. The website is another avenue to circulate this work to a non-Muslim audience, and I provide critical discussions of these projects in a way that is accessible to non-academic readers. I agree with Hector Tobar that art and creative media are exceptional sites to illustrate our common humanity. Because of these unique features of art and because of the unjust ways that Muslims are portrayed as subhuman in mainstream media, I felt it was essential for these creative projects to circulate among a wider audience. Additionally, as a scholar doing work on a topic that is relevant to real-world situations, it is important that I bring this work out of the siloed spaces of academia.

While my main contention in this study is that creative projects have political potential because of their ability to shift impressions of Muslims and to create a space of articulation and negotiation of Muslim identity, I don’t want to overly romanticize how digital spaces enable resistance to dominant forces. In the next chapter, I will take up the various critiques of political

⁹ Hector Tobar, “We Need Protests. And Paintings,” *The New York Times*, January 27, 2018, <https://nyti.ms/2Gme9lB> (accessed February 5, 2018).

activism within digital spaces. Using digital media to create and distribute artistic projects is not political activism in and of itself, but rather it serves as a way for Muslim youth to formulate and articulate their own subjectivity as political actors and to connect with others in preparation for wider social action. Through these creative projects, Muslim youth acquire a sense of their agency and ability to intercede in political spaces. Without these digital spaces, Muslims would have few avenues to create their own counter-narratives.

Furthermore, the creative projects in this study offer more than a positive antidote to the negative stereotypes of Muslim Americans. In her book on American Islam, Nadia Marzouki expresses skepticism of Muslims who use popular culture and media to present themselves as good and normal Americans. The short-lived reality TV show, *All-American Muslim*, is a perfect example of the misguided attempt to overwhelm viewers with the normality of these Muslim American families. According to Marzouki, when Muslims claim to practice a faith that is compatible with American public life, they tend to dull the critical edge of Islam so that it will fit into the Protestant-inflected model of a private religion. She elaborates, “Invoking the recognition of a humanity common to all individuals and the equivalence of all faiths leads to the depoliticization of the speech of Muslim Americans and a notable reduction in the power for criticism and dissensus that this speech could potentially represent.”¹⁰ Instead of focusing on political issues like the right to pray in public or to wear religious dress, Marzouki sees many American Muslims presenting Islam as a “good religion” that is focused on “spirituality, interiority, faith.”¹¹

Marzouki also addresses the dominant dichotomy between good and bad Muslims, which positions Islam as everything or nothing—an extremely powerful religion that will take over all

¹⁰ Nadia Marzouki, *Islam, an American Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 25.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 135.

of American life or a harmless spiritual tradition that doesn't distinguish Muslims from every other "spiritual but not religious" American. The actual contradictions within Islam and the complex experiences of Muslims are difficult for Americans to digest. As Marzouki explains, "That Islam might simply be 'something' between 'all' and 'nothing'—something both banal and specific that can be described ordinarily without drama—is something that Western societies always seem to have a hard time accepting."¹² It is my hope that this study will bring out some of the complexities of the Muslim American experience. The creators in this study live in these ambivalent spaces between the good Muslim/bad Muslim dichotomy.

Marzouki's critique is important to bear in mind since the creative projects in this study demonstrate how Muslim Americans interact with popular culture in order to shift impressions. While there is a tendency for this type of engagement with mainstream American culture to weaken the political aspects of Islam, the creators use visual styles and digital spaces to go beyond the simplistic portrayal as good Muslims who easily fit into American life. In these cases, the creators are unapologetic about how their religion is a prominent aspect of their lives and, at times, is in conflict with American values. They are not trying to assimilate into an American way of life, but rather assert that they can determine for themselves how they will be Muslim and American, along with numerous other markers: woman, mother, feminist, queer, immigrant, native-born, South Asian, Arab, African American, hipster, artist, student, etc.

In many of these cases, the participants deliberately reject labels and play with identity categories. Blogger Zainab bint Younus writes under the name, The Salafi Feminist, and is aware that this hybrid identity challenges stereotypes. She wants to resist the fact that "everyone wants to shove me and my views into an annoyingly narrow box, because unless you fit into a pre-

¹² Ibid., 197.

constructed box, you don't count!"¹³ Similarly, Layla Shaikley, one of the creators and participants in the Mipsterz fashion video, discusses how the idea of the Mipsterz—Muslim hipsters—is a play on the fact that Muslims are constantly minimized into categories. As she explained in her conversation with me, “you do get a double take when you try to indicate that you are more than what meets the eye.”¹⁴ By identifying as Mipsterz, these young Muslims are almost stating the obvious: they are multifaceted human beings whose lives do not only revolve around religion.

These creators must constantly work against the dominant visual tropes that oversimplify Muslim lives. For instance, after three Muslim college students were murdered in Chapel Hill, NC, images of the victims circulated through social media, and the headscarves on the two female victims—sisters, Razan and Yusor Abu-Salha—immediately identified them as Muslims. The headscarf is a loaded symbol that easily marks women as pious and modest Muslims or as oppressed victims of a backwards religion. Doha Hindi, a friend of the victims, remarked that these photographs did show the positive values of her friends but the images also reduced their complexities to a piece of fabric. Doha stated in our conversation, “Even though [the hijab is] an outward symbol of their religion, they had a lot more spirituality within them and good characteristics. The headscarf isn't necessarily going to show all of that.”¹⁵ As was shown in the opening example of the American flag hijab poster, Doha's reflections point to the problem that images simplify complexities in order to produce easily digestible messages.

Many of the producers of these creative projects bring together a variety of symbols in order to resist this tendency of images to over-simplify complexities. As I will explore in the

¹³ Zainab bint Younus, “The Salafi Feminist Manifesto,” The Salafi Feminist Blog, <http://thesalafifeminist.blogspot.com/p/on-being-salafi-feminist.html> (accessed February 5, 2018).

¹⁴ Layla Shaikley, phone interview by author, Boulder, CO, September 20, 2016.

¹⁵ Doha Hindi, personal interview by author, Durham, NC, January 22, 2017.

work of the Salafi Feminist, her visual representation incorporates symbols from Islam, American popular culture, feminism and her cultural background. The Mipsterz video highlights the fashion styles of women who blend Islamic modesty, Western trends, African and South Asian cultural dress, hipster sensibilities and American popular culture. All of the participants in this study express pride in their religion and how it marks them as distinct in American public life rather than blending into American culture. Another project, the Places You'll Pray photo series, profiles Muslim Americans who claim the right to pray in prominent American locales. These photo subjects do not need to sacrifice the public aspects of their religion in order to fit into American life. In a similar manner, the Salafi Feminist incorporates aspects of Western feminism like agency, but she uses this agency to choose to cover her body with modest attire—an action that goes against Western presumptions of agency and dress.

The circulation of photos in the aftermath of the tragic murder of three college students in Chapel Hill, NC is probably this study's clearest example of how the complex lives of these three individuals were transformed into symbols of good Muslims. While it is difficult to find any evidence that these college kids were anything but model citizens, it is clear that Islam was paramount in their lives. It was not only the quest to be good citizens and make their immigrant parents proud that motivated these young people, but the values of Islam also drove them to be successful, serve their community and seek justice. For instance, Yusor Abu-Salha reflected on her Twitter page about why she wore the headscarf, "Hijab is my constant reminder that we aren't living for this world. Hope we ladies can reap the rewards of this daily test." Yusor expresses awareness of how the hijab marks her as a representative of Islam, and she must struggle to live up to the expectations that come with this symbolism.

Additionally, the tragedy of the shootings in Chapel Hill highlights a depressing trend in how Muslim lives and deaths are treated in American society: Muslims must be seen as completely flawless supporters of American values in order to be accepted as fully American. As Omar Suleiman discusses in a column on the one-year anniversary of Trump's first proposed travel ban, the few Muslims who can be celebrated and protected as "American" are those who are involved in protecting U.S. national security. Suleiman gives the examples of an Iraqi refugee who assisted the U.S. military during the war and Khizr and Ghazala Khan, the parents of an American soldier killed in action. Muslim Americans have the same rights, Suleiman argues, and they should be treated as equal because of their humanity and not because they are good Muslims who help fight against terrorism. Muslim Americans are exhausted with being reduced to political icons in order to be treated equally. As Suleiman writes, "Frankly, more and more American Muslims are not willing to alter their identity to gain the half-hearted advocacy of any group that merely sees them as a political football."¹⁶ The Muslim creators in this study resist these forces that try to minimize their complex experiences. Instead, these young Muslims creatively demonstrate that they don't have to sacrifice their religious convictions, or any other aspect of their backgrounds, in order to be American.

Suleiman ends his column detailing the experience of going to the Dallas-Fort Worth airport to protest the travel ban in January 2017. When it was time to pray, the Muslim protestors gathered in an empty space in the baggage claim while the non-Muslims continued the protest. Suleiman reflects on this experience of praying publicly in a large group, "For those few moments, we got to be fully us, unashamed in our American-ness, unapologetic in our Islam and

¹⁶ Omar Suleiman, "One year after the travel ban, I am not your American Muslim," *CNN*, January 24, 2018, https://amp.cnn.com/cnn/2018/01/24/opinions/travel-ban-anniversary-suleiman-opinion/index.html?_twitter_impression=true (accessed January 31, 2018).

fully acknowledged in our humanity.”¹⁷ Like this action of a large group of Muslims praying in the middle of an airport baggage claim, the creative projects in this study demonstrate the full humanity of Muslim Americans whose lives are hybrid, complex and contradictory.

Political moment for American Muslims

Since December 7, 2015, when Donald Trump—at the time, an unlikely candidate for U.S. President—issued his now infamous call for a “total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States,” the political situation for American Muslims has grown even worse than in the days after the 9/11 attacks. In 2015, according to the Pew Research Center, “there were 91 reported aggravated or simple assaults motivated by anti-Muslim bias,” a number on par with the rates post-9/11.¹⁸ Additionally, the Southern Poverty Law Center recorded that the number of anti-Muslim hate groups grew from 34 in 2015 to 101 in 2016.¹⁹

Specific violent attacks have made national headlines, such as a fatal stabbing on an Oregon train in May 2017. When a man started to scream anti-Muslim insults at two Muslim women, bystanders stepped in to protect the women. Two of the men were fatally stabbed and the third man was wounded.²⁰ Later that same summer, a group of Muslim teenagers were walking back to their Virginia mosque after breaking the Ramadan fast at a nearby McDonalds when a driver got into an argument with the group. The driver allegedly got out of the car and beat 17-year-old Nabra Hassanen with a baseball bat, kidnapped her, assaulted her and killed her.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Katayoun Kishi, “Anti-Muslim assaults reach 9/11-era levels, FBI data show,” *Pew Research Center*, November 21, 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/21/anti-muslim-assaults-reach-911-era-levels-fbi-data-show/> (accessed January 19, 2018).

¹⁹ “Hate groups increase for second consecutive year as Trump electrifies radical right,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, February 15, 2017, <https://www.splcenter.org/news/2017/02/15/hate-groups-increase-second-consecutive-year-trump-electrifies-radical-right> (accessed January 19, 2018).

²⁰ Matthew Haag and Jacey Fortin, “Two Killed in Portland While Trying to Stop Anti-Muslim Rant, Police Say,” *New York Times*, May 27, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/27/us/portland-train-attack-muslim-rant.html> (accessed January 31, 2018).

Police say that the attack was motivated by road rage and not over anti-Muslim hatred, but the family and friends argue that the group of young people was targeted for being Muslim.²¹ These are just two horrific incidents of violence and hatred against Muslims that have made national news, but numerous other incidents have been underreported, such as people pulling off women's headscarves, fires and vandalism at Islamic centers, anti-Islam marches in various cities, and never-ending threats made on social media sites.

In addition, several proposed laws and policies have specifically targeted Muslims, such as the many versions of the travel and immigration ban first proposed in the days after Donald Trump's inauguration. This ban specifically restricts immigration from Muslim-majority countries, limits the number of refugees resettled in the U.S., and institutes tougher screening procedures for refugees coming from certain "high-risk" countries.²² As a consequence of the chaos in the U.S. refugee program, many refugees and asylum seekers have turned to Canada as a possible home, taxing the immigration system of Canada and revitalizing anti-immigrant groups there. On the state and local level, policies like anti-Sharia laws and bans on face coverings create inhospitable environments for Muslims. While most bans on face coverings have been struck down or withdrawn in the U.S. due to the constitutional protection of religious

²¹ Conor Gaffey, "Suspect in Baseball Bat Killing of Muslim Girl to Appear in Court; Police Say it wasn't a Hate Crime," *Newsweek*, October 13, 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/nabra-hassanen-darwin-martinez-torres-684091> (accessed January 31, 2018).

²² "US ends ban on refugees from 'high-risk' countries," *BBC*, January 30, 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-42866983> (accessed January 31, 2018).

practices,²³ the Canadian province of Quebec passed a law that makes it a crime to wear a face covering in certain public spaces.²⁴

Issues that involve Muslims, such as immigration, religious freedom, public harassment, national security and refugee policies, have become prominent topics of public discussion and debate in American society. Surveys of the American public indicate that feelings towards Muslims are actually warming, especially among young people and those who personally know a Muslim. A 2017 Pew Research Center study found that around 45% of Americans say that they know someone who is Muslim, up from 38% in 2014. The same study found that feelings towards Muslims, based on a feeling thermometer scale of zero to 100, have warmed from 40 to 48. Moreover, if a person knows someone who is Muslim, his/her feelings towards Muslims are higher at 56 degrees as opposed to 42 degrees for those who don't know a Muslim.²⁵ A Brookings Institution study found that 60% of 18-24 year-olds had favorable views of Muslims, compared to 43% of those over the age of 65.²⁶

Additionally, when issues that affect Muslims are prominent in media coverage and political discussions, it is necessary to consider how this rhetoric might impact public impressions of Muslims. In a study of TV news coverage, Meighan Stone attempted to account for the negative public opinions of Muslims. She argues that consistent negative coverage of

²³ Ralph Ellis, "Georgia lawmaker withdraws bill to restrict burqas," *CNN*, November 17, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/11/17/us/burqa-ban-bill-georgia-trnd/index.html> (accessed January 31, 2018).

²⁴ Liam Stack, "Burqa Bans: Which Countries Outlaw Face Coverings?" *New York Times*, October 19, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/19/world/europe/quebec-burqa-ban-europe.html> (accessed January 31, 2018).

²⁵ "Americans Express Increasingly Warm Feelings Toward Religious Groups," *Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life*, February 15, 2017, <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/02/15/americans-express-increasingly-warm-feelings-toward-religious-groups/> (accessed January 19, 2018).

²⁶ Shibley Telhami, "What Americans really think about Muslims and Islam," *The Brookings Institution*, December 9, 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2015/12/09/what-americans-really-think-about-muslims-and-islam/> (accessed January 19, 2018).

Muslims and refugees cultivated greater support for Trump's travel ban. The study examined CBS, Fox and NBC nightly news from April 1, 2015 to March 31, 2017 and found that "there was not a single month where positive stories about Muslims outnumbered negative stories."²⁷ The majority of the stories focused on war and terrorism, and there were very few positive, human-interest stories about Muslims. When Muslims were the topic of the story, only 3% of the voices in the story were Muslims and quotes from Trump were 21% of the total quotes. When Muslims are rarely given a voice and the only news about them is negative, it makes it difficult for people to connect to them as fully human and regular Americans. These media portrayals also work on an affective level to attach sentiments of fear and terror to Muslim bodies, especially in the years since September 11. As I will discuss more in chapter four, the Muslim creators in this study work to delink these negative affects from their body and to articulate their own subjectivities as multifaceted individuals.

While the political situation for Muslims is overwhelming, a lot of Muslim Americans are using creative spaces of film, art, TV, literature, comic books, social media and comedy to present more multifaceted versions of their experiences. Comedians like Hasan Minhaj and Maz Jobrani incorporate issues like racial profiling, harassment, identity formation and typecasting into their work. For his performance in *Moonlight*, Mahershala Ali became the first Muslim actor to win an Academy Award in 2017. Comedian Aasif Mandvi created his own Muslim family sitcom, *Halal in the Family*, a web series that tries to address serious political issues while connecting to the audience through humor. Through the comic book, *Ms. Marvel*, writer G. Willow Wilson portrays the complex experiences of a 16-year-old Muslim American superhero.

²⁷ Meighan Stone, "Snake and Stranger: Media Coverage of Muslims and Refugee Policy," *Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy*, June 22, 2017, <https://shorensteincenter.org/media-coverage-muslims-refugee-policy/> (accessed January 19, 2018).

In his semi-autobiographical film, *The Big Sick*, comedian Kumail Nanjiani portrays members of his Muslim and Pakistani American family as relatable and multidimensional characters. There is plenty to unpack with these examples—notably, most of the popular Muslim figures are male comedians—but this brief list illustrates the ways that Muslim creators attempt to work against these negative stories that constantly run in mainstream media outlets. These projects contribute to the never-ending struggle against the good Muslim/bad Muslim paradigm, which only understands Muslims in relationship to national security concerns.

The current media moment

Along with the current political moment, which positions Muslims as front and center of debates around immigration, national security, assimilation, harassment and religious freedoms, the current media moment allows for an expansion of the spaces for political debate and expression. Without romanticizing that digital media provide an equitable public sphere, the current media moment is distinguished by the influx of digital platforms, mobile technologies and networked infrastructures. There is a certain “hyper”-ness to this moment as infinitesimal connections are formed, the rate of technological development accelerates, information circulates too quickly to fully comprehend it, and there are endless spaces of communication and expression. Media and technology scholars have used a variety of terms to theorize this moment, and I will briefly address a few of these concepts.

First of all, the acceleration of technologies is only one aspect of the wider speeding up of social life, according to Hartmut Rosa. He explains that social acceleration consists of the speeding up of social change and the “pace of life,” along with the development of technologies.²⁸ Similarly, Carlos Scolari examines the interconnections between the acceleration

²⁸ Hartmut Rosa, “Social Acceleration: Ethical and Political Consequences of a Desynchronized High-Speed Society,” *Constellations* 10, no. 1 (2003): 3–33.

of social practices and mediation. He develops the concept of hyper-mediations, which examines, “the complex network of social production, exchange and consumption processes that take place in an environment characterized by a larger number of social actors, media technologies and technological languages.”²⁹ Scolari focuses on what unique social practices are possible due to the development of new forms of mediation, which go beyond traditional broadcasting.

Along with the acceleration of social practices and technologies, theorists have also addressed the ubiquity of media in social life. Mark Deuze formulates the concept of “media life” to explain how we no longer live *with* the media but *in* the media. The media have become so ubiquitous that they become invisible, and “we become blind to that which shapes our lives the most.”³⁰ In a similar manner, Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp argue that we live in a period of “deep mediatization,” in which digital media are deeply embedded in social life.³¹ Going further than Henry Jenkins’s formulation of “convergence culture,”³² Couldry and Hepp use the term “media manifold” to describe the complex and multidimensional digital media moment, in which media forms and technologies overlap.³³ In this period when media technologies are deeply embedded in daily lives, individuals frequently use mobile technologies to document their lives and digital platforms to present a version of their selves. Couldry and Hepp detail how social practices of maintaining a self are changing in this media moment, “Being ‘someone’

²⁹ Carlos A. Scolari, “From (new)media to (hyper)mediations. Recovering Jesús Martín-Barbero’s Mediation Theory in the Age of Digital Communication and Cultural Convergence,” *Information, Communication & Society* 18, no. 9 (2015): 1099.

³⁰ Mark Deuze, “Media Life,” *Media, Culture & Society* 33, no. 1 (2011): 137.

³¹ Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp, *The Mediated Construction of Reality* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2017), 34.

³² Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

³³ Couldry and Hepp, *The Mediated Construction*, 55.

shifts from being associated with a certain quality the self and others can abstract from the stream of everyday habitual action, to being continuously managed ‘project,’ that is, an ‘external’ responsibility of the self *towards* the social world.”³⁴ The digital media provide avenues to work on this project of the self: individuals maintain an online self, they perform for a presumed audience, and they track data on the impact of this work.³⁵ It has become almost essential for individuals to do this work in digital media spaces, as Couldry and Hepp explain, “For those who live in a world of constant ‘connectivity,’ the self faces new pressures to perform itself online in order *just to function* as a social being.”³⁶ Along with the pressures in the neoliberal context to brand oneself, people are expected to use digital media spaces to constantly maintain and monitor their selves.

Concerns about the current media moment often stem from an overload of data and information, easily collected and quickly circulated through numerous interconnections. This increase in connections and speed may lead to more social anxiety about the virality of fads, memes, rumors and false information.³⁷ As Mark Andrejevic³⁸ and Christian Fuchs³⁹ have separately discussed, online data—purchase history, media consumption and web traffic—can also be used to sell more items or to track and survey citizens. Furthermore, an increase in information circulating online can lead to what Andrejevic terms “infoglut,” or a situation where people cannot wade through all of the information. People often rely on affects and gut instincts

³⁴ Ibid., 146.

³⁵ Ibid., 158-159.

³⁶ Ibid., 160.

³⁷ Tony D. Sampson, *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

³⁸ Mark Andrejevic, *iSpy: Surveillance and Power in the Interactive Era* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2007).

³⁹ Christian Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*, 2nd Edition (London: SAGE, 2017).

to tread a path through the infoglut.⁴⁰ This concept of infoglut is certainly prescient of our current situation of “fake news,” in which people distrust the authority of established media outlets and instead seek out and produce their own “news” and “alternative facts.” Along with an inability to discern what information is reliable online, individuals are also more skeptical that digital media can provide a space of expression, the opportunity to organize with others, or interactions that are free from harassments and threats. Digital media are not inherently progressive, as Christian Fuchs explains; undesirable information can circulate just as quickly, and it is extremely difficult to prosecute people for illegal behavior.⁴¹ These critiques of the idealism of digital media have also been taken up outside academia, as can be seen in the ongoing debates over how to solve the problems of social media sites like Facebook.

Several of the creators in this study engage with the affordances of this media moment, such as the ability to document and circulate their everyday experiences. For Muslim Americans, who are so often misrepresented or absent from entertainment and news media, digital platforms provide new spaces to formulate their own counter-narratives and visual expressions. For example, Sana Ullah used an Instagram hashtag to spread the word about her photo series of places where Muslims pray. Rather than only sharing her work on her own website, Sana encouraged other Muslims to share their prayer photos and further promote this project through the #PlacesYoullPray tag. Similarly, when Zainab bint Younus saw an offensive photo series that attempted to show life from behind the veil, she collected and posted a series of self-portraits from actual niqabi women. Social media allowed her to connect with other Muslim women, and websites that encourage submissions, such as *Huffington Post* and *BuzzFeed*, provide a sense of

⁴⁰ Mark Andrejevic, *Infoglut: How Too Much Information is Changing the Way we Think and Know* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

⁴¹ Fuchs, *Social Media*, 240.

legitimacy and a place to share these images with a wider audience. Digital media facilitate these creative responses to stereotypical portrayals of Muslims.

At the same time that digital media allow for the circulation of these alternative experiences, cases like the aftermath of the Chapel Hill shootings illustrate the limitations of digital spaces. As I will discuss more in chapter four, the easy circulation of the images of the victims had an impact in the wider media coverage and awareness of the events, but it also reduced the multifaceted experiences of three young Muslims to one-dimensional icons. Additionally, it is hard to determine if the circulation of these positive images of Muslims online can even make a dent in the monolithic media representation of Muslims as violent and irrational extremists. Doha Hindi, a friend of the victims in Chapel Hill, gave the example of how the circulation of all the negative information about Donald Trump wasn't enough to defeat him. She explains, "And that makes me afraid that seeing those images [of the Chapel Hill victims] might not be enough for people. I feel like maybe social media, as powerful as it is, I felt like in this election, it was not enough to get the worst possible candidate out of office."⁴² Doha also discusses how social media creates "filter bubbles," where people don't see information from multiple sides. Consequently, it is hard to reach people who hold negative views about Muslims. "When it comes to trying to change their minds, I don't know. I really don't. I'm hoping that having more conversations, face-to-face would be more conducive," Doha discusses. "It can be hard to have political conversations on social media because it can be easy to kind of block off the other side when you are not seeing emotions." Doha and the other participants in this study are cognizant of the limitations and problems with the digital media moment, but at the same time, not participating in these spaces of communication is impossible for Muslims, who are so

⁴² Doha Hindi, personal interview by author, Durham, NC, January 22, 2017.

often kept silent. As my discussion in the next section will elaborate, Muslim Americans are working hard to confront the persistent negative stereotypes of their lives.

Western visual portrayals of Muslims

In order to comprehend the significance of these creative projects from Muslim American youth it is necessary to understand the extensive visual history that these images are working against. Within Western culture, there is a long tradition of portraying Muslims as the exotic other that becomes the source of either curiosity or fear. The visual representation of Muslims in artwork, photographs and media is part of a greater project of racializing Muslims as belonging to a distinct group that is naturally different and inherently inferior to Western Europeans. Amaney Jamal describes the racialization of Muslims as “a process by which the dominant social group claims moral and cultural superiority in the process of producing an essentialized, homogeneous image of Muslim and Arab Americans as non-whites who are naturally, morally, and culturally inferior to whites.”⁴³ The racialization of Muslims as inherently inferior occurs through imagery: Muslim women are shown as oppressed but with a hypersexual appetite, and Muslim men as aggressive, violent and monomaniacal.

The bodies of Muslim women, in particular, become symbols of the inherent repression and backwardness of Islam. As Lila Abu-Lughod has detailed, the covered Muslim woman is viewed in Western culture as a faceless victim in need of liberation from Western culture. When those in the U.S. use this rhetoric of saving, Abu-Lughod argues, they place the U.S. in a superior position and neglect to realize how Western countries have been part of the real

⁴³ Amaney Jamal, “The Racialization of Muslim Americans,” in *Muslims in Western Politics*, ed. Abdulkader H. Sinno (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), 205.

oppression of women in these parts of the world.⁴⁴ Similarly, Alia Al-Saji argues that when Muslim women are portrayed as the opposite of Western women—oppressed, covered and victimized—gender oppression is seen as an inherent flaw of Islamic cultures. Western representations of Muslim women “provide the foil or negative mirror in which western constructions of identity and gender can be positively *reflected*.”⁴⁵ At the same time that the oppression of women becomes an essential feature of Islam, Western culture is viewed as inherently progressive.

The visual portrayal of Muslim women as oppressed victims of Islam goes hand in hand with the images of Muslim women as hyper-sexualized and exotic objects of the Western male gaze. As I discuss further in chapter five, Dina Siddiqi offers an astute analysis of an American Apparel advertising campaign, which used the naked body of a Bangladeshi American model to highlight the need for Muslim women to be sexually liberated.⁴⁶ In his book project on haram photographs, Malek Alloula discusses the Western obsession with the mythical haram space, where the male Europeans believed that the hyper-sexualized Muslim women lie in wait for the white man to liberate them. Alloula calls the haram space a “phantasm” because it exists in the heads of Western colonizers but not in reality.⁴⁷ This study illustrates how the photographs of veiled Muslim women, which were distributed in postcard form, are used to position Muslims as exotic others and to assert the superiority of Western Europeans. These pornographic postcards

⁴⁴ Lila Abu-Lughod, “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others,” *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (September 2002): 784.

⁴⁵ Alia Al-Saji, “The racialization of Muslim veils: A philosophical analysis,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 36, no. 8. (2010): 877.

⁴⁶ Dina Siddiqi, “Sexuality as Liberation? The Work of Salvation Narratives in Neoliberal Times,” *Alal O Dulal* (March 2014). <http://alalodulal.org/2014/03/13/sexuality-as-liberation/> (accessed Dec. 5, 2015).

⁴⁷ Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

were also a form of symbolic violence, as Western men used the images to fulfill their sexual fantasies to get “under the veil” and possess the Muslim women’s bodies.

Contrary to the women, Muslim men are portrayed as violent aggressors and abusers, constantly threatening the Western way of life. In his extensive study of Western films, Jack Shaheen details how Muslims and Arabs become subhuman stereotypes of terrorists, rapists, abusers, religious fanatics, oil-rich sheikhs and murderers. Arabs and Muslims are almost always portrayed as villains and never shown as regular, everyday people. Shaheen explains that Arabs and Muslims are shown as “brutal, heartless, uncivilized, religious fanatics and money-mad cultural ‘others’ bent on terrorizing civilized Westerners, especially Christians and Jews.”⁴⁸ Ultimately, these repeated portrayals have the effect of dehumanizing and vilifying Muslims in real life. One example of how this denigration works in popular culture is to visually connect Muslims and Arabs to animals. Waleed Mahdi analyzes how the connection to camels has a negative effect: “The consistency in associating Arabs with camels misleads audiences into believing that backwardness, primitiveness, and crudeness are innate characteristics of Arabs and Muslims.”⁴⁹ This portrayal leads to a naturalization of the connections between negative, animalistic aspects of camels with Muslims and Arabs.

In my conversations with the various creators in this study, they expressed awareness of these negative stereotypes and how these tropes shape impressions of Muslims. For instance, Zainab bint Younus mentioned that men have interpreted her face veil as a sexual or exotic symbol based on Orientalist stereotypes from films like *Aladdin*. Along the same lines, Mohammad Dorgham, a friend of the Chapel Hill victims, discussed some of the negative

⁴⁸ Jack G. Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (New York: Olive Branch Press, 2001), 2.

⁴⁹ Waleed F. Mahdi, “Marked Off: Hollywood’s Untold Story of Arabs, Muslims, and Camels,” in *Muslims and American Popular Culture*, eds. Anne R. Richards and Iraj Omidvar (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2014), 158.

stereotypes that he observes, “when you think Muslim, in the media, you always think about a dark-skinned man, with a beard, unkempt, usually angry and these stereotypes when you have a woman in a burqa or a niqab and that’s what a lot of people think that Islam is.”⁵⁰ While these young Muslims, like Zainab and Mohammad, are all too aware of these dominant misrepresentations of their lives, they seek to use the power of alternative visual portrayals to complicate these stereotypes and dichotomies. The creators in these various cases interfere in the visual spaces and offer distinct, complex and intersectional representations of their lives and experiences.

Foundational theories

Before presenting my argument in the next chapter about the political potential of engaging with aesthetics, affect and hybridity, I want to first situate this study in foundational theories that seriously address the work of material culture, popular media and embodied practices, especially as they relate to religious beliefs, practices and identities. First, I will address the culturalist turn in studying media as spaces of meaning-making and how that can be expanded to include formulating religious meaning. Alongside the culturalist approach, scholars have shifted to focus on the mediation of religion and how religious subjectivity is formed through practices of meditation. Both of these approaches move away from seeing media as transmission devices but instead see the practices of mediation as ways for individuals to experience religion through their senses and to formulate meaning. Then, I will address the particular role that material practices and mediation play in the formulation of Muslim subjects. Next, I will explain the influence of cultural studies and the emphasis on seeing popular culture as spaces of struggle over ideology. Finally, the section will conclude with a discussion of how

⁵⁰ Mohammad Dorgham, personal interview by author, Raleigh, NC, January 21, 2017.

daily practices and bodily comportment can also serve as spaces of resistance. Although I do not engage with these theories directly in the rest of this study, they are all essential to support my larger arguments about viewing aesthetic styles, embodiment and digital media as serious spaces for cultural work and the articulation of meaning and identity.

The culturalist turn and the mediation of religion

A culturalist approach is foundational to this project because of its call to see communication as a space to create shared meaning. Moving beyond a transmission model or a media effects approach, James Carey proposes a ritual model that sees communication as a process of collectively building social reality. The ritual view “sees the original or highest manifestation of communication not in the transmission of intelligent information but in the construction and maintenance of an ordered, meaningful cultural world that can serve as a control and container for human action.”⁵¹ Through communication practices, including the media, social meaning is collectively produced. Furthermore, Stewart Hoover brings Carey’s culturalist approach to communication into conversation with studies of media and religion. Media and communication are channels to construct cultural meaning but also to create religious meaning. With the larger cultural shift away from institutions to seeing the individual self as a project of self-improvement, religion and media become spaces for self-work. As Hoover explains, “We should expect to find the self actively engaged in a process of seeking and meaning making around questions of religion.”⁵² Individuals make accounts of the self, and media and religion are spaces that they engage with in order to create these accounts.

⁵¹ James Carey, “A Cultural Approach to Communication,” *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (Boston, MA: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 18-19.

⁵² Stewart M. Hoover, “The Culturalist Turn in Scholarship on Media and Religion,” *Journal of Media and Religion* 1, no. 1 (2002): 31.

Similar to Carey, Jesus Martin-Barbero advocates for seeing communication as a “process of mediations” instead of focusing on media institutions that transmit messages.⁵³ Martin-Barbero proposes a new concept of culture that looks at how people develop meaning through practices of mediation. He states, “We are placing the media in the field of *mediations*, that is, in a process of cultural transformation that does not start with or flow from the media but in which they play an important role.”⁵⁴ He shifts to focusing on how people use the media to create meaning and not on how those in positions of power convey messages through the media. As David Morgan explains, this formulation sees media as more than spaces of social control; people can also use the media as tools of liberation. Morgan elaborates on Martin-Barbero’s theorization, “The media are not delivery devices but the generation of experiences, forms of shared consciousness, communion, or community that allow people to assemble meanings that articulate and extend their relations to one another.”⁵⁵ Again, the focus is on how individuals create shared meaning and values through the practices of mediation.

These approaches are significant for my research because they view digital media as spaces for Muslim American youth to articulate their values and identities. Additionally, the mediation approach emphasizes the importance of materiality, embodiment and sensations, especially in relation to religious experiences. As David Morgan explains, theorization of both media and religion have shifted to look at the individual, embodied experiences. Rather than examine religious institutions or focus on belief systems, Morgan states that recent religious studies work focuses on “embodied practices that cultivate relations among people, places, and

⁵³ Jesus Martin-Barbero, *Communication, Culture and Hegemony: From the Media to Mediations* (London: SAGE, 1993), 2.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁵⁵ David Morgan, “Introduction: Religion, media, culture: the shape of the field,” in *Key Words in Religion, Media and Culture*, ed. David Morgan (New York: Routledge, 2008), 7.

non-human forces...resulting in communities and sensibilities that shape those who participate.”⁵⁶ Again, the focus is on how people develop meaning through various practices, including mediation.

Additionally, Jeremy Stolow proposes that we study “religion as media” since religion has always been mediated. Religion, Stolow elaborates, “can only be manifested through some process of mediation.”⁵⁷ From material objects like candles, statues and books to more modern technologies like radio waves and social media, religious messages must be conveyed through mediation. Birgit Meyer further explains that religion should be studied as a practice of mediation that connects humans to a perceived transcendent realm. She incorporates Hent de Vries’s argument that we need “to understand religion as both positing, and attempting to bridge, a distance between human beings and a transcendental or spiritual force that cannot be known as such.”⁵⁸ Religion and media intersect in certain situations, but religion is itself a practice of mediating the divine or transcendent to believers.

This approach of seeing religion as a practice of mediation also emphasizes the importance of material objects, aesthetic styles and embodiment to constituting religious subjects. This is a foundational approach for this study of Muslim American youth since I want to move away from seeing media as spaces to convey messages and instead to examine how the material aspects of media help to formulate religious identities and meanings. Birgit Meyer develops the concept of “aesthetic formations” to argue that people are connected through aesthetic styles and sensational experiences. Meyer provides a definition, “‘aesthetic formation’

⁵⁶ David Morgan, “Religion and Media: A Critical Review of Recent Developments,” *Critical Research on Religion* 1, no. 3 (2013): 347.

⁵⁷ Jeremy Stolow, “Religion and/as Media,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 22, no. 4 (2005): 125.

⁵⁸ Birgit Meyer, “Introduction: From Imagined Communities to Aesthetic Formations: Religious Mediations, Sensational Forms, and Styles of Binding,” *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion, and the Senses* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 11.

captures very well the formative impact of a shared aesthetics through which subjects are shaped by tuning their senses, inducing experiences, molding their bodies, and making sense, and which materializes in things.”⁵⁹ Many of the case studies in this project illustrate the importance of aesthetic elements, such as visual styles, fashion, affective dispositions and bodily comportment, in forming Muslim American subjects into a larger collectivity. I want to argue that these aesthetic elements are significant sites to analyze because of how they influence what it means to be a young Muslim in North America.

Material practices in Islam

In addition to these ideas on mediation, mostly coming out of media studies and religious studies, anthropological studies of Muslim communities have focused on the material aspects of religious practices. In a study of the role of cassette sermons in Egypt, Charles Hirschkind explores how this aural medium shapes the dispositions of listeners and in turn, influences the political and moral context of the Egyptian cities. The cassette sermons shape the society “not simply in [the medium’s] capacity to disseminate ideas or instill religious ideologies but in its effect on the human sensorium, on the affects, sensibilities, and perceptual habits of its vast audience.”⁶⁰ In his study, Hirschkind elaborates on how the sense of hearing is honed through various techniques that the religious teachers use in their sermons, such as tone of voice, sounds, emotions, modulations and rhythm. Listening to the sermons is a way for Muslim men to cultivate a more ethical disposition, as the tapes focus on “questions of social responsibility, pious comportment, and devotional practice.”⁶¹ As individual Muslims are crafted into more

⁵⁹ Ibid., 7.

⁶⁰ Charles Hirschkind, *Ethical Soundscapes: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 2.

⁶¹ Ibid., 5.

pious subjects and as the sermons become part of the public soundscape of Egyptian cities, a particular Islamic ethical sensorium infuses society.

In an ethnographic account of a women's mosque movement in Egypt, Saba Mahmood emphasizes how material objects, like the headscarf and modest dress, along with bodily comportment and the self-regulation of emotions play a significant role in the constitution of more pious Muslim subjects. On the surface, many of the Muslim women in this study appear to lack agency, but Mahmood argues that a formulation of agency, based in Western feminism, focuses on actions that are resistive to male dominance. Mahmood moves the concept of agency away from liberatory politics to examine how the Muslim women in her study have agency as they choose to embrace, rather than reject, traditional practices. She explains, "In this sense, agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one *inhabits* norms."⁶² The women may choose behavior that appears to be submissive as a way to embody Islamic values of modesty and piety.

For the Muslim women in Mahmood's study, it is through embodied practices that they work to become more pious and ethical. The women use their bodies and actions as avenues to achieve the religious virtue that they seek. The goal is for their inner state to match their outer appearance—to be pious on the inside and outside. Clothing, for instance, is one way for women to appear modest, act modest in their interactions with men, and hopefully train their interior state to be more modest. These bodily acts, Mahmood explains, "are the *critical markers* of piety as well as the *ineluctable means* by which one trains oneself to be pious."⁶³ Under this Aristotelian concept of aesthetics and ethics, one's exterior appearance does not symbolize one's

⁶² Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 15

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 158.

interior state. Instead, it is through one's physical embodiment of ethical actions that one is able to cultivate a more ethical interior state. These ethnographic studies from Hirschkind and Mahmood should be understood within their particular contexts, but their approach of studying how material objects, media and embodiment create pious Muslim subjects is relevant to my study. I examine how Muslim American youth engage with aesthetics and affects to shape and shift meaning, and in turn, the Muslim youth are constituted as religious subjects within larger communities, tied together by aesthetic styles.

Popular culture as site of meaning-making and struggle

This shift that I have traced within media studies and religious studies to the ways that individuals make meaning through cultural practices and mediated spaces is greatly indebted to cultural studies and the British theorists who saw everyday culture as a significant site of meaning-making and struggle over ideology. Raymond Williams offered the simple but significant assertion that "culture is ordinary" and that scholars should take seriously the work that everyday people create in their daily lives. Williams disagrees with the Marxist assumption that cultural meanings are forced on people from dominant powers. This approach ignores how people produce meaning within society. "A culture is common meanings, the product of a whole people, and offered individual meanings, the product of a [person's] whole committed personal and social experience," Williams states. "It is stupid and arrogant to suppose that any of these meanings can in any way be prescribed; they are made by living, made and remade, in ways we cannot know in advance."⁶⁴ This approach doesn't ignore political economic forces, but it sees individuals as finding space, especially within popular culture, to articulate alternative meanings.

⁶⁴ Raymond Williams, "Culture is Ordinary," in *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism* (London, Verso, 1989), 8.

Furthermore, Stuart Hall formulates popular culture as a space of struggle over ideology, especially for those who have been marginalized or misrepresented. He discusses how ideologies about social difference, like gender or race, are constituted in cultural spaces, especially the media. Hall explains that the media produce “representations of the social world, images, descriptions, explanations and frames for understanding how the world is and why it works as it is said and shown to work.”⁶⁵ These ideologies, or ways to make sense of the world and social difference, are not given but are constantly contested and changed.⁶⁶ Hall emphasizes that those on the margins can use spaces of popular culture to struggle over ideology. He sees popular culture as a dialectic space where there is a constant struggle as those on the margins resist and the dominant authorities reassert their powers. Hall writes, “Cultural hegemony is never about pure victory or pure domination (that’s not what the term means); it is never a zero-sum cultural game; it is always about shifting the balance of power in the relations of culture; it is always about changing the dispositions and the configurations of cultural power, not getting out of it.”⁶⁷ Since popular culture is the space of struggle, those on the margins must work within these cultural spaces in order to incorporate their perspectives. As I will discuss more in the next chapter, cultural studies is still attentive to the structures of power that constrain this cultural work, but this approach is useful for my examination of how Muslim American youth find strategic moments of resistance through media and popular culture.

Everyday practices and fashion studies

In addition to the cultural studies work on popular culture, other theorists have focused on how daily practices, bodily comportment and fashion styles can provide opportunities for the

⁶⁵ Stuart Hall, “The Whites of their Eyes,” in *Silver Linings*, eds. George Bridges and Rosaline Brunt (Lawrence & Wishart, 1981), 35.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁶⁷ Stuart Hall, “What is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?” *Social Justice* 20, nos. 1-2 (1993): 107.

articulation of meaning and counter-narratives. Since many people are left out of institutions of power or formal political channels, Michel de Certeau emphasizes how people can resist through daily practices. If power is dispersed in society through multiple tactics of discipline, then individuals cannot resist through what Michel Foucault calls a “grand refusal” but instead through tactics of resistance, or what de Certeau calls a “multitude of ‘tactics’ articulated in the details of everyday life.”⁶⁸ Rather than focus on counter-cultural groups that are visibly resisting dominant powers, de Certeau looks at how individuals “consume” elements of the dominant culture in slightly varied ways. If we look at the dress of Muslim American women, for instance, they aren’t wearing styles that come directly from Muslim majority countries like Saudi Arabia, but they are incorporating elements of Islam and various cultures to create a blended fashion style. A Muslim woman might amend popular Western fashion trends to be more modest while wearing a headscarf that she ties in a style that is worn in Indonesia. De Certeau explains, “Users make (bricolent) innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules.”⁶⁹ These daily practices work within the culture to resist rather than creating a whole new system.

Scholarship of fashion has also theorized how the daily practice of getting dressed can be a political gesture of articulation and resistance. Rather than emphasize the symbolism of clothing, Joanne Entwistle approaches dress as “a situated bodily practice” that helps ready the body for social interactions.⁷⁰ Getting dressed is a private activity that is done in relationship with larger social forces; it is an act of “preparing the body for the social world.”⁷¹ Similar to de

⁶⁸ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), xv.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, xiv-xv.

⁷⁰ Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2000), 38.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

Certeau's everyday tactics, getting dressed is also a means through which people can work within structures to resist. Entwistle explains, "Structures such as the fashion system impose parameters around dress; however, within these constraints, individuals can be creative in their interpretations of fashion and their practices of dress."⁷² For Muslim American youth, for example, getting dressed can be a way of negotiating social norms, American cultural expectations, religious rules, the fashion system and pressures based on their intersectional positions in terms of race, gender, class, religion, etc.

Additionally, Malcolm Barnard approaches fashion as a cultural space of struggle over meaning and ideology. If we take for example a contentious item of clothing like the headscarf, this item has many different meanings ranging from a simple piece of fabric that covers to a sign of piety and modesty to a symbol of oppression or terrorism. Barnard sees the meanings of clothing items as being "the result of a constantly shifting negotiation, and that they cannot escape the influence of differing positions of dominance and subservience."⁷³ The meaning of a piece of clothing matters significantly and is always up for debate. While fashion is often used to reinforce dominant social structures, such as how women's clothing often inhibits the physical power of women, fashion can also contest ideologies and structures. Barnard writes, "fashion and clothing are used as ideological weapons in a struggle between social groups."⁷⁴ As I will address in my analysis of the Mipsterz video, Islamic fashion is one way to question Western standards of beauty and to critique the objectification of women in fashion media.

⁷² Ibid., 40.

⁷³ Malcolm Barnard, *Fashion as Communication* (London: Routledge, 2002), 33.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 44.

Creative tactics of contestation and expression

Several elements connect these various case studies, and these connections influenced my decision to include them in this study. Foundationally, all of the cases involve representations of Islamic identity and experiences through aesthetic styles like images, music, dance, sculpture and fashion. Because of my emphasis on visual projects, I was not able to include all of the thoughtful discussions and written materials that are shared in various social media pages and websites, such as the FITNA (Feminist Islamic Troublemakers of North America) Facebook page or the MuslimGirl website. It was also significant that I selected cases, in which regular Muslims—not celebrities or religious leaders—were portraying their own experiences through a variety of media channels. I chose not to include representations of Muslims from non-Muslim creators, such as portrayals of Muslims in film and TV shows. I also chose not to include mainstream media representations of Muslims that are created by Muslim Americans, such as the *Ms. Marvel* comic book or the film *The Big Sick*, since these more established creators have access to more resources than the up-and-coming creators that are the center of this study. I also didn't include portrayals from the numerous Muslim leaders and scholars who have found a following through websites and online videos.

I wanted to focus on how Muslim American young adults use their creativity and the affordances of digital media to create their own forms of expression that may contradict, complicate or reconstruct the representation of their identities both in the mainstream media and within Islamic circles. Reflecting on the current political moment and social context within which Muslim American youth are living, all of these cases illustrate how Muslim youth respond to the pressures to act in certain ways, the stereotypes of their appearances, and the anxieties over how Muslims might change the perceived American way of life. The Places You'll Pray photo

series responds to the suspicions over and physical threats towards Muslims for practicing their religion in public. The Our Three Winners campaign was created in the aftermath of a violent attack on Muslim lives in North Carolina. The work of the Salafi Feminist, specifically the niqabi photo series, counters stereotypical portrayals of Muslim women that reduce them to their clothing. Some of her work also reacts to political issues around the right for women to wear the niqab in Canadian public spaces. And the Mipsterz fashion video was created as a reaction to visual stereotypes of oppressed Muslim women, but the women in the video also respond to pressures within Islam that they must appear and act in a particularly pious manner.

Places You'll Pray photo series

The Places You'll Pray photo series from Sana Ullah is the most recent case and addresses contemporary political issues; Sana presented an exhibit of the photos in the spring of 2017 for her graduate thesis project. She received an MA in New Media Photojournalism from George Washington University's Corcoran School of the Arts and Design in Spring 2017. The daughter of immigrants from Bangladesh, Sana was born and raised in South Florida. She has remained in the Washington DC area after her graduate studies and is currently the photo editor at Discovery Communications. In her comments in our conversation, her written reflections and her visual work, Sana illustrates the challenges of living as a Muslim American within the current climate of racism against Muslims. Current examples of this anti-Islam sentiment abound in the age of Donald Trump, such as the many iterations of the "Muslim ban," numerous hate crimes against those who are perceived to be Muslim, and protests and threatening actions outside of mosques. Sana hopes that these photos encourage other young Muslim Americans to have the courage to pray and practice their faith in public.

This photo series began as a personal project to document some unique places where Sana would pray with her family and friends, but after the encouragement of a professor, she decided to use this project for her MA thesis work. In addition to displaying the photos in a traditional exhibit, she incorporated the images into a multimedia website that includes quotes from the participants, written reflections on prayer practices, and a video about the Muslim experience in the U.S.⁷⁵ Sana also promoted a hashtag on Instagram, #PlacesYoullPray, so that participants from around the world could share their own images of various prayer locales. In addition to her thesis exhibit, a few of the images were on display at the Smithsonian's Dillon Ripley Center in DC from February 2017 to January 2018. Sana plans to continue the Places You'll Pray project throughout her life, and eventually, she would like to create a book collection of the photos. Articles about this project were posted in *BuzzFeed*,⁷⁶ *The Huffington Post*,⁷⁷ *Miami New Times*,⁷⁸ and the Muslim site, *Mvslim*.⁷⁹

The photos highlight the interesting and unusual places where Muslims pray, but a lot of the images show that Muslims frequently pray in places that are convenient and relatively quiet. Sana found subjects for this series by reaching out to friends and acquaintances through social media. Additionally, when she spotted people praying in public, she would ask if she could

⁷⁵ Sana Ullah, "Places You'll Pray," <https://www.placesyoullpray.com/> (accessed November 7, 2017).

⁷⁶ Ahmed Ali Akbar, "This Photographer Is Capturing The Way Muslims Pray In Public," *BuzzFeed*, September 23, 2016, https://www.buzzfeed.com/ahmedaliakbar/this-powerful-photo-series-captures-the-public-places-muslim?utm_term=.moOqB31k1#.feGW86aLa (accessed January 17, 2018).

⁷⁷ Carol Kuruvilla, "A Muslim Woman Is Documenting All The Strange And Wonderful Places Muslims Pray," *Huffington Post*, October 19, 2016, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/places-muslims-pray-sana-ullah_us_58065410e4b0b994d4c1b1a8 (accessed January 17, 2018).

⁷⁸ Brittany Shammas, "FIU Grad's Photo Series Aims to Change Perception of Islam," *Miami New Times*, September 22, 2016, <http://www.miaminewtimes.com/news/fiu-grads-photo-series-aims-to-change-perception-of-islam-8791390> (accessed January 17, 2018).

⁷⁹ "Places You'll Pray: A Photo Series That Captures All The Wonderful Places Muslims Pray," *Mvslim*, November 3, 2017, <http://mvslim.com/places-youll-pray-photo-series-captures-wonderful-places-muslims-pray/> (accessed January 17, 2018).

photograph them. Because of the increased threats towards Muslims after the election of Trump, Sana explained that several participants dropped out of the project. For each photo, Sana would have the participants select a memorable place where they had prayed in the past or simply a place where they pray regularly. Then, they would go to that location and Sana would pray with the participants at one of the five set prayer times. When the subjects moved into the non-required prayers, Sana would then photograph them. This process is notable for several reasons. First, as the photographer, Sana is not a passive observer but actually takes part in the ritual. Second, the photos capture the authentic moment when the subjects are actually praying. The photos are neither voyeuristic, orientalist portraits of Muslims nor staged recreations of prayer.

Our Three Winners

The next case in this study involves the aftermath of the murder of three Muslim college students in Chapel Hill, NC. Deah Shaddy Barakat, 23; his wife, Yusor Mohammad Abu-Salha, 21; and her sister Razan Mohammad Abu-Salha, 19, were shot on February 10, 2015 by a neighbor in Deah and Yusor's apartment. Within an hour after the shooting, the neighbor, Craig Hicks, turned himself in to the police and confessed to the killing. While his wife reported to the media that the shootings were probably caused by an argument over parking, family and friends of the victims quickly pointed to the fact that no one was parked in Hicks's parking spot at the time of the murder. Additionally, people conveyed stories of how Hicks had threatened the young couple once before by showing his gun, and he had made comments about how he didn't like how Yusor dressed, implying that he disliked her headscarf and Islam. Hicks had also posted things on social media that indicated his stance against all forms of religion.⁸⁰ Because of many

⁸⁰ Jonathan M. Katz, "In Chapel Hill, Suspect's Rage Went Beyond a Parking Dispute," *New York Times*, March 3, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/04/us/chapel-hill-muslim-student-shootings-north-carolina.html?_r=1 (accessed January 17, 2018).

of these issues, federal prosecutors opened up a hate crime investigation, but the results of this have not been released.⁸¹ The criminal case against Hicks still has not come to trial as of Spring 2018.

In the immediate days after the shooting, the mainstream media outlets reported on the shootings as resulting from arguments over parking, but a different narrative emerged on social media as friends and family of the victims shared stories of how Craig Hicks had threatened the victims in the past because of their religion. Since Deah and Yusor were fastidious to ensure that no one parked in any spots that would enrage Hicks—even going so far as to distribute maps to family and friends of safe locations to park—it is highly unlikely that parking was what enraged Hicks on that day.⁸² Friends and family members began a social media campaign, “Our Three Winners,” to circulate photos, videos and quotes from the victims through Facebook and Twitter. The victims were children of Arab American immigrants, and their families have been active members of the Muslim American community in the Research Triangle area of North Carolina. The Our Three Winners social media pages also served as avenues to share information about the various memorial services, and to this day, the Facebook page has over 173,000 followers and is still used to share the continued campaigns and fundraisers in honor of the victims. This social media work served not only to celebrate the lives of Deah, Yusor and Razan, which were so tragically lost, but also to advocate that the media should focus on how hatred towards Muslims was mainly responsible for this violent act.

This study will focus on the various creative projects that emerged in the days and months after the shootings. Graphic design student Mohammad “Teddy” Alsalti created a black

⁸¹ Anne Blythe, “Judge orders FBI notes turned over to man accused of shooting three Muslim students,” *The News & Observer*, March 14, 2017, <http://www.newsobserver.com/news/local/crime/article138457408.html> (accessed September 6, 2017).

⁸² Katz, “In Chapel Hill,” *New York Times*.

and white silhouette image of the victims in the morning after the murder. When he posted this image to his Instagram page with the tags #OurThreeWinners and #ChapelHillShootings, the image circulated through digital media spaces, as people began using the image as their profile pictures. The image continues to be used on T-shirts, bracelets, posters and promotions for campaigns in honor of the victims. In addition, many people were touched by the event and created various projects to honor the victims, such as Mohammad Moussa who created a spoken word performance piece to celebrate his friend, Deah, and Tarek Albaba who is currently producing a documentary about the murders.

The Salafi Feminist and niqabi art pieces

The next collection of cases revolves around the work of Canadian blogger, Zainab bint Younus, who goes by the moniker the Salafi Feminist online. Zainab lives in Victoria, BC, where she was born and raised. Her family is of Indian origin, but they have lived in Canada for three generations. Zainab identifies proudly as a Canadian woman of color. As a young adult, Zainab traveled around the Middle East and lived in Egypt and the Persian Gulf. Since 2006, Zainab has maintained a popular blog, The Salafi Feminist, where she discusses famous Muslim women in history and the Qur'an, issues related to women and Islamic teachings (divorce, sexuality, childrearing, etc.), and a revitalization of the feminist aspects of Islam. She has over 27,000 followers on Facebook and around 6,800 followers on Twitter. In 2015, *Wired* magazine named Zainab one of five women who are “quashing preconceptions about Islam on social media.”⁸³ My analysis of Zainab’s work will focus on her visual identity, both in her social media profiles and in public. Even though Zainab never shows her face in public and rarely posts

⁸³ Omar Mouallem, “5 Women Quashing Preconceptions About Islam on Social Media,” *Wired*, Dec. 3, 2015, <http://www.wired.com/2015/12/muslim-women-twitter/> (accessed Dec. 5, 2015).

pictures of herself online, she creates a visual expression through the cartoon image on her online sites.

This case study will also analyze a series of portraits that Zainab collected from women who wear the niqab face veil. This photo series was motivated by a stereotypical collection of images from Associated Press photographer Hassan Ammar, claiming to show the view from behind the veil.⁸⁴ Ammar took photos of famous locations in the Middle East and North Africa but placed a cloth over the camera lens to blur the images. This photo series was problematic for several reasons, namely that most niqabis don't cover their eyes so their view of the world is unobstructed. More significantly, these photos reinforced the Orientalist tropes that there is a secret harem space behind the veil and that Muslim women are so oppressed that they can't even see the world clearly. Zainab's response to this photo project was to collect self-portraits from women who wear the face veil, as a way for these women to show the normality of their daily lives. In the summer of 2015, Zainab posted these photos, along with sarcastic written commentary on *BuzzFeed*,⁸⁵ *The Huffington Post*⁸⁶ and *Medium*.⁸⁷

Finally, Zainab also promoted the art project of friend and fellow niqabi woman, Lindsay Budge. Zainab published an interview that focuses on Lindsay's 3D art piece, "Privilege: Or,

⁸⁴ Nick Kirkpatrick, "What some Muslim women see: Views from behind the veil shot by an AP photographer," *The Washington Post*, May 19, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/05/19/what-some-muslim-women-see-views-from-behind-the-veil-shot-by-an-ap-photographer/?postshare=6091432129509116> (accessed Dec. 5, 2015).

⁸⁵ Zainab bint Younus, "Veiled Snapshots: Muslim Women Who Are Begging to Be Saved," *Buzz Feed*, June 1, 2015, <http://www.buzzfeed.com/zainabbintyounus/veiled-snapshots-muslim-women-who-are-begging-to-1loki> (accessed January 17, 2018).

⁸⁶ Zainab bint Younus, "Covering One's Face Does Not Render One Silent or Stupid," *Huffington Post*, June 12, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/zainab-bint-younus/overing-ones-face-does-not-render-one-silent-or-stupid_b_7539964.html?utm_hp_ref=tw (accessed January 17, 2018).

⁸⁷ Zainab bint Younus, "For me, niqab is a feminist statement," *Medium*, June 4, 2015, <https://medium.com/aj-story-behind-the-story/for-me-niqab-is-a-feminist-statement-13ca2fc2fe9a#.m7dvi936t> (accessed January 17, 2018).

Shit People Say to Muslim Women.”⁸⁸ The art project is a life-sized plank, covered in black abaya fabric. On the fabric, Lindsay wrote many of the hateful things that people have said to her in public because she covers her face and body. While this art piece was on display at Lindsay’s college, the images of the piece were shared in digital media spaces.

Somewhere in America #MIPSTERZ

The final case that will be discussed in this study is the fashion video, “Somewhere in America #MIPSTERZ,” which was released in November 2013, and the surrounding Mipsterz movement of young people who identify as Muslim hipsters. The Mipsterz video was released multiple times on YouTube and Vimeo because of controversy of the Jay-Z song, “Somewhere in America,” which plays over the footage. At first a “clean” version of the song replaced the original unedited version, and then the music was pulled from the video all together because of copyright infringement. Because of the multiple versions of the video, it is difficult to determine an exact view count. The original video received around 600,000 views and the most recent version has around 137,000 views on both YouTube and Vimeo.

The two-and-a-half-minute video features a number of women displaying their original fashion ensembles in various urban sites in New York, Boston, Los Angeles, Washington, DC, and Hillsborough, SC. The women run, dance, strut, laugh, skateboard and goof around for the camera, but the camera angles and shots emphasize the strength, creativity and independence of the women. The purpose of the video, according to several of the participants was to create a visual portrait of their identities and to highlight their individuality and creativity. Soon after its

⁸⁸ Zainab bint Younus, “Privilege: Or, Shit People Say to Muslim Women,” *Review Sphere*, November 29, 2016, <http://www.reviewsphere.org/news/privilege-or-shit-people-say-to-muslim-women/> (accessed January 17, 2018).

release, the video inspired active debates among Muslims on social media⁸⁹ and within Islamic online media sites, such as *Islamic Monthly*,⁹⁰ *altmuslim*⁹¹ and *Al-Jazeera*.⁹² The video also reached outside of Muslim circles, as mainstream blogs and news sites discussed the debates but also praised the video for its creativity.⁹³

The video and participants received criticism, mostly from other Muslims, for focusing on the shallow aspects of fashion and consumption. The video was fairly well received by non-Muslims, even though these articles tended to focus on the novelty of seeing Muslim women participating in Western culture. Layla Shaikley was a participant in the video, as well as the fashion director and co-producer. She became the unofficial spokesperson for the video, as she wrote articles and gave interviews about her experiences and motivations for creating the video. She argued that this video was a way to visually portray the complex and intersecting identities of Muslim American women. The Mipsterz movement itself is way to play with categories and to claim complex, intersecting and conflicting identity markers.

⁸⁹ See, for example, Dr. Suad, "All I know to be is a Soldier for My Culture," *Tumblr*, December 1, 2013, <http://drsquad.tumblr.com/post/68745089632/somewhere-in-america-somewhere-in-america-there> (accessed March 23, 2017).

⁹⁰ Sana Saeed, "Somewhere in America, Muslim Women Are 'Cool'," *The Islamic Monthly*, December 2, 2013, <http://www.theislamicmonthly.com/somewhere-in-america-muslim-women-are-cool/> (accessed March 23, 2017).

⁹¹ Rabia Chaudry, "Somewhere on the Internet, Muslim Women are being Shamed," *altmuslim*, December 3, 2013, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/altmuslim/2013/12/28/250786141/muslim-hipsters-turn-a-joke-into-a-serious-conversation> (accessed March 23, 2017).

⁹² "Beyond the #Mipsterz debate," *Al-Jazeera: The Stream*, December 10, 2013, <http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/201312102302-0023240> (accessed March 23, 2017).

⁹³ See Amarra Ghani, "Muslim 'Hipsters' Turn a Joke Into A Serious Conversation," *NPR: Code Switch*, December 28, 2013, <http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/12/28/250786141/muslim-hipsters-turn-a-joke-into-a-serious-conversation> (accessed March 23, 2017); and Yasmine Hafiz, "'Mipsterz' 'Somewhere in America' Video Showcases Muslim Hipster Swag; Sparks a Passionate Discussion," *Huffington Post*, December 2, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/12/02/mipsterz-somewhere-in-america-video_n_4374182.html (accessed March 23, 2017).

Methods and positionality

In order to gather data and analyze these various cases, I employed several methodological approaches. Specifically, my project incorporated various forms of media analysis along with in-depth interviews with the creators. My own interpretations of the visual projects can only be enhanced by talking to the producers and hearing their own interpretations and intentions. I used critical discourse analysis with an emphasis on visual images in order to analyze these creative projects. I completed an extensive ethnographically informed analysis of the various digital spaces in which these cases circulate, including the photographs, artwork, hashtags, comments, articles and websites. I also conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the creators of these projects in person, over the phone or through Skype. Finally, feminist methodology is foundational to my research work because of its call to be aware of my position and power as a researcher.

Critical discourse analysis

For this study, I conducted a critical discourse analysis of the visual materials, focusing on how discourses produce knowledge and truth about Muslims both through language and visual images. My goal is to examine how Muslim Americans create images that resist and subvert dominant discourses. I incorporate Gillian Rose's formulation of discourse analysis because it allows for an examination of how social differences, such as race, gender and religion, are constructed and given power in society through discourse. As Rose elaborates, discourse analysis has its roots in Foucault's work on discourse, knowledge and power. "Discourse is a particular knowledge about the world which shapes how the world is understood and how things are done in it."⁹⁴ Visuality can be understood as a type of discourse, so that visual images can be

⁹⁴ Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials* (London: SAGE, 2012), 190.

analyzed in a similar way to language. Rose explains, “A specific visuality will make certain things visible in particular ways, and other things unseeable.”⁹⁵ How we understand ourselves as subjects within the larger social world is formulated by discourse through language but also through visual images.

Rose also provides helpful advice on how to conduct critical discourse analysis of images. She recommends approaching images without preconceived ideas and then deeply engaging with the images to discern the key themes. The researcher should be open to the many complex and contradictory meanings that might emerge within the image. It is also important to account for what is not said or visualized in the images. As Rose states, “Absences can be as productive as explicit naming; *invisibility* can have just as powerful effects as visibility.”⁹⁶ Most importantly, critical discourse analysis must elaborate on the larger social context for the visual images under study, such as the audience and institutional forces. Finally, Rose explains that scholars conducting critical discourse analysis produce discourse themselves, and they need to be reflexive about the claims to truth that are made through their scholarly discourses.⁹⁷

Teun Van Dijk further outlines critical discourse analysis, specifically examining issues of power and dominance. He argues that critical discourse analysis isn’t simply a research method, but instead it is a perspective that encourages scholars to resist dominant powers and to use their research to work for social equality. Van Dijk also advocates for scholars to be aware of their own positions within structures of power. This approach is helpful for my research because of its emphasis on the power dynamics behind who is able to access the communication channels to spread discourse. Select groups have the “symbolic resources” to control discourse and impact

⁹⁵ Ibid., 191.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 219.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 222.

the thoughts and actions of those with less power.⁹⁸ Only certain Muslim Americans have the symbolic resources to share discourses online, depending on their class position and educational level, but many Muslims lack resources because of their gender, ethnicity and religion. As I will discuss in the section on positionality, I must also be self-reflective of my power as a researcher in order to do work that enhances the voices of these Muslim youth instead of speaking for them.

Visual analysis

Critical discourse analysis is a helpful starting point for my research, but it is essential that I also examine the uniqueness of visual images, especially in comparison to texts. W.J.T. Mitchell argues for a “visual turn” in research that moves visual analysis away from deciphering the meaning of images to examining the desires of images. Mitchell sees images as having agency since we already approach pictures “as if [they] had will, consciousness, agency, and desire.”⁹⁹ Despite the fact that this understanding of images is irrational, Mitchell encourages visual studies scholars to take seriously how images are viewed in society as active beings with agency. In a direct critique of critical discourse analysis, Mitchell argues that images should not be analyzed like language or texts, “Vision is as important as language in mediating social relations, and it is not reducible to language, to the ‘sign,’ or to discourse. Pictures want equal rights with language, not to be turned into language.”¹⁰⁰

The purpose of research is to comprehend what pictures want, instead of approaching pictures with a predisposed method of interpretation. Critical discourse analysis is still helpful for my work because of the emphasis on power dynamics behind images, but my research must also address the specificity of images instead of reducing images to subsets of text. Although it is

⁹⁸ Teun A. Van Dijk, “Critical Discourse Analysis,” in *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, eds. Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen, and Heidi E. Hamilton (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 355.

⁹⁹ W.J.T. Mitchell, “What Do Pictures *Really* Want?” *October* 77 (Summer 1996): 74.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 82.

important to elaborate on the context of an image, such as the iconic image of the three victims in the Chapel Hill shooting, it is also significant to examine the agency of the image and how the image gained its own life as it circulated through various spaces. This image of the three victims was initially taken to celebrate a graduation, but the image has now gathered more complex meanings through its circulation. My analysis of this image needs to account for the complex desires of this one image.

While Mitchell's argument is significant for emphasizing the primacy of visual images, his article provides little concrete advice for how to put this approach into practice. In particular, Mitchell doesn't account for the fact that most visual images exist in relationship to texts. I am focused on still images and videos, but I will also discuss the texts that accompany images, such as captions, descriptions, comments, blogs and articles. Sarah Pink's "multisensory approach" to conducting online research accounts for the intersection of different types of media beyond just images and texts. Pink argues that the Internet should be studied as a "multisensory environment" that engages more than just the visual sense.¹⁰¹ She emphasizes the spatiality of the Internet, the interactions between offline and online spaces, and the researcher's location in these spaces. Instead of focusing on visual images online and how people look at screens, Pink proposes that we "conceptualize our emplaced experience as one of moving through a digital environment while rooted in the materiality of our immediate circumstances and engaging embodied memories and imaginations of past and possible future experiences."¹⁰² This approach encourages research that focuses on the embodied and multisensory experiences of online practices and how these practices are deeply connected to offline experiences.

¹⁰¹ Sarah Pink, "Visual Ethnography and the Internet: Visuality, Virtuality and the Spatial Turn," in *Advances in Visual Methodology*, ed. Sarah Pink (London: SAGE, 2012), 119.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 122.

Pink advocates for a “sensory turn” in visual research to examine how images are experienced through multiple senses.¹⁰³ The main focus should be on the relationship between the visual and other senses, but the researcher must be self-reflexive about her position in terms of cultural understandings of sensory categories. For instance, a Western researcher is more likely to privilege the visual over the aural. Just like the researcher is aware of the multisensory experiences of research subjects, she should also be cognizant of how her own body is a research tool since “the sensory, affective and empathetic dimensions of being human are central to the research process.”¹⁰⁴ The multisensory approach allows me to see the images that I study as interacting with a larger sensory environment in which the participants and I engage with sensory information to make meaning. This approach allows me to account for more than just the images that young Muslims post online but also the multisensory embodied experiences of producing these images, posting them online, receiving the images and formulating interpretations.

Ethnography and interviews

For each of the examples in this study, I conducted an ethnographically informed analysis of the various elements and spaces related to the cases. I didn’t perform a traditional ethnographic study, as I was not an active participant in many of these spaces and communities, but I did collect and analyze the many aspects of these cases, such as images, artwork, websites, videos, tweets, hashtags, Facebook posts, comments, blogs and articles. I wanted to get a larger sense of how these creative projects traveled and transformed and how people were interacting with and responding to these projects. To study the Mipsterz video, for instance, I conducted an in-depth analysis of each scene in the video, paying particular attention to the fashion styles,

¹⁰³ Sarah Pink, “A Multisensory Approach to Visual Methods,” in *The Sage Handbook of Visual Research Methods*, eds. Luc Pauwels and Eric Margolis (London: SAGE, 2011), 603.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 606.

camera angles and gestures. Additionally, I looked at the articles that were written in critique of the video, as well as the articles that the participants wrote in defense of the video. I also watched news pieces and read articles about the Mipsterz video. I joined the Mipsterz Facebook page and Google listserv and read through the various items posted in these two places. I looked at other artwork and imagery tied to the Mipsterz movement. While the majority of these materials will not be addressed in this final study, it is important as a researcher to immerse myself in the community in order to get a better sense of the larger issues and discussions that happen both online and offline.

Anthropologists have reflected on how digital spaces can be studied through ethnographic methods, such as interviews and participant observations. Some of the earlier approaches to ethnographies of digital spaces, such as netnography¹⁰⁵ and virtual worlds,¹⁰⁶ tended to focus on the uniqueness and insulated nature of digital spaces. These approaches advocated that online spaces should be studied as their own isolated field sites, separated from offline spaces. More recent work has expanded this approach to look at what John Postill and Sarah Pink describe as the “messy web” of social practices that exist as people easily move between online and offline spaces.¹⁰⁷ Ethnographies of digital spaces must also account for offline actions and answer deeper questions about the social experiences of participating in these online spaces. By incorporating traditional ethnographic methods like interviews and participant observations along with data collection and the analysis of social media content, this allows researchers “to refigure social media as a fieldwork environment that is social, experiential and

¹⁰⁵ Robert V. Kozinets, *Netnography: Redefined*. (London: SAGE, 2015).

¹⁰⁶ Tom Boellstorff, Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce and T.L. Taylor, *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

¹⁰⁷ John Postill and Sarah Pink, “Social Media Ethnography: The Digital Researcher in a Messy Web,” *Media International Australia*, no. 145 (2012): 125.

mobile.”¹⁰⁸ In order to understand the larger social experiences of young Muslim Americans, it is important that I study the materials that circulate online while also talking with the participants about their own experiences and motivations.

I follow Postill and Pink’s advice of doing “internet-related ethnography rather than internet ethnography” because this allows for an emphasis on the interactions between offline activities and online participation.¹⁰⁹ Since the participants in this study easily move and exist in digital and offline spaces, there is no need for me as a researcher to make distinctions between spaces and actions. Postill and Pink explain that the research site of social media “is dispersed across web platforms, is constantly in progress and changing, and implicates physical as well as digital localities.”¹¹⁰ Researchers must study the complexities and dynamic nature of digital spaces and how they relate to other spaces. This idea of a “messy web” of interconnections relates well to assemblage theory. I will discuss how I use assemblage theory in the next chapter, but this is a helpful methodological approach to examine the relationships between elements like digital spaces, social media platforms, mobile technologies, offline actions and the physical body.

Furthermore, Yarimar Bonilla and Jonathan Rosa use the example of the protests against police brutality in Ferguson, MO to explore how to study digital activism. They propose the method of “hashtag ethnography” to address the overlap between the production of social meaning in online and offline spaces. The authors assert the need to take seriously the cultural production in digital spaces, especially for individuals like African Americans who are misrepresented in the media and face oppression in their daily lives. They explain, “The

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*

increased use and availability of these technologies has provided marginalized and racialized populations with new tools for documenting incidents of state-sanctioned violence and contesting media representations of racialized bodies and marginalized communities.”¹¹¹ In the case of Ferguson, people used hashtags to participate in conversations on Twitter about the experiences of being an African American within this context of police violence and physical threats. The digital media became a space to share practical information about the protests but also for articulating meaning and creating counter-narratives. In a similar way to how African Americans used Twitter hashtags like #HandsUpDontShoot to counter dominant images of their experiences, so Muslim Americans also use hashtags like #OurThreeWinners to celebrate the positive values of the victims in the Chapel Hill, NC shootings.

Twitter hashtags can be theorized as spaces of meaning-making and contestation, and the authors also advocate that hashtags be studied in connection to a wider social context. Twitter should not be studied as a public sphere in and of itself, but rather it offers a limited glimpse of a wider social context. Even though Twitter hashtags provide a partial view of the world, Bonilla and Rosa argue that they shouldn't be ignored as important sites of social meaning, “Rather, we must approach them as what they are: entry points into larger and more complex worlds.”¹¹² The approaches of both “hashtag ethnography” and “internet-related ethnography” are most relevant to my work because of the move away from studying digital spaces in isolation and the encouragement to look at the interconnections between various spaces. The participants in this study produce meaning and counter-narratives by engaging in a variety of media spaces and technologies. While digital media spaces like Twitter are not isolated field sites, they are

¹¹¹ Yarimar Bonilla and Jonathan Rosa, “#Ferguson: Digital Protest, Hashtag Ethnography, and the Racial Politics of Social Media in the United States,” *American Ethnologist* 42, no. 1 (2015): 5.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 7.

important spaces of social interaction and expression. Studies like this one of #BlackLivesMatter activism provide a useful methodological framework for how to address the particular social experience of a medium like Twitter.

Along with studying various instantiations of Muslim American expression in online spaces like photographs, videos, hashtags and blogs, it was also essential that I spoke with the various creators to get a sense of their own motivations, experiences and interpretations. In their handbook on ethnography in virtual worlds, Tom Boellstorff, Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce and T.L. Taylor discuss the benefits of conducting interviews with people about their participation in online spaces. Interviews allow participants the chance to reflect on their behaviors and cultural work. People can make important connections between what they do and what they say.¹¹³

If this study focused on the content that was available online and only included my own analysis of these materials, the results would offer a limited, singular perspective. Instead, I conducted in-depth interviews with the participants behind the creative projects in order to incorporate their own reflections on this work. It was also important that I spoke with people in person as much as possible since I was able to build more rapport with participants when we met face-to-face. I found it to be easier to have participants trust me with their stories when they were able to meet me and get to know me on a personal level. It was also useful to spend time with people and observe them in their normal environments.

I traveled to Victoria, BC and stayed with Zainab bint Younus for a couple of nights. We spent one day touring around Victoria together, with Zainab showing me her favorite locations. We also had a dinner gathering with a few of her friends, and I was able to conduct semi-structured interviews with Zainab as well as a couple friends who participated in the niqabi photo

¹¹³ Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce and Taylor, *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds*.

series. While I could easily analyze Zainab's online persona as the Salafi Feminist, I was able to deepen my understanding by spending time together, observing her offline appearance and watching her interactions with others. Out of respect for the intimate female-only spaces of which I was privy during my visit, I won't discuss the appearance of any of the women in these domestic spaces or any of the topics that were addressed outside of the formal interviews.

I also traveled to North Carolina to meet with several people in Chapel Hill, Raleigh and Durham who knew Deah, Yusor and Razan. Although we had previously spoken on the phone, I was able to meet in person with Mohammad "Teddy" Alsalti along with twin brothers, Abdullah and Mohammad Dorgham, who were close friends with Deah. I also met with Doha Hindi, a friend of Razan. Deah's brother, Farris Barakat, gave me a tour of the Light House, a new community space that he is running in honor of the victims. While in Chapel Hill, I spent some time at the dental school at University of North Carolina where I saw a memorial to Deah and Yusor, who were dental students there, and I noticed a student wearing a service day T-shirt that featured the silhouette image of the victims. Because of the sensitive nature of this case, it was even more important that I visited with people in person so that they could trust me with their stories. Several people mentioned the difficulty of having reporters come from outside the community and take up their time and emotional energy to get a quick story. It was important that I conveyed to participants that I was not trying to take advantage of this tragic story for my own gain. As I will discuss in the next section on feminist methodology, I emphasized that I seek to use my work to further advance the collective goal of social justice for Muslim Americans.

Unfortunately, because of personal reasons and lack of travel funds, I had to conduct some phone and video interviews. I spoke on the phone with Sana Ullah about her Places You'll Pray photo series. I also talked on the phone with Layla Shaikley and Habib Yazdi about their

work to create the Mipsterz video. Finally, I video chatted with Tarek Albaba about his documentary on the Chapel Hill murders, and I spoke on the phone with Mohammad Moussa about his spoken word piece on the Chapel Hill victims.

Feminist methodology and positionality

Since I am not Muslim and don't belong to any of these Muslim American communities, I faced several challenges in conducting my research that need to be addressed. On a practical level, I dealt with some difficulty in getting connected with people. For some of the cases, such as the Salafi Feminist and the Mipsterz video, I worked through friends and acquaintances who knew the creators, but in other cases, such as the Places You'll Pray series, I contacted the participants directly. Once I had made contact, I found that some participants were curious about my interests or slightly cautious about speaking with me. I didn't encounter anyone who was completely resistive to participating. In my interviews with participants, I tried to convey that I was aware of the various issues that Muslim Americans face and that I did not want to take advantage of their experiences.

The Chapel Hill, NC case presented the most difficulties because of the sensitive nature of the case but also because it wasn't clear who created many of the visual projects. For instance, the silhouette image was used in many different spaces, but the name of the creator was not included in any of these iterations. I happened to come across an article that had interviewed Teddy Alsalti, the creator, and that was how I was able to get in contact with him. In terms of contacting some of the other people who knew the Chapel Hill victims, I reached out to a friend who lives in the area and is connected to the Muslim community there. I had a video conversation with Anna Bigelow, a professor at NC State who knew Deah, Yusor and Razan. After I explained the goals of my study, she was willing to put me in contact with Deah's friend,

Mohammad Moussa. Through Mohammad and Teddy, I was able to get in contact with other people and meet with various people when I visited the Chapel Hill area.

As a scholar and someone who is not a Muslim American, I am aware of my privileged position. In my conversations, I tried to connect with the participants over their experiences as college students and young Americans, working for social justice and equality. On the other hand, I do not know the experiences of being judged and harassed for being Muslim. I cannot understand the deep pain of only seeing your religion portrayed in negative ways in the media and rarely seeing your lives valued by American society. In her ethnographic work on the experiences of Punjabi youth in England, Marie Gillespie reflects on this dilemma of always being an insider and outsider. While Gillespie could relate to her subjects because she was also an immigrant to England, but from Ireland, she couldn't assume that her experiences were exactly the same as the Punjabi youth. There is a balance between not exoticizing research subjects and also not identifying too closely with them that you cannot be critical. Gillespie explains this balance, "The process of identifying and refining similarities and differences has enabled a progressive critical distancing from both my own and my subjects' experiences."¹¹⁴ As a researcher, I must always maintain a critical distance but also be aware that because of my position as a white, non-Muslim woman, I am always subject to ethnocentric and racist tendencies that are part of white privilege.¹¹⁵

Feminist methodology was also essential to my research process because of its call to be aware of the power dynamics inherent in research and my position as a researcher, who is both an insider and outsider to the communities that I study. There was a tendency in early feminist research to assume that female researchers could relate to all of the experiences of female

¹¹⁴ Marie Gillespie, *Television, Ethnicity, and Cultural Change* (London: Routledge, 1995), 50.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 73.

subjects, but obviously differences in terms of race, class, religion and sexuality would produce different experiences. Patricia Zavella argues that this assumption that all women are insiders to other women's experiences leads to the essentialization of female researchers and neglects the real power differences between feminist scholars and their subjects. She advocates for feminist researchers to reflect on their positions as both insiders and outsiders and how this will impact their research.¹¹⁶

Furthermore, Donna Haraway warns of the danger in thinking that scholars have this objective view from nowhere or from everywhere, so that a researcher might think that she can represent another viewpoint. Haraway says that a researcher needs to both situate her own viewpoint within a particular position and also to deconstruct and situate the viewpoint of the people she is studying. This prevents the relativizing of viewpoints and the belief that the views are from nowhere and everywhere at the same time. Haraway advocates for a vision that is localized but partial, a view from somewhere. This on-the-ground view from the body is complicated and can get messy, but it allows scholars to see from different positions.¹¹⁷ The benefit of Haraway's approach is that it allows me as a researcher to get past this constant struggle over whether I can study Muslim Americans who have different life experiences. Researchers will always be studying viewpoints that are complex and different, so instead of romanticizing a viewpoint or claiming to authentically present a perspective, researchers need to critically locate the complexities of the viewpoint. I need to situate my viewpoint within my position as a white, American woman and understand the power dynamics that come from this

¹¹⁶ Patricia Zavella, "Feminist Insider Dilemmas: Constructing Ethnic Identity with Chicana Informants," in *Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork*, ed. Diane Wolf (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 140-141.

¹¹⁷ Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," in *Just Methods: An Interdisciplinary Feminist Reader*, ed. Alison M. Jaggar (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2014), 349-350.

position. I also need to be aware that my opinions and tendencies grow out of a particular cultural and political context. I should not try to hide these tendencies but instead reflect on how my opinions might influence my research. Additionally, there will always be blind spots, points of view that I will not understand.

A few specific issues came up in my research because of my outsider position. First, since Islam is a religion that is so often misrepresented in American society, there is an inclination for Muslims, when given a chance to share alternative experiences, to take on the spokesperson role and only present Islam in a positive light. One of the main goals of this study is to move beyond the good Muslim/bad Muslim dichotomy and to look at the complex experiences of Muslim Americans. While I came across these positive portrayals of Islam in several interviews, I deliberately worked to create an environment in which the participants felt comfortable discussing varied experiences and contentious topics. I tried to show participants that I am aware of some of the controversial issues within Muslim communities in order to illustrate that I wanted to move beyond only portraying Islam in a positive light. For instance, in my conversations with Zainab bint Younus, we discussed issues of misogyny within Islam and how female voices are silenced within the mosques. Zainab shared how women were not allowed to participate in the leadership of her Islamic center, and we discussed how Christianity and Islam have both written out the role of women leaders and scholars in the early religious communities. Additionally, in my conversation with Doha Hindi, a friend of the victims in the Chapel Hill shootings, she was honest about how she didn't know if all the work to portray the positive values of her friends was enough to change the minds of Americans, like those who support Trump. I found this to be a frank discussion about the possibilities of visual images to actually change the situation for Muslim Americans. Since we met the day after we both attended

the 2017 Women's March in two different cities, we also reflected on the future of progressive politics in the U.S.

Another issue that came up in my interviews was how I could relate to and address the deep pain that Muslim Americans experience because of their marginalization. Participants had both positive and negative outlooks on how their work might actually change opinions and transform the social situation for the better. The Chapel Hill case was obviously emotionally raw since the creative projects were reacting to a violent event. I had to be cognizant of how my role as a researcher might exacerbate the grieving process of the participants. Doha Hindi specifically addressed how seeing images of her friends in social media often hindered her personal healing. "The fact that all of their content from social media is so readily available makes it extremely difficult to move forward," Doha shared with me. "A lot of times you will be looking through your Facebook feed and you won't be expecting to see anything because it's a regular day, and you'll see a picture of [Deah, Yusor and Razan] and it sets you back." Deah's friends, Mohammad and Abdullah Dorgham, also discussed how the family and friends of the victims became exhausted from doing so many interviews with journalists about the murders. I tried not to take up too much of their time or rehash emotional experiences. For instance, when I was interviewing Farris Barakat, Deah's brother, we mostly talked about the Light House community center and events happening in honor of the victims. When I asked a few questions about the circulation of images after the murders, I noticed that Farris was getting uncomfortable and more emotional. I switched the topic and suggested that he give me a tour around the Light House. My goal in speaking with the creators was to get a better sense of the motivations and experiences behind these visual projects; I did not want to break open emotional wounds. I tried to listen intently and let people discuss the topics that they felt comfortable with discussing.

Along with participating in larger academic discussions about these topics, this research work also contributes to wider work for equality for Muslims and other marginalized groups in American society. One way to get beyond some of the limitations of being an outsider to this community is to emphasize in my conversations with participants that I want this research to amplify their voices and bring their creative work to a wider audience. Many of the participants in this project were highly critical of the ways that media and academics speak for Muslims. Since the main goal of most of these creative projects is for Muslim Americans to speak for themselves, I certainly do not want this study to dampen these voices. I am aware of the problematic practice, especially within Western feminism, of speaking for Muslim women and attempting to save them from the oppression of Muslim men.¹¹⁸ By speaking with the participants about their creative work and the current issues that Muslim Americans face, my goal is to give the creators the space to reflect on these projects and to share their own opinions. My aim was to present a co-interpretation of these creative projects, so that as the researcher I did not have what Katherine Borland calls ultimate “interpretive authority.” Borland explains, “I am suggesting that we might open up the exchange of ideas so that we do not simply gather data on others to fit into our own paradigms.”¹¹⁹ It is essential that I don’t only present my own interpretations of what these images mean but that I let the participants offer their own reflections and perspectives, especially when these interpretations challenge my own ideas. My overall goal is that this work will complicate some of these dominant narratives of Muslim

¹¹⁸ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, 271-313 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

¹¹⁹ Katherine Borland, “‘That’s Not What I Said.’ Interpretive Conflict in Oral Narrative Research,” in *Women’s Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, eds. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (New York: Routledge, 1991), 532.

American lives, especially the patronizing work that comes from Western, progressive feminists who attempt to save Muslim women.

Finally, I view this research project as extending beyond the requirements to finish my degree and to further my academic profile. Instead, I hope that this research contributes to social justice work for equality for Muslims and other religious and ethnic minorities in American society. I created a complementary website as my own personal intervention into this current political moment when Muslims in particular have been silenced, harassed and persecuted in public spaces. The website profiles the numerous examples of the creative work that Muslim American youth are currently producing—numerous innovative pieces that I cannot address in this study. While Muslim Americans are slowly entering into mainstream media spaces, the youth, in particular, are creating some of the most innovative and smart representations of their own lives. I hope that my website helps to circulate these original projects.

CHAPTER II:
DEVELOPING A POLITICAL DISPOSITION THROUGH
CREATIVE WORK IN DIGITAL SPACES

Through decades of visual portrayals of Muslims in the media as religious extremists and violent terrorists, feelings of fear and apprehension become solidified in the minds of many American viewers. It is almost possible to count on one hand the portrayals of Islam and Muslims in the American media that do not make connections to violence, war or terrorism. Because of these dominant negative images, it was jarring to see a rather unexciting but joyful image of three Muslim youth at a graduation circulating through social media and news channels in February 2015. The photograph featured Deah Barakat, his wife Yusor Abu-Salha, and her sister Razan Abu-Salha, three college students who had been tragically murdered in a Chapel Hill, NC apartment by a neighbor over what the media initially reported as a “parking dispute.”

This photograph, along with other social media images, began circulating in digital spaces, as Muslims and non-Muslims alike advocated that the triple murder should be investigated as a possible hate crime, rather than as resulting from an argument between neighbors. As people shared these images along with positive stories about the victims, the news media shifted the coverage of this story. For instance, in a CNN segment, Deah’s sister, Suzanne Barakat, spoke with Anderson Cooper about how these three young people contributed positively to the community. She also discussed how the suspected murderer had harassed the three victims in the past about their religion.

While this story might have faded into the background as one of countless violent crimes in the US, the digital activism to share more about the victims’ lives played an important role in

changing the mainstream media narrative. What is tragically ironic about this story is that it took a horrible murder to see such positive and multifaceted portrayals of Muslims in the news media. The friends and family members of Deah, Yusor and Razan were interviewed in numerous media outlets, and discussed the service work and accomplishments of the victims. This media coverage highlighted how the loss of these young lives should be mourned as a loss to all Americans.

I will discuss this activism surrounding the Chapel Hill murders in more details in chapter four, but this case highlights the emerging mediated spaces, which allow for the circulation of stories, images and emotions that previously would have gone untold and unseen. However we describe the current media moment—terms like digital culture, media manifold and hyper-mediation are a few examples—most media theorists would concede that there are new opportunities for expression that were not possible before. Focusing on what is distinct in this moment does not neglect the many ways that these forms of expression are still co-opted by capitalist forces, silenced by dominant discourse, or simply drowned out by the cacophony of expressions. Additionally, I don't want to suggest that the current digital culture is somehow a break from previous modes of mediation. However, there are some features to the current media moment that are distinct, such as the acceleration of technology, the convergence of media spaces, the faster circulation of information, the archiving of swaths of data, and the chance, however fleeting, for a small voice to reach a large audience.

Of particular concern to this study is the increase in spaces and creative tools that young Muslim Americans can use to work through political issues, such as the violent attack in Chapel Hill, in connections with other Muslims while also creating representations that counter dominant stereotypes. Most of the creators behind the projects in this study discuss how they do

this work in part to change opinions and stereotypes held by non-Muslims. While these projects have been somewhat successful at reaching a wider, non-Muslim audience, my analysis of these cases is less focused on quantifying the impact of these various projects. This study does not include a survey of the audience or a quantitative assessment of the viewership for these creative projects. I want to focus on how the creators aspire to change minds and hearts but not on measuring the success of this effort. Furthermore, I am most interested in how the young creators engage with aspects of this media moment, such as aesthetic styles, affects and hybridity, as a way to work through the pressures and tensions they face both from the larger American culture and from within Muslim circles. The digital media and creative styles become means of negotiation as Muslim youth address the dominant Western regime of representation, the convergence of identity markers around race, class, gender and sexuality, and the political pressures within Islamic communities that reinforce certain modes of being modest and pious. Ultimately, young Muslim Americans produce innovative projects that unapologetically display their understandings of Islam, pride in their multi-layered identities, and the value of their lives.

As was discussed in the introduction, this study builds off foundational research work on the material and sensational experiences of mediation, the political aspects of popular culture and everyday tactics, and the embodiment and physical practices of Islam. While recent theorization examines digital media spaces, I find it more productive to bring together theories on the political potential of aesthetics, affect and hybridity—theories that often come from marginal, non-white and queer perspectives. In the first section of this chapter, I will lay out my argument about how young Muslim American creators engage with aspects of the current media moment to not only counter stereotypes and assert the radical equality of Muslim lives but also to work through contentious issues within Islam in preparation for larger political activism. In the second

section of this chapter, I will present some of the emerging theories on digital media spaces and address critiques about the potential of activism within digital media. Finally, I will discuss assemblage theory and explain why this is the most appropriate theoretical approach to the current media moment.

Aesthetics, affect and hybridity

In the current political context, it has become more and more difficult to see the effectiveness of participation in formal channels of political action, such as writing congress people or organizing protests. For Muslim Americans and other marginalized groups, they face even more barriers that dampen their voices in traditional political spaces. Consequently, people turn to alternative spaces like digital media, artistic projects and daily practices to express their frustrations. We can look at the developing activism around sexual harassment and assault, which widened its reach through the #MeToo online campaign, or the ability of Black Lives Matter activists to organize and spread information through hashtags. In this study, I will critically analyze the various visual expressions and creative projects that Muslim American youth produce and circulate in digital spaces. These projects shine a light on the serious issues that Muslims face, but this creative work also prepares Muslims for social action in traditional political spaces, like voting, writing congress people and community organizing.

As I traced in the introduction, Muslim Americans have been silenced or misrepresented in the mainstream media and political spaces, but digital media expand their creative opportunities. The various cases in this research project illustrate the ways that Muslim American youth employ the affordances of this digital moment, such as aesthetic styles, the expansion of spaces, affective connections and hybridity. The innovative engagement with these aspects of digital media allow Muslim youth to counter stereotypes, complicate dichotomies,

showcase the value of their lives, develop feelings of resonance with viewers, and address contentious political issues within Islamic communities. This creative work is an antidote to the deep pain caused by centuries of visual portrayals of Muslims as subhuman, but these visual projects also help to develop Muslim Americans into political subjects who speak for themselves and interrupt political discussions about their lives.

Through creative projects, Muslim American youth use aesthetic styles to assert their radical equality with other Americans, illustrate the complexities of their lives and claim a space for Muslims in the American landscape. Instead of focusing on formal political spaces, theorist Jacques Rancière argues that an engagement with the senses through artistic projects is a political mode for those on the margins to equalize themselves with those in power. Rancière formulates the sensorium as what one can experience through the five senses, and those in positions of power determine “the distribution of the sensible,” or what people are able to see, hear, feel, taste, etc.¹ Since only the elite can participate in traditional political processes, people turn to artistic and creative projects in order to reconfigure the sensorium in a way that will provide equal access to political spaces. For instance, the Places You’ll Pray photo series is an effort for Muslims to use attractive aesthetic styles to demonstrate that Muslim lives have equal value and contribute positively to American society. The photographer, Sana Ullah, uses composition, lighting, settings and color to display the Islamic practice of prayer as a positive religious ritual that brings beauty and peace to the American landscape. These photos shift the sensory regime away from the negative and threatening imagery of Muslims praying en masse and to attractive and tranquil visual styles.

¹ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, ed. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), 7.

Alongside this work to shift the sensory realm of how Muslims are perceived, other producers use creative tactics, embodiment and the occupation of space to more aggressively confront the negative rhetoric about Islam. When Muslim youth use their bodies and artistic styles to resist dominant stereotypes, they perform what Marwan Kraidy calls “creative insurgency,” or a form of activism against both symbolic and physical oppression.² As Kraidy discusses in the Arab context, creators use their physical embodiment of a particular style along with the occupation of space as modes of political expression. The digital media provide avenues for these creative projects to circulate to a wider audience. In response to repeated public harassment over her choice to wear a niqab face veil and long abaya robe, Canadian artist Lindsay Budge created a confrontational 3D art piece of black abaya fabric with the various offensive phrases that people have said to her written everywhere. Through this project, Budge creatively responds to those people who feel empowered to say such dismissive and hurtful things to another human being. Budge uses the implied body of the abaya fabric, draped over a piece of plywood, to shift the power dynamics and physically confront her oppressors.

This 3D art project, along with other work in this study, uses the body and aesthetic styles to occupy spaces, both physical and mediated, as a way to demand that Muslims be recognized as equals in American society. W.J.T. Mitchell examines how activist movements like Occupy Wall Street inhabit physical spaces in order to create a “space of appearance,” which is a space of radical equality prior to political action. Occupation involves taking over a public space and demanding to be acknowledged and heard.³ While all of the cases in this study are shared and circulated in digital media, many of the creative projects involve the occupation of American

² Marwan M. Kraidy, *The Naked Blogger of Cairo: Creative Insurgency in the Arab World* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016), 5.

³ W. J. T. Mitchell, “Image, Space, Revolution: The Arts of Occupation,” *Critical Inquiry* 39, no. 1 (2012), 10-11.

public spaces. For example, the Places You'll Pray series features images of Muslims praying in American spaces like parks, national memorials, shopping malls, schools and libraries.

Additionally, the Mipsterz fashion video profiles the fashion styles of Muslim women, who occupy urban landscapes and participate in American cultural spaces. The occupation of American locales is not simply a way to show how easily Muslims blend into these spaces, but more importantly, it demonstrates that Muslims occupy these spaces with their own political dispositions and complex experiences. They will not compromise their multifaceted identities in order to be accepted as equals in these public spaces.

In tandem with an exploration of how aesthetics have the potential to engage the senses and shift the larger regime of what is considered attractive and valued, this study also examines how particular affective dispositions can be deployed, especially through images and creative projects, as modes to shift impressions. In chapter four, I discuss the case of the murder of the three Muslim college students in Chapel Hill, NC and analyze how feelings of positivity, happiness, authenticity and grief adhered to the images of the victims and in turn worked to complicate wider assumptions of Muslim Americans. The affects in these images not only created feelings of resonance in non-Muslim viewers but also elicited feelings of connection among progressive young Muslims, striving for social change. Sara Ahmed's conceptualization of affect as what adheres to and moves between bodies is particularly useful in exploring how certain negative affects of fear and terror tend to stick to Muslim bodies and symbols like the headscarf.⁴ In contrast to these negative feelings, the circulation of positive images of the Chapel Hill victims allowed for a transformation in how Muslim Americans are typically perceived in American culture. These pictures, particularly a graphic silhouette image of the victims,

⁴ Sara Ahmed, "Happy Objects," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 29.

employed feelings of positivity, success, happiness and authenticity to produce feelings of resonance among viewers. Ahmed focuses on the political aspects of affect as emotions create social meaning by impressing upon subjects and solidify connections to certain feelings and values.⁵ While the positive affects that adhered to these images along with the authentic style of these photos may shift the feelings that adhere to Muslim bodies, there is a danger of reducing the complex lives of these three Muslim college students into icons of good Muslims.

Despite the tendency of these highly affective images to over-simplify complex experiences, the creative projects produced in the aftermath of the terrible tragedy in Chapel Hill employed affects to develop a sense of connection among Muslims and to encourage non-Muslims to feel themselves into the experiences of these three Muslim students. In her work on affective publics in digital spaces, Zizi Papacharissi focuses on how social media can “facilitate feelings of engagement” and develop community in new and distinct ways.⁶ This sense of connection has the potential to lead to offline political action and collective organizing. As Papacharissi explains “Social media help activate and sustain latent ties that may be crucial to the mobilization of networked publics.”⁷ Social media may not cause social change in and of itself, but “[social media] are our means for feeling our way into worlds we cannot experience directly.”⁸ In the case of the murders in Chapel Hill, social media provided the spaces to circulate these images of the victims and cultivate feelings of resonance. This connection can be

⁵ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2014), 208.

⁶ Zizi Papacharissi, *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 8.

⁷ Zizi Papacharissi, “Affective Publics and Structures of Storytelling: Sentiment, Events and Mediality,” *Information, Communication & Society* 19, no. 3 (2016): 310.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 321.

developed both among other Muslim Americans who share similar experiences as the victims, and non-Muslims who can relate to the story of these three young Muslims.

Along with using aesthetic styles and affects to shift sensory experiences and emotional perceptions, Muslim American creators engage with hybrid styles and interstitial spaces to complicate the one-dimensional stereotypes of Muslims. Blogger Zainab bint Younus plays with categories and blended aesthetic styles in her visual representation as the Salafi Feminist—a traditional Salafi Muslim woman who wears the niqab face veil but loves punk and goth styles, comic books and biker culture, while also advocating for feminist values of equality and agency. The in-between-ness of digital spaces allows for Muslim women like Zainab to deconstruct binaries that position them as either oppressed by Islam or liberated by Western culture.

In analyzing Zainab's online activism, queer theory offers a useful foundation to explore how those from marginal perspectives in terms of gender expression and sexuality challenge dominant power structures by existing in between dichotomies. In a similar way to the dominant dichotomies that queer individuals fight against, such as male vs. female, hetero vs. homo, Muslim women constantly confront dichotomies that position them as either oppressed by Islam or liberated and hyper-sexualized within Western cultures. Without minimizing the centrality of sexuality and gender expression to a formulation of queerness, it is still valuable to reflect on how straight Muslim women are also marginalized because their expressions of gender and sexuality do not fit into hetero-normative categories. As Fatima El-Tayeb argues in the European context, Muslim women who engage in queer politics—wearing modest attire and engaging in progressive activism—refuse easy categorization as either oppressed Muslims or as liberated Westerners.⁹ In a similar way to how queer activists point out the unnatural distinctions of

⁹ Fatima El-Tayeb, *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

gender and sexuality, so too do Muslim women like Zainab, who are involved in feminist activism while practicing a traditional interpretation of Islam, dismantle binaries that seek to position Islam as completely separate from feminism. Zainab creates feelings of unease in viewers who struggle to make sense of her hybrid identity.

In addition, digital media provide the flexibility and relatively open space to play with these hybrid styles and to confront binary thinking. Digital media can be understood as third spaces, as formulated by Homi Bhabha, which provide in-between sites of articulation, negotiation and struggle for people who have been classified as “other” and excluded from Western cultural spaces. The hybridity of third spaces allow for the blending of aesthetic styles, and these hybrid styles have political potential to destabilize dominant ideologies. For example, Zainab curated a series of self-portraits of Muslim women who wear the niqab face veil, but in the photos the women also engage in their environment and demonstrate their complex identities. Again, these images challenge dominant dichotomies that position veiled Muslim women as oppressed and lacking any sense of individuality. While the dominant images tend to reduce Muslim women to their religion and its inherent oppression, the photos that Zainab circulates illustrate the individual personalities of the women and their interests in various topics outside of religion.

Because Muslim Americans produce these artistic projects from positions marginal to mainstream American culture, they attempt to infiltrate these mainstream cultural spaces in order to critique and transform the culture. Similar to how Stuart Hall theorized popular culture as a space of ideological struggle,¹⁰ queer theorist Jose Esteban Muñoz develops the concept of disidentification to explore how those in marginal, queer positions resist the dominant culture

¹⁰ Stuart Hall, “What is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?” *Social Justice* 20, nos. 1-2 (1993): 107.

through creative projects. Instead of simple acceptance or resistance, disidentification “is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance.”¹¹ Muslim American creators engage with American cultural spaces to contest and shift what is considered attractive and valued in American society. The niqabi self-portraits that Zainab collected from Muslim women resemble typical social media profile pictures in how they display the personality and interests of the women. On the other hand, the images challenge the assumption that portraits must feature faces. These photos attempt to display the individuality of the women without showing their facial features or body form. The Mipsterz fashion video is another example of how Muslim producers use the cultural form of fashion photography to deliberately subvert and critique how this form often transforms women into hyper-sexual objects of the male gaze.

As I analyze various creative projects, I will focus each chapter on specific theories around aesthetics, affect and hybridity, but related themes will arise in these case studies. Significantly, the predominance of queer, postcolonial and feminist theories highlights the importance of marginalized perspectives and critiques to this study. In particular, those on the margins because of their gender, sexuality, race, class or religion have always turned to aesthetic styles and embodied tactics as modes of articulation and resistance. This study seeks to explore how Muslim Americans, whose marginalization is compounded by several factors along with religion, find modes of expression, negotiation and contestation through visual projects that circulate in media spaces. Each chapter separately addresses aesthetics, affect and hybridity, but these concepts are closely connected, and each case in this study illustrates how Muslim

¹¹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 11-12.

American youth engage in these three concepts as they create artistic representations. As will be discussed in the next section of this chapter, the majority of media theory on digital spaces focuses on the novelties of the new technologies or on the political economic factors of who controls and benefits from digital media. This study seeks to examine how theories related to creative styles, emotional connections and queerness might enhance existing theories on the current media moment, and how Muslim American youth find modes of expression through the specific aesthetic styles and affective elements of digital media spaces.

Although digital media may provide more opportunities for marginalized groups, such as Muslim youth, to formulate their own expressions, the analysis of these cases seeks to go beyond celebrating the positivity or novelty of Muslims engaging in Western culture. Instead, I endeavor to critically examine how Muslim American youth are creating some of the most innovative artistic projects that offer unapologetic portrayals of their complex lives. At the same time that these creators emphasize biting critiques of the Western regime of misrepresentation, they also use these visual projects to work through contentious issues within North American Islamic communities. Muslim American youth are caught between competing pressures and tensions, and these visual projects provide the creative space to work through these issues. For instance, Muslim Americans face pressure from many sides to always represent Islam in a positive light, but the youth in particular seek to address problems within Muslim communities around sexual harassment, misogyny, classism and racism. In addition, there are contentious issues over how Muslims are expected to practice modesty and piety in public. These visual portrayals strive to complicate these expectations and to portray the multifaceted expressions of Islam. Although there are obvious concerns about overly celebrating the potential of digital media, which I address in the next section, my primary assertion is that there is something notable about this

current media moment that provides not only avenues of expression for marginalized perspectives but also spaces of negotiation and debate. Ultimately, this creative activism in digital spaces is significant work through which Muslim Americans can develop their subjectivity as political actors who are able to intervene in these public debates.

The promise of participation

The majority of this study will provide a deep analysis of how Muslim American youth engage with aesthetics, affects and queerness as they circulate creative projects in digital media, but it is essential to my argument about the political aspects of these creative projects that I lay out some of the key theories about politics and resistance in the current media context. While media scholars have celebrated the expansion of access offered by new media technologies, such as social media and mobile phones, other theorists have been rightly skeptical of the potential of these new digital spaces to offer legitimate political voice and action. Digital media may provide avenues for political action, but media scholars cannot neglect the numerous pitfalls and the ability for corporations to coopt this digital labor. In this section, I will discuss some of these critiques of the political potential of digital spaces while also addressing how my approach understands digital media as nuanced spaces in between exploitation from corporations and resistance to dominant powers.

In his recent book, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*, Christian Fuchs devotes an entire chapter to critiquing the approach of Henry Jenkins and other fan studies scholars, who emphasize how participation in online media provide avenues for fans to produce their own culture and, in turn, to resist dominant cultures. Fuchs critiques Jenkins for formulating participatory culture in the same vein as involvement in politics without addressing established

work on participatory democracy.¹² This approach to participatory culture inflates culture while ignoring political and economic forces and means of exploitation within online spaces, such as unpaid labor, surveillance and data collection.¹³ Furthermore, Jenkins doesn't elaborate on how the participation of fans in digital media spaces might lead to political action. Fuchs explains, "[Jenkins] tends to idealize fan communities' political potentials and cannot explain why these communities should make fans more interested and active in politics."¹⁴ Studies of social media and creative culture should not overly idealize the political aspects of this work.

Fuchs's takedown of participatory culture is an important reminder that the spaces of popular culture and digital media are not inherently progressive or resistive. Fuchs points to the British Cultural Studies tradition and the work of Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams, which didn't simply celebrate everyday culture but instead called for a materialist approach to studying culture that emphasized the dialectical relationship between culture, politics and economics. In his later career, Hall was suspicious of cultural studies work that moved away from political economic questions. Furthermore, Fuchs reiterates Williams's articulation of how "all social systems are material because they are based on production processes."¹⁵ As Williams asserts, culture is actually produced on the base level, and the material aspects of culture should be the focus of study.¹⁶ Fuchs argues for a critical approach to social media that addresses the ways that corporate forces own media channels, control what type of activities are possible, and exploit the labor and data that users contribute in social media. There may be space for people to struggle

¹² Christian Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*, 2nd Edition (London: SAGE, 2017), 67.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁶ Raymond Williams, "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory," in *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, 31-49 (London: Verso, 1997).

against these forces, but social media are just as likely to reinforce dominant ideologies than to promote progressive values.

In a special conversation series in the *International Journal of Communication*, media studies scholars address contemporary issues related to participation and digital media. While discussing issues related to platforms, Tarleton Gillespie points to similar political economic issues as Fuchs. The platforms where most people are participating, Gillespie explains, are mainly run by large, for-profit companies, which heavily influence how people can interact and participate. In addition, the algorithms that structure platforms are often hidden, and companies use digital technology to collect the data that participants offer.¹⁷ While Gillespie discusses how platforms work to “steer” communication, he is also interested in how people work against these forces. He elaborates, “Whatever structure a platform attempts to introduce may cause its own little eddies and detours, but they are minor compared to the massive perturbations endemic to public discourse: shifting sentiments, political flare-ups, communal and national rhythms, and the recursive loops of how forms of participation emerge and propagate, then are superseded.”¹⁸ Gillespie indicates that a critical approach to digital media can find moments for political resistance and contestation while still accounting for political economic structures.

These are significant calls for scholars of digital media to be aware of the ways that capitalist forces exploit this creative labor, but most of the cases in this study are artistic projects that are not likely to be highly valued by corporate interests. This cultural work represents the marginal experiences of Muslims in North American society and doesn’t have a lot of potential to be marketed for a larger audience. For example, a photograph of a woman in a black abaya

¹⁷ Clark, Jessica, et al, “Participations: Dialogues on the Participatory Promise of Contemporary Culture and Politics Part 5: Platforms,” *International Journal Of Communication* 8 (January 2014): 1447-1448.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1460.

and niqab face veil, goofing off with her friends at Target, may be created, in part, out of the neoliberal impulses to brand one's identity and to create a self-portrait. On the other hand, it seems highly unlikely that Target, for example, would want to use this image in a marketing campaign. It is foundational to acknowledge the ways that corporate interests influence the structures of social media sites and what people are allowed to do in these platforms, but the focus of this study is on the work that people are creating within these structures.

Despite the fact that companies are less likely to exploit the digital labor of Muslim Americans, the neoliberal pressures of branding, disclosure and maintaining a personal narrative still infiltrate the digital media spaces. Within this period of "deep mediatization," Couldry and Hepp explain that individuals must use digital spaces and technologies to do continuous work on the self. They explain, "For those who live in a world of constant 'connectivity,' the self faces new pressures to perform itself online in order *just to function* as a social being."¹⁹ This pressure to create a narrative of the self is closely tied to the Western obsession with personal disclosure, traced by Michel Foucault in his work on sexuality and confession in Western Europe.²⁰ These therapeutic practices of revealing one's desires and depravities while managing an individual self now occur through the confessional space of digital media. As Couldry and Hepp elaborate, most actions, positive and negative, are now recorded through digital data, making it possible to assess how well individuals are managing and performing their selves.²¹ The need for self-discipline and disclosure of indiscretions is only promoted through digital technologies, such as blogging platforms, social media profiles, location services, selfies and exercise trackers.

¹⁹ Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp, *The Mediated Construction of Reality* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2017), 160.

²⁰ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I*. Translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

²¹ Couldry and Hepp, *The Mediated Construction*, 146-147.

Alongside maintaining a self through digital media, Sarah Banet-Weiser elaborates on the particular pressure for young women to create a self-brand. Because of the infiltration of the market logic in these digital spaces, individuals feel compelled to create a public brand that demonstrates an authentic version of the self. This culture of branding is filled with contradictions, as Banet-Weiser explains, “self-branding is fraught with tensions between empowering oneself as a producer and occupying this empowered position within the terms and definitions set up by broader brand and commercial culture.”²² For instance, Zainab bint Younus maintains her own brand as the Salafi Feminist through creating visual imagery, a personal narrative and a particular approach to discussing Islamic topics. While Zainab is able to use the spaces of her blog and social media to engage with Muslim women and to talk about issues that cannot be discussed in offline Islamic communities, the ways that she presents herself are still highly influenced by the neoliberal pressures to market oneself, to maintain a personal brand, to demonstrate authenticity, and to self-disclose personal information. As will be discussed in chapter five, Zainab deliberately constructed and maintains her Salafi Feminist identity; she incorporates various visual symbols into her profile picture in order to convey a certain brand. And Zainab is successful at attracting followers online, in part, because of her ability to work within this neoliberal system that rewards those who can brand and market an authentic self.

Furthermore, women must not only cultivate a self-brand in order to attract followers, but they must also maintain a perfect self, both on the outside and inside. As Rosalind Gill explains, “The body is presented simultaneously as women’s source of power and as always unruly, requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodeling (and consumer spending)

²² Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Authentic™: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 70.

in order to conform to ever-narrower judgments of female attractiveness.”²³ Every aspect of a woman’s appearance is up for constant scrutiny, but this never-ending form of labor must appear to be “fun, pampering, or self-indulgence and must *never* be disclosed.”²⁴ This emphasis on positioning women’s bodies as sites of constant self-work stems out of neoliberal pressures to create a self-brand, but perfecting the female self through consumption is also an aspect of the postfeminist moment. Angela McRobbie formulates postfeminism not as a backlash against feminism but as an acceptance that the political goals of feminism have been achieved and that feminism “is no longer needed, it is a spent force.”²⁵ Since there is no longer a need for radical feminist activism, women can seek further liberation through consumption and self-work. Under postfeminism, women are granted this false sense of freedom to buy more and more products in the hopes of perfecting the body and personal identity.

Along with monitoring one’s external appearance, women are also encouraged to work on their interior selves. Gill explains that in the postfeminist context how one appears on the outside is a sign of how she is able to monitor and control her interior life. A woman who doesn’t wear makeup and goes out in her pajamas, for instance, is assumed to have a disastrous personal life. Gill explains, “the self has become a project to be evaluated, advised, disciplined and improved or brought ‘into recovery.’”²⁶ McRobbie discusses how women are expected to have “life-plans” and to always be self-reflexive about their personal choices.²⁷ Every aspect of a woman’s life is always up for scrutiny.

²³ Rosalind Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10, no. 2 (2007): 149.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 155.

²⁵ Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Postfeminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*. (London: SAGE, 2009), 12.

²⁶ Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 156.

²⁷ McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Postfeminism*, 19

Many examples in this study illustrate how these pressures to document, disclose and discipline the self are embedded into the spaces of digital media. The aftermath of the shootings in Chapel Hill, NC is a perfect illustration of the power of effective branding. This tragic event would not have gotten the circulation that it did in social media and mainstream news media if not for the confluence of several factors related to neoliberalism in the current media moment. First, the family and friends of the victims immediately “branded” their loved ones as #OurThreeWinners and all the social media posts shared this phrase. This connected the images of the victims to positive values and created a sense of solidarity around the tragedy. Additionally, the three victims each had done extensive work in their lives to document their activities and commitment to social causes through images and written posts. This documentation could then be used after their untimely death to showcase an authentic and intimate view of their lives. As this example and others in this study will show, neoliberal forces structure digital spaces and encourage the development of self-brands and personal narratives. All participants are implicated in these political economic structures even when this labor does not directly benefit corporate interests.

Voice and circulation in digital media

Since various political economic forces structure digital media spaces, it is relevant to question the potential of social media and digital spaces to provide effective avenues for political action against dominant forces. Media scholars have also examined how voices are often drowned out and political action is disempowered in social media spaces. Nick Couldry argues that under neoliberalism, we are experiencing a “crisis of voice,” in which one may have unlimited opportunities to voice an opinion, but these voices are not heard or valued. Voice is a process through which individuals make a social account of the narrative of their lives. Couldry

argues that having one's voice heard and valued is essential, "This is why to deny value to another's capacity for narrative—to deny her potential for voice—is to deny a basic dimension of human life."²⁸ There are now endless opportunities for individuals to express themselves through digital media channels and by purchasing new products and fashion styles, but there are fewer opportunities to have one's voice heard and made intelligible to others, especially the voices of marginalized groups.²⁹ New spaces online may offer the chance for an expression of voice, but Couldry is cautious about whether these expressions are truly recognized and valued or if neoliberal forces will subsume them.³⁰

Jodi Dean takes a slightly different approach to Couldry by focusing not on voice but on the circulation of information. She argues that the proliferation of new media technologies doesn't provide opportunities for real political change but just the space for the endless circulation of information. She makes a distinction between "politics circulating as content and official politics," the latter of which she defines as how people govern themselves through the first amendment freedoms of speech, assembly and the press.³¹ There is a disconnect between these two areas of politics, so that people circulate information but these actions never cause political change. Dean formulates the concept of "communicative capitalism" to describe this "deadlocked democracy," which doesn't lead to change and promotes circulation and consumer choice as political action.³²

²⁸ Nick Couldry, *Why Voice Matters: Culture and Politics After Neoliberalism*. (London: SAGE, 2010), 7.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 122.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 131.

³¹ Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism & Left Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 21.

³² *Ibid.*, 22.

Dean argues that communicative capitalism takes hold through the new media technologies that emphasize networks, participation, circulation and exchange. People use these spaces, which are based on the models of consumption and production, to circulate information, but the political potential of this information is often weakened. Dean explains, “Under conditions of intensive and extensive proliferation of media, conditions wherein everyone is presumed to be a producer as well as a consumer of content, messages get lost.”³³ People contribute information to the circulation stream, but it lacks any political power. Despite the impotency of the information, people still contribute to the circulation stream as if they are contributing something meaningful.³⁴ Similar to Couldry, Dean is skeptical that the cultural work of individuals in the spaces of new digital technologies will actually lead to significant political action. People might feel good by participating online, Dean acknowledges, but “this feeling is unconnected from any larger collective practice that might actually affect change.”³⁵ Dean also finds that political action in online spaces of communicative capitalism only distracts away from offline political actions.³⁶

Similarly, Christian Fuchs doesn’t see the connections between participating in online fandom communities—centered on the pleasure of cultural consumption—and offline political protest. Even if participatory culture online leads to offline activism, Fuchs points out that there is no guarantee that it will be progressive activism. He explains that participatory culture “idealizes community and fan culture as progressive and ignores the fact that the collective intelligence and activity of cultural communities and fandom can easily turn into a fascist

³³ Ibid., 24.

³⁴ Ibid., 31.

³⁵ Ibid., 40.

³⁶ Ibid., 41.

mob.”³⁷ Fuchs’s assertion predicts the rise of the Alt-Right in the U.S. and the public protests in Charlottesville, VA, which stemmed from participation in online communities, centered around white nationalism.

Couldry, Dean and Fuchs bring up significant concerns about overly celebrating the emancipatory potential of digital media spaces. These concerns reflect the common critique of cultural studies, as a field that over-emphasizes popular culture while neglecting to account for political and economic forces. In analyzing the creative projects of Muslim Americans, the goal is not to simply celebrate this cultural work but to account for the ways that political, economic and cultural pressures restrict and influence this creative work. I fundamentally disagree with the implication of Couldry and Dean and the assertion of Fuchs that the corporate-owned digital media spaces can never allow for political action. As Fuchs writes, “The participatory Internet can only be found in those areas that resist corporate domination and where activists and users engage in building and reproducing non-commercial, non-profit Internet projects such as Wikipedia or Diaspora.”³⁸ It is possible to study social media and digital spaces and account for the business end of who owns, structures and benefits financially from these spaces while still finding spaces of resistance and negotiation. In the current media context, there are few spaces that are not owned by large media conglomerates and almost all digital spaces are influenced in some ways by a neoliberal, market logic, which infuses most aspects of Western society. In addition, the few alternative media spaces that do exist outside of corporate control are often not easily accessible to a mainstream, less technically savvy audience, and the materials produced in these spaces rarely circulate to a larger audience. Because of this context, I incorporate Sarah Banet-Weiser’s approach to studying the “ambivalences” of contemporary branded culture as a

³⁷ Fuchs, *Social Media*, 73.

³⁸ Fuchs, *Social Media*, 75.

way to take seriously the cultural work that is produced within these neoliberal, branded spaces. Banet-Weiser asserts that there is no longer a pure and authentic space outside of the forces of neoliberalism, but instead we should study the ways that individuals negotiate the ambivalences of contemporary culture, as individual cultural production overlaps with neoliberal pressures and market forces.³⁹

Similarly, Michela Ardizzoni analyzes the current moment of social activism, in which groups engage with hybrid spaces and blur boundaries between offline/online, commercial/non-profit, and alternative/mainstream. Ardizzoni develops the concept of “matrix activism” to explore the “multi-layered, complex web of interactivity and connectivity,” which activists use in order to dismantle traditional boundaries.⁴⁰ She elaborates, “In contemporary societies, the fluid nature of protest and dissent does not afford these practices a binary approach to activism; instead, they embrace a matrix strategy that compels them to straddle the mainstream and the oppositional, the commercial and the nonprofit, the individual and the social, production and consumption.”⁴¹ Instead of assuming that there is an authentic space of activism that does not engage with commercial media channels or neoliberal forces, Ardizzoni asserts that “the value of contemporary practices of media activism is located also (though not solely) in the ambivalent spaces they embrace—in between the sets of binaries, but reaching out to both ends.”⁴² For instance, the young Muslim Americans in this study produce work within online media spaces, which are often operated by large-scale media corporations. I seek to find a productive method to analyze the cultural work created in these ambivalent spaces in between the dichotomy of being

³⁹ Banet-Weiser, *Authentic*

⁴⁰ Michela Ardizzoni, *Matrix Activism: Global Practices of Resistance* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2017), 2.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 15.

duped by corporate interests or being completely free of the neoliberal logics inherent in these digital media spaces.

Alternative spaces of political action

In their separate critiques of the political aspects of new media, Nick Couldry and Jodi Dean tend to focus on formal spaces of political action, like union organizing, street demonstrations, and petitioning political representatives. Their work doesn't clearly account for contemporary shifts in what can be considered alternative political action or resistance. In particular, those on the margins, such as Muslim Americans, immigrants and non-white Americans, have little political representation, but they attempt to resist the dominant powers that restrict them through everyday tactics, such as fashion style, music, artwork and photography. Additionally, digital spaces provide new avenues for oppressed and misrepresented groups to formulate counter-narratives. As was discussed in a study of hashtag activism around the Ferguson, MO protests and Black Lives Matter, African Americans engage with digital media spaces like Twitter in part because of their marginalized positions. The authors explain, "It is surely not coincidental that the groups most likely to experience police brutality, to have their protests disparaged as acts of 'rioting' or 'looting,' and to be misrepresented in the media are precisely those turning to digital activism at the highest rates."⁴³ Rather than dismissing this digital activism as having little social impact, it is more relevant to use Rancière's tactic of seeing these creative gestures as modes of correcting misrepresentations and displaying one's radical equality. Through the visual projects in this study, it is not only important for Muslim Americans to be heard by others, but it is just as significant to the individual creators that they have the chance to use aesthetic styles to equalize themselves with those in power. It is not only

⁴³ Yarimar Bonilla and Jonathan Rosa, "#Ferguson: Digital Protest, Hashtag Ethnography, and the Racial Politics of Social Media in the United States," *American Ethnologist* 42, no. 1 (2015): 8.

about whether a voice is heard and has a social impact, but also about how the ability to express one's value has a strong impact on the individual.

In the current moment, as spaces of political action continue to narrow and political parties increasingly serve corporate interests, it is necessary to reflect on what can be considered political resistance. While scholars like Jodi Dean focus more on the lack of opportunity for activism and social change, other theorists like Jacques Rancière and Chantal Mouffe argue that we need to rethink the political resistance that is possible in these contexts. Rather than promote the idea of a post-political world where everyone participates in harmonious, rational democratic debates, Mouffe argues that antagonism and conflict are the main features of democracy. Striving toward this post-political goal is actually dangerous because it doesn't acknowledge antagonism, which can lead people to associate with radical groups based on ethnic, religious or nationalist identity markers. The promotion of agonism between adversaries is the most effective solution for democratic politics because people with different views are not enemies to be destroyed but opponents on the same playing field. The adversaries are still in conflict, but "they see themselves as belonging to the same political association, as sharing a common symbolic space within which the conflict takes place."⁴⁴ Democracy should be a space where antagonisms are changed into agonism and where these conflicts between adversaries can occur. Formal political acts like voting are not as important in this context; people seek out affective connections to certain identities and disputes between disparate sides. As Mouffe explains, "In order to act politically people need to be able to identify with a collective identity which provides an idea of themselves they can valorize."⁴⁵ When democratic spaces promote consensus and rationality instead of antagonism and affective connections, people move further to the edges of

⁴⁴ Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London: Routledge, 2005), 20.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

political identities and enter into conflicts that emphasize the moral inferiority of their enemies. Mouffe's theorization aptly diagnoses the current political context of the U.S., in which radical ideas are lobbed from both sides, people identify with extreme groups, and moralizing language is used to disregard arguments from various groups. For the Muslim youth in this study, they are not trying to simply fit into American life, but to assert that their values and opinions also have a place in this agonistic political landscape.

Similarly, Rancière sees politics as depending on what he calls dissensus, or different ways of sensing the world. What we might typically consider as politics is really a way of maintaining consensus—one standard way of experiencing ideas through the senses. Politics is about allowing for dissensus or creating “an intervention in the visible and the sayable.”⁴⁶ Political action creates spaces for people to appear and new avenues to make sense of the world. As Rancière explains, politics “begins when they make the invisible visible, and make what was deemed to be the mere noise of suffering bodies heard as a discourse concerning the ‘common’ of the community.”⁴⁷ In other words, it is political action for Muslim American youth to demonstrate through aesthetic projects that their experiences and lives deserve to be visible and valued in American public spaces.

Jodi Dean disagrees that the current political problems revolve around consensus and the policing of people under a dominant sensory regime. Instead, she argues that the forces of neoliberalism, notably in the U.S. context, weaken traditional policing forces of the state in favor of privatization and de-regulation. Dean asserts that real political issues involve dissensus and disagreement and not consensus, as Rancière argues. The assumption that we live in a post-political age, Dean asserts, has led the political left to embrace social movements around identity

⁴⁶ Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. Steven Corcoan (London: Continuum, 2010), 37.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 139.

instead of seeking radical social change. Dean argues that this brand of identity politics or Ranciere's push for aesthetic gestures of visibility and equality is not real politics, "Contemporary protests in the United States, whether as marches, vigils, Facebook pages, or internet petitions aim at visibility, awareness, being seen. They don't aim at taking power. Our politics is one of endless attempts to make ourselves seen."⁴⁸ Dean argues that the radical left needs to move away from a focus on democracy and giving everyone a voice. She argues that this approach, which she terms "politics without politics," does not lead to radical social change.⁴⁹ Dean points out that the problem with identity politics and the emphasis on being seen is that these approaches turn identities like race and gender into social markers that create conflict and distinguish people from each other rather than as political categories that can make claims based on the intersections of oppression.⁵⁰

I agree with Dean that over-emphasizing identity and diverse experiences can have the negative result of further dividing progressive movements and driving people away from effective political action. On the other hand, one of my main arguments is that the creative projects within digital spaces provide the opportunity for Muslim youth to express the value of their experiences and for them to negotiate various issues with other Muslims. While these efforts in online media may not produce tangible political changes, they are important avenues for Muslim youth to develop their political consciousness and to organize with others for offline activism. Dean's encouragement for offline political action does not address the work that Muslims and other marginalized individuals must do to prepare their bodies and selves for these political spaces. Muslim Americans experience a deep hurt as their lives are devalued and their

⁴⁸ Jodi Dean, "Politics without Politics." *Parallax* 15, no. 3 (2009): 35.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 24.

bodies are turned into subhuman objects of hate. In order to prepare their bodies to enter political spaces, Muslim Americans need to do this creative work in digital spaces to assert their value and humanity. This work to redistribute the sensible develops a political disposition in these young Muslim creators and allows them to transform their sense of self away from these subhuman representations.

In a similar way, African American youth have been using Twitter and digital images to contest how their bodies have been used and abused in the media and physical spaces. As Yarimar Bonilla and Jonathan Rosa discuss in their study of digital protest around the Ferguson shooting of Michael Brown:

Whereas, in face-to-face interactions, racialized young people like the ones described above might not be able to contest the meanings ascribed to their bodies (or impede the deadly violence exerted on them by the police), through their creative reinterpretations on social media, they are able to rematerialize their bodies in alternative ways. With these creative acts, they seek to document, contest, and ultimately transform their quotidian experiences by simultaneously asserting the fundamental value and the particularity of their embodiment both on- and off-line.⁵¹

The Muslim American youth in this study are doing similar work to creatively contest the negative ways that their bodies are perceived. Even though it's difficult to change people's opinions of Muslims, these youth refuse to let their experiences be silenced or misrepresented.

Within the current political and media context, marginalized groups like Muslim American youth may find that they are not granted access to traditional political spaces and that digital media provide new avenues for expression. More recently, Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp discuss how in this period of what they call "deep mediatization," there are new ways for people to construct a narrative of their identity and self. In social contexts where certain voices

⁵¹ Bonilla and Rosa, "#Ferguson: Digital Protest," 9.

are restricted for whatever reason, the opportunity for expression in digital spaces is even more significant. Couldry and Hepp use the example of female bloggers in Saudi Arabia, “If speaking up in a public space is deeply restricted (as for women in many Middle Eastern countries), the blog is a liminal site where otherwise silent selves enter public existence, even if still a restricted one.”⁵² Again, there is a need to address the new avenues for expression and organization that are available to groups like Muslim Americans, who have for so long been silenced in formal political spaces and portrayed as subhuman in mainstream media channels.

Furthermore, in the aftermath of the election of Donald Trump as president of the U.S. and the related disenchantment with social media spaces, notably Facebook, more and more Americans have expressed a renewed interest in engaging with formal political channels, such as coordinating demonstrations, contacting representatives, staging sit-ins and planning other forms of direct action. The common critique that online political action, such as “clicktivism,” has no real world impact is challenged as people organize online and bring political action into offline spaces. In addition, all of the case studies that I explore in this project have a strong emphasis on how the online representation extends into offline political action. The creators are well aware of this popular critique of the ineffectiveness of online-only activism. Very few people have online-only modes of existence; political actions move fluidly between online and offline spaces. There are several recent examples of how people have extended online organizing into offline action: women connected on Facebook through the Pantsuit Nation private group to organize what would become the 2017 Women’s March; people shared stories of sexual harassment under the #MeToo hashtag, creating a sense of solidarity for more individuals to address sexual harassment in public spaces; and the aforementioned Black Lives Matter movement began as a hashtag and

⁵² Couldry and Hepp, *The Mediated Construction of Reality*, 158.

now serves as a national movement to address police brutality and racial injustice. In all of these cases, there is a fluid movement between online spaces of organization, solidarity and identity formation and offline political action and protest.

Shift to connective action

The cases in this study signal shifts that are occurring within the current media moment and social context as political action moves away from formal, offline, collective action to creative projects and feelings of connection that are facilitated in the online spaces and flow into offline gestures of resistance. The approach of scholars like Christian Fuchs is to evaluate how effective social media and digital technologies are as tools that facilitate political action. Throughout his book on critical approaches to social media, Fuchs relies on quantitative data to make the point that social media are not used for political action. For instance, he shows that the top Twitter hashtags and most followed handles are mainly entertainment focused. Simply because the most followed individuals on Twitter are celebrities does not mean that they don't tweet about political topics, and the fact that most trending topics are about entertainment does not discount the substantial political discussions that happen on Twitter within smaller communities. Most importantly, by only focusing on quantifying through "clicks" and "likes" the impact of online political action, this fails to account for the individual experiences of sharing stories or learning about others' experiences. Quantitative studies cannot capture how people use social media to feel themselves into larger social movements and political action. As discussed above in relation to the hashtag activism around the Ferguson, MO protests, African Americans use these creative gestures in online spaces to demonstrate the value of their lives. Bonilla and Rosa explain that #BlackLivesMatter should be understood "as a reflection of the ways that

social media can become a site for the reevaluation of black materiality.”⁵³ It is impossible to measure the personal impact of having the space to contest how your body is represented and valued. For instance, a scholar like Fuchs might not categorize tweets reflecting on the celebration of Black womanhood in Beyoncé’s *Lemonade* as “political,” but these are significant moments for individuals to develop political dispositions.

Fuchs specifically questions whether Twitter can be a public sphere that allows for deliberation and political action. He disagrees with Zizi Papacharissi’s argument that the activities that people do on social media in the private sphere of their homes can be seen as political action. Fuchs states, “Papacharissi assumes that social media such as Twitter have resulted in a collapse of the boundaries between the private sphere and the political public sphere so that the private sphere becomes the realm of the political.”⁵⁴ Social media might serve as a way to coordinate and organize offline political action, Fuchs argues, but social media cannot replace in-person political protest as a significant challenge to social power. As I will discuss more in chapter four, Papacharissi makes a nuanced argument that work within social media may not be actual political action, but that the affects and narratives within social media allow people to feel themselves into the story and to feel connected to something larger than their individual selves. These feelings can potentially lead to political action.

For instance, the circulation of the images and stories of the three victims in the murder in Chapel Hill, NC most likely created feelings of resonance and grief in non-Muslims on social media. Someone may have viewed the images, read stories about the victims, and in the process, learned more about the experiences of Muslim Americans. That same anecdotal person may feel more connected to Muslim Americans to the point that she may feel driven to go to her local

⁵³ Bonilla and Rosa. “#Ferguson: Digital Protest,” 9.

⁵⁴ Fuchs, *Social Media*, 228.

airport and protest Trump's travel ban. Again, it's quite difficult to quantify the level of resonance that viewers feel when they see these creative projects from Muslim Americans or the degree to which these projects motivated them to get involved in political actions, but Papacharissi's point is that social media allow for the sharing of stories and for people to feel connected to these experiences. This sense of connection may inspire traditional methods of political action. For the purpose of this study, I am focused on how these feelings of connection also impact the producers of these creative materials. The creators are able to develop their political consciousness and connection to other issues of social injustice when they share these images, demonstrating the value of Muslim lives and creating feelings of resonance in non-Muslim viewers.

Papacharissi builds off W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg's concept of "connective action," as well as their assertion that we need alternative ways of understanding social action and politics in the digital media moment. The authors lay out two logics of action, collective and connective. The traditional logic of collective action requires people to commit to a larger organization and its values and actions. It involves participants working toward an outcome that will benefit the collective good.⁵⁵ The logic of connective action is more appropriate to the current society in which people are less tied to formal organizations but create connections through social media.⁵⁶ The logic of connective action involves two aspects of more "personalized communication." First, political ideas can be compressed into personalized concepts or "person action frames" that are easy for people to relate to, such as "we are the 99

⁵⁵Lance W. Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg, "The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics," *Information, Communication & Society* 15, no. 5 (2012): 748-749.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 748.

percent.” Second, the recent “personal communication technologies” allow people to circulate and share these frames.⁵⁷

Within the current media moment, Bennett and Segerberg argue that “digitally networked action” must be studied as operating under a distinct logic instead of making arguments like Christian Fuchs or Jodi Dean that frame social media activity within the traditional logic of collective political action. Bennett and Segerberg want to move beyond the easy dismissal of social media activities as “clicktivism” to examine the importance of personal expression to creating connections in social media spaces. They explain, “The linchpin of connective action is the formative element of ‘sharing’: the personalization that leads actions and content to be distributed widely across social networks.”⁵⁸ Again, what is distinct about the digital media moment is the ability within online spaces for people to create connections and to relate to the experiences of others.

In their recent book, Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp argue that within the current moment of “deep mediatization,” social life, specifically how people make meaning and interact, is greatly impacted by processes of mediation and new media technologies. They move away from Stig Hjarvard’s formulation of mediatization, which sees the logic of the media as overtaking all aspects of society. Instead, Couldry and Hepp argue that in this period of “deep mediatization” media technologies are interconnected, complex and deeply embedded in social practices.⁵⁹ They elaborate, “Rather, deep mediatization refers to a meta-process involving, at every level of social formation, media-related dynamics coming together, conflicting with each

⁵⁷ Ibid., 744

⁵⁸ Ibid., 760.

⁵⁹ Couldry and Hepp, *The Mediated Construction of Reality*, 55.

other, and finding different expressions in the various domains of our social world.”⁶⁰ In this formulation, the media are infused into all aspects of social life, but there is a push and pull as people negotiate how to use the media technologies and spaces.

It stands to reason that collective action and politics would also shift in this moment of deep mediatization. Couldry and Hepp remain skeptical that new media might provide avenues for the overthrow of the politically and economically powerful, but they do want to explore how social movements are changing with new media. They write, “There emerges a tension between more loosely connected, individualized forms of political action on the one hand, and new ways of actually constructing political collectivity on the other.”⁶¹ Couldry and Hepp incorporate Bennett and Segerberg’s concept of the “logic of the connective action,” which creates the distinction between the typical “hierarchically organized social movements” and “a highly individualized political engagement that is more ‘me-centric.’”⁶² This personal form of political activism doesn’t mean that people are selfish and individualistic, but rather they use digital media to imagine their own experiences as related to a larger collective. Individuals can join the collective in the streets, as well as follow the collective movement online. Couldry and Hepp use the example of the Occupy Wall Street movement to illustrate how the movement “offered symbolic resources for imagining oneself as part of such a wider collectivity, and in so doing supported its own spread beyond the figuration of local protests.”⁶³ People could feel themselves into the collective imaginary that was centered on ideas of the 99 percent. The 2017 Women’s March in Washington DC and countless other cities is a recent example of how people engaged

⁶⁰ Ibid., 215.

⁶¹ Ibid., 179.

⁶² Ibid., 180.

⁶³ Ibid.

with connections that were forged online to organize one of the largest political gatherings in U.S. history and to continue to conduct advocacy on behalf of a variety of political positions.

Assemblage of social actors

While it is essential to examine the critical work on digital media spaces and their potential for facilitating political action, this type of scholarship has the tendency to grant new media technologies with over-whelming power to determine what social actions are possible. Rather than privileging digital media and focusing on how new media and technologies allow for political resistance, this study approaches digital technologies and mediation as part of a larger assemblage of various social actors and forces, such as physical space, affects, aesthetics, networks, circulation, human bodies, mobile technologies, and algorithms. While a political economic approach might emphasize the capitalist forces that own and control digital spaces or a cultural studies approach might celebrate the digital spaces as providing opportunities for political action, this study looks at the overlap and interactions between political, economic and cultural forces as well as other social actors.

Instead of focusing on particular technologies, like mobile phones, or a certain platform, such as Twitter, this study examines how young Muslim Americans use various technologies and interact on several different platforms at one time. The young creators are not making distinctions between when they use certain technologies or platforms, so there isn't a need to focus on a certain media space. Additionally, as I will discuss in the section on queer theory, assemblage theory offers an appropriate approach to studying the creative projects of Muslim Americans because of its focus on the relationships between identities categories, such as religion, ethnicity, sexuality and gender, as well as other social actors, such as affects, space, embodiment and aesthetic styles. I will engage with Jasbir Puar's argument that assemblage

theory, rather than intersectionality, provides a more effective approach to dismantle dominant binaries.

Recent scholarship on media and technologies have begun to think through how assemblage, as presented by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, might be relevant to analyze the current media moment without privileging certain spaces, objects or subjects. Rather than focus on a certain social actor, Deleuze and Guattari's approach looks at the interactions between various aspects of an assemblage. As Sanjay Sharma explains, assemblage "explores the processes by which heterogeneous elements are arranged and brought together in particular sets of relations, relations that constitute forms of territory and expression."⁶⁴ These assemblages of various actors are dynamic; they are constantly shifting and changing.⁶⁵ Similar to rhizomes, assemblages do not have a central, unified subject or object of focus. Instead of a typical root system that has a central point out of which all other roots grow, a rhizomatic system has numerous points of connection.⁶⁶ Assemblages are not only about the connections between physical actors, like human beings and objects, but also the connections to feelings, affects and signification.⁶⁷ Certain tools, such as the mobile phone, should not be studied as isolated objects, but instead in relation to human subjects, other objects, social media platforms, networks, algorithms and affects.⁶⁸

In addition to Deleuze and Guattari's work on assemblages, other scholars explore media and mediation beyond an emphasis on the objects to look at the relationship between various

⁶⁴ Sanjay Sharma, "Black Twitter? Racial Hashtags, Networks and Contagion," *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics* 78, no. 78 (2013): 54.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 8.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 88.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 90.

actors. Bruno Latour presents Actor Network Theory, which examines multiple “actants,” both human and non-human. The responsibility for an action doesn’t rest in one actant but in the relationships between many actants. He uses the example of a person shooting someone with a gun to explain that the blame for this action doesn’t fall on one actor, but on the relationship between various actants, such as the shooter, the emotions, the gun, the regulations of guns, the social context, etc. Latour explains, “It is neither people nor guns that kill. Responsibility for the action must be shared among the various actants.”⁶⁹ This is a distinct approach that also emphasizes the relationship and connections between various social actors.

Furthermore, Arjun Appadurai moves away from a human-centered theory of mediation to examine other forces and the interactions between what he terms, “mediants,” or media objects that have agency and make demands on human actors. Appadurai explains that objects become alive through their mediation.⁷⁰ He argues for a new theory of mediation, “one that can accommodate our new-found interest in the range of vitalities, energies, and agencies that bind the human order to other natural orders and the visible to the invisible within the ontologies of different human orders.”⁷¹ He seeks to move away from an emphasis on certain media technologies to focus on the assemblage of various actors, affects and embodied practices that interact through mediation.⁷²

Finally, in his work on media as infrastructures, John Durham Peters argues that the media must be studied as part of the materiality of human life. Media do not stand apart from the

⁶⁹ Bruno Latour, “On Technical Mediation-Philosophy, Sociology, Genealogy,” *Common Knowledge* 3, no 2. (Fall 1994): 34.

⁷⁰ Arjun Appadurai, “Mediants, Materiality, Normativity,” *Public Culture* 27, no. 2 (2015): 222.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 224.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 233.

natural world as somehow artificially created.⁷³ Media are all assemblages of natural and human-created elements; it is not possible to separate these elements. As Peters explains, “Every medium, whether our bodies or our computers, is an ensemble of human artifice and natural elements.”⁷⁴ The approach to studying media should not be to privilege new media technologies, but rather to study media like infrastructures or environments in which various elements are interconnected.⁷⁵

Assemblage theory and digital media

Instead of focusing on new technologies or digital media platforms, assemblage theory provides a more complex method to study the relationships between new technologies, media spaces and various other social actors, both human and non-human. As Jennifer Slack explains, assemblage theory moves away from a focus on how media objects transmit messages to human subjects. The assemblage approach instead focuses on the relationships between various elements and how these relationships create meaning. Assemblage, Slack explains, “refers to the dynamic collection or arrangement of heterogenous elements (structures, practices, materials, affects and enunciations) that expresses a character or identity and asserts a territory.”⁷⁶ As John Durham Peters asserts, human bodies have always existed in relationship to technologies and non-human actors, so digital technologies are not novelties or aberrations.

In a recent study of online selfie photos, Aaron Hess uses assemblage theory to go beyond the facile argument that selfies are only about the individual to examine “the nexus of the

⁷³ John Durham Peters, “Infrastructuralism: Media as Traffic between Nature and Culture,” in *Traffic: Media as Infrastructures and Cultural Practices*, eds. Marion Näser-Lather and Christoph Neubert (Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2015), 33.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁷⁶ Jennifer Slack, “Beyond transmission, modes, and media,” in *Communication Matters: Materialist Approaches to Media, Mobility and Networks*, eds. Jeremy Packer and Stephen B. Crofts Wiley (New York: Routledge, 2011), 152.

intimate self, public spaces, locative technology, and digital social networks.”⁷⁷ Hess finds that “reading selfies” through assemblages allows for a deeper analysis of the meaning that is created as these different elements come into relation to each other.⁷⁸ Hess identifies four aspects of the selfie assemblage: the need to present an authentic self, the physical space where the selfie is taken, the digital devices that allow selfies to be taken anywhere and shared, and the larger network and audience that circulate selfies.⁷⁹ By employing assemblage theory, Hess is able to study the ways that human actors move in between online and physical spaces, engage with multiple technologies, and maintain particular affective dispositions. As Hess explains, “Thus, the selfie assemblage is a constellation of multiple elements of existence within contemporary technological culture that expresses—even copes with—the affective tensions of networked identity.”⁸⁰ Through an examination of selfies as an assemblage, Hess is better able to understand the ways that humans exist and interact in relation to a variety of different actors and negotiate the feelings and expectations of particular technologies and media spaces. This approach doesn’t ignore the importance of political economic forces, for instance, but exploring an assemblage of actors allows for a more nuanced study of the digital media moment.

Similarly, Sanjay Sharma argues that when studying the racial aspects behind a phenomenon like Black Twitter, it is necessary to also take into account the “technocultural assemblages,” such as algorithms, software platforms and affects.⁸¹ Instead of only seeing race as about representation and identity, Sharma understands race as an assemblage of various elements that is dynamic and always in relation to other assemblages. He incorporates Deleuze and

⁷⁷ Aaron Hess, “The Selfie Assemblage.” *International Journal of Communication* 9 (2015): 1630.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 1642.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 1632.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 1631.

⁸¹ Sharma, “Black Twitter?,” 48.

Guattari's work to position race as an event or a process that is constantly changing. Sharma explains, "The boundaries of racial identities are fuzzy and messy, entangles with other differences, constantly being made and unmade."⁸² By approaching race as an assemblage of various actors, this makes it easier to think about how, in an online space like Twitter, race then interacts with an assemblage of actors like mobile technologies, algorithms, digital spaces, hashtags and language.⁸³

My analysis of the cases in this study doesn't focus on individual digital technologies or particular media spaces, but rather I found it beneficial to study the interactions between various elements of an assemblage. I focus on traditional aspects of media studies, like social media pages, hashtags, comments, images, videos, blogging platforms, and news websites. This study also takes account of new technologies like smart phones that allow people to take photos, post images, comment and spread materials from practically everywhere. It is also essential to recognize the networks that circulate information and images, as well as the algorithms that determine what circulates and has a wider impact. With this study, it is essential to emphasize the social and political context of Muslims within North American society, and to position the Muslim American identity as an assemblage of various elements like race, ethnicity, class, gender and sexuality. Finally, and most importantly, this study incorporates a focus on the aesthetics and affects, which are made possible through new technologies and digital spaces in the current media moment.

We can take the case that opened this chapter of the murder of three Muslim college students in Chapel Hill, NC and the ensuing "Our Three Winners" campaign as an example of an assemblage. The images that circulated after the death of Deah, Yusor and Razan cannot be

⁸² Ibid., 54.

⁸³ Ibid., 64.

understood as separate media objects, but need to be studied in relation to an assemblage of different actors, both human and non-human. In examining this case, it is important to take account of the individual self that shares and responds to these images, the affects within the images that influence viewers' responses, the digital devices that allow for the easy capturing of daily social life in images and videos, the software platforms of Facebook and Twitter that encourage the archiving and sharing of images, the networks that allow for circulation and connection, and the larger social context that influences the embodied experiences of Muslims. In the following chapters, I provide a deeper analysis of how the digital spaces and technologies allow for particular aesthetic styles and affects, but these elements of digital media cannot be studied outside of the embodied experiences of Muslim Americans who live within a particular political and social context. It is important to study the relationships and interactions between all of the actors in this assemblage, as well as the interactions and overlaps with other assemblages.

CHAPTER III:
AESTHETIC STYLES, CREATIVE INSURGENCY AND THE
OCCUPATION OF AMERICAN SPACES

As part of her MA thesis project, Sana Ullah created a series of photographs of Muslims praying in various public spaces. A young woman kneels on a flat rock in the middle of a tranquil creek. Another woman finds a space of relative peace alongside the road as cars wiz past. A young man takes a break from playing basketball for prayer as the sun sets behind him. A group of women pray together in front of the memorial to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in Washington DC. Rather than simply document unique and sensible places where Muslim Americans pray, this photo series showcases the beauty of the practice of prayer. For Muslims who strive to pray five times a day, there is a practical need to find a relatively quiet and peaceful place to pray, but this photo series also highlights the desire to pray in places that are beautiful and inspirational, such as parks and public memorials. Sana employs these attractive settings along with framing, lighting, angle and colors to emphasize that the Islamic practice of prayer is not only an act that induces feelings of tranquility but that it is also a beautiful practice that belongs within American public spaces.

The photos in this series are also notable for what they are positioned against. Dominant image of Muslims praying within media tend to show large groups in mosques or pouring into the streets outside of mosques. The images almost always show Muslims in the prostrate position, with rows and rows of people in the exact same gesture. Photos like this highlight the sheer number and size of the Muslim population and the robotic obedience of Muslims to do everything exactly the same. These images reinforce the stereotypes that Muslims are fearful and

threatening, as they resemble a virus that spreads and takes over public spaces, especially through the practice of prayer. In Sana's photo series, she purposely highlights the variety of prayer, in larger congregations, in small groups and solo. She also wants to show that Muslims pray for many purposes, such as at weddings and funerals, for a new baby, or as part of recent protests against government policies.

These photos bring to the surface feelings of anxiety and tension over the visible presence of Muslim bodies and Islamic practices in American public spaces. Through the policing of the sensory realm, the complex experiences of Muslims are generally made invisible in public spaces or reduced to political icons. Sana's photos and similar aesthetic projects reconfigure the sensorium of how Muslims are perceived. These creative interventions use the occupation of physical and digital spaces as a way to argue that Muslim lives and Islamic values belong in public spaces. Through the use of aesthetics, these Muslim creators shift the larger sensory realm of what is considered attractive, beautiful and valued in American society. Sana's photos transform the foreign and threatening elements of a Muslim praying in public into a beautiful and peaceful practice that enhances the American landscape. Along with Sana's photographs, this chapter also explores how a Muslim artist uses a confrontational 3D art piece to challenge and subvert stereotypes of Muslim women. In addition, I will examine how Muslim Americans use fashion to question standards of beauty and modesty and to negotiate various aspects of their identities. In all of these cases, creativity and aesthetics styles provide an avenue for young Muslim Americans to illustrate the complexities of their lives and to claim a space for Muslim voices in the American landscape.

Aesthetics and the sensory realm

All of the cases in this chapter are examples of how Muslim Americans make attempts at aestheticization or engaging in sensory styles in order to make accounts of their lives. My analysis of these creative projects revolves around an understanding of aesthetics that is distinct from the traditional association with what is attractive in fine art. Instead, I am engaging with the Aristotelian sense of *aisthesis*, which examines, as Birgit Meyer and Jojada Verrips explain, “our total sensorial experience of the world and our sensuous knowledge of it.”¹ This idea of aesthetics shifts from a focus on beauty or privileging the sense of sight to incorporate the full sensual and embodied experiences. In his writings on the politics of aesthetics, Jacques Rancière uses the concept of the sensorium to explain that aesthetics are what one experiences through the senses—what we can see, hear, feel, taste, etc. Rancière explains that the distribution of the sensible “establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts”² Those in positions of power determine how the sensory realm is allocated and who is included and excluded in sensory experiences. For Rancière, politics is intimately connected to aesthetics and the policing of the boundaries of who has access to the sensory realm. He explains, “Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time.”³

According to Rancière, politics is not about participating in rational discussions to reach a consensus, as Habermas advocated for. Instead, politics is about the struggle for those on the

¹ Birgit Meyer and Jojada Verrips, “Aesthetics,” in *Key Words in Religion, Media and Culture*, ed. David Morgan (New York: Routledge, 2008), 21.

² Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, ed. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), 7.

³ *Ibid.*, 8.

outside to get their voices heard. Individuals cannot wait to be invited to participate in politics; they must assert their equality with the political elites. As Gabriel Rockhill explains in the introduction to Rancière's work, "politics consists in interrupting the distribution of the sensible by supplementing it with those who have no part in the perceptual coordinates of the community."⁴ Real politics is about overthrowing the policing system of what appears to be politics. This policing system exists to maintain the distribution of the sensible and to determine who can access the aesthetics in society. Politics is about those who have been excluded from systems of power now asserting their radical equality with those in power and redistributing the sensible to give everyone equal access.

Ultimately, Rancière argues that it is through aesthetics—an engagement with the senses—that people can do political work to equally distribute the sensible. It is not through participation in the traditional modes of politics, which Rancière would call policing, that individuals can challenge dominant powers. Rather, it is through art, aesthetics, embodiment, visual culture and other sensible modes that people can reconfigure the sensorium in a way that will provide everyone with equal access to political spaces. Through a policing of the sensorium, Muslim lives have often been unseen or misunderstood in public spaces. The dominant sensory regime portrays Muslims as threatening, foreign, aggressive, irrational and essentially, out of place in American society. The creative projects that I will discuss in this chapter demonstrate Rancière's formulation of politics as those actions that engage with aesthetic styles in order to expand the common sensorium and to incorporate marginalized viewpoints. This work is an attempt for Muslim Americans to use artistic projects and digital media spaces to subvert the dominant sensible regimes, to shift the way that Muslims are perceived, and to assert the radical

⁴ Gabriel Rockhill, "Editor's Introduction: Jacques Rancière's Politics of Perception," in *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, ed. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), xiv.

equality of Muslim lives. Ultimately, this creative work develops the disposition of the Muslim youth as political subjects who have the ability to act in larger political spaces.

The aesthetic beauty of prayer

When Sana Ullah began her career as a photojournalist, she wanted to avoid covering subjects that dealt with Islam or Muslims out of fear of being pigeonholed into only covering those issues. After the encouragement of a graduate school professor, Sana realized that she needed to use her artistic skills to share her unique experiences. “I knew that if I didn’t tell stories about my community, then someone else is going to do it and it’s not going to be as true,” she explains.⁵ While the Places You’ll Pray photo series eventually developed into Sana’s MA thesis project, it began as a personal project to document some of the unusual places that Sana would pray with her family and friends. She also launched an Instagram hashtag, #PlacesYoullPray, allowing people from all over the world to contribute their own photos of prayer locales. These images inspired Sana to focus her MA thesis project on this subject of various public locations where Muslim Americans pray. Sana shot formally composed photos of Muslims praying and incorporated these images into a multimedia website, which also features a 10-minute video about the Muslim American experience and an article that elaborates on the Islamic practice of prayer and shares reflections from participants in the photos.⁶ The photos in this series, along with the materials on the multimedia site, highlight the beauty of the Muslim subjects and the practice of prayer. In turn, these images present Islam as a beautiful religion that contributes positive values to individual lives and American society. Through this project, Sana uses aesthetics to shift what is considered attractive and valuable in American society.

⁵ Sana Ullah, phone interview by author, Boulder, CO, February 2, 2017

⁶ Sana Ullah, “Places You’ll Pray,” <https://www.placesyoullpray.com/> (accessed November 7, 2017).

One of Sana's goals for this project is to express pride in her religion and to encourage other Muslims to bravely practice their faith in public. Because of the current political climate, Sana shared that she was nervous about praying in public spaces, but she has been motivated to continue this project based on the feedback that she has received from viewers. "It's a reminder to the Muslims that I have been getting comments from that yes, it is ok to be Muslim and it gives me courage," Sana states. "It gives me courage to practice my religion despite everything that is going on." In addition to cultivating pride in Muslim viewers, Sana also wants the images to encourage non-Muslims to ask questions about Islam and the practice of public prayer. She hopes that by profiling young people in the photos that viewers will be more able to connect with the images. "I think with images, people are able to relate with one another if they see a person in it. They can put a face on what they couldn't put a face on before," Sana explains.

When Sana decided to focus her MA project on the public places where Muslims pray, she reached out to friends and acquaintances through social media channels. For each person, she asked them to select a space where they regularly pray outside of the home or a memorable place where they had prayed in the past. Then Sana would go with the person to the set place during one of the five prayer times. Notably, none of the pictures are staged recreations of prayer, but Sana always prays the required prayers at the set times along with the photo subjects. When the participants begin private prayers, then Sana would step back and take the photographs. While most participants are hesitant at first that it might be offensive to take pictures of prayer, the process of praying first and then taking the photos creates a respectful environment. Other participants were nervous about drawing attention as they prayed in public, but afterwards they felt more confident about their practices and beliefs. There is a sense of authenticity to the images as they capture Muslims in the midst of a religious experience. Additionally, the fact that

Sana also participates in the practice offers an alternative to the tired trope of non-Muslim voyeurs capturing photos of Muslims praying en masse.

In each of the photos, Sana uses particular aesthetic styles and photographic techniques to emphasize the beauty of the practice of prayer and the positive values of Islam. First of all, the photos focus on the subjects as they are praying, but in most of the images, the subjects are small in comparison to the outdoor landscapes. In one image a woman kneels in prayer on a hillside overlooking a subdivision, but two-thirds of the frame is taken up by stunning gray and pink cloud formations in the sky. In another image, a woman stands with her head bowed underneath a park pavilion; she is surrounded by a reflective lake with green lily pads and a bright blue sky. In another photo, a young couple prays by the side of the road as the setting sun glows between the orange and red leaves on the autumn trees. All of these images focus on different moments in the practice of prayer, but the most attractive parts of the photos are the natural elements: the clouds, the blue sky, the colorful leaves and the calm lake. The praying figures are still the central focus of the image, but the natural beauty of their surroundings reinforces the beauty of the individuals while they pray.

One of the most notable images in the series (figure 2) features a young woman kneeling in prayer on a large rock in the middle of a creek. The woman is slightly off-centered; she is framed in the foreground by the leaves of an over-hanging tree and in the background by a stone bridge. The rippling creek and gray stones surround her, and green trees and foliage color the background. The woman wears a black headscarf and purple robe, which nicely complement the green colors of the trees. Like in the above images, there is little sign of other people in this secluded space. The colorful trees, gently moving creek and natural lighting convey a sense of tranquility and quiet. According to Sana, the subject in the creek picture was hesitant at first to

pray in such an unusual location, worried that the image would look too ostentatious. Sana explains how the young woman shifted her point of view, “Afterwards, she comes up to me and was like, ‘That was the most serene places that I have prayed in my whole life.’ She’s like, ‘All you heard was the water rushing while you are praying.’” These images of Muslims praying among gorgeous scenery work against dominant stereotypes that portray Muslims and the act of prayer as threatening, aggressive and routinized. In portraying Muslims praying in large groups, the emphasis is often on the robotic nature of the practice, as people follow along without thinking and the religion rapidly spreads. In these photos, the practice of prayer easily fits into the natural settings, and it is a practice that brings peace.



Figure 2: Praying on the rocks by Sana Ullah

In addition to how she frames participants in natural surroundings, Sana uses lighting and color in ways that focus on the individuals in the midst of prayer. In one photo, a young man stands in front of his prayer mat, which he has set up on an outdoor basketball court. He is praying the dusk prayer, the light of the sun barely visible in the background. A spotlight focuses

on the man, but the natural background light creates beautiful blue and red colors in the sky. An image such as this one could easily appear as lifeless in such a dull setting of a public basketball court, but Sana uses the spotlight and natural lighting to focus the viewer's gaze on the brightness of the young man, alongside his prayer mat and basketball.

In another striking image (figure 3), a woman prays in a grassy median in between two fast moving lanes of traffic. Again, a spotlight or possibly car headlights are used to place the subject in bright lighting as the sun has recently set. The woman is quite small in the center of the frame, almost over-taken by a gorgeous blue and pink sky. While cars are a blur of motion on either side of her, the subject stands calmly with her eyes closed. She wears a red shirt, perfectly complementing the blue clouds. As in the previous image, the use of both natural twilight and the spotlight effect work together to beautifully highlight the subject in the act of prayer.



Figure 3: Praying along the highway by Sana Ullah

In another image at the Miami Zoo, Sana pays particular attention to how the color of clothing interacts with background colors. A woman kneels on a stone floor in front of a water

tank with turtles swimming past. She wears a denim blue jacket and a green headscarf, which perfectly match the blue and green light radiating from the large tank behind her. Although this is a simple image in terms of composition, Sana effectively employs the natural lighting and the brilliant colors from the tank to create an alluring photo, drawing in the viewer.

Sana began this photo project as a fun activity to document the different public locations where she would pray with family and friends, but as the political situation for Muslim Americans has become more difficult, these photos assert that Muslims have the right to pray in public. When Sana was praying with one participant in the series, she was embarrassed and nervous when he was praying loudly in public. “I did not expect him to be reciting the prayers so loudly because when we do this project, we do it so it doesn’t bother anyone,” Sana explains. “But I’m like, why am I thinking like that? Why do I even care that this bothers someone? This is what we do. This is our religion.” This project is one way for Sana to work through her own position as a Muslim American and her apprehension about practicing her faith in public spaces. The attractive stylistic elements of these images also demonstrate how the Islamic practice of prayer enriches the American public spaces through its beauty and peacefulness.

While many participants selected unusual or naturally attractive spaces in which to pray for these photos, others choose to pray in banal locations or practical spots as they go about their daily lives. When the location is not as aesthetically pleasing, Sana uses composition, lighting techniques and color to emphasize how the practice of prayer brings life and light to these dull spaces. For example, in one photo a young woman prays in between the stacks of a university library. The bright colors of the books and the shelves, as well as the perspective of the bookshelves, draw the viewer’s eye into the image and the subject praying among the stacks. In another photo, a woman prays in front of the baggage claim at the Fort Lauderdale airport, an

extremely tacky and unappealing space. The grey and yellow columns, ceiling tiles and metal baggage claim belts clash with the blue and green leaf design carpeting. Informational signs and advertisements for Bud Light Lime-a-Rita compete for attention in the background. The woman prays in the foreground of the image, wearing a colorful blouse and a bright peach colored headscarf. She brings brilliance to this drab space through her eye-catching clothing and the unusual gesture of kneeling in prayer.

One photo of a woman praying in the fluorescent-lit space of a department store changing room is less successful at incorporating the positive values of Islamic prayer into a sterile and banal space. The composition of the picture is not particularly appealing, as the subject is positioned in the bottom half of the frame with her right knee slightly cut off. The top half of the photo features a three-part mirror with three different reflections of the subject's back, but because she is wearing a black jacket, the reflections are black blobs with no details. The use of color in the image is also uninteresting; the main color palette consists of beige and black with a splash of color added by a red purse. The fluorescent lighting of the changing room covers the whole image in a coating of unflattering light and doesn't spotlight the subject like some of the previously discussed photos.

In the majority of photos in the Places You'll Pray series, Sana is able to effectively use the natural surroundings, lighting techniques, color, composition and framing to position the subjects and the act of prayer as tranquil, beautiful, awe-inspiring and illuminating. In these photos, Sana deliberately works against stereotypical images of Muslims praying en masse. Each photo shows a subject in a different prayer gesture—standing, bowing, kneeling, eyes open and closed, bowing the head, turning the head to the neighbor, pointing a finger, and holding the

hands with palms facing up. Notably, only a couple pictures feature participants in the genuflecting gesture that is almost universal in mainstream media portrayals of Muslims praying.

While most of the pictures feature people praying on their own, Sana also included pictures of small groups praying. She deliberately did not take photos of Muslims praying in large groups within mosques because she said that these images look threatening and portray Islam as “this huge cult.” When she took a photo at a large prayer in a public park, she focused in on one woman praying by herself in the back instead of the collective group of men praying. Alongside the praying woman, this image focuses on a young girl who is running around a stroller and waving an American flag while the adults pray. Sana said that a portrait of a person praying is more relatable, as the viewer can see the face and connect to the subject as an individual rather than one part of a mass.

Through this project, Sana uses aesthetic styles to not only resist persistent stereotypes of Islam and prayer but to also shift impressions of Muslims by redistributing what is considered attractive and valuable in American society. These photos visually assert that the Islamic practice of prayer is a beautiful, peaceful and valuable practice. Furthermore, I will discuss at the conclusion of this chapter how Sana’s photos and the act of public prayer are avenues for Muslims to claim a space within the American landscape.

Confronting stereotypes through embodiment and creativity

While the Places You’ll Pray photo project engages with aesthetically attractive styles and tranquil settings to present an appealing image of American Muslims, other creative projects are more confrontational in how they present the humanity and complexities of Muslim lives. Canadian art student Lindsay Budge created a 3D art piece that uses embodiment and multisensory style to symbolically attack those in powerful positions who feel privileged to

critique her Islamic dress. Marwan Kraidy's concept of "creative insurgency" proposes the possibility of blending "activism and artistry" through the use of the human body, digital spaces and creative styles.⁷ Kraidy focuses on the contemporary upheaval in several Arab countries, where people are struggling against symbolic and physical persecution. He wants to incorporate creative actions that go "beyond aesthetic concerns to incorporate actions that are physical and symbolic, violent and peaceful."⁸ Along with traditional creative actions like artistic projects, Kraidy discusses creative actions that physically protect people from violence. Creative insurgency is planned out and often engages the physical body, but digital spaces assist in circulating these creative projects in new ways. Kraidy elaborates, "Creative insurgency, then, consists of imaginatively crafted, self-consciously pleading messages intended to circulate broadly and attract attention: forms in search of visibility."⁹ Acts of creative insurgency exist in physical embodied space but also move through digital spaces and challenge dominant forces.

Artist Lindsay Budge used creative insurgency to confront and subvert stereotypes of Muslim women like herself who wear the niqab face veil and black abaya gown. Her 3D art piece, "Privilege: Or, Shit People Say to Muslim Women," features a 5'8" piece of black abaya fabric onto which Budge wrote some of the offensive comments that she has received in public (see figures 4 and 5). This art piece was displayed at her university, but images of this work circulated through digital spaces. Zainab bint Younus, whose work as the Salafi Feminist I discuss extensively in chapter five, is Lindsay's friend and the two women did an interview together about this artwork. Through this piece, Lindsay uses the implied body of an abaya-clad Muslim woman along with aesthetic styles to confront and subvert stereotypes.

⁷ Marwan M. Kraidy, *The Naked Blogger of Cairo: Creative Insurgency in the Arab World* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016), 5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

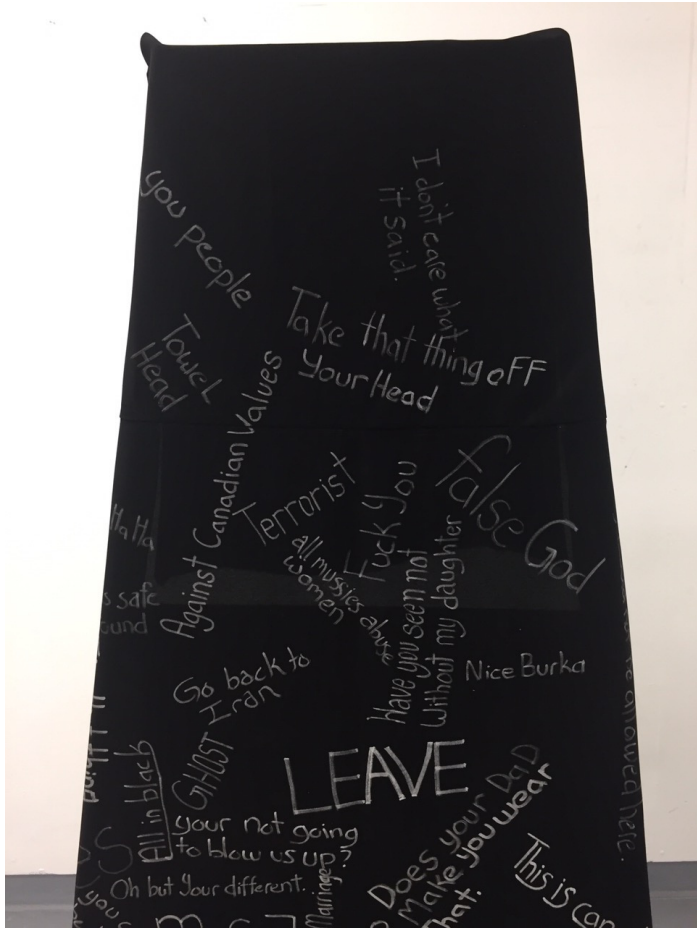


Figure 4 by Lindsay Budge

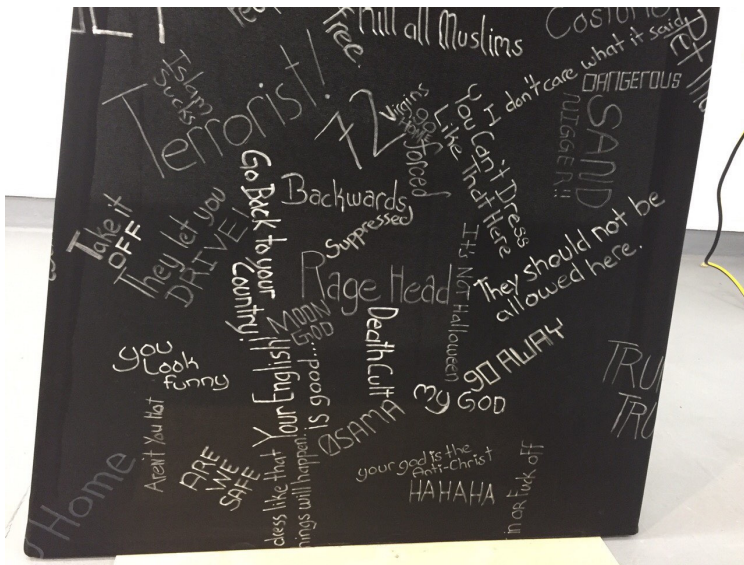


Figure 5 by Lindsay Budge

Although Lindsay doesn't incorporate her actual body in the art piece, the use of abaya fabric is meaningful since Muslim women are often reduced to a piece of fabric, covering their bodies. Significantly, the art piece resembles the human form as it is about the same width and height as the average woman. Lindsay uses the fabric sculpture to work through how her actual body is treated in daily life. With a silver pen, she documents all of the hateful, threatening and dehumanizing things that people have said to her in public.

In the context of Arab countries, Kraidy focuses on how the body can be a site of creative insurgency against both symbolic forces and threats of physical violence. As Kraidy explains, "People use their bodies for aesthetic expression, but also in actions that are creative in physical or political ways."¹⁰ While Lindsay's artwork is primarily a symbolic form of insurgency, it is important not to dismiss the real physical danger that Lindsay and other Muslim women who cover must face within North American societies. There are countless stories of Muslim women who have been physically attacked, not to mention vocally harassed, in public spaces in the U.S. and Canada. Kraidy specifically discusses how Muslim women's bodies often become icons of larger political struggles. In response, Muslim women use creative insurgency to work against stereotypes that reduce them to a dichotomy of either covered and oppressed by Islam or naked and liberated by Western culture. As Kraidy discusses in relation to the comic strip, *Qahera*, there is a "false choice between all-exposed boob and all-concealing burqa."¹¹ Muslim women use creative insurgency to resist becoming icons and instead claim their position as "abstract individuals."¹²

¹⁰ Ibid., 15.

¹¹ Ibid., 190.

¹² Ibid., 199.

In a similar way, the comments that Lindsay has written on the black abaya fabric in this art piece point to common stereotypes of Muslim women: they are oppressed, violent terrorists or forever foreigners to North American culture. A few examples of quotes include:

“Take that thing off your head”
“Against Canadian Values”
“Does your dad make you wear that?”
“Go back to your country”
“You’re not going to blow us up?”
“They should not be allowed here”
“Suppressed”

While one could spend some time teasing out all of the meanings behind these phrases, it appears more significant to examine what drives people to say such ignorant and hateful things to another human being. Lindsay explains in an interview with Zainab bint Younus, “People say these things because they feel privileged enough to get away with it—they feel safe to say these hateful things to Muslim women because they know that there will be little or no consequences to doing so.”¹³ The fact that people feel liberated to say such hurtful things to a complete stranger also highlights that many Americans and Canadians struggle to see a covered Muslim woman, especially one wearing a face veil, as an equal individual. These highly offensive comments point to the refusal of people to acknowledge that there is a human being underneath the covering, an individual who cannot be reduced to these one-dimensional statements.

Lindsay’s response to these comments is to use the aesthetics of her artwork to assert her complexity as an individual and not as an icon of larger political struggles. Her creative work can be seen as what Kraidy designates as a “gradual” form of creative insurgency that works to subvert dominant norms. Although Lindsay is not attacking a particular sovereign power, she uses creative styles to symbolically attack those in powerful positions who feel privileged to

¹³ Zainab bint Younus, “Privilege: Or, Shit People Say to Muslim Women,” 29 November 2016, <http://www.reviewsphere.org/news/privilege-or-shit-people-say-to-muslim-women/>

attack her in public. As Kraidy elaborates, “Through symbolic inversion, such actions pull the powerful down to the level of the powerless.”¹⁴ It is a powerful gesture for Lindsay to take control of the conversation by pulling these offensive words out of the mouths of the privileged and putting them on display for all to see. This art piece reinforces that there is an individual underneath that fabric who is personally wounded by these hateful words.

Because of the aesthetics of the piece—a large monolith covered in black fabric with countless hateful words scrawled all over the fabric—viewers cannot ignore how overwhelming and hurtful these statements are for Muslim women. Lindsay explains in her conversation with Zainab that her goal was to illustrate these daily experiences of harassment. “I just want people to be able to visualize what they are told is happening,” Lindsay states, “we know that hate crimes, against visibly Muslim women and people of colour and faith who are perceived to be Muslim (even if they’re actually Sikh! Or lupus patients!)—but a lot of times, people don’t get it until they see it.”¹⁵ Lindsay makes specific stylistic choices in this art piece that elicit overwhelming feelings of empathy for women who have to experience this public harassment in a society that claims to protect religious freedoms. The aesthetic aspects of this form of creative insurgency allow Lindsay to critique those in positions of privilege who dehumanize Muslim women and to subvert these dismissive stereotypes. Instead of minimizing Muslim women, this art piece reflects back these hateful words and allows Lindsay to represent her own complex experiences. This art project creates a space in which Lindsay can safely speak back to her oppressors without fear of physical attack, and she is able to demonstrate her radical equality as a human being and political subject. In addition, digital spaces allow for this art piece to circulate to a wider audience alongside the written reflections from Lindsay’s discussion with Zainab.

¹⁴ Kraidy, *Naked Blogger*, 18.

¹⁵ bint Younus, “Privilege.”

Fashion as creative insurgency and space of negotiation

In addition to Lindsay Budge's artwork and Sana Ullah's photography, which utilize aesthetic styles to subvert persistent stereotypes of Muslims, the emerging creative space of Islamic fashion allows Muslims to shift the sensorium of what is considered attractive and stylish and to negotiate intersecting identity markers. Dick Hebdige's foundational work on style and subcultures is relevant here to address how clothing styles can do the political work that Rancière discusses of redistributing the sensible so those outside of the structures of power have equal access. In his influential study, Hebdige argues that those in subcultural groups like punks use aspects of style to contest, resist and struggle over social meaning. Hebdige argues that subcultural groups mark themselves as distinct from the mainstream by their conscious decisions over how they will craft their fashion and display certain codes. While the mainstream style is about blending in and appearing to wear what is natural and normal, the subcultural groups subvert standard codes of beauty and use commodities out of context in an effort to call attention to the unnaturalness of hegemonic structures. Subcultures use techniques like *bricolage* to appropriate various styles and symbols from the hegemonic systems of representation.¹⁶

While Hebdige's work has its limitations, notably that the focus on symbolism ignores the role of the body,¹⁷ it is helpful to examine how marginalized groups like Muslim women engage with style to subvert standards of beauty. The punks in Hebdige's study used grotesque and banal items, such as toilet seat covers and clothespins, to question what we define as attractive. Muslim women engage with Islamic fashion to challenge what is seen as beautiful, attractive and stylish in American society, while at the same time questioning standards of

¹⁶ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979).

¹⁷ See critique in Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2000).

modesty and piety within Muslim circles. One of the most impactful creative portrayals of Islamic fashion in America was the 2013 video, “Somewhere in America #MIPSTERZ,” a two-and-a-half-minute-long video that introduced viewers to the Mipsterz movement or Muslim hipsters. The soundtrack of Jay-Z’s “Somewhere in America” plays over the visuals of numerous stylish young Muslim women in various urban landscapes. The women run, jump, dance, spin, laugh, pose and skateboard throughout the frame, showcasing their original fashion styles.

The creators of the Mipsterz video were well aware of the visual portrayals that reduced Muslim women to stereotypes. Participant and fashion director Layla Shaikley describes the portrayal, “I would say historically it has been a pretty one-dimensional view that tends to be subdued or oppressed or not very fun.”¹⁸ One of the video’s directors Habib Yazdi shares similar reflections on the dominant visual portrayal of Muslim women, “What I saw were images that felt kind of dark to me and quite literally there is a lot of black, and you always see these masses of women all wearing black.”¹⁹ Unfortunately, these negative visual portrayals often influence how Muslim women are perceived and treated in real life. Layla elaborates in our conversation on the influence of these images, “The reality is the portrayals create the narrative for the stereotypes. So folks who need someplace to generate a context or reference point, the stereotypes serve as that reference point.”

In response to these one-dimensional portrayals, the Mipsterz video showcases the complexities and innovative styles of the participants. “The mipsterz video, more than anything, is creative,” Layla explains to me. “We asked creative girls to bring their selves and to be real. It’s colorful; it’s competitive with the sports; and it’s multidimensional.” The Mipsterz identity is not about creating a clear definition of what it means to be Muslim American or a hipster, but

¹⁸ Layla Shaikley, phone interview by author, Boulder, CO, September 20, 2016.

¹⁹ Habib Yazdi, phone interview by author, Boulder, CO, September 27, 2016.

instead it is a way to play with intersecting identity markers and assigned categories. In written reflections on the Mipsterz video and subsequent controversy, Layla describes a Mipster as “a young Muslim American just trying to find a space for themselves unapologetically ... reconciling multiple identities and doing it like a rock star.”²⁰ In the video, the women demonstrate their multidimensionality by being active and engaged in the world around them. They interact with each other, joke around, take selfies, run and dance in public parks, and skateboard in empty parking lots. The women display their creativity through their original fashion styles, which highlight a variety of trends from a chic, professional look to a hipster style of layering a variety of patterns and fabrics.

Although the Mipsterz video is a light-hearted portrayal of fashion styles, the women in the video (see figures 6 and 7) employ aesthetic styles to assert that modest Islamic dress can be attractive and stylish. In their fashion styles, the women use what Hebdige termed *bricolage* to bring together a variety of cultural styles, standards of modest religious dress, American popular culture, and contemporary fashion styles. For instance, one woman in the video wears a sleek and professional outfit with leggings, high heels and gold jewelry, while maintaining modesty with a long and flowing tunic and a silk headscarf. In another scene, Layla wears a T-shirt with “You’re Killin’ me Smalls” written on it, a reference to the catch phrase from the popular 1990s film, *The Sandlot*, as she skateboards and takes selfies. In other scenes, women showcase a layered look that blends together a variety of patterns and materials while also incorporating a turban-style headscarf, reflecting African cultural influences. The women illustrate their complex individuality and how they easily blend together many aspects of their backgrounds into their fashion. They also demonstrate their ability to incorporate Islamic values of modesty into a

²⁰ Haimy Assefa, “Mipsterz: a space for Muslim hipsters,” *CNN*, June 3, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/06/03/living/mipsterz-muslim-hipsters/index.html> (accessed November 9, 2017).

visual style that is still hip and attractive. The women shift the sensorium of what is regarded as fashionable and beautiful. Modest elements like headscarves and flowing materials, as well as patterns and fabrics from African and South Asian cultures, can be incorporated with contemporary fashion trends and American popular culture.



Figure 6: Mipsterz video



Figure 7: Mipsterz video

Fashion provides the opportunity for these Muslim women to bring together various identity markers in order to work against one-dimensional stereotypes, but the multidimensional nature of fashion also creates a space for the women to negotiate their subjectivities as Muslim Americans. Fashion theorist Susan Kaiser describes fashion as “a social process of negotiation” of various subject positions, such as gender, ethnicity, class, race or sexuality.²¹ She sees fashion as an interstitial space that allows subjects to address various competing elements while also articulating an intersectional subjectivity. Kaiser explains, “Especially compelling are the overlapping or ‘in between’ spaces, through which fashion subjects exercise agency and articulate more than one subject position simultaneously.”²² The Mipsterz video is a good example of how the women use the aesthetics of fashion styles to visually portray their creativity and their easy engagement with American culture while still celebrating their cultural backgrounds and maintaining their religious convictions. Layla discusses with me how this video creates a space for Muslim women to represent their lives and to work through these identity issues. “It’s really just creating a space that didn’t exist,” Layla explains. “There was a vacuum and I think that’s why there was such a wide reception to it. And why years later it’s still a topic of conversation that people still want to flesh out and discuss more and more.” This video and the fashion styles within it provide space for the women to address the various aspects of their identity, such as religion, culture, ethnicity, class and gender.

Emerging scholarship examines how Islamic fashion in particular provides an avenue for Muslim women to formulate representations of their complex and intersectional identities. Annelies Moors and Emma Tarlo discuss how Muslim women in the West engage with fashion and aesthetics styles as tools of expression, “Our key contention is that through their visual

²¹ Susan B. Kaiser, *Fashion and Cultural Studies* (London: Berg, 2012), 1.

²² *Ibid.*, 37.

material and bodily presence young women who wear Islamic fashion disrupt and challenge public stereotypes about Islam, women, social integration and the veil even if their voices are often drowned out in political and legal debates on these issues.”²³ Even though the women in the Mipsterz video do not speak, they express themselves through their clothing choices and the visual style of the video. Muslim women who cover are also faced with what Emma Tarlo terms a “representational challenge,” as they are always visible as public representatives of Islam. Muslim women often feel pressured to always portray Islam in a positive light and against negative stereotypes. Tarlo elaborates, “through experimenting with style and adopting mainstream fashions, innovative young hijabi women develop and project assertive and attractive self-images which correspond to their complex backgrounds, interests and concerns whilst simultaneously challenging and combating dominant negative stereotypes of Muslims.”²⁴

Although the Mipsterz video received a lot of criticism from within the Muslim American community for not saying anything substantial, the participants in the video defended their choices by focusing on creating a visual self-portrait. As Layla Shaikley explained in a written reflection, she was tired of telling her story through words and wanted to express herself through a “creative action.”²⁵ In the video the women use their creative fashion styles, vibrant colors and fun activities to illustrate that they are not subjugated women who lack individuality. Instead, they are creative, active, strong, independent and colorful, among other things.

One of the directors, Habib Yazdi, discusses the specific aesthetic choices that the creators made both to work against negative stereotypes of Muslim women and to resist

²³ Annelies Moors and Emma Tarlo, *Islamic Fashion and Anti-Fashion: New Perspectives from Europe and North America* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 3.

²⁴ Emma Tarlo, *Visibly Muslim: Fashion, Politics, Faith* (Oxford: Berg, 2010), 74.

²⁵ Layla Shaikley, “The Surprising Lessons of the ‘Muslim Hipsters’ Backlash,” *The Atlantic*, March 13, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/03/the-surprising-lessons-of-the-muslim-hipsters-backlash/284298/> (accessed November 7, 2017).

objectifying the women. First, the filmmakers employed a documentary style that used natural lighting and urban locations, as opposed to fashion films that use artificial lighting, slow motion and special effects to create an otherworldly quality. Second, the creators used camera angles that specifically worked against the male gaze, which tends to dominate fashion imagery. “If you look at fashion films, a lot of the angles are almost pornographic in terms of low angle on hips and it’s moving across or close-ups that will really accentuate breasts or bare neck or shoulders,” Habib explains. “And we took a very different approach. And it’s a lot of wide shots. Or if it’s close-ups, it’s a lot of details of the fashion. But it’s always showing the women in context and action. There are no low angles, I don’t think. Maybe there is just one, I think where they are standing up, but it’s made to make them look powerful but not to invite some sort of gaze.” The camera angles in the video are either straight on and document the innovative styles of the women or they are from particular angles that highlight the strength of the women. For instance (see figure 8), there’s a shot from below where a group of women stand up on a bridge in a park. The women are not objectified but instead are shown as strong and in control. There are other scenes where the women face down the camera, challenging the gaze, and there is one shot where a woman actually grabs the camera and moves it around.



Figure 8: Mipsterz video

Despite the conscious decisions made by the video creators and participants to work against the objectification of women, the release of the Mipsterz video created a lot of controversy within the Muslim American community. The critics argued that the video misrepresented Islam, that the women objectified themselves by appearing as fashion models, that the video promoted over-consumption and a focus on appearances, and that the women were immodest and over-sexualized. Perhaps one of the most well-circulated critiques came from Sana Saeed, a writer for *The Islamic Monthly*, in which she argues that the video attempts to normalize Muslims by fitting them into mainstream culture and presents a shallow visual portrayal of the women. Saeed concedes that the video is aesthetically attractive, but she finds little substance in these images. She writes, “The video doesn’t really seem to have any purpose aside from showing well-dressed, put together Muslim women in poses perfect for a magazine spread.”²⁶ Saeed seems doubtful that visual portrayals can ever provide a deep and unproblematic representation of Muslims.

Saeed’s critique is significant because a video like this clearly will not interrupt larger political issues over how Muslim women are treated in public spaces. The Mipsterz video cannot shift everyone’s opinions and lead to equality for Muslims in American society. On the other hand, my focus is on how these creative projects help to constitute the political subjectivity of these young Muslims. The Mipsterz video is an appropriate example of how Muslim women, who are sick and tired of being minimized to icons of good Muslims or bad Muslims, are representing their lives in the way that works best for them, through fashion, movement, music and visual styles. The debates that surfaced over the Mipsterz video illustrate the anxiety in the Muslim American community over the public appearance of women. Muslim American women

²⁶ Sana Saeed, “Somewhere in America, Muslim Women Are ‘Cool’,” *The Islamic Monthly*, December 2, 2013, <http://www.theislamicmonthly.com/somewhere-in-america-muslim-women-are-cool/> (accessed March 23, 2017).

face constant pressure to always be positive representatives of Islam, especially in light of overwhelmingly negative stereotypes in mainstream American media. The Mipsterz video is a way for the women to liberate themselves from this trap of resisting stereotypes of their oppression while also serving as perfect role models of Islam.

Even though the Mipsterz video faced criticism for the apparent shallowness and frivolity of a fashion video, the video illustrates how Muslim Americans, who are often kept out of formal political channels, are able to represent their own complex identities while also claiming that their intersectional experiences have value and belong within the American landscape.

Throughout the video, the women easily employ symbols of American culture, such as hip-hop music, the American flag, a Marilyn Monroe T-shirt, skateboards, high heels and jewelry. At the same time, the women occupy American public spaces in the video. Instead of spending time in homes, Islamic centers, restaurants or shops, the women take to the public streets and parks, claiming their right to exist in these spaces. Because Muslim women are so often misrepresented in the media, it is a political move for these young women to use this video as a space to work through their own complexities. Layla Shaikley discusses with me the right, “to be represented in a way that is accurate and doesn’t lead to potential danger to you based on inaccuracies.”

American Muslim women, especially those who cover, often face physical and verbal threats in public spaces. Layla continues, “And without the representation there are real serious consequences. And also it’s just a singular view of a multidimensional world and there’s a lot of danger that comes with that singularity.” In addition to physical threats, there is an emotional impact that occurs when Muslim women never see portrayals of their experiences in ways that illustrate the value and equality of their lives. The Mipsterz video is one effort for Muslim

women to portray themselves as multifaceted individuals who are radically equal to other Americans and contribute positive values to American society.

Occupying space in the American landscape

In all three of these cases of creative action, the young Muslim Americans use aesthetic styles and their physical bodies to occupy American spaces and to claim the right for Muslim bodies to be seen and valued in these spaces. With her abaya 3D design piece, Lindsay Budge works through how her covered body is dismissed and denigrated in most American spaces. By creating a large and confrontational monolith, Lindsay forces viewers to read the hurtful things that people have said to her and to acknowledge the human individual underneath the black fabric. Additionally, the women in the Mipsterz video assert that their fashion styles, which incorporate their religion, ethnicity and cultural backgrounds, belong within the urban American landscape. Finally, the Places You'll Pray photo series is a clear example of how Muslims are using aesthetics to create what Hannah Arendt calls a "space of appearance" in areas where Muslim bodies are absent or ignored. The photos in this series claim that Muslim bodies, wearing symbols like the headscarf and performing the practice of prayer, belong within American public spaces.

In his analysis of the Occupy Wall Street movement and the Arab Spring, W.J.T. Mitchell argues that the activists worked to occupy space and to create a "space of appearance" in which all people are treated as equals.²⁷ According to Mitchell, occupation involves "a demand for presence, an insistence on being heard, before any specific political demands are made."²⁸ The immediate goal is to create this space where all can become equal and this can be a

²⁷ W. J. T. Mitchell, "Image, Space, Revolution: The Arts of Occupation," *Critical Inquiry* 39, no. 1 (2012): 11.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

staging ground for larger political action.²⁹ As Mitchell explains, “This space is foundational because it is prior to politics in the usual sense, constituting a potentially revolutionary and constitutive site of assembly, speech, and action.”³⁰ Hannah Arendt theorized the space of appearance as a space of equality that predates formal political action. It is simply, “the space where I appear to others as others appear to me.”³¹

The photos in the Places You’ll Pray series specifically show Muslims creating a “space of appearance” by occupying public American locations. Symbols and practices of Islam, like the headscarf and prayer, belong within these spaces. Several of the photos show the participants praying in spaces with ties to American culture, consumerism and history. A young man prays at an outdoor mall with logos of popular American stores behind him. In another photo, a woman takes a break from touring the Metropolitan Museum of Art to pray on the sidewalk out front, as a security guard walks by and people enjoy their lunch breaks. At the United Nations in New York City, a young woman kneels in front of a display that explains the work towards achieving world peace. A small group of women pray outside of the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. memorial in Washington, DC. In the corner of a hallway at the Columbia University law school (see figure 9), a young man begins his prayers while a portrait of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg hangs on the wall next to him. In all of these examples the Islamic practice of prayer is visually connected to symbols of American values, such as capitalism, justice, equality, peace, innovation and creativity.

²⁹ Ibid., 11.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 178-79.



Figure 9: Praying at Columbia University law school by Sana Ullah

Through these public practices of prayer, the Muslim Americans in these photos formulate themselves as political subjects. In a discussion of the political theories of Arendt and Rancière, Mustafa Dikeç elaborates on the importance of space in the constitution of political actors. Dikeç engages with the example of the *Sans papiers* movement in France to illustrate how these undocumented immigrants develop into political subjects through the occupation of public spaces. Since radical equality, according to Rancière, is a given and not something that people must work to achieve, then individuals like these immigrants in France or Muslim American youth occupy spaces to illustrate their inherent equality. As Dikeç explains, “Politics, therefore, exists not because we are distinct in our faculty of speech, but because those who are not counted as capable of speech make themselves count as speaking beings by enactments of equality.”³² This photo project can be understood as an “enactment of equality” through which Sana and the participants purposely choreograph their occupation of American public spaces in

³² Mustafa Dikeç, “Beginners and Equals: Political Subjectivity in Arendt and Rancière,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 38, no. 1 (2013): 87.

the face of dominant aesthetic regimes that eliminate Muslim bodies from these spaces.

Additionally, Sana encourages other Muslims to participate in this project by submitting their own photos on Instagram and occupying digital spaces as well.

This photo project is notably distinct from an attempt to infuse public, secular spaces with an Islamic ethical disposition, as was traced by Saba Mahmood and Charles Hirschkind in their separate accounts of Islamic movements in Egypt. The Places You'll Pray photos assert the equality and value of Muslim American lives while also developing the interior dispositions of the participants as religious and political subjects within American society. Instead of trying to transform the society to be more pious and ethical, this photo series incorporates Islamic values into the larger multi-religious landscape of the U.S. The presence of Muslims praying in these spaces challenges the assumption that Western modern spaces must be free of religion. Nilüfer Göle's work on the veiling movement in 1980s Turkey demonstrates how Muslim women attempted to bring an Islamic modern subjectivity into spaces that were deemed modern but secular. The modernization process in Turkey created a strict separation between the secular, public space and the religious, private sphere. By wearing the veil in public and participating in educational and political spaces, the Turkish women dismantled this boundary between the public and private while claiming that modernity is not the purview of Western, secular cultures. Islamic values, like wearing the veil, allow women to enter public spaces and still maintain their modesty and religious convictions. Göle explains that Islam is not anti-modern, but rather, "it acts as a compass of life and as a means of management with modern society."³³ Instead of shifting the larger ethical disposition of Turkish society, these women use veiling and other interior practices to shape their own subjectivity as modern, religious and political subjects.

³³ Nilüfer Göle, *The Forbidden Modern: Civilization and Veiling* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 138.

Similarly, through their participation in the Places You'll Pray series, Sana and the individual subjects work through their own concerns about the meaning of prayer and practicing their religion in public. In several images, Muslims are praying in spaces that are less tied to American symbolism but are simply practical locations to pray during a busy day, such as a library, airport baggage claim area, parking garage, department store changing room, public park or space on the side of the road. While these images might not be as symbolic or aesthetically attractive, they still indicate the need to bring this interior practice of prayer into public spaces. On the website for the photo series, Sana includes quotations from some of the participants and several of them reference the importance of praying in public, despite feelings of apprehension. A man who prayed in the center of an outdoor mall explains, "When you pray in public, it is completely different than praying in private because when people look at you...that's when you know that you don't care what they are thinking, or how they perceive you to be." The practice of praying in public can be a way to reinforce the importance of performing one's faith under the watchful eyes of others.

Another participant reflects on a similar feeling of being judged by onlookers. "Your body never feels more aware than when you're praying out in public under the watchful eye of strangers (many of whom might be judgmental)," the subject states alongside a photo of her praying in the Miami Zoo. She continues, "It's hard to fully pay attention to your prayer when you feel the weight of people's curious eyes on you, but that moment when you realize that there really isn't anyone there besides you and God... That is the best part of the entire experience." In both of these statements, the participants reflect on how the presence of judgmental or simply curious observers actually helps them to focus on God and the purpose of prayer. These reflections indicate that the participants have a more individual, rather than collective, experience

of prayer, which may be influenced by the wider American culture. Instead of exclusively seeing prayer as a way to participate in the wider Islamic community, these participants discuss the personal experience of praying in public and how the observations of non-Muslims only help deepen their connection to God through prayer.

Contrary to these observations, the woman who prayed on the rock in the middle of the creek discusses why she would rather pray in a quiet and secluded location, “I prefer praying in nature. You don’t have to worry about nature turning on you, or having to explain yourself to a body of water.” Instead of seeing the curious eyes as a challenge to prayer, she would rather find a space away from judgment. On the other hand, the subject who prayed in the hallway at the Columbia law school sees his public prayer as way to represent Islam. “To hide, to go out of my way, or to pray somewhere hidden is a disservice to myself as a Muslim,” he says. “I don’t need to be invisible for anyone.” These quotes from participants reinforce the justifiable anxiety about praying in public amidst incidents of harassment and physical attacks, but the participants also reflect on the importance of claiming their right to pray in public. Through public prayer, the participants strengthen their focus on God despite distractions, demonstrate their serious commitment to their faith, and contribute Islamic values to the American landscape. Most importantly, the practice of praying in public and Sana’s documentation of this practice reinforces that Muslims belong in the religiously diverse landscape of America. They do not need to compromise their religion to be active in public spaces.

Contrary to the personal benefits of praying in public spaces, it is necessary to question this compulsion to make Islamic practices public. In the diverse religious landscape of the U.S., religions that fall outside of the Protestant majority are often pressured to open up and make their private practices visible to the wider public. For instance, the Mormon Church is often criticized

for performing “secret” rituals in their temples away from the presence of non-Mormons. As a way of dispelling these rumors, all newly constructed Mormon temples are opened up to the public before they are consecrated. This pressure to publicize strongly influences non-Christian religious groups, like Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus or Buddhists, to open up their houses of worship and publicly share their religious practices. In the case of this photo series, there is a similar motivation to demystify Islam by bringing the practice of prayer to a public audience. Sana told me that she wants these photos to bring up questions about Islam, “And that’s what I’m hoping that these images will open discussion and have people ask, why do Muslims do this? Are all Muslims like this? What about people who say they are Muslims but they hurt people? We need questions like that being asked.” Although it is not misguided to want to spread information about one’s religion, it is notable that Sana and the photo subjects are compelled to create an aesthetic representation of a personal religious practice and to bring private traditions into the light of public scrutiny. These same expectations do not fall onto White, Protestant Christians in the U.S. or Muslims living in other countries. This desire to publicly represent Islam through these photos, praying in public or wearing the headscarf, is influenced in part by the religious context of the U.S. and the Protestant expectation of publicity and disclosure.

Through publicizing Islamic practices, Sana hopes to encourage young Muslims to engage with their religion and to be more politically involved. The actions in these images and the spreading of the photos online can be seen as creating a space of appearance or claiming the radical equality of Muslim lives in preparation for larger political involvement. Not only can Muslims occupy public spaces as they pray, but they also can move into spaces of political action. In the shadow of the Trump Administration, there are already numerous examples of Muslim Americans participating in politics by organizing marches and rallies, advocating for

those impacted by the numerous iterations of the “Muslim ban,” running for political office, and organizing in local communities. Since she began the photo project as a fun exploration of the unusual places where Muslims pray, Sana has evolved to viewing her project as a form of advocacy. “In the beginning, I never would have considered this project political,” Sana shares. “But my thesis professor, she said something interesting to me last semester. She was like, ‘I think you are really into advocacy work.’ ... Ok, I guess in a way, this is advocacy work. This is a political statement. This is my own little struggle and this is me trying to fight it.” Through the occupation of space, both physical and digital media spaces, Sana and the participants are able to advocate for the rights of Muslims to publicly practice their faith. As the one participant said, Muslims do not need to be invisible; they do not need to compromise their faith in order to be accepted as American.

Conclusion

While this entire study addresses how marginalized groups use creative projects and aesthetic styles to produce alternative representations of Muslim American lives, this chapter focuses on the ways that aesthetic styles in particular are employed to shift impressions of what is valued in American society. Working against stereotypes that Muslims are oppressed and lack individuality, the Muslim American creators employ visual styles, fashion, embodiment, the occupation of space, and the easy circulation within digital media spaces to demonstrate their multifaceted identities. Significantly, all of these cases show the overlaps and relationships between the various social actors in the assemblage of this current media moment. The Muslim creators fluidly move between their embodied existence and their creative representations, which circulate through digital media spaces. For instance, the subjects of the Places You’ll Pray photos participated in the embodied practice of prayer alongside the photographer, who then stepped

back to take a photo of the act of prayer. These photos were then posted and shared on Sana's website, but the photos were also exhibited in traditional gallery spaces. The practice of prayer is mediated and moves through these different spaces and various aesthetic frames. Sana reflects on how she has been transformed by the creative process and the overlap between her embodied experience of religious practices and the visual representation of prayer. "I think from the very beginning, I thought it was something fun to the point now where I feel a lot of really intense emotions toward it and I feel very, very close to my project," Sana explains. "And I think it's me trying to visualize a part of my heart or my mind in a way. There are so many things going on. I think it's my only way of fighting or resisting everything. It's been quite a journey." Through making and displaying these photographs, Sana represents what it means to be a Muslim but she also develops her own interior disposition as a religious subject.

Rather than focus on the novelty of praying in unusual locations, the Places You'll Pray photo series reinforces that Muslims are not going to hide their faith or diminish the importance of prayer in their daily lives. At the same time that the photos claim a space for Muslims in the American landscape, the photo series also presents Islamic prayer as a beautiful practice that brings positive values to American society. Furthermore, the 3D art piece by Lindsay Budge employs aesthetic elements, such as black fabric, a tall and monolithic structure, and countless rude and profane words, to convey the overwhelming and insulting nature of the harassment that Lindsay faces on a daily basis. Viewers cannot ignore the depth of the hatred and fear that people are willing to express to Muslim women. Finally, the Mipsterz fashion video and the wider movement of Islamic fashion are modes through which Muslim women can present their intersecting identity markers while also demonstrating that modest dress does not need to be dour and unattractive.

In the creative projects in this chapter, as well as the other cases in this study, aesthetics play a significant political role by providing a path for Muslim youth to equalize their lives, identities and styles with the dominant powers. In the face of negative stereotypes that consistently dismiss the value of Muslim lives by portraying them as oppressed, one-dimensional, aggressive, and ultimately not offering any positive or innovative contributions to society, these Muslim youth are unapologetically conveying the equality of their lives through these different creative projects. Through these artistic projects, Muslims don't need to abandon their religious convictions or practices in order to participate in American society. In fact, these artistic projects assert that Islamic aesthetic styles and practices, such as modest fashion and public prayer, enhance the American landscape. The creators use aesthetics to shift the larger sensorium of what is considered attractive, beautiful and valued in American culture.

CHAPTER IV:
SHIFTING AFFECTS IN THE AFTERMATH
OF THE CHAPEL HILL SHOOTINGS

In our current hyper-mediated moment, the aftermath of any tragic event is quickly followed by the circulation of images—generally, pulled from social media accounts—of the victims and known suspects. These images often highlight the disturbed characters of perpetrators, as in the case of Dylann Roof’s self-portraits with guns, the Confederate flag and Apartheid era patches. Other images point to the ambivalence behind these cases, such as a photo of Trayvon Martin looking menacing in a hoodie or looking young and innocent in a high school picture. As was seen after the Charlottesville, VA violence with the close-up profile picture of victim Heather Heyer, the majority of images of victims show the banality of most social media pictures. In a similar manner, an image (figure 10) of three young adults at a graduation began circulating through social media on the morning of February 11, 2015. It was a positive, if not typical, image of a post-graduation celebration in a school gym, but most notably, the two women in the image were wearing headscarves, identifying them as Muslims.

This image was shared in social media pages to call attention to the tragic murder in Chapel Hill, NC of the three individuals in the picture: Deah Shaddy Barakat, 23; his wife, Yusor Mohammad Abu-Salha, 21; and her sister Razan Mohammad Abu-Salha, 19. While many mainstream news outlets initially reported on the death of the three victims as caused by a parking dispute with a disgruntled neighbor, grassroots efforts were staged almost immediately to spread this image and other social media pictures in an effort to emphasize that deep-seated hatred and fear of Muslims motivated this murder. As was presented in the introduction, there is

a long visual history of portraying Muslims as violent foreigners and oppressed victims. These visual portrayals work to adhere affects of fear and distrust to Muslim bodies, but the images that circulated after the Chapel Hill murders disrupted this visual narrative by presenting happy and successful Muslim Americans. In the most tragic of ironies, it took the brutal death of three innocent lives in order for positive images of Muslims to be made visible in mainstream American media.



Figure 10: Graduation photo of Deah, Yusor and Razan

These images serve as an affront to the typical emotions of fear and hatred toward Muslims. The affects of sadness that affix to these images challenge non-Muslims to feel grief over the loss of three young American lives. Individuals moved by this tragic event, both those who knew or never met the victims, circulated images, began hashtag campaigns and created artistic projects as a way to memorialize the victims and their positive contributions to society. In this chapter, I will explore how these creators employ the affects within these images, such as feelings of positivity, happiness, authenticity and familiarity, as well as affects of sadness that

surrounded this event in order to shift assumptions of Muslim Americans. Through an analysis of these images and their circulation, I will assert that these creators conduct political work by attempting to promote feelings of resonance and grief in non-Muslim viewers but also to create feelings of connection among Muslim youth that are foundational for offline political action.

First, I will explain how I am engaging with affect, which is mainly influenced by Sara Ahmed's theorizing of affect as what circulates and clings to bodies. I will then use this understanding to discuss the spread and stickiness of affects in the immediate aftermath of the Chapel Hill shootings, especially in regards to the rapid circulation of a silhouette image created from the initial graduation photo. Then, I will analyze how this event triggered feelings of connection between Muslims from the U.S. and across the world, and how these feelings might be employed to organize offline political action. Finally, I will examine how ongoing artistic projects to continue the legacy of the Chapel Hill victims work to create feelings of resonance in non-Muslim Americans and a sense of loss over these valuable American lives.

The flow and adherence of affects

Alongside a focus on materiality and the body, affect theory has seen a growth of popularity within the humanities over the last decade. While this work has been intriguing in how it emphasizes the importance of embodiment, some branches of affect theory are unnecessarily opaque and provide few concrete examples. In addition, several scholars have correctly pointed out that the trendy affect theory approach is not significantly different from existing feminist scholarship on emotions. Rather than go into a deep theoretical examination of affect, it will be most beneficial to incorporate the more tangible formulations of affect, which can easily be discussed in relation to this case in Chapel Hill.

On a foundational level, affects can be thought of as the forces that exist in between bodies and objects. Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg offer a definition, “affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, *and* in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves.”¹ Affect is an intensity that flows between bodies, sticks to objects and bodies, and resonates with certain bodies. Affect is also tied to potentiality or “a body’s *capacity* to affect and to be affected.”² Affects are dynamic and easily move between bodies and have the ability to shift bodies.

In the same volume on affect theory, Sara Ahmed explains that affect is not an autonomous force that stands separate, but rather it is part of a larger mess of various interactions.³ She emphasizes, “Affect is what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects.”⁴ Ahmed uses the example of happiness to explain how this affect circulates between objects and impacts bodies by influencing the orientation towards certain objects, depending on whether they bring happiness.⁵ Objects are not inherently happy or positive, but people share an orientation toward certain objects as being happy or positive.⁶ Similar to assemblage theory, Ahmed focuses on the interactions and space of circulation between human bodies, objects and affects.

¹ Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, “An Inventory of Shimmers,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 1.

² *Ibid.*, 2.

³ Sara Ahmed, “Happy Objects,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 30.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

In reflecting on the recent popularity of affect theory, Ahmed acknowledges the long history of feminist theory on the political potential of emotions. Affect theorists like Brian Massumi distinguish affects from emotions by explaining that “affects are pre-personal and non-intentional” and “emotions are mediated and contained by signification.”⁷ This approach has the tendency to displace affects to the indiscernible space of pre-cognition while leaving emotions in the tangible realm. This tendency dismisses the long history of feminist work on emotions for being too focused on the human body and not on the more highfalutin work of affect studies.

In her earlier work on the political aspects of emotions, Ahmed was less concerned about making a distinction between affects and emotions, but she formulates affects as the intensities of emotions that impact bodies. She is interested in “how bodies are ‘pressed’ upon by other bodies” and “how these presses become impressions, feelings that are suffused with ideas and values.”⁸ Emotions are not simply personal feelings, but Ahmed wants to examine how emotions formulate subjects by influencing orientation and movement towards or away from certain objects.⁹ Ahmed points to the work of feminist and queer scholars who have long been focused on the political aspects of emotions, as emotions impress upon bodies and in turn shape individuals and social life.¹⁰ Affects, or the intensity of emotions, adhere to certain objects, and then these affective objects circulate and create impressions on bodies.¹¹ “Such objects become sticky, or saturated with affect, as sites of personal and social tension.”¹² In her analysis of texts, Ahmed is focused on how certain affects stick to certain words and objects and how these affects

⁷ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2014), 207.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 208.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 209.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹² *Ibid.*, 11.

in turn influence the way people orientate themselves. She elaborates on her approach, “I am tracking how words for feeling, and objects of feeling, circulate and generate effects: how they move, stick, and slide. We move, stick and slide with them.”¹³ In my analysis of the Chapel Hill case, I am focused on how affects circulate by attaching to the images of the victims and also how this circulation of affect influences the way viewers approach these images.

In connection to affect theory, Stuart Hall’s discussion of articulation is helpful to examine how affects are one method of connecting certain discourses to particular bodies. Hall elaborates:

By the term “articulation,” I mean a connection or link which is not necessarily given in all cases, as a law or a fact of life, but which requires particular conditions of existence to appear at all, which has to be positively sustained by specific processes, which is not “eternal” but has to be constantly renewed, which can under some circumstances disappear or be overthrown, leading to the old linkages being dissolved and new connections—re-articulations—being forged.¹⁴

Articulation is a way of linking ideas, such as fear and foreignness in this case, to certain bodies or cultural items, such as the hijab or images of Muslims. Articulation is an active process through which hegemonic ideas can be solidified into common sense, but, as Hall discusses, these connections are never permanent. In an interview with Lawrence Grossberg, Hall uses the example of an English “articulated” truck (semi-truck or tracker-trailer in the U.S.) to demonstrate how articulation connects two distinct elements, but this linkage “is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time.”¹⁵ The two elements can be separated and new connections or re-articulations can be formed. According to Jennifer Slack, articulation is a

¹³ Ibid., 14.

¹⁴ Stuart Hall, “Signification, representation, ideology: Althusser and the post-structuralist debate,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 2, no. 2 (1985): 113.

¹⁵ Lawrence Grossberg, “On postmodernism and articulation: An interview with Stuart Hall,” in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, eds. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996), 142.

constant practice of attempting to interfere and change these connections, “Articulation is, then, not just a thing (not just a connection) but a process of creating connections, much in the same way that hegemony is not domination but the process of creating and maintaining consensus or of co-ordinating interests.”¹⁶ Dis-articulation is a way to unlink these connections, which often times gain strength through their appearance as natural or common sense, and then create new links to different meanings. This chapter will examine how articulation works to link Muslim Americans to affects of terror, foreignness and danger. At the same time, young Muslim creators engage with emotions and aesthetic styles to dis-articulate and re-link their bodies to ideas of positivity, happiness, success and belonging in the American landscape.

The creation of an iconic image

Mohammad “Teddy” Alsalti was studying graphic design at a the University of Dayton when he heard from his mother on the evening of February 10, 2015 about the murder of three young Muslim students in his family’s new community of Chapel Hill, NC. Although Teddy had never met the victims, he was struck by what happened and the similarities between the victims’ lives and his own experiences as a Muslim college student. That night, he began reading more about the developing story and came across the graduation photo of Deah, Yusor and Razan, which had been posted on social media and news sites. Teddy was motivated to do something to contribute to the emerging work in honor of the victims. The very next morning, he popped open his laptop in a university café and quickly drew up a graphic version of the graduation photo, which featured black and white silhouettes of the three victims (figure 11). Teddy posted the image and the hashtag #ChapelHillShooting to his Instagram page, where he shared art and design work with a couple hundred followers, and then he headed off to class.

¹⁶ Jennifer Slack, “The theory and method of articulation in cultural studies,” in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, eds. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996), 114.

Within a few hours, that simple image, sketched out by a graphic design student in between classes, had spread throughout social media, and people from all over the world were posting the picture to honor the legacy of Deah, Yusor and Razan. The image quickly was connected to the official “Our Three Winners” Facebook page, which was started by the victims’ family members. Additionally, in the few years since the tragic events of February 10, Teddy’s silhouette image has been used on T-shirts (figure 12), plaques, public art displays (figure 13), bracelets, banners and as part of fundraising projects in remembrance of the victims. The image has become an icon not only of the horrible loss of these three young lives, but also of the larger social justice projects for Muslim Americans, in a similar way to how the symbols of the hooded sweatshirt and the hands-up gesture are used as icons of the Black Lives Matter movement.



Figure 11: Silhouette image by Mohammad "Teddy" Alsalti



Figure 12: T-shirt used for a fundraising campaign



Figure 13: Temporary art display on the campus of NC State

Through an analysis of the minimal aesthetic style of this graphic image, I want to examine how affects of positivity and authenticity were able to stick to this image as it circulated. As a result, the easy flow of this image through various media spaces allowed for a re-articulation of the affects that generally adhere to Muslim bodies. Ahmed formulates the concept of “affective economies” to explain how the circulation of emotions through objects produces affect. She posits a theory of emotions as economy in that “emotions work as a form of capital: affect does not reside positively in the sign or commodity, but is produced as an effect of its circulation.”¹⁷ In other words, the circulation and movement of objects and signs of emotions is what produces affect, and in turn, the affect impacts and shapes bodies. Focused on the affective economy of hate, Ahmed discusses how hate flows between various bodies, but hate also has the potential to more easily stick to certain bodies—dark-skinned, Muslim men, for instance—or certain signs, such as a hijab.¹⁸ An image such as this graduation photo of a Muslim man and two hijab-wearing Muslim women generally elicits affects of fear and hatred in non-

¹⁷ Ibid., 45.

¹⁸ Ibid., 60.

Muslim viewers. On the other hand, the happiness, positivity, authenticity and success displayed in the graduation photo along with the simplicity of Teddy's silhouette image resonated with viewers and allowed the images to more easily circulate.

When Teddy first saw the graduation photo that was circulating the night of the murder, he was instantly inspired to create a minimal image that would pull out the main elements of the photo. As a young Muslim college student, Teddy understands the articulation process through which Muslims are connected to violence, aggression and fear. Teddy's graphic image disarticulates or de-links these negative feelings and shows Muslims as the victims rather than the aggressors. Using minimal aesthetic elements, Teddy creates an image that cultivates sympathy from viewers and honors the legacy of the three victims. As a graphic design student, Teddy recalled learning about the power of simple designs, "If you can convey a message in its simplest form, that's when you have the most effective design."¹⁹ The black and white image features the outlines of Deah's hair and ears. The black silhouettes of their headscarves frame Yusor and Razan's faces, but Razan's graduation cap is removed. For the sake of simplicity, Teddy left the faces of the victims blank, but after the fact, he reflected on how the blank faces allowed people to place themselves into the image. "Leaving it blank, kind of leaves it up to interpretation," he explains. "Not to say that you can't have sympathy if their faces were there, but you can make up your own story behind it. Like, oh man, I could have been that guy with the hair, just a regular dude playing basketball. And being Muslim, I could see myself doing that or my brother or my friend or whoever." The uncomplicated design of the image allows viewers, especially other young Muslims, to easily relate to the subjects in the image.

¹⁹ Mohammad Alsalti, phone interview by author, Boulder, CO, October 31, 2016.

It is easy to see how a young Muslim like Teddy could feel a sense of solidarity with Deah, Yusor and Razan based on similar experiences, but the silhouette image and the graduation photo that it is based on feature feelings and experiences that also are relevant to the lives of Americans, regardless of religious background. For instance, the images point to the love and support of families, the joy in celebrating the success of young people, and the hope for future accomplishments. Nearly every American has similar photos in their albums of post-graduation celebrations in front of the unspectacular backgrounds of a school auditorium or gymnasium. Teddy frequently discussed how the silhouette image resonated with viewers because of its open design, “When you have artwork or design, when you leave it up to interpretation and people have their own interpretation, they create their own story behind it. And it resonates with them.” The uncomplicated design allows for affects of positivity, happiness and vitality to stick to these images and reverberate from the image. The positive affects that vibrate out from this image create feelings of resonance with the viewers; they strike a chord and move the viewer at the same emotional vibration.

Something deeper is occurring when an ordinary graduation photo and a black and white outline image spread so quickly and are still used today to remember the victims. One of Deah’s close friends, Mohammad Dorgham, discusses how the graphic image is simple but that there is a weight and depth to the icon that accounts for its easy circulation. When Mohammad travels, he often gives away wristbands that display the silhouette image in order to continue the legacy of his friends. He elaborates, “So it’s not just the shirts or the wristbands, when you can materialize it into something, even a profile picture, it almost feels like there’s a weight to it, it’s almost like a charm to always remind you. ... It wasn’t just a shirt or a wristband, it’s something

much heavier, something more dense.”²⁰ The weight within these images can partly be attributed to what was lost in this tragic event—the lives of three successful, bright and engaged young Americans.

Even though this image is banal in its subject matter and composition, there is an emotional depth to the image as viewers are moved by contradictory emotions of positivity and unimaginable grief. Mohammad Dorgham’s brother, Abdullah, discusses his ambivalence towards this image, which serves as a reminder of the loss of his friends but also highlights their positive attributes. “I know that the silhouette can bring out some emotions, but for me, at least, when I look back at the silhouette, when it got really viral, it to me was a good thing to see,” Abdullah shares. “It wasn’t something that reminded me of the tragedy. It reminded me of who they were and how they grew together. The way that they posed in that picture was the family that they were.”²¹ The contradictory affects that stick to the photo, I would argue, are what gives it greater weight and allows it to more easily circulate. There is a greater reverberation as viewers connect to this relatable image of happy, young people and then realize that these lives ended in a violent way.

Additionally, the ease with which this one graduation photo moved through various digital media spaces and continues to circulate in the form of the silhouette image demonstrates the aura of this image. As W.J.T. Mitchell advises, we must look at the desires of pictures and how an image like this has an inherent power to impress certain feelings onto viewers.²² For many viewers of the graduation photo, there is great sadness and grief over the loss of such young lives, but this image also has the potential to imbue a blessing onto the viewers. In a

²⁰ Mohammad Dorgham, personal interview by author, Raleigh, NC, January 21, 2017.

²¹ Abdullah Dorgham, personal interview by author, Raleigh, NC, January 21, 2017.

²² W.J.T. Mitchell, “What Do Pictures *Really* Want?” *October* 77 (Summer 1996): 71-82.

similar way to how images of religious saints have often been used by believers for spiritual blessings and protection, this photo has a similar aura of saintliness, especially since the victims could be defined as martyrs who died for their religious faith. In their studies of a Senegalese Sufi branch of Islam, Allen F. Roberts and Mary Nooter Roberts explore the circulation and re-appropriation of a single photo of a Sufi saint, Cheikh Amadou Bamba. The various versions of this image become religious icons that bestow blessings onto those who come into contact with the saint's representation. The authors explain that the aura behind this image "possesses the capacity to produce a response, bestow well-being, and protect its viewers."²³ In the case of the Chapel Hill murders, the emotional weight of this image could also be attributed to the desire of the image to imbue the viewers with the same saintliness and positive values of the three victims.

In the next sections, I will discuss in further detail how the affects that stick to these images have been employed to shift how non-Muslims perceive Muslims, but first it is important to qualify that the circulation of affects is not inherently a positive phenomenon. In this case, the affects embedded in various images have been used for productive work on behalf of Muslim Americans, but it is difficult to control what affects will stick, where they will circulate and how they will reverberate in viewers. One of Razan's close friends, Doha Hindi, shares that she has a different emotional experience when she sees these images in social media, "As people who knew them personally, that imagery is always on Facebook. People have it as their profile pictures to this day, two years later. It makes it so that sometimes you start to think of them as that image rather than as the people that you knew."²⁴ The image has become connected to something much larger, so it becomes difficult for Doha and others who knew the victims to

²³ Allen F. Roberts and Mary Nooter Roberts, "A Saint in the City Sufi Arts of Urban Senegal," *African Arts*, 35, no. 4 (Winter, 2002): 55.

²⁴ Doha Hindi, personal interview by author, Durham, NC, January 22, 2017.

grieve. “The fact that all of their content from social media is so readily available makes it extremely difficult to move forward,” Doha explains. “A lot of times you will be looking through your Facebook feed and you won’t be expecting to see anything because it’s a regular day, and you’ll see a picture of them and it sets you back.” The affects that allow the image to circulate and reverberate with viewers at the same time cut into the fresh emotional wounds of those grieving the loss of loved ones.

In addition, this was certainly not the first time that innocent Muslim Americans were killed, but a confluence of specific factors led to the rapid circulation of these images and affects. The victims were young, extremely accomplished, highly educated, devoted hours to service work, and participated in American cultural activities. Most notably, they were the children of Arab American immigrant parents who have successful careers in business and medicine and are involved in the local Muslim community. The class level and ethnic background of their families made it easier for the victims to be accepted as assimilated into American culture, and in turn, it was easier for the mainstream American audience to grieve their lost lives as American. As a point of contrast, around a year after the Chapel Hill murders, three young African men were murdered execution-style in Fort Wayne, IN. The victims were immigrants from Sudan and two of them were Muslim.²⁵ Doha discusses this incident and questions why the Our Three Winners campaign to honor Deah, Yusor and Razan has been far more successful. “They tried to make the ‘Our Three Boys’ thing. I thought about why didn’t that situation garner the same amount of attention?” Doha asks. “I realized that their parents were not as eloquent at speaking English. I think that the African American Muslim community in general is not getting the attention that it

²⁵ Daniel Marans, “‘Execution-Style’ Killing of 3 Young Men Sparks Outrage,” *Huffington Post*, February 28, 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/execution-style-murder-young-muslim-men_us_56d35a51e4b0871f60ebc77a (accessed September 5, 2017).

deserves. There were a lot of things that went into play there that just made their story not as popular.”

With the Fort Wayne case, the victims were lower class, African immigrants, poorly educated and living in a house that had been tied to drugs and gangs in the past. In other words, they did not have the social capital that allowed the Chapel Hill families to be accepted as productive immigrants in American society. The positive affects associated with American values of hard work and optimism did not adhere as easily to the images of three black bodies. The images of the three young men did not circulate because, sadly, there is nothing unusual about seeing photos of black men who died violently. The images of the Chapel Hill victims were distinct, as I have shown, because of how they shifted the affects that normally adhere to Muslim bodies. Positive affects stick to these images of Deah, Yusor and Razan and allow the images to circulate and resonate with viewers. In the next sections, I will explore how these affects have the potential to shift larger impressions of Muslims and motivate political action.

Creating a feeling of connection

The rapid circulation of images following the murders in Chapel Hill, NC points to the extraordinary role that affects played in this case. While the affects of positivity and happiness easily stick and spread as these images move, it is important to analyze the impact that this circulation of affects has on social life and political action. In her work on affective publics in digital spaces, Zizi Papacharissi argues that affects create feelings of connection that may motivate offline political action. Moving away from seeing politics as revolving around rational public sphere, Papacharissi focuses on affective publics, or “public formations that are textually rendered into being through emotive expressions that spread virally through networked

crowds.”²⁶ Affective publics account for how people are engaged in political action through sentiments and feelings. Digital media, especially the “storytelling infrastructure” of certain spaces, allow people to feel connected to the experiences of others.²⁷ The ability for people to feel connected through stories and images is not unique to the digital moment, but Papacharissi explores how the digital infrastructure allows for more connections to form.²⁸ She explains, “Therefore, media are capable of sustaining and transmitting affect, in ways that may lead to the cultivation of subsequent feelings, emotions, thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors.”²⁹ Through an application of Raymond Williams’s concept of “structure of feelings,” Papacharissi explores how the soft structures of feelings, which are possible in the digital media moment, “may potentially sustain and mediate the feeling of democracy.”³⁰ In the case of the Chapel Hill murders, the various images of the victims flow through the social media spaces and facilitate affective connections with viewers. These feelings of connection both among Muslim youth and with non-Muslims may motivate organization and political work in offline spaces.

In addition to the wide circulation of the graduation photo and the silhouette image of Deah, Yusor and Razan, numerous other photos of the victims circulated throughout social media, spreading similar affects of positivity, happiness, authenticity and love. There were numerous photos of the three young people doing service work in the local North Carolina community, as well as providing dental care to Syrian refugees in Turkey. Images were pulled from social media accounts, sharing the victims hanging out with friends, attending sporting

²⁶ Zizi Papacharissi, *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 133.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.

events and celebrating other graduations. There was also a series of professional photos from Deah and Yusor's wedding, featuring Yusor dancing with her father (figure 14); Deah handling a basketball in the style of idol, Steph Curry (figure 15); and Deah and Yusor seated and surrounded by white lace and flowers. These images radiate with positive affects and showcase that the three victims were typical, if not extraordinary, young Americans who excelled in education, served their community, enjoyed time with family and friends, and participated in American cultural activities.



Figure 14: Yusor with her father



Figure 15: Deah at his wedding

In my conversation with brothers Mohammad and Abdullah Dorgham, they shared their hope that the images of their friends will elicit feelings of connections in non-Muslim viewers. “I’m pretty sure that most people could become friends with them. These were very relatable people,” Mohammad states. “You may not share the same faith or skin color, ancestral heritage, but again, these are regular, three American kids, trying to make not just their community but their country better. I feel like that is a very relatable message to all Americans.” Abdullah shares a similar belief that images, especially those shared in social media, have the ability to move beyond the “us vs. them” mentality and to reinforce our connections as human beings:

Because with social media, the fact that you got access with that image to begin with just shows us how connected we all are. We can’t dismiss someone and think less of them. At the end of the day, we have pictures to show that we are just like them. ... It shows you that we are all one. I know that may sound very preachy and loving, but at the end of the day, that’s how we should be. Human beings, we have a need for that connection, and images should be what we get from that. Why do we like pictures on social media? Because they make us feel something. And I hope that picture does make people feel something in a good way.

In a similar way to how Papacharissi discusses the “soft structures of feelings” that are enabled by social media, Abdullah reflects on how people are influenced by the affects circulating in social media to feel a sense of connection to people from different backgrounds.

These feelings are reinforced when people share and circulate the images, but the larger goal is that these feelings will progress into offline action. Mohammad discusses how the political situation for Muslim Americans can improve through sharing images, such as these of Deah, Yusor and Razan, that complicate the stereotypes of Muslims. “Of course, there are horrible things done by Muslims. But at the same time, when they see another person who is feeding the homeless, going to an animal shelter, they’ll say, ok, Muslims are like this, but this one that I know and have seen with my eyes isn’t,” Mohammad explains. “And that kind of

grays the waters where usually people see things as black and white. I think that is going to be the biggest agent of change. When people start seeing with their own eyes, like no this is not the Islam that I am seeing.” These images are not only relatable but they challenge assumptions that Muslims are violent and forever foreign to the American way of life. These photos point to how Deah, Yusor and Razan loved their family, enjoyed spending time with friends, excelled professionally, and contributed positively to the American community. The intimate and authentic spaces of social media enable affective connections to form among viewers, who are also circulating similar images of their family and friends.

On the other hand, there is a risk that all of this work to portray the three victims as normal Americans will reduce their complex experiences and transform their lives into a superficial symbol of good Muslims. As Nadia Marzouki argues, this work to portray Muslims as just like any other Americans will tame the political work of Muslim Americans.³¹ Razan’s friend, Doha Hindi, points to this problem of normalization in her reflections on the use of the silhouette image. While she sees the simplicity of the silhouette drawing as providing an avenue for viewers to “put themselves in the shoes” of the victims, she sees a downside to the simple icon. “The fact that this simple logo became kind of a trademark of what happened, I see it as a blessing and a curse,” Doha says. “I think that it’s easy for people to see that and think that they know the whole story. Or to see that and just reduce them down to this picture. I know that’s not the intent of the logo at all. It definitely had a great impact in spreading the word to people and getting people involved with the endowment fund and service projects in honor of them.”

The circulation of the silhouette image, in particular, runs the risk of reducing the complex lives of Deah, Yusor and Razan to a simple icon or a brand. For some of the loved ones,

³¹ Nadia Marzouki, *Islam, an American Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 25.

Doha explains, the “branding” of the lives of these young people, especially under the “Our Three Winners” label, was “a little bit strange and maybe excessive.” It has been difficult for Doha to see the lives of her friends whittled down to these few images. Additionally, the silhouette drawing emphasizes Razan and Yusor’s headscarves. This symbol narrows in on the religion of the victims, but this can also diminish Razan and Yusor’s faith to this one symbol. Doha explains that her friends were proud to wear the headscarf but their faith went deeper than that, “Even though it’s an outward symbol of their religion, they had a lot more spirituality within them and good characteristics. The headscarf isn’t necessarily going to show all of that.” While the silhouette image can easily convey a simple message about the value of Muslim lives, it has the tendency to reinforce the stereotypes of oppressed and veiled Muslim women.

Developing connections for offline action

As the images of Deah, Yusor and Razan circulate throughout social media along with positive affects, people feel connected to the lives of these young Muslim Americans. The hope is that these feelings of connection will lead to offline organization and political action. Papacharissi explores how social media might “facilitate feelings of engagement” and encourage people to be involved in political movements.³² While people may not actually be connected in communities, the online work creates feelings of community that can move into offline connections being formed. As Papacharissi explains, “Social media help activate and sustain latent ties that may be crucial to the mobilization of networked publics.”³³ In the Chapel Hill case, affects can be employed to allow non-Muslims to feel themselves into the story of these three young Muslims, but affects can also unite Muslim Americans around shared experiences

³² Papacharissi, *Affective Publics*, 8.

³³ Zizi Papacharissi, “Affective Publics and Structures of Storytelling: Sentiment, Events and Mediality,” *Information, Communication & Society* 19, no. 3 (2016): 310.

and emotions. Muslim Americans use the affects that surround this tragic event to formulate representations of Muslim lives that resist negative stereotypes.

The affective publics that are possible in social media provide subtle modes of resistance for marginalized groups. Papacharissi explains, “Affective publics typically produce disruptions/interruptions of dominant political narratives by presencing underrepresented viewpoints.”³⁴ The circulation of the images of the Chapel Hill victims allows Muslim Americans to re-articulate a narrative of Muslims as generous, happy, productive and positive members of American society. Rather than the numerous images of terrorists, these images not only show a positive picture of Muslim Americans but they also challenge viewers to feel sadness over the loss of these American lives.

This work to shift feelings around Muslims by presenting alternative narratives and representations is foundational for larger social justice work on behalf of Muslims and other marginalized groups. Social media is not a space of direct political action, but that does not mean that the work in social media, like spreading these images, has no political potential. As Papacharissi explains, “Understanding social media as structures of feelings, as soft structures of storytelling, permits us to examine them as soft structures of meaning-making practices that may be revolutionary.”³⁵ For instance, a young Muslim American artist, Teddy Alsalti, was moved by what occurred in Chapel Hill, and he created the silhouette image as an alternative to the dominant visual portrayal of Muslims. Muslims and non-Muslims have since circulated this image as a way to spread an alternative representation and shift impressions of Muslims. This work to produce and circulate these images, demonstrating the value of Muslim lives, also impacts the interior disposition of Muslim subjects. For so long, their bodies have been

³⁴ Papacharissi, *Affective Publics*, 130.

³⁵ Papacharissi, “Affective Publics and Structures,” 321.

bombarded with negative feelings and associations with violence and terror. By using these creative spaces to re-articulate positive feelings and to share alternative meanings, Muslim youth like Teddy can potentially develop a new sense of who they are as political subjects with the agency to act and speak in wider political spaces.

This image and the affects that adhere to it have moved beyond producing feelings of connection in social media to influencing offline political spaces. Immediately after the murders, the circulation of the images influenced the mainstream news media to shift their narratives away from a parking dispute to a hateful act. Additionally, the images of the victims encouraged investigators to consider whether this case should be prosecuted as a federal hate crime.³⁶ Since the images showed the young Muslims as positive members of American society and not likely to provoke a violent dispute with a neighbor, it is more feasible that some form of religious bias or hatred influenced this crime.

Finally, the silhouette image has been used in numerous public spaces to fundraise for various organizations, to promote food drives and charity events, and to advocate for the value of Muslim lives. In a similar way to the various icons of the Black Lives Matter movement, the silhouette image has become a marker, expressing that Muslim lives have equal value in America. Several months after the shootings, a local North Carolina artist sent the victims' families a small wood panel with the silhouette image laser-engraved over an American flag (figure 16). This art piece is a political statement, emphasizing that Muslims are not forever foreign and that the loss of these young lives should be mourned as a loss to all Americans.

³⁶ Anne Blythe, "Judge orders FBI notes turned over to man accused of shooting three Muslim students," *The News & Observer*, March 14, 2017 <http://www.newsobserver.com/news/local/crime/article138457408.html> (accessed September 6, 2017).



Figure 16: by Brain Dawson

Using affective labor to cultivate empathy

In addition to how the silhouette image and photos were spread throughout digital spaces, other artists have employed various creative media forms to continue the legacy of Deah, Yusor and Razan and to demonstrate the value of Muslim American lives. Similar to Teddy Alsalti's graphic design work, these artists engage with affects to connect with audiences and to shift impressions of Muslims. This work further demonstrates how affects can be used for political purposes to re-articulate Muslim American lives, which may in turn lead to more equal and just treatment of Muslims.

One of Deah's close friends, Mohammad Moussa,³⁷ was deeply moved by the horrific murders and the families' response to the tragedy. When he traveled back home to California after the funeral services, he began writing poetry about his feelings of grief and memories of his friends. "As I was writing, I particularly felt very impacted by how graceful the families' response was to something so hateful," Mohammad states. "You could tell that they had this

³⁷ Note, that Mohammad Moussa should not be confused with Deah's other friend, Mohammad Dorgham.

resolve, and they had this purpose that they didn't want to fight fire with fire. They did not want hatred to consume the love that they had."³⁸ As a way of sharing the story of his friends and the graceful response of the families, Mohammad created a multimedia, spoken-word performance piece called "Shattered Glass." In the 45-minute piece, which Mohammad has performed at universities and for the anniversary of the murders, he shares personal poetry about the events, as well as images and videos of Deah, Yusor and Razan.

Through sharing these images and alternative narratives, Mohammad strives to disarticulate the common affects, such as fear and distrust, towards Muslims and to create connections with the audience over feelings of grief and loss. "I think my goal for this piece is to give a glimpse of the loss and pain that the community suffered in an attempt to make people understand that pain," Mohammad explains. "If you as an audience member understand that pain and hopefully you will try to do everything in your power to make sure that no one feels that type of pain again." Through his spoken-word piece, Mohammad performs what Michael Hardt terms "affective labor," by using affects to develop feelings of connection with the audience. Hardt defines affective labor as "immaterial, even if it is corporeal and affective, in the sense that its products are intangible: a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, passion—even a sense of connectedness or community."³⁹ Mohammad employs the positive affects within the images, love for his friends, as well as feelings of grief and sadness to create a connection with viewers.

Even though this was a tragic event, the images of the victims elicit positive affects and are relatable to viewers. Mohammad wants to use the love of the family to shift away from the hate of this murder and to create a positive impact on the viewers. He sees storytelling, both

³⁸ Mohammad Moussa, phone interview by author, Boulder, CO, October 2, 2016.

³⁹ Michael Hardt, "Affective Labor," *boundary 2* 26, no. 2 (1999): 96.

through poetry and visuals, as a way for marginalized groups to share their own experiences in an effort to elicit empathy in people from different backgrounds. Mohammad discusses how storytelling can change minds and actions:

There's a quote that says, violent actions start off as violent thoughts. And one of the most powerful things you can do is change someone's mindset in a positive way because it's in the mindset that these violent actions begin. And what storytelling does is it allows us to create collective empathy for one another, collective love and acceptance of one another in a way that makes these violent actions less and less common.

In a similar way to how Teddy and others hoped that the positive affects of the silhouette image and graduation photo would resonate with viewers, Mohammad also uses affects in his multimedia piece to move viewers emotionally and to cultivate empathy.

Additionally, Mohammad's performance piece works to de-link the affects of fear and terror that typically stick to Muslim bodies. In a study of Asian American YouTube stars, Christine Bacareza Balance explores how these video creators perform affective labor in their efforts to shift stereotypes and emotions about Asian Americans. In the face of dominant discourse that positions Asian Americans as either homogenous and threatening foreigners or as model minorities, these performers contradict these stereotypes through the deployment of affects. As Bacareza Balance explains, "Breaking out of the model minority myth's discursive containment, these emerging online personalities restage and respond to the banal and ridiculously racist moments of Asian America's everyday life, performing the affective labor of transforming alienation into humor, hate into love."⁴⁰

In a similar way, Muslim Americans like Mohammad Moussa are hyper-aware of the stereotypes and negative affects that are associated with their bodies. "I think this was one of the

⁴⁰ Christine Bacareza Balance, "How it Feels to Be Viral Me: Affective Labor and Asian American YouTube Performance," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 40, nos. 1 & 2 (Spring/Summer 2012): 149.

first times that the general American media picked up on the normal, Muslim students who were so philanthropic and dedicating huge amounts of their time to service and to these different causes,” Mohammad discusses. “As tragic as this event is, ironically, this is the first time that we get this true face of Islam, as we know it, on every TV in America.” Through the use of images and affects in his performance piece, Mohammad continues this work of re-articulating a distinct image of Muslim Americans. Instead of displaying Muslims as terrorists to fear, these photos show the victims as generous, kind-hearted and positive members of American society.

Mohammad hopes that by displaying these images he can shift the audience members’ perception of Muslims, which have often been engrained from a long visual history that associates violence and aggression with Muslims. “It’s very difficult in the face of [these photos] to say, how could you be afraid of them? Of like a dude who was obsessed with basketball? Or like any other college kid, going out and taking time out to volunteer and do his own initiatives and pass out dental supplies to the homeless population? It definitely had a shift. I think that’s a very powerful image and a powerful juxtaposition.” One can only speculate what was going on in the head of the suspected assailant of these murders, but it is disturbing to contemplate how the negative images of Muslims in the media may have motivated this crime by transforming these energetic and caring young people into bodies to fear and destroy.

Sentimentality and style

When filmmaker Tarek Albaba heard about the tragic shooting of three young people close to his hometown of Charlotte, NC, he felt a personal sense of duty to use his filmmaking skills and industry connections to create a documentary about the events in Chapel Hill. “Their story really resonated with my own because it just hit home for me,” Tarek explains. “They’re from North Carolina. Their families were very similar to my family, culturally, religious-wise,

sports-wise. And I just felt like their story is my story. And I felt like their family is an extension of my own.”⁴¹ Similar to the work of Teddy Alsalti and Mohammad Moussa, Tarek engages with visual images and positive affects to formulate a connection with viewers. His documentary film about the Chapel Hill events is still in production because he wants to cover the case through the trial, which has been delayed to 2019.

Tarek argues that the documentary film is an effective medium to present information in digestible bites, to share diverse personal experiences, and to engage with viewers on an emotional level. For the majority of Americans who do not personally know a Muslim, Tarek hopes that this documentary will convey the relatability of Muslim Americans. Tarek explains the benefits of documentaries, “And you have to look at all of these facts and if you can do it in an artistic and cinematic way and show the relatability aspect of a family in need, of a young woman and a young man in love, of people trying to fight for social justice on the forefront of creating good and empathy in this world, then I think, people would be more interested and more likely to understand where they are coming from.” Tarek’s goal is to engage with the aesthetic elements of the documentary form and the affects that surround this tragic event to transform how many Americans perceive Muslims. Tarek would even welcome the challenge of having a far-right Trump supporter watch his film. “Because I certainly think there’s a sense of undeniability. When you honestly look at the facts—when you take an honest moment and look at what these kids did, their impact, their legacy—there is no way that you can look me in the eye and say that these people are evil, that these people are associated with some sort of terrorism. There is just no way,” Tarek explains.

⁴¹ Tarek Albaba, Skype video interview by author, Boulder, CO, October 31, 2016.

In the footage that Tarek has already shot for the documentary, he purposely engages with style and embodiment in order to induce an emotional response in the viewers, to work against stereotypes, and to imagine new subjectivities for Muslims. The stylistic choices in this documentary relate to how Minh-Ha Pham discusses the style and affects within fashion blogs written by Asian American and Asian British women. She argues that fashion, as expressed through blogs, can be political as female bloggers use aesthetics, embodiment and what she terms “sentimentality” to change perceptions and to image new subjectivities in terms of gender, race and sexuality. Rather than see the digital space as a disembodied utopia where race and gender are irrelevant, Pham sees fashion blogs as a significant site for the embodiment of identity. For instance, Asian fashion bloggers use their style and embodiment in images to resist stereotypes that Asians are unstylish.⁴² In addition to using style and embodiment to formulate new subjectivities, Pham also examines how fashion bloggers engage with affects to shift impressions. She argues, “A radical politics of feeling or the countersentimental creates new subject formations, reveals hidden histories, and redefines public culture in the context of digital media and consumer culture.”⁴³

Aesthetic style and affects also play significant roles in the formulation of Muslim subjects counter to misrepresentations. Tarek makes stylistic decisions in his documentary footage that convey the emotional weight of losing the lives of such vibrant young people. He deliberately shot footage to highlight that Deah, Yusor and Razan are never coming back, such as images of a bouncing basketball to convey that Deah will never play basketball again or a shot of Yusor and Razan’s mother, surrounded by trophies in their empty room and looking out the

⁴² Minh-Ha T. Pham, “Blog Ambition: Fashion, Feelings, and the Political Economy of the Digital Raced Body,” *Camera Obscura* 76 26, no. 1 (2011): 14.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 17.

window for her daughters to come home. Tarek felt uncomfortable staging this emotional moment with the mother, but he wanted to emphasize the affects of loss and grief. He explains, “I knew that if I captured that moment, it would be this million-dollar moment, and it absolutely was. And I had to rush out of the room because I started crying because it was this idea that they are never coming back.” Emotional moments like this one with the mother and interviews, in which the family members start to cry, convey the utter tragedy of these events.

Tarek employs natural lighting, intimate domestic spaces, soothing piano music, and medium to close-up shots in the interviews to highlight the humanity, gentleness and genuine love of the family and friends. By portraying them as relatable individuals who have deep love for the three victims, the documentary elicits feelings of connection in the viewers. Tarek also explains that he chose natural lighting to focus on the positivity and light of the three victims. “So here we have this opportunity to show Muslim Americans in their true light, beautiful, educated, in shape, compassionate,” Tarek states. “So stylistically, Deah’s name means light in Arabic so I wanted it to be natural light. I wanted it to have a really sharp contrast with the bloody murders and the gruesomeness of what went down.” Tarek also incorporates footage from the mainstream news coverage of the murders as well as images of anti-Islam protests and other hateful incidents, but this footage is shown in quick takes and is accompanied by fast-paced music. The frenetic and aggressive nature of this footage serves as a counterpoint to the peaceful and slow-paced interviews with the family members, images of the victims, and footage from the various memorial services.

Through aesthetic choices and the deployment of positive affects, Tarek’s documentary footage resists the dominant stereotypes that position Muslims as violent aggressors or oppressed victims and instead imagines a counter-sentimentality that displays Muslim Americans as

positive, authentic, peaceful and caring. Ultimately, this documentary asserts that these young Muslim lives must be celebrated and mourned as American lives. The short documentary preview video ends with the camera zooming in on the wood panel art piece with the American flag and the silhouette image of the victims. Again, this final image reinforces that Deah, Yusor and Razan were not foreigners or threats to American culture, but rather were kind-hearted Americans who generously contributed their time and talents to improve the lives of others. Despite the heartbreak surrounding these violent events, their deaths served as an unprecedented moment when non-Muslim Americans were confronted with feelings of grief and injustice. In addition, this documentary does more than just create feelings of resonance with the viewers, it profiles the work that family and friends are continuing to do to push for these murders to be tried as a hate crime, to advocate for the equal rights of Muslim Americans, and to continue the service work of the victims through various community projects. Tarek hopes that this documentary may inspire viewers to get involved in this social justice work.

Conclusion

The tragic events that occurred in Chapel Hill, NC on February 10, 2015 may not have had the same impact as the cases in which Muslims are the perpetrators of violence, but it was unprecedented to see images of happy and successful young Muslim Americans spread throughout social media and mainstream news outlets. Unlike the numerous other shooting cases, this situation was fairly black and white: an older white man who had espoused anti-religious views online shot three Muslim college students in their apartment. The photos that circulated reinforced the positive values of the victims' lives, and this was one of the first and only times that a mainstream American audience could see images of Muslims, living normal lives and contributing to society.

Something within these photos influenced how quickly and easily they spread in the hours after the murders, as well as how the images remain permanent symbols of advocacy work for Muslim Americans. I outlined above how positive affects adhered to these images and allowed for the easy movement through different media spaces. In particular, the simplicity of the black and white silhouette image created a feeling of connection in viewers and encouraged circulation. Although there are uncomplicated meanings around family and success attached to these images, there is also a depth to these images that can be attributed to the contradictory affects that surround these events. As I traced above, negative affects around fear usually affix to Muslim bodies, but in this case, the affects have shifted to ones of positivity, love and joy. This shift creates contradictory feelings in viewers who may not be accustomed to seeing Muslims as the innocent victims of a white aggressor. The emotional weight behind these images can also be attributed to the conflicted feelings that viewers may experience when they realize that these incredible young people were murdered in such a violent and senseless manner.

The silhouette image is easy to digest and relate to, but there is always the risk of transforming these complex lives into one-dimensional icons. Of all the cases in this study, this one can most easily be criticized for portraying Muslims as normal, unthreatening and apolitical Americans. Although a lot of the images showcase Deah, Yusor and Razan as average American young adults, their faith is always front and center as the motivation for their service and social justice work. The silhouette image is only an entry point into how these young people lived complex lives and were greatly influenced by Islamic values. There is space for these simple images, which circulate easily and re-articulate affective associations, along with the deeper creative projects like Mohammad Moussa's spoken word piece and Tarek Albaba's documentary. Additionally, these Muslims, both the victims and survivors, have never been

treated like normal Americans. The efforts to memorialize these three victims demonstrate how Muslims must go above and beyond the expectations of average Americans in order to be accepted as loyal and unthreatening to the U.S. The families still face pressures to grieve in a particularly visible way in order not to be accused of being foreign or of rejecting the freedoms of American life.

Despite the pressures that the family members and friends faced to mourn the Chapel Hill victims while still maintaining a patriotic spirit, the circulation of images and affects in this case was particularly notable for how it allowed Muslims and non-Muslims alike to feel a sense of connection to Deah, Yusor and Razan. The current media moment enabled this circulation and feelings of resonance through an assemblage of the aesthetics of digital spaces, the social media platforms, the online networks, and mobile technologies. If we take the graduation photo as an example, the photo was likely captured with a smart phone and then shared in social media. That archived photo was pulled from the social media account of one of the victims and then posted on the accounts of friends and family members after the murder. Quickly, this image circulated through accounts of people who didn't even know the victims and was soon shared in mainstream news media sources. Then, Teddy Alsalti was able to create the silhouette image, which developed feelings of resonance with viewers and continued to be circulated through online spaces. As Zizi Papacharissi argues, the social media spaces enable greater feelings of connection that may lead to offline action. In this case, people are united under the banner of "Our Three Winners" to do service and social justice work to achieve equality for Muslim Americans and other marginalized groups.

CHAPTER V:
THE HYBRID STYLE AND QUEER POLITICS
OF THE SALAFI FEMINIST

Through the use of blended clothing styles, hip-hop music, American urban landscapes, and popular culture, the Mipsterz fashion video presents a two and a half minute, fast-paced introduction to the intersecting identities of young Muslims in the U.S. and Canada. The quick jump cuts between various scenes highlight the wide variety of styles and interests of Muslim women. The video announces that the Mipsterz identity is not one universal thing but instead a blending, borrowing and rejection of aspects of many identity categories. Women skateboard in several scenes, another woman rides a motorcycle, Olympic fencer Ibtihaj Muhammad practices in a gym, and several women run, dance, jump, twirl and strut. The women wear chic, professional outfits; dark, biker styles; layered thrift store items; T-shirts with references to popular culture; African-inspired patterns; and flowing tunics and skirts.

As fashion director and co-producer Layla Shaikley shared in an interview, “You do get a double take when you try to indicate that you are more than what meets the eye. And the reality is that we are all that: we’re American; we’re Muslim; we have tons of identities. And the irony in the term Mipsterz is that it is outrageous that one would even think that there would be a Muslim hipster. It’s kinda like a big joke.”¹ Layla describes how the Mipsterz identity is claimed in a tongue in cheek manner as young Muslims reject the categories and dichotomies that have been forcefully applied to their lives. The women in the Mipsterz video use the label Mipsterz along with religious values, American and other cultural styles, ethnic and racial identities,

¹ Layla Shaikley, phone interview by author, Boulder, CO, September 20, 2016.

popular culture, sports and hip-hop style to unapologetically create their own self-portraits.

While the label Mipsterz is a created identity marker that does not have a significant meaning, the label and the hybrid styles that accompany it provide young Muslims with a way to playfully question assumptions.

In a similar manner to the embrace of the label “Mipsterz,” Canadian Muslim blogger Zainab bint Younus identifies online as the Salafi Feminist, her own somewhat ironic refusal to be dismissed as either a traditionalist Muslim or a progressive Western woman. In both of these cases, the incessant labeling of Muslim bodies by others encourages these women to manipulate categories and create their own humorous but meaningful labels. Both Zainab and the Mipsterz women use these labels and their hybrid aesthetic styles to create what Zainab calls a “visual shock” that works against stereotypes and assumptions. Through creative projects that circulate in digital spaces, these women confrontationally present their identities as Muslim women who are proud of their religious and cultural backgrounds but who also hold interests in popular culture and styles outside of their religion. These women are also interested in working for social justice and equality for marginalized people.

This chapter will examine the online advocacy work of Zainab bint Younus, who maintains the popular Salafi Feminist blog and various social media sites and who in June 2015, curated a series of self-portraits from “niqabis,” or Muslim women who wear the niqab face veil. Other cases in this study, such as the Mipsterz video and the Our Three Winners campaign, also emphasize how Muslims are constantly working against stereotypes and binary thinking that over simplify their experiences, but Zainab’s work and the niqabi photo series illustrate the innovative ways that young Muslims can use blended visual styles and the in-between-ness of digital spaces to resist and deconstruct these stereotypes and binaries. Scholarship within queer

theory provides the most useful analysis of how marginalized and “othered” individuals can resist dominant powers by rejecting binary thinking. By engaging in ambivalences, hybrid aesthetic styles and interstitial spaces, Zainab and the other Muslim creators attempt to use this queerness to call into question one-dimensional perceptions of Muslim Americans, to play with categories and identity markers, and to subvert dominant dichotomies. Ultimately, this online work is a way for Zainab and other niqabi women to negotiate competing pressures and to formulate their subjectivities as complex Muslim women.

Queerness, resisting norms and complicating dichotomies

In order to understand how the work of Zainab bint Younus and other traditional Muslim women, who wear face veils and long flowing robes, can be identified as queer and resistive to the status quo, it is helpful to first discuss theories that examine how queerness, hybridity and interstitial spaces can be used to counter dichotomies. Queer theory comes out of the experiences of individuals who fall outside of binaries of male/female or heterosexual/homosexual, but queerness can be expanded to include the experiences of individuals marginalized for different reasons. Judith Butler lays the foundation for queer theory in her assertion that both sex and gender are constructed through discourse and are performed in daily life. While there is no escape from the fabricated sex and gender binaries, Butler identifies queer resistance through “gender trouble” or behavior that plays with the gender binary.²

Individuals who don’t fit into the binaries of male/female, feminine/masculine or homo/hetero have the potential to resist these norms. In her discussion of queer feelings, Sara Ahmed discusses how the norms of heterosexuality are impressed on people’s bodies through

² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

emotions.³ Queer politics does not come out of the work to normalize homosexual relationships through things like marriage rights, but instead there is potential for resistance in the feelings of uneasiness and discomfort that queers sense within a heteronormative society. Rather than transcend the heteronormativity, queer individuals feel “a lack of ease with the available scripts for living and loving, along with an excitement in the face of the uncertainty of where the discomfort may take us.”⁴ Queer individuals display the unnaturalness of heterosexual norms and the possibility of living differently in the world.

According to Michael Warner’s work, queer individuals from marginalized sexualities have a unique ability “to challenge the pervasive and often invisible heteronormativity of modern societies.”⁵ An incorporation of sexuality into social theory will take account of the power dynamics of sexuality but also the ways that those outside of the dominant norms of sexuality find modes of resistance. Warner writes, “The preference for ‘queer’ represents, among other things, an aggressive impulse of generalization; it rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal.”⁶ In other words, the foundations for queer theory come out of the experiences of those who have felt marginalized and uneasy within the dominant binaries, and queer politics involves the actions that resist the norms of sexuality and gender.

In addition to queer theory’s intervention into feminism of accounting for sexuality and non-binary expressions of gender, an intersectional approach to feminism accounts for the confluence of various identity categories and forms of oppression, such as gender, race, class,

³ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 146

⁴ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁵ Michael Warner, *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

ethnicity, religion, etc. It is essential to account for these various factors when studying Muslim women, but as was discussed earlier in the analysis of the digital media moment, this study thinks about Muslim American experiences in relation to assemblages. Furthermore, as Jasbir Puar clearly argues, it is more productive to think about queerness and complex identities in terms of assemblages rather than intersectionality. While not the intention of the creator of the concept of intersectionality, Kimberle Williams Crenshaw,⁷ Puar explains that this approach has often led to a stagnant understanding of the intersection of oppression. This conceptualization produces binary thinking of two types of oppression intersecting, but Puar argues that oppression can be seen as a complex grid that is constantly shifting. Assemblage theory is a useful approach for this study because it moves beyond the static concepts of identity categories to think about the assemblage of the human body, as well as non-human social actors and affects.⁸ Puar asserts that “assemblages allow us to attune to movements, intensities, emotions, energies, affectivities, and textures as they inhabit events, spatiality, and corporealities” as opposed to intersectionality which is focused on identity, representation, visual symbols and meaning.⁹

Not only does assemblage theory account for these other social actors, but it also analyzes the dynamic nature of various interactions and relationships.¹⁰ Rather than use intersectionality to think about queerness in a binary and static way, Puar advocates thinking about queerness as an assemblage that moves away from binaries and a focus on identity categories. As Puar explains, there is not a single queer identity or subject:

⁷ Kimberle Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex,” in *Critical Race Feminism: A Reader*, ed. Adrien Katherine Wing, 23-33 (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

⁸ Jasbir K. Puar, “‘I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess’: Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory,” *philoSOPHIA* 2, no. 1 (2012): 50-51

⁹ Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 215.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 195.

There is no entity, no identity, no queer subject or subject to queer, rather queerness coming forth at us from all directions, screaming its defiance, suggesting a move from intersectionality to assemblage, an affective conglomeration that recognizes other contingencies of belonging (melding, fusing, viscosity, bouncing) that might not fall so easily into what is sometimes denoted as reactive community formations—identity politics—by control theorists.¹¹

Puar's intervention to bring assemblage theory into conversation with queerness is particularly influential for this study because it allows for an expansion of queerness beyond identity categories of sexuality or gender to think about an assemblage of human and non-human bodies, affects, aesthetic styles, material objects and other social actors that fall outside of the normative dichotomies. This allows space for an exploration of how a traditional Salafi Muslim woman like Zainab can be seen as engaging in queerness in her blatant refusal to be boxed into categories.

As Zainab engages with these digital platforms to express her frustrations with being placed into certain boxes, she becomes what Sara Ahmed terms a “willful subject” who strays from the straight (non-queer) path that appears to lead toward happiness.¹² Since willfulness is applied to subjects who *will* in the wrong way and wander from the straight path, Ahmed emphasizes the queerness of the willful subject. She explains, “To queer the will is to show how the will has already been given a queer potential.”¹³ Instead of remaining silent and passive, Zainab is a willful subject who acts against the labels that have been applied to her life. Ahmed explains that queer individuals who fall outside of norms are often charged with willfulness, “Indeed, willfulness as a judgment tends to fall on those who are *not* compelled by the reasoning of others. Willfulness might be what we do when we are judged as being *not*, as not meeting the

¹¹ Ibid., 211.

¹² Sara Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 8.

¹³ Ibid., 11.

criteria for being human, for instance.”¹⁴ While Zainab and other niqabi women are not queer in their sexuality or gender expression, they are deemed willful, and deviants from the straight path, because they are not white, Christian or male. Most importantly, these niqabi women refuse to express their sexuality in a manner that would be appealing to the straight, white, male gaze.

As Muslim women like Zainab are excluded from normative spaces, they use digital spaces to create and inhabit a dwelling where they belong. In her reflections on “queer phenomenology,” Sara Ahmed discusses how those who are queer and deviate from the straight path can also create their own spaces for dwelling. “Becoming reorientated, which involves the disorientation of encountering the world differently, made me wonder about orientation and how much ‘feeling at home,’ or knowing which way we are facing, is about the making of worlds.”¹⁵ Rather than being disorientated or lost, queer subjects create new paths and develop alternative spaces, in which to reside.

Muslim women as oppressed or sexualized

Although Zainab holds fairly conservative views on gender roles and homosexuality, her online work can be seen as queer in terms of how she confronts and deconstructs dichotomies of Muslim women that position them as either oppressed by the presumed backwardness of Islam or as liberated and sexualized by Western culture. As discussed in the introduction chapter, Lila Abu-Lughod argues that after 9/11, the images of burqa-clad women in Afghanistan circulated in U.S. media as symbols of the oppression of Islam. The images of these women became a justification for the war because the American troops would save the women with the

¹⁴ Ibid., 15.

¹⁵ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 20.

introduction of progressive Western culture.¹⁶ The use of these images only served to reinforce that Muslim women are merely icons of larger political struggles, or as miriam cooke explains the women are reduced to their religious-gendered identity of “Muslimwoman.” The women, who are marked by the veil, become one-dimensional victims of Muslim men.¹⁷

On the other side of the dichotomy, Muslim women who are seen as liberated from the oppression of Islam are reduced to symbols of sexual availability. As was discussed previously, Malek Alloula’s analysis of harem photography in the early 20th century showcases how the action of lifting the veil is not a genuine way to liberate Muslim women but only an avenue to access the forbidden space under the veil. The women do not become individuals with their own autonomy but rather they are liberated in order to become sexually available for Western men.¹⁸

In her analysis of an American Apparel advertisement called “Made in Bangladesh,” Dina Siddiqi clarifies this dichotomy that Muslim women face. The ad featured a topless Bangladeshi woman, along with a story about how she escaped from the oppression of Bangladesh and Islam. This ad reinforces the ideologies of liberal feminism and secular democracy sweeping in to liberate Muslim women. The model in the ad has only two choices: to remain physically covered and oppressed by Islam or to uncover herself and be sexually liberated by Western culture. Siddiqi explains, “Exercising the ‘right’ to bare the body signifies an act of empowerment for the Muslim woman whose ‘natural’ state is understood to be covered and

¹⁶ Lila Abu-Lughod, “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others,” *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (September 2002): 783-790.

¹⁷ miriam cooke, “The Muslimwoman,” *Contemporary Islam* 1, no. 2 (2007): 139-154.

¹⁸ Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

behind the veil.”¹⁹ The only way for the woman in the image to embrace the freedoms of the West is to abandon Islam and to uncover her body, revealing herself as a sexual object.

In her conversations with me, Zainab indicated that she is hyper-aware through personal experiences of this dominant dichotomy of Muslim women, especially those who wear the face veil. “You have two ideas of what niqab represents,” Zainab says. “There’s the hyper-sexualized, Orientalist, haram side of it, where it’s like, you exotic woman. . . . And it comes off as a benevolent compliment, but it’s not. Especially when guys will say, oh your eyes are so beautiful and I’m like, thanks but no thanks. I don’t need to be fetishized because of these ideas that you have from watching *Aladdin*.”²⁰ On the other side, Zainab sees the common argument that Muslim women lose their femininity and agency when they choose to wear the niqab. “I’m owning [my femininity] for myself. I’m deciding who’s in control of my body,” Zainab explains. “And a lot of people will say and do say, ‘well that doesn’t mean that you have to cover your face. You are implying that men can’t control themselves and women can’t control themselves.’ No, I’m perfectly aware that they can control themselves. It doesn’t mean that I don’t have the right to choose to wear this anyway.”

Zainab explains that the stock images of niqabi women that appear online and in news media often show these women as separated from their surroundings and not interacting with others. The distance and inactivity in these images consequently diminishes niqabi women to one-dimensional stereotypes. Zainab elaborates in our conversation, “We’re portrayed within a very narrow idea of who niqabis are and what they do and what they are like, but not even what they are like because we have no personality. We have no sense of person. We’re not seen as

¹⁹ Dina Siddiqi, “Sexuality as Liberation? The Work of Salvation Narratives in Neoliberal Times,” *Alal O Dulal* (March 2014). <http://alalodulal.org/2014/03/13/sexuality-as-liberation/> (accessed Dec. 5, 2015).

²⁰ Zainab bint Younus, personal interview by author, Victoria, BC, November 10, 2016.

person by the people, who are claiming to speak for us.” Zainab clearly lays out the binary thinking that diminishes Muslim women to stereotypes, but as I will examine in the rest of this chapter, it is through Zainab’s writings in her blog, her personal style both in online images and in person, and her coordination of the niqabi self-portrait photo series that she is able to complicate these dominant dichotomies.

Queering and complicating dichotomies

As was traced above, queer theory and politics come out of the experiences of individuals who do not fit into the gender binary or sexuality binary, but some queer thinkers have left space in their theorizing for anyone who falls outside of dominant norms and binaries, which could include Muslim women like Zainab. In an article advocating for radical queer politics that challenges hetero-normativity, Cathy Cohen argues that a lot of “queer activism” ends up reinforcing the binary between queerness and heterosexuality. By focusing on the experiences of queer individuals, this approach often ignores the interconnections between powerful forces that oppress queer individuals as well as people who are marginalized because of their race, class, gender or other factors.²¹ She wants to examine “how we might construct a new political identity that is truly liberating, transformative, and inclusive of all those who stand on the outside of the dominant constructed norm of state-sanctioned white middle- and upper-class heterosexuality.”²²

Cohen incorporates other forms of marginalization into queer theory while still foregrounding sexuality and hetero-normativity as the main areas of marginalization.²³ Truly radical queer politics, Cohen argues, needs to work to dismantle all dominant norms and

²¹ Cathy J. Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3, no. 4 (1997): 438.

²² *Ibid.*, 441.

²³ *Ibid.*, 444.

challenge structures of oppression.²⁴ Cohen makes a significant assertion that there is not a “uniform heteronormativity from which all heterosexuals benefit.”²⁵ In other words, lots of straight individuals fall outside of dominant norms based on markers like class, race or gender. Because of the domination of white, male heterosexual norms, there is a need to regulate the sexual behavior of people who deviate from these norms, such as poor mothers, enslaved people and immigrants, among others.²⁶ Queer activists tend not to see straight people as potential allies, but Cohen asserts that queer politics must incorporate any individuals who have been deemed outside of the norms, such as a Muslim woman like Zainab who covers her body as a form of worship but refuses to be seen as an oppressed victim who lacks individuality.

In a study of Muslim women in Europe, Fatima El-Tayeb found that women were able to perform queer activism through their physical presence in public. By wearing modest clothing and practicing their religion in public while advocating for gender equality and other feminist concerns, Muslim women were able to use their bodies “to disrupt normative narratives and suggest alternative modes of European Muslim identities.”²⁷ As in the case of the Bangladeshi model in the American Apparel advertisement discussed above or public figures like Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the assumption is that Muslim women can only be fully liberated by Western culture if they break completely free from religion. Again, the dominant dichotomy positions the oppression of Islam in opposition to the liberation of Western culture. El-Tayeb argues that the advocacy work of Muslim women in Europe is a way for these women “who wear the *hijab* while practicing types of agencies supposedly incompatible with its presence, challenge the implicit visual logic

²⁴ Ibid., 438-439.

²⁵ Ibid., 452.

²⁶ Ibid., 453.

²⁷ Fatima El-Tayeb, *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 84.

of racialized and gendered hierarchies hidden beneath the discourse of colorblindness and contribute to the queering of ethnicity by working on and with contradictions and impossibilities.”²⁸ Through their public presence as covered women who are concerned with progressive causes, Muslim women perform a form of queer activism that dismantles the dominant positioning of Islam and Western culture as incompatible.

Creating The Salafi Feminist

In North American society, Muslim women, especially niqabi women, are greatly marginalized to the point that their voices go unheard in public debates about things like the right to wear the niqab. Zainab uses digital media, like her blog, online news sites, Facebook and Twitter, as well as her public appearance to assert her individuality and the right for the voices of niqabi women to be heard. Specifically, through the Salafi Feminist blog, the online imagery of her persona, and her aesthetic style in public, Zainab uses her complex identity to queer and complicate binary thinking and stereotypes. Zainab started blogging in 2006 under a different name, but it wasn't until she read more on feminism that she began to rethink the title and focus of her blog. Zainab found that she didn't relate to a lot of the “secular leftist, white feminism” because it was dismissive of religion and ignored racism. Zainab's understanding of feminism comes out of her religious identity. She explains this inability to separate Islam from feminism:

But my religious identity will always come forward; that's primary. Beyond anything else, I am Muslim. And my feminism is not separate from that. It's very much tied into that because I read the Qur'an and I see the way that God addresses men and women both, the way that we are universally encouraged to be individuals of faith, of character, of justice.²⁹

²⁸ Ibid., 118.

²⁹ Zainab bint Younus, personal interview by author, Victoria, BC, November 10, 2016.

Rather than see the niqab, for instance, as a form of oppression, Zainab argues in an article entitled, “For me, niqab is a feminist statement,” that the niqab is a declaration that she owns and controls her body. Instead of hiding her individuality, Zainab sees the niqab as a way to control how other people interact with her. She writes, “Wearing niqab does not erase me from society. Rather, it gives me the freedom to engage in it on my own terms, without being bound by others’ demands.”³⁰ She also calls wearing the niqab, “the ultimate act of ownership and empowerment.”³¹ Instead of seeing the niqab as a sign of oppression or social restriction, Zainab understands the niqab to be liberating because she is able to manage how people interact with her socially. Throughout her posts, Zainab repeatedly asserts that she has the agency to choose to cover her body and face, but her interpretation of agency differs from the Western assumption of women as free agents who resist the status quo. She describes wearing the niqab as “an act of worship that I hold between myself and God.”³² The niqab is not resistive but rather a way to physically embody religious convictions and to submit oneself to God.

Zainab’s understanding of agency and the importance of the embodiment of Islamic virtues relates to the arguments that Saba Mahmood makes in her study of the women’s mosque movement in Egypt. Within this movement, women choose to embrace more traditional practices: wearing the headscarf, being subservient to men, and acting in a more shy and passive manner. Zainab’s understanding of feminism is distinct from the Egyptian women that Mahmood studied, especially in Zainab’s assertion of the equality of men and women. On the other hand, Zainab still chooses to wear clothing that marks her as submissive instead of resistive to the status quo. Mahmood argues that Western liberal feminists find it difficult to understand Muslim

³⁰ Zainab bint Younus, “For me, niqab is a feminist statement,” *Medium*, June 4, 2015, <https://medium.com/aj-story-behind-the-story/for-me-niqab-is-a-feminist-statement-13ca2fc2fe9a#.m7dvi936t> (accessed Dec. 5, 2015).

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

women like Zainab who choose to wear a headscarf and act in ways that appear to be subservient to men. Western liberal feminists often work with an assumption of agency that includes “the belief that all human beings 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.”³³ Mahmood expands the concept of agency beyond just resistive acts. A woman can assert agency “not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one *inhabits* norms.”³⁴ Choosing to wear the headscarf is an act that may inhabit the norms of Islam and more traditional gender relations, but this act is also a critical act against secular, liberal culture, which dictates what women like Zainab should and should not do in order to be liberated.

Zainab’s existence as a subject who covers her body and face but also advocates for gender equality reveals the limitation of Western liberalism and its focus on acts of resistance. A figure like Zainab is confounding in the North American liberal context because of the foundational understanding of the liberal subject as one who resists the oppressive structures of institutions like religion. The liberal feminist formulation of agency disregards the possibility that Muslim women may benefit greatly in their religious life through the wearing of the veil. As Zainab discusses, wearing the veil is an act of worship that allows her to grow closer to God. This understanding of the embodiment of religious conviction relates to what Mahmood found in how the women in the Egyptian mosque movement used physical practices like wearing the veil as a way to cultivate Islamic virtue. Mahmood engages with Aristotelian ethics to argue that these Muslim women attempt to develop virtuous interiors through exterior practices. For

³³ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 5.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 15

instance, there is a connection between the abstract norm of modesty and wearing the veil, “such that the veiled body becomes the necessary means through which the virtue of modesty is both created *and* expressed.”³⁵ It is essential for these Muslim women that their inner status matches their outward behavior and vice versa. For example, Zainab discusses how as a child she watched her mom wear the niqab, but she wasn’t able to wear it until she understood the full meaning of the niqab. She explains, “When I put one on, it was with utter conviction that it was something I not only wanted, but needed. It was a reflection and extension of my identity, without being the sum of my existence.”³⁶ The niqab was something that Zainab felt she needed to wear for her faith, and she hopes that this act will work on her interior soul and lead her closer to God.

While she wears the niqab as an act to please God, Zainab argues that covering her body does not eliminate her agency to act in the world. Unlike the women in the Egyptian mosque movement, Zainab does not believe that wearing the niqab means that she has to act in a submissive manner. Zainab elaborates on conversations that she has had with critical Muslims:

I don’t feel compelled to fit anyone’s idea of who I should be. And I’ve actually gotten flack for that from fellow Muslims. Like they’ll say, “A good Muslim women, especially one with a niqab, should be conducting themselves with modesty.” But I’m like, “What about me isn’t modest?” They say, “Well, you’re loud, or you laugh too much, or you talk too loudly, or you’re too aggressive.” I write a lot in my Facebook posts about the double standards in our community. They say, “Well, if you were really a modest woman, you wouldn’t speak like this. You would be soft-spoken and demure.” Like, “Are you kidding? Have you even met me?! Because, no that’s not who I am.”³⁷

³⁵ Ibid., 23.

³⁶ bint Younus, “For me, niqab.”

³⁷ Zainab bint Younus, personal interview by author, Victoria, BC, November 10, 2016.

Zainab's reflections indicate that wearing the niqab is an agentive act that allows her to develop her faith and connection to God without limiting her ability to speak and act for herself. These comments, furthermore, illustrate Zainab's refusal to become a voiceless icon of either an oppressed or pious Muslim woman.

In addition, Zainab proudly identifies as a Salafi Muslim, which means that she primarily looks to what the Prophet Muhammad and his companions did and said for guidance on current practices. Because of the inability to separate out Salafism and Feminism, Zainab embraces both aspects. "So there you go, I'm Salafi and I'm feminist," Zainab states. "Of course, nobody thinks the two will ever fit. And to be honest, this is something that I pretty much made up, but it is who I am. It was tongue in cheek, partially because some Salafists would say this is really bad. And a feminist would be like, oh my God, how can you be an orthodox Muslim woman? Your entire religion is about oppressing women."³⁸ In a similar way to how Layla Shaikley discusses the created term "Mipsterz" as a humorous way to play with labels, Zainab also playfully brings together two oppositional labels while incorporating aspects of her background as a Canadian woman of color who enjoys things like goth fashion and fantasy novels.

Zainab almost relishes the controversy and confusion that come about in readers, both Muslim and non-Muslim, when she identifies on her blog as "a Goth (Steam) Punk, wannabe-biker niqaabi feminist who may or may not be a Salafi according to your definition thereof." She is aware that her identity online and in person will create feelings of uneasiness as she bridges the deep divisions between categories. In one blog post, Zainab defines "The Salafi Feminist" as "someone who just likes to see everyone get their knickers in a knot when they see the words

³⁸ Ibid.

‘Salafi’ and ‘feminist’ put together.’³⁹ Later on in the same post, she admits that she is trying to instigate people with the name Salafi Feminist, but she wants to resist the fact that “everyone wants to shove me and my views into an annoyingly narrow box, because unless you fit into a pre-constructed box, you don’t count!”⁴⁰ Her identity is multifaceted just like any other woman, and she is tired of being reduced to her religion and a piece of fabric. She frequently discusses how the niqab is one part, but not the whole, of her identity. “I’m a writer, a feminist, and an orthodox Muslim (Salafi, to be precise). I have a fondness for all that is goth, (steam)punk, and Batman. I’m obsessed with leather biker jackets. I’m loud, somewhat annoying, and absent-minded. And I wear niqab.”⁴¹ In the face of dominant dichotomies that work to reduce niqabi women to one-dimensional stereotypes, Zainab’s hybrid identity challenges these dichotomies.

The incorporation of hybridity and blended styles also extends into Zainab’s visual style both in her online persona and her offline appearance. After relaunching her blog under the name Salafi Feminist, Zainab commissioned an artist to create an image for her blog and social media accounts (figure 17). She wanted to illustrate a Muslim woman doing something “awesome” and “cool.” The artist used a graffiti style to draw Zainab in a black *abaya* (full body gown), black biker jacket, black boots and a black niqab. She is leaning on a motorcycle and clutching a long and ornate sword in her right hand. Behind Zainab the words, “The Salafi Feminist,” are spray-painted on the wall. Zainab explains in our conversation that she wanted a visual image that went beyond the niqab to highlight her identity and interests, “I love goth fashion and steam punk fashion. I love reading fantasy. I’m obsessed with motorcycles, checking them out. This is all

³⁹ Zainab bint Younus, “The Salafi Feminist Manifesto” <http://thesalafifeminist.blogspot.com/p/on-being-salafi-feminist.html>

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ bint Younus, “For me, niqab.”

part of who I am.” As opposed to the tropes of the oppressed and covered Muslim woman, this image highlights Zainab’s strength and unique personality.



Figure 17: Salafi Feminist banner image

For over ten years, Zainab has been developing her online presence as the Salafi Feminist and negotiating the various aspects of her identity. The online spaces of blogs and social media serve as testing grounds to try out these blended identities and styles, which she then incorporates into her offline appearance. Unlike how she is visually portrayed in her graphic image, Zainab is a petite and thin woman in real life. She uses various accessories and her strong personality to engage with people in public and display her individuality (see figure 18). When I spent a day touring around Victoria, BC with Zainab, she accentuated her black abaya and niqab with a purple purse, black leather jacket with gold studs, purple sparkly sneakers, purple lace gloves, and black rings. People often stared at Zainab, as she is one of a handful of niqabis in Victoria, but she appeared oblivious to the stares and was friendly and engaging with everyone that she met. Zainab’s accessories serve as points of connection when she meets people in person. Conversation starters include knit hats with phrases like “still killin’ it” or “bite me”

embroidered on front, lace gloves, a denim jacket with numerous pins, a Batman ring, and colorful purses and shoes. The accessories highlight Zainab's personal interests and allow her to connect with people over similar interests. "That's my engagement, my interactions with people," Zainab explains, "They do pick up on these things. They are able to look past the fabric covering my face and still be able to identify me and engage with me on some level."



Figure 18: One of Zainab's self-portraits

In our conversation, Zainab shares that she wears certain accessories that represent her interests, like goth fashion, comic books and the color purple. These accessories also emphasize that Muslim women cannot be reduced to religion and the identity of a one-dimensional victim. Her accessories begin conversations about popular culture. "[The conversation] doesn't have to do with religion at all," Zainab discusses. "That's another assumption that people make. If you are a Muslim woman, if you are visibly Muslim and you wear niqab then everything must be about religion for you. Well no, I have an entire life that has so many different facets and aspects to it." Her public appearance is a visual affront to the assumptions that Muslim women are oppressed and lack individual personalities.

By existing in this interstitial space in between easy categories, Zainab performs a form of queer politics that dismantles normative binaries separating feminism, agency, liberation and individuality from Islam. Furthermore, Zainab illustrates the willfulness that Sara Ahmed discusses, as she becomes a disruption to the status quo—a disruption that must be pushed down and contained. Ahmed explains, “Willfulness involves persistence in the face of having been brought down, where simply to ‘keep going’ or to ‘keep coming up’ is to be stubborn and obstinate. Mere persistence can be an act of disobedience.”⁴² Through her digital activism, blogging about feminist topics and visual appearance, Zainab persistently brings up critiques of both Muslims and progressive Americans. She never runs out of energy as she constantly provokes people to think differently about Muslim women.

In-between spaces and hybrid styles in digital media

In addition to how Zainab plays with labels, imagery and fashion styles to create a queer representation of her identity as the Salafi Feminist, her work in coordinating a series of self-portraits from other niqabis illustrates how Muslim women engage with the interstitial spaces of online media as well as hybrid styles to further challenge dominant dichotomies. Homi Bhabha’s concept of third space is useful to think through how online media might provide in-between spaces that encourage the blending of aesthetic styles. Writing in the context of post-colonialism, Bhabha examines how those who have been classified as “other” to Western culture find themselves positioned in a third space in between Western culture and the local culture. He sees these in-between spaces as sites of articulation, negotiation and struggle. As Bhabha explains, “It is in the emergence of the interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—that the intersubjective and collective experience of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural

⁴² Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, 2.

value are negotiated.”⁴³ As has been discussed throughout this chapter, Muslim women, especially those who wear the niqab, are trapped in this dichotomy that positions Islam and religious practices like wearing modest clothing as irreconcilable with Western feminist values of agency and liberation. In this case of the niqabi self-portraits, online media provide third spaces that are in between this dichotomy of the West vs. Islam, and these spaces allow for a blending of aesthetic styles and a negotiation of categories, which work to destabilize dominant norms and binary thinking.

In May 2015, Associated Press photographer Hassan Ammar posted a series of photographs, purporting to show the view from behind the veil.⁴⁴ Ammar draped a cloth over the camera lens to blur the images of tourist locales in the Middle East and North Africa. This photo series was problematic for several reasons, namely that most niqabis don’t cover their eyes so their view of the world is unobstructed. More significantly, these photos reinforced the Orientalist tropes that there is a secret harem space behind the veil and that Muslim women are so oppressed that they can’t even see the world clearly.

In response to what she saw as a “ridiculous” photo series, Zainab wanted to create an avenue for women who wear the niqab to share their actual viewpoints. “So when it came to that photo essay in particular, I was like forget it, I’m not going to sit around and wait for others to speak for me,” she explains to me. “Yes, you are very well-intentioned but you don’t know what my life is like. You don’t know what niqab means to me and how I view the world while I’m wearing niqab.” Zainab reached out to niqabi friends and followers on social media, seeking

⁴³ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 2.

⁴⁴ Nick Kirkpatrick, “What some Muslim women see: Views from behind the veil shot by an AP photographer,” *The Washington Post*, May 19, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/05/19/what-some-muslim-women-see-views-from-behind-the-veil-shot-by-an-ap-photographer/?postshare=6091432129509116> (accessed Dec. 5, 2015).

candid photos from their daily lives. She then posted the photos along with written reflections and captions on *BuzzFeed*, *Huffington Post*, and *Medium*. In the images, the women illustrate their multifaceted identities, incorporate hybrid visual styles and play with presumed dichotomies that separate Islam and the veil from Western, consumer culture.

Some of the images showcase the women within commercial spaces like department stores, highlighting the ease with which the women exist in Western culture. In a series of images, several friends goof around in Target and take pictures wearing a Darth Vader helmet (figure 19) and Halloween mask (figure 20). In another picture, Zainab herself appears wearing a Batman mask in a clothing store. Other images display how the women interact with Western culture, such as one image of a niqabi woman at the Harry Potter studio in England and another photo featuring a Canadian woman, playing hockey in a neighborhood street (figure 21). These photos illustrate that Muslim women, even those who wear the niqab and abaya, are not cloistered but engage with aspects of Western, consumer culture. The women use the images to “redistribute the sensible,” as Jacques Ranciere wrote, and to place the niqab—and all the negative concepts that go along with it—within spaces of neoliberal, Western culture.⁴⁵ The women shift the negative assumptions of the niqab and assert that their covered bodies belong within the fun and fluorescent-lit consumer spaces.

⁴⁵ Jacques Ranciere, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Bloomsbury, 2004).



Figure 19: Darth Vader mask at Target



Figure 20: Halloween mask at Target



Figure 21: Playing street hockey

Furthermore, these photos engage in third spaces by imitating certain cultural tropes that point to the contradictions in Western society. Bhabha discusses the concept of mimicry as another tactic of the third space, “The menace of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority.”⁴⁶ Mimicry can be used as a political tool to subvert the colonizers’ power by pointing to the flaws in Western arguments while still borrowing from Western culture in politically productive ways. In these niqabi self-portraits, the women mimic Western popular culture as they wear Batman, Darth Vader and Halloween masks. At the same time, these women cleverly challenge the ridiculous assumption that they are oppressed because they wear the niqab face veil for religious reasons. The face veil that they wear under the pop culture masks are somehow offensive to liberal society, but it would be ridiculous to question the agency of Darth Vader, Batman or anyone who wears a Halloween mask. Within this hybrid digital space, the women employ the tactics of mimicry to point out the ambivalences and hypocrisy of Western culture.

⁴⁶ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 126.

Additionally, the women use the images to demonstrate that they are active individuals who interact with their environment, contrary to the dominant stereotypes of passive and isolated niqabi women. The niqabis are seen horseback riding (figure 22), jet skiing (figure 23), standing by a car, playing street hockey and driving a scooter. These images also show that the women have interests that extend beyond their religion. The photos that show the women trying on Halloween masks in Target demonstrate that niqabi women are not dour and oppressed but have personalities and enjoy having fun with friends like any other young woman. The women use these self-portraits to force the viewers to see them as complex individuals who are not restricted by the fabric that they wear. This work to present niqabi women as deeper than their body coverings does run the risk of normalizing these women into mainstream American culture. It is more productive for the women to work from a hybrid space in-between Western culture and Islam. This hybridity allows the women to remain critical of both sides without restraining their religious convictions or sacrificing their membership in Western society.



Figure 22: Horseback-riding

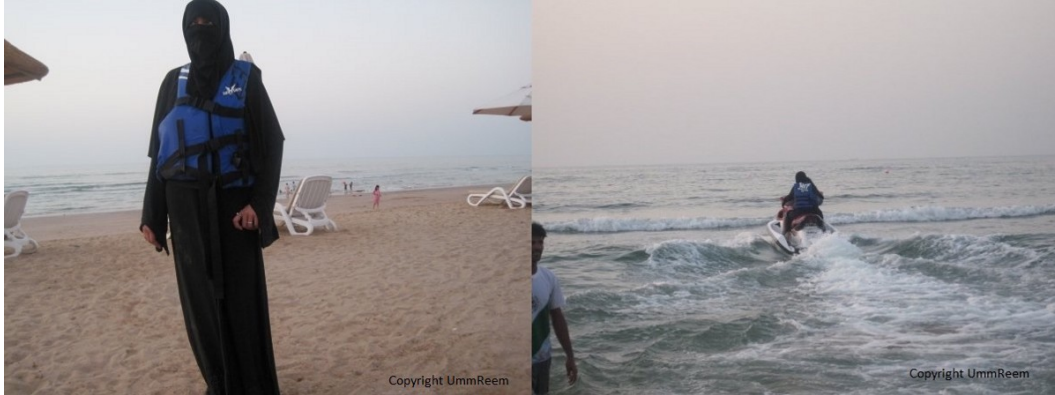


Figure 23: Jet-skiing

Sarah,⁴⁷ one of the participants in the Target images, elaborates on how the photos illustrate the multidimensionality of Muslim women. She shares, “People should see that we like to have fun and that we have a sense of humor. And it’s not all about being religious 24/7.”⁴⁸ The photos and online media gave Sarah a chance to blend the different parts of her background as a Muslim who was raised by immigrant parents in Canada, “I just feel like social media has helped Muslims because our generation has so much to say because we really want to be like, this is our experience and you are not going to define it for us.” Sarah adds that sometimes the representations of Muslims in social media go too far and lose sight of the value of Islamic teachings. She explains, “Recently there have been some Muslims participating in make-up ads, and I just think that’s ridiculous because it’s like, we cover to be modest. And then why do we have to prove that we need makeup?” The political potential of these niqabi self-portraits rests in their hybridity and their inability to be placed into an easy category of either Western culture or Islam. These niqabi self-portraits are far more “queer” or resistive to binary thinking than a Muslim woman trying to normalize herself into Western culture by taking off her modest clothes

⁴⁷ Sarah did not wish to be identified by her last name.

⁴⁸ Sarah, personal interview by author, Victoria, BC, November 10, 2016.

and wearing makeup. These niqabi women resist the pressure to fully assimilate into American culture; instead, they claim that their conservative religious values can be incorporated with certain aspects of American culture.

Additionally, the digital spaces that are used in this niqabi photo series, both the social media channels where Zainab collected and circulated the images and the websites like *Huffington Post* that encourage submitted content, provide new avenues for women like Zainab and Sarah to create representations of their lives. Zainab talks about how online media are useful because these spaces are free of filters and barriers, “These are the things we do when we are allowed to represent ourselves. And I find that social media is an awesome platform for that because there are no restrictions; there isn’t an editor that you are going through. . . . This is us being totally honest, unadulterated.”

While there are obvious negatives to digital spaces, in this case, it is far more important to Zainab and the other women that they have a chance to share their own stories. Zainab acknowledges that the niqabi images probably didn’t get as wide of circulation as the original AP photographer’s series, but it was important to the women involved to have these images out there in the wider public. “It meant something to the women that were involved that here we are speaking for ourselves,” Zainab explains. “We’re not waiting for someone to say something for us. We are doing it for ourselves. We’re presenting ourselves. We’re putting ourselves out there. And it’s empowering. It’s a sign of our agency. It directly contradicts the idea that we are so oppressed that somebody else has to come in as savior.” Since there are almost zero hijabi women—let alone niqabi women—in mainstream media, it meant a lot to the women that they were able to create their own responses to the problematic photo series. Instead of being reduced to voiceless and oppressed icons of Islam, these women use the creativity of these self-portraits

and the flexibility of digital spaces to develop their consciousness as willful subjects who act in political spaces and respond when their lives are misrepresented.

Employing humor and play in online spaces

In addition to hybridity and the blending of styles, the online spaces are also flexible in how they allow for humor and play. In his book on Muslim women and veiling, Thorsten Botz-Bornstein discusses how the ambivalences and hybridity of queer theory allow for Muslim women to play with categories and symbols. While certain second wave feminist approaches tend to see symbols like the veil as signs of male oppression, feminist work inflected with queer theory conceives of the veil as a flexible symbol beyond the dichotomy of covered and oppressed or naked and liberated. Scholarship on the veil tends to minimize the veil to a single meaning. “Both pro-veiling and anti-veiling discourses have often essentialized the veil as the authentic, traditional, and morally correct form of Islamic dress for women,” Botz-Bornstein writes. “Only humor and play (to be learned from Third Wave feminism) can relativize this essentialization”⁴⁹ The women in this niqabi self-portrait series use humor and play to resist the over-simplified assumptions of veiled Muslim women.

For instance, the images in Target show the women having fun with each other and using symbols of Western consumer culture, such as the department store and Halloween masks. In turn, the women challenge assumptions that niqabi women are victimized, dour and depressed. Zainab discusses how humor and play have an impact, “I think it goes to show that we are not these dry, somber, formal, depressed women who have no spark to their lives. All the Muslim women that I know, niqabi or otherwise, have such vibrant personalities.” Through these self-

⁴⁹ Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, *Veils, Nudity, and Tattoos: The New Feminine Aesthetics* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015), 43.

portraits, Zainab and the niqabi women claim that the niqab and Islamic values can exist in the fun and colorful spaces of Western consumer culture.

Furthermore, Zainab employs humor and sarcasm in her posts that accompany the niqabi images. She wrote a post on *BuzzFeed*, “Veiled Snapshots: Muslim Women Who Are Begging to Be Saved,” as if she was a Western feminist who could not comprehend this new phenomenon of Muslim women covering their faces. Zainab writes, “Despite the advances of technology and the freedom of Western countries available to them, so many of these women seem to be choosing to hide their identities with this hotly-debated item of cloth.”⁵⁰ Here Zainab calls out Western feminists who assume that Muslim women would never willingly choose to wear the veil because women would naturally choose to embrace the “freedoms of Western countries” such as fashionable clothing, makeup and hair styles. Zainab also reinforces the Western assumption that wearing the veil is so oppressive that it usurps other forms of liberation like education and employment. Along with an image of a woman who is a physician, the caption disregards the woman’s education, “So what if you’re a medical professional? The veil obviously renders your education and your success completely moot. We will save you by removing your veil and your choice to wear what you please!”⁵¹ Along with the participants in the photo series, Zainab is well aware of the hurtful things that people say and think about women who wear the niqab, but the women use humor, flexibility and hybridity to take control and subvert the narrative. While Zainab might appear to be subservient and powerless, she uses these images and the written reflections to present herself as strong, quick-witted, sarcastic and independent.

⁵⁰ Zainab bint Younus, “Veiled Snapshots: Muslim Women Who Are Begging to Be Saved,” *Buzz Feed*, June 1, 2015, <http://www.buzzfeed.com/zainabbintyounus/veiled-snapshots-muslim-women-who-are-begging-to-1lokj> (accessed Dec. 5, 2015).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

Creating a “visual shock” from within culture

Zainab’s online work and the niqabi photo series go beyond simply resisting binary thinking, so that the women work from within American cultural spaces and symbols to transform the normative logic that often leads to their marginalization. Jose Esteban Muñoz’s concept of disidentification elaborates on how those in marginal, queer positions, such as Muslim Americans, can resist the dominant culture through creative projects. Disidentification is a political strategy for those who are unrepresented and misrepresented in mainstream media to articulate their complex lives through creative projects.⁵² Muñoz offers a definition, “Disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship.”⁵³ Muslim women who wear modest clothing and cover their faces can easily fall outside of the category of “normative” citizens, as they constantly negotiate the categories and labels that are assigned by the dominant culture.⁵⁴

Building on Michel Pecheux’s theory of disidentification, Muñoz explains the three ways that subjects are created through ideology: identification or agreement with the ideology, counter-identification or disagreement with the ideology, and disidentification. Instead of simple acceptance or resistance, disidentification “is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance.”⁵⁵ Disidentification is a

⁵² José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 1.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

mode of resistance that still acknowledges the power of ideology but it sees the potential for small moments of resistance from within ideology. Instead of identifying or resisting dominant culture, the queer subject disidentifies or reads “oneself and one’s own life narrative in a moment, object or subject that is not culturally coded to ‘connect’ with the disidentifying subject.”⁵⁶ Similar to Stuart Hall’s concept of “oppositional reading” or bell hooks’s formulation of the “oppositional gaze,” disidentification works from within a cultural text to create an alternative and innovative reading from a marginal perspective. In addition to displaying the flaws in the majority culture, disidentification is a way of “representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture.”⁵⁷ The political potential of this tactic lies in the ability for subjects to rework the dominant meanings of cultural texts in ways that point out the problems with the text while also incorporating the voices of the marginalized.

The niqabi self-portrait series is an example of disidentification as the women aren’t only resisting dominant stereotypes, but more importantly, they employ the cultural forms of cell phone self-portraits, consumer spaces and American popular culture to create an innovative representation. The women create what Zainab calls a “visual shock” that challenges viewers’ assumptions of niqabi women as they appear in the common cultural form of a cell phone picture. “We’re so used to portrayals of Muslim women in the niqab, again as either sexualized, so there’s the close-up of the veiled woman with the exotic eyes, or it’s like the distant vision of that woman all in black,” Zainab explains to me. “These pictures were full of color; they are full of life. These pictures are full of energy. And none of them had any emphasis on sexuality, whatsoever. None of them had any context of oppression either.” The presence of covered

⁵⁶ Ibid., 12.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 31.

Muslim women within these spaces of Western culture complicate the binary thinking about the oppression and sexualization of Muslim women.

The niqabi women transform the “cultural logic” from within in order to show how they easily exist in consumer spaces like Target and interact with popular culture like Harry Potter, Batman and Star Wars. Additionally, the in-the-moment, authentic style of the images highlights that the women are comfortable using this media form and regularly take candid pictures on their cell phones. The women also alter the concept of a self-portrait. While almost any other self-portrait shared on social media would emphasize the face and the body of the subject, in these images, the veils obscure the women’s faces, and flowing robes hide their body shapes. Nevertheless, the images still perform the role of a self-portrait by emphasizing the individual personalities of the subjects. The humorous pictures at Target show that the women have fun together, the images of the women jet-skiing, playing hockey and horseback riding highlight various hobbies and activities, and the photos that incorporate Harry Potter and Batman emphasize their fandom. The self-portraits show that the women have vibrant and diverse personalities and that the women hold interests in activities that extend outside of their religion. The women engage in Western cultural forms to transform the “cultural logic” from within in an attempt to change the larger public opinions that lead to the oppression and marginalization of their lives. Niqabi women have individual personalities and interact with their environment, and self-portraits shared in social media do not need to emphasize the body and physical features in order to showcase people’s identities.

Finally, Zainab’s work on her blog and in creating her online persona is another example of disidentification because of how she uses the cultural forms of social media, profile images and blogs to call into question assumptions. As discussed above, Zainab identifies in her written

profile and graphic image as a complex individual whose identity cannot be reduced to her religion or a piece of clothing. She also employs codes of Western feminism to call out so-called progressive feminists who silence the voices of Muslim women. In an article for *Huffington Post*, Zainab writes:

Those who take it upon themselves to ‘be a voice’ to Muslim women, and especially those in niqab, display a sickening arrogance when they do so. They forget—or deliberately ignore—that covering one’s face does not render one silent or stupid. Furthermore, it is the bitterest of ironies when self-proclaimed feminists fall into the damsel in distress narrative by attempting to ‘liberate’ niqabi women while at the same time putting them down as being too ignorant to make their own choices.⁵⁸

Zainab calls out Western feminists for assuming that they are in a superior position from which to speak for Muslim women. She compares Western feminists who try to speak for Muslim women to misogynists and chauvinists who want to police what women wear. She writes, “Whether one agrees personally with the wearing of the niqab or not, the feminist course of action is not to reject it outright, but to respect the choices of those women who do choose to wear it freely.”⁵⁹ It is patronizing for Western feminists to assume that Muslim women don’t have the ability to decide what they want to wear and to represent themselves. Zainab turns the common concepts of Western, white feminism on their head in order to point out the hypocrisy of those who claim to be doing progressive feminist work.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have argued that the online work of Canadian Zainab bint Younus is a form of queer political activism because of how she, along with other niqabi women,

⁵⁸ Zainab bint Younus, “Covering One’s Face Does Not Render One Silent or Stupid,” *Huffington Post*, June 12, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/zainab-bint-younus/overing-ones-face-does-not-render-one-silent-or-stupid_b_7539964.html?utm_hp_ref=tw (accessed Dec. 5, 2015).

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

utilizes the hybrid visual styles and in-between spaces afforded by digital media to complicate dominant dichotomies and stereotypes of covered Muslim women. These stereotypes dehumanize Muslim women and reduce them to pawns to be used by both progressive feminists and anti-Islam conservatives. In a similar way to how gay and gender queer individuals fall outside of traditional dichotomies, so are Muslim women, especially those who cover, placed in a marginal position outside of white, male heterosexual desires. Muslim women, who cover their bodies and faces, are queer subjects that fall outside of the traditional understandings of how gender and sexuality should be performed.

While Zainab and the other niqabi women are not queer in terms of their sexuality or gender identity, they can be seen as performing a form of queer politics in how their online work dismantles and challenges normative ways of thinking. The women use these images of themselves as complex individuals, interacting with their environments and easily living in Western cultural spaces, to resist being categorized as covered and oppressed by Islam or as unveiled and liberated by Western progressive politics. As opposed to a woman like Ayaan Hirsi Ali who has to uncover and completely abandon Islam in order to benefit from liberal “freedoms,” these women claim an ability to exist in both spaces. The women go beyond simply presenting that they can be both Muslim and Canadian/American/Western, a claim that Nadia Marzouki critiqued because of the tendency of this approach to depoliticize Islam and turn it into a “good religion” that does not challenge public life.⁶⁰

As discussed before, one of the informants for this study, Sarah, made a significant point that sometimes Muslim Americans go too far in their work to appear as normal Americans. The work of Zainab and the other women in the niqabi photo series illustrates the subjects’

⁶⁰ Nadia Marzouki, *Islam, an American Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 25.

complexity and individuality in the face of one-dimensional stereotypes, but the images don't present them as normal, young American women. The women wear face veils and black gowns while they shop at Target, ride a jet ski or play street hockey. Zainab is accurate in her observation that these images are a "visual shock." They are far from the normal selfies or profile pictures shared in social media. Additionally, Zainab's written reflections on how feminist values influence her conservative religious beliefs highlight her traditional views on gender roles, modest dress, homosexuality and the separation of the sexes. These women are not trying to normalize themselves or to fit into American culture. They use digital media to expand the cultural spaces in order to claim that their complex lives have value and can exist in the ambivalent spaces in between Islam and American culture. Additionally, the women work from within cultural forms, like the self-portrait and social media profiles, to assert alternative understandings of modesty, beauty and identity.

CHAPTER VI:
TRANSCENDING THE
GOOD MUSLIM / BAD MUSLIM PARADIGM

In March 2017, amateur rapper Mona Haydar released a music video, “Hijabi (Wrap my Hijab),” that at first glance resembled a typical fashion video with groups of women showing off their styles and dancing to the music.¹ In the year since the video was released, it has been viewed over three million times, a not insignificant number for a video celebrating the identity and diversity of Muslim American women. On deeper examination, the song lyrics, body gestures and visual composition of this video display the empowerment of Muslim women and their unity in the face of racism and patriarchy.

The opening lines recreate the insensitive things that men say to Muslim women on the street: “What that hair look like? Bet that hair look nice.” But Mona’s response calls out the Orientalism in those catcalls: “Not your exotic vacation. I’m bored with your fascination.” As Mona raps, groups of women sit up straight with serious expressions; they make little eye contact with the camera (figure 24). As opposed to the come-hither look that invites the male gaze, the women refuse to return the gaze, challenge the gaze by staring down the camera, or dance and perform for the enjoyment of each other.

The lyrics move into a celebration of the diversity of Muslims, with the repeated hook, “All around the world, love women every shading,” and women from a variety of cultural backgrounds dance and sing. This song addresses the concern that Muslims of African origin, either immigrants or American-born, often face discrimination or judgment within Muslim

¹ Mona Haydar, *Hijabi (Wrap my Hijab)*, video, 3:19, March 27, 2017, https://youtu.be/XOX90_kvPeo (accessed February 28, 2018).

communities in North America. The rap concludes with Mona name-dropping a plethora of ethnic, cultural and religious identity markers of Muslim women; the message of this video is that Muslim women should unite because of their religion and interest in feminist causes.



Figure 24: Still image from "Hijabi (Wrap my Hijab)"

Mona's second video, "Dog," is even more biting in its criticism of Muslim men who try to police how women dress and act, but these same men commit graver sins on the down low (DL), like flirting, cheating, harassing and even assaulting women.² As Mona raps, in reference to harassments in online spaces like direct messages (DM), "Sheikhs on the DL, sheikhs in my DM, begging me to shake it on my cam in the PM." Another repeated line points out the hypocrisy of these men, who claim to be pious religious leaders but harass women online, "Say you can save my spirit. But you're a dog at night." Other lines point out how women are silenced in Muslim circles, such as, "Panel on women, only dudes. Um, excuse me. Really? Rude." Mona addresses how some Muslim men claim that what women are doing is "haram" by trying to have a voice in the Muslim community.

² Mona Haydar, *Dog*, video, 4:12, July 17, 2017, https://youtu.be/idMJIEFH_ns (accessed February 28, 2018).

This video demonstrates how Muslim women join together to speak out against harassment and assault. Most of the video features Mona by herself or with the video's guest star, Jackie Cruz, an actress from the TV show, *Orange is the New Black*. Towards the end of the video, there are scenes of Mona with a crew of other women, not all hijabis, behind her. This video fits in perfectly with wider social conversations around sexual assault and harassment, but Mona actually released this song before the momentum around #MeToo. She ends the video with statistics about how many women are assaulted or abused as a call to take action.

Mona Haydar's activism through these music videos is an interesting counter-point to the opening example of Shepard Fairey's American flag hijab image from the Women's March in January 2017. As opposed to this fairly one-dimensional graphic image of a Muslim woman, wearing an American flag headscarf, Mona's song lyrics and the visuals in her videos go beyond the good Muslim icon to display the complex Muslim American experience. The women in the videos express pride in their multifaceted identities while the songs also address contentious issues within Muslim American communities, such as racism, misogyny and sexual assault. Additionally, these two examples illustrate the coming of age of Muslim American youth during this difficult political period, as they have moved from voiceless icons to outspoken participants, calling out injustices in American society and within Islamic circles. Muslim Americans have developed their own voice and political agency to move beyond this good Muslim/bad Muslim binary.

Complicating an essentialized concept of Muslim culture

The political situation for Muslims in North American society is inarguably negative with physical assaults, policies targeted against Muslim immigrants and refugees, and racist rhetoric in social media and political commentary. At the same time, these issues about the representation

of Muslims in the media and the unequal treatment of Muslims in American society would never have been addressed if it wasn't for the negative rhetoric coming out of the White House. When the first travel ban was issued in the weeks after Trump's inauguration, protestors flocked to local airports to support the various people who were caught in the ban's net. The protestors, the majority of whom were not Muslim, objected to the ban because it was a targeted attempt to block Muslims from entering the country, and the protestors called out the policy for demonstrating contempt for religious freedom.

The political motivations behind Trump's travel ban reflect a larger Western political strategy of designating the spiritual aspects of Islam as harmless but the political elements of Islam as dangerous and threatening. As Mahmood Mamdani traces in his work on the Western categorization of good Muslims and bad Muslims, "We are told that there is a fault line running through Islam, a line that separates moderate Islam, called 'genuine' Islam, from extremist political Islam."³ Significantly, Mamdani asserts that this reflection of Islam as a political ideology that makes demands on public life and challenges Western modernization is a recent manifestation, which developed in response to Western colonization and imperialism. As Mamdani writes, "Contemporary 'fundamentalism' is a modern political project, not a traditional cultural leftover."⁴ Contrary to this reality, Muslims are often portrayed in the Western imaginary as stuck in the past and controlled by backwards religious and cultural traditions. Policies like the travel ban reflect the fear that any and all Muslims might fall into the dangerous, political side of Islam and consequently will dismantle American public life.

³ Mahmood Mamdani, "Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: A Political Perspective on Culture and Terrorism," *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (2002): 767.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 772.

Mamdani's book⁵ goes into more detail about how this dichotomy of good Muslim/bad Muslim develops out of the colonial impulse to categorize and has been deployed to reinforce Western political powers, whereas my analysis of these emerging creative projects examines how young Muslim Americans respond to these dominant political discourses, which are often reflected in visual imagery. As Gillian Rose demonstrates through the critical discourse analysis of visual materials, images become an important site to reproduce dominant discourses.⁶ Through the established Western regime, which I traced in the introduction, of visually presenting Muslims as irrational and violent aggressors or as passive and oppressed victims, dominant discourses are reinforced, positioning Muslims into the good/bad dichotomy. Additionally, Muslims are reduced to symbols of larger political struggles and are removed from the current context of their real lives. As Lila Abu-Lughod discusses, Muslim women in Afghanistan were positioned as victims of an oppressive religion and a backwards culture, while the actual social and political contexts were ignored.⁷

The various creators in this project are responding to this visual regime, which reduces their complex lives in order to promote the superiority of Western political powers. This dominant visual regime is a method of discursive violence, which for so long has reduced Muslims to the essential characteristics of their religion. The young creators respond to these images, which reduce Muslims to passive and inanimate objects, by instead claiming their agency as subjects who act in the world. The violence of this dominant discourse forces Muslims into a position where they have to explain something so elementary—they are active, individual

⁵ Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004).

⁶ Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials* (London: SAGE, 2012).

⁷ Lila Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others," *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (September 2002).

subjects who are not stuck in the past. Where these creative projects are particularly effective is when they go beyond simply showing the complexities of Muslim lives to disrupt the norms that structure North American public life. In these cases, the young Muslims claim their ability to be modern, assertive, liberated and energetic subjects, who also do things counter to progressive Western values, like wear the niqab face veil, pray in public locations, or express pride in Islamic values. For instance, the niqabi self-portraits challenge Western understandings of individuality and self-representation. These Muslim women claim that they can show their unique personalities and individual selves without showing their faces—a direct affront to the Western epistemology of the individual self in society.

Additionally, my analysis of these various cases illustrates the tensions that exist for Muslims who are constantly reduced to one-dimensional stereotypes but at the same time recognize the value of iconic imagery, such as the Shepard Fairey American flag hijab image or the silhouette image of the Chapel Hill victims. Although icons minimize complex experiences, they also circulate quickly and resonate easily with viewers. The hope is that the increased presence of these positive, if not one-dimensional, images of Muslims will intrigue non-Muslim Americans to seek more developed representations of Muslims as active subjects, doing things unrelated to terrorism or national security. In recent years, Muslim faces, like Kumail Nanjiani, Linda Sarsour, Rabia Chaudry, Hasan Minhaj, Ibtihaj Muhammad and Aasif Mandvi, have become more prominent in mainstream American culture. As people desire multifaceted representations of Muslims, the ground is ripe for the various creative projects that I have discussed in this study. Furthermore, there are more opportunities in the digital moment with social media, streaming services and creative tools to produce and circulate alternative narratives.

The creative projects in this study complicate the narratives around Muslims in North America by moving beyond iconic imagery like the American flag hijab image. While Muslims want to acknowledge their belonging as Americans, the creators in this study attempt to portray their own interpretation of how their identity as Muslim and American intersects with numerous other factors. Rather than create knee-jerk responses to the negative stereotypes that propel policies like the Travel Ban, these creators produce their own complex representations of their experiences. They are also not afraid to bring up controversial issues within Muslim American communities. As is demonstrated in Mona Haydar’s music videos, Muslim American women address hypocrisies within Islamic circles around sexual harassment and racism. Similarly, the Mipsterz fashion video was meant to celebrate the diversity of Islamic fashion styles, which are often influenced by ethnic backgrounds, and also to demonstrate the various interpretations of modest dress. Furthermore, Zainab bint Younus uses her online platform to advocate that just because Muslim women choose to cover doesn’t prevent them from speaking with authority, especially within Muslim communities.

In a similar way to how Stuart Hall argued that there is not an essentialized black popular culture, these Muslim creators also demonstrate that they are not interested in recuperating a pure form of Muslim culture. As Hall discusses, black popular culture is a space of “strategic contestation,” as participants draw from a variety of cultural traditions.⁸ Hall’s description of how people identify as black and British, along with other markers, reflects the experiences of these Muslim American youth. Hall elaborates, “You can be black and British . . . because even those two terms, joined now by the coupler ‘and’ instead of opposed to one another, do not exhaust all of our identities. Only some of our identities are sometimes caught in that particular

⁸ Stuart Hall, “What is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?” *Social Justice* 20, nos. 1-2 (1993): 108.

struggle.”⁹ The Muslim American creators in this study are similarly interested in going beyond dichotomies that define what it means to be Muslim in opposition to American culture. Instead, they use these creative projects to build a new formulation of Muslim American culture that incorporates a variety of identity markers. The diversity of these creative projects illustrates that there is not one essential concept of Muslim American culture but rather a plethora of interpretations and expressions.

Furthermore, through the process of creating and circulating these various projects, Muslim American youth develop their disposition as political subjects who not only act on social injustices like the Travel Ban that directly influence their lives but also recognize the intersections of oppression that harm other marginalized groups. The Mipsterz video addresses issues of how Muslim women become the object of the male gaze because of their modest dress, but the controversy that ensued after the release of this video highlighted the anxiety over how Muslim women represent Islam in public. The family and friends of the victims in Chapel Hill, NC use imagery to promote that Muslim lives are valuable, but they realize how affects of fear mark the bodies of other individuals, such as African American men, as dangerous and less valued. The Places You’ll Pray photos celebrate the Islamic practice of prayer in the face of public harassment and physical assaults of Muslims. These projects are about more than changing the narrative or countering representations; the creative process also develops an awareness of larger forces of oppression and how one can work to dismantle these systems of domination.

⁹ *ibid.*, 111.

Creative expression as a means of developing political consciousness

Within the current political and media context, more and more activism and organization is happening through digital networks. As the avenues for traditional political action narrow and people grow weary with the ineffectiveness of voting and calling representatives, Americans are more engaged in hashtag campaigns and online organizing. This study responds to emerging work in media studies on the political potential of creative expression within digital media spaces. At the same time, earlier work on popular culture, embodiment and daily practices provides a foundational understanding of how people kept out of formal political spaces find room for resistance and expression.

While digital media spaces should not be celebrated for being inherently progressive or resistive, this study focuses on the new opportunities for expression and connection that are offered by digital media. It is hard to ignore the expanded possibilities for representation and interaction that are possible through online spaces. At the same time, scholars must not ignore the political economic forces that structure and benefit from these new spaces. For Muslim American youth, who have been consistently marginalized from political spaces, digital media provide the creative tools not only to produce counter-narratives but also to develop their own disposition as political subjects. These creative projects are ways for Muslim youth to express their complex identities and work through the pressures that they face in American culture and the wider Islamic community. Because of constant tensions, pulling Muslim youth in different directions in terms of how they should represent Islam, the participants in this study offer unapologetic portrayals of the complexities and contradictions of their own lives. Through their activism online, these young Muslims develop their consciousness as political subjects who will

no longer remain voiceless icons of their religion. In expressing themselves through creative projects, the Muslim producers assert the value and equality of their lives.

By bringing theories on aesthetics, affect and queerness into conversation with contemporary media studies work on digital spaces, this study has examined the political potential of a wide variety of visual projects. These case studies illustrate the ways that visual styles, emotions and hybridity can be deployed to produce alternative representations that demonstrate the equality, value and complexities of Muslim lives. These projects also serve as productive spaces to negotiate tensions, to debate issues and to develop the political subjectivity of Muslim Americans. This work easily spreads to other spaces, as Muslim Americans engage in offline political action.

It is essential that a study like this one examine the relationships between the offline, embodied experiences of Muslims and the symbolic representation of their lives in media. Even when studying what might appear to be the virtual, disembodied spaces of digital media, Meenakshi Gigi Durham argues that feminist media studies scholars must not ignore the physical body. Feminist scholars must not lose the political edge of this research by focusing too much on symbolic representation in digital spaces and neglecting the work to fight against injustices and inequalities that physically impact marginalized people. As Durham elaborates, “the experiential connections between symbolized and real-world bodies must be acknowledged as central to feminism’s liberatory goals.”¹⁰ Much of the creative work in these cases is about illustrating the connections between how Muslims are symbolically represented and how they are treated in public spaces.

¹⁰ Meenakshi Gigi Durham, “Body Matters: Resuscitating the Corporeal in a New Media Environment,” *Feminist Media Studies* 11, no. 1 (2011): 58.

By emphasizing aesthetics styles and affects, I am attempting to demonstrate the ways that Muslim youth engage with the symbolic realm to shift impressions and most importantly, to improve the ways that they are treated in real life. As was discussed in the chapter on the Chapel Hill, NC murders, the fact that the killer perceived these three young, accomplished college students as bodies to fear and destroy clearly illustrates the connections between the symbolic portrayal of Muslims in the media as threatening and the violence done to real-life Muslim bodies. By interfering in the representational space of digital media, these young Muslim creators attempt to dis-articulate the negative affects that attach to their bodies and contribute to their marginalization in society.

Through a variety of creative projects—photographs, graphic images, fashion, videos, music and artwork—these Muslim Americans engage in political work as they produce counter-representations of their experiences, assert the equal value of their lives and negotiate their intersectional identities. Ultimately, the creative work done in these digital media spaces helps Muslim youth to develop a political consciousness in preparation for offline activism. It is not coincidental that most of the theoretical work that is foundational for this study comes from work addressing how those marginalized from political spaces find spaces of expression and contestation by using their bodies, aesthetic styles, emotions and queerness. As the digital media provide easier access to aesthetics, affect and hybrid spaces, Muslim American youth use these media spaces to prepare their bodies for offline political action. Muslim youth shift how their bodies are treated in real life through this creative process of humanizing and complicating their experiences. This work allows them to develop a sense of who they are as radically equal political subjects, contributing their voices in larger political discussions.

Assemblages of social actors in the media moment

Additionally, the cases in this study demonstrate that the current media moment should be conceptualized as an assemblage of social actors, in which there are overlaps and interconnections between spaces, human and non-human actors, aesthetic styles, feelings, media forms, and technologies. In all of these cases, various aesthetic styles are engaged and the creative materials easily move through digital media spaces, physical spaces and traditional media channels. For instance, the photos of the Chapel Hill victims initially circulated in digital media, but they also appeared in TV news. In addition, the silhouette image of the victims has appeared in public art displays, T-shirts, bracelets, banners and posters. The Places You'll Pray photo series and the abaya art piece were both exhibited in offline galleries, where people could come and interact with the pieces. However, both of these art projects had longer lifespans as they circulated through online spaces and reached wider audiences.

All of these creators employ the particular aesthetic elements of the digital media spaces to demonstrate the value and equality of the Muslim American experience. While the chapter on aesthetics focuses on the Places You'll Pray series, the Mipsterz fashion video and the abaya art piece, the other cases also effectively employ aesthetics to shift the sensorium of what is considered attractive and valued in American culture. The images of the shooting victims in Chapel Hill incorporate stylistic elements like authenticity, vitality, brightness and color to demonstrate the positive values that the victims contributed to American life. By engaging with the authentic and intimate style of social media, these images also attempt to forge feelings of connections in viewers. The aesthetic elements of Zainab bint Younus's visual portrayal in her blog and in person, along with the niqabi self-portrait series, also engage with the positive values

of happiness, humor and play to counter-act dominant visual misrepresentations of veiled women as dour and depressed.

Furthermore, the creators occupy digital spaces and physical spaces in order to claim their right to appear as equal within American society. In the niqabi self-portraits, the subjects take pictures in the commercial space of a department store. In the Mipsterz video, the women exhibit their fashion styles in public parks, sidewalks and other urban locals. While these images showcase Muslims in public spaces, the Our Three Winners case in Chapel Hill demonstrates how the photos of Deah, Yusor and Razan occupied the digital spaces of social media. The images also circulated in physical spaces, such as a mural on the campus of NC State, a memorial at the UNC dental school, T-shirts, posters and bracelets.

The aftermath of the murders in Chapel Hill obviously produced powerful affective responses, but several of the other cases illustrate the ways that affects can be deployed to disarticulate the negative feelings that generally attach to Muslim bodies and Islamic symbols. Photographer Sana Ullah engages with affects of radiance and tranquility in her pictures of prayer in order to detach the feelings of fear and foreignness that often adhere to Muslims seen praying in public. Another strategy to de-link feelings of fear and oppression from Muslim bodies is illustrated in how Zainab bint Younus engages with humor and playfulness in her visual representation online and in person.

Finally, several other creators in this study replicate Zainab's use of queer political strategies, such as playing with categories and dismantling binaries. Since Muslims are often minimized to binary thinking, it can be politically effective to visually demonstrate the multifaceted experiences of Muslims, as was shown in the Mipsterz fashion video. The images that circulated after the shootings in Chapel Hill also highlighted that the victims had interests in

sports, popular culture, socializing and community service that went beyond their religious identity.

At the same time that engaging with the senses and affects can be an effective strategy for shifting impressions, there are limitations to aestheticizing Muslim experiences. The creative projects in this study might increase the visibility of Muslims and cultivate emotional resonance, but these easily digestible images often times do not convey the depth and complexities of individual lives. It's a double-edged sword, for instance, when the silhouette image of the Chapel Hill shooting victims begins circulating and motivating people to take action to protect Muslim lives, but the actual lives of the three victims are concealed behind this simple image.

Additionally, the silhouette image focuses on the headscarf as the marker of Islamic identity, further reinforcing the dichotomy of the repression of Islam against the liberation of Western, secular culture. The manifold expressions of Islam are boiled down to a piece of fabric and its association to oppression, irrationality and aggression. Even though all of the creators in this study are deliberate in how they represent the complexities of their lives, there is a tendency for images to over-simplify the narratives and iron out contentious issues.

Limitations and future directions

In conducting a study of the creative expressions of Muslim youth within digital media, I hope to complicate the perceptions of North American Muslims and move beyond the good Muslim/bad Muslim dichotomy. Despite this goal, some gaps remain in the issues that could be addressed in this work, and future research could enlighten these areas. Although I attempted to utilize a variety of methodological tools in assessing the significance of these creative projects, my results remain limited without a detailed analysis of how these project impact the wider public. Future work could be done to qualitatively assess how these images might shift

perceptions in audiences or to quantitatively assess the circulation and reception of these projects.

An additional limitation comes out of the fast-paced nature of the current media moment, which creates challenges in how researchers are able to collect and analyze materials. For instance, it is nearly impossible to keep track of every location where the photos of the Chapel Hill victims were used—from social media profile pictures to public art displays to mainstream news outlets. Additionally, the rapid-fire rhetoric of the political moment, especially with the U.S. president issuing contradictory responses on Twitter and in public statements, makes it difficult to focus on a subject without getting distracted by the latest absurdity. Keeping track of the many versions of the Trump Travel Ban, for example, proves to be difficult even for legal scholars.

In expanding this research, I would like to look at the offline organization and activism reverberating from these creative projects. Because of time restrictions and funding limitations, I was not able to travel to conduct interviews with all of the creators. This study would also benefit from additional participant observations of spaces such as Mipsterz-organized social gatherings, a photo shoot for the Places You'll Pray series, or a memorial event for the Chapel Hill victims. This type of ethnographic work would allow me to further examine the relationship between creative expression in online spaces and offline activism to improve the lives of Muslim Americans.

As detailed in the introduction, Muslim Americans are statistically younger (60% are under the age of 40) and from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds.¹¹ Alongside these

¹¹ "U.S. Muslims Concerned About Their Place in Society, but Continue to Believe in the American Dream," *Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life*, July 26, 2017, <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/07/26/findings-from-pew-research-centers-2017-survey-of-us-muslims/> (accessed January 31, 2018).

demographics, I have observed through my conversations with Muslim youth that they are actively engaged in political issues. They comprehend how the struggles of Muslim Americans intersect with oppression faced by other religious and ethnic minorities in North America, as well as injustices caused by U.S. and Canadian interventions abroad. In addition, about 76% of Muslims in the U.S. are either immigrants themselves or children of immigrants.¹² While the first generation of immigrants tends to be more cautious about criticizing their new countries, my observations of Muslim youth, who are often children of immigrants, is that they are more willing to speak out against oppression, to criticize those in power and to be politically engaged.

Instead of simply fitting into the image of the good Muslim, who is just like any other normal American, young Muslim Americans are increasingly producing projects that dismantle this binary thinking while also addressing issues of social injustices in American society and Muslim communities. Mona Haydar's music is one instance where young women use creative media and digital spaces to address the racism and misogyny within Muslim American communities. One of the most popular podcasts about Muslim American issues is even called #GoodMuslimBadMuslim, and the creators, Tanzila "Taz" Ahmed and Zahra Noorbakhsh, discuss the pressures to negotiate this binary. They write on the podcast's website, "We'll define what it means to be a good American Muslim ourselves and through our #GoodMuslimBadMuslim podcast. And poke fun at both sides of this margin. We'll create our own narrative how we see fit, and with lots of satire and laughs."¹³ These reflections illustrate how Muslim American youth are exhausted with being told how they should appear and act from non-Muslims and Muslims alike.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Tanzila Ahmed and Zahra Noorbakhsh, "About," #GoodMuslimBadMuslim <http://www.goodmuslimbadmuslim.com/about/> (accessed March 1, 2018).

Several other examples demonstrate how Muslim Americans, women in particular, are pushing beyond these dichotomies to address political topics. Recently, Muslim women have been taking to digital spaces to share stories of sexual harassment and assault that they experienced in Muslim circles. On the FITNA Facebook group (Feminist Islamic Troublemakers of North America), several people have been sharing allegations of sexual misconduct at the hands of prominent Muslim scholars like Tariq Ramadan and Nouman Ali Khan. Furthermore, feminist writer Mona Eltahawy began the #MosqueMeToo campaign as a space for Muslim women to share stories of sexual assault while on the Hajj pilgrimage.¹⁴

Along with serious concerns over assault and harassment of women within Muslim spaces, issues of racism and classism are also coming to the surface in a lot of online discourse. In a recent article on the popular website, MuslimGirl.com, Leah Vernon wrote about her experiences of racism as an African American Muslim woman who does not fit the perfect mold of a skinny, attractive Muslim icon. She explains that Muslim Americans often don't want to air their own dirty laundry by addressing issues of racism because this will make Islam look even worse in the face of constant attacks from non-Muslims. She elaborates on these racial issues, "There's a superiority complex that a Middle Eastern Muslim is better, more authentic and that anyone else is a 'copy' or 'unauthentic.'"¹⁵ While Muslim Americans face constant oppression through restrictive policies, physical assaults, verbal harassment and media misrepresentations, these young Muslims are not afraid to also address issues of oppression and inequality within Muslim communities.

¹⁴ Mona Eltahawy, "#MosqueMeToo: What happened why I was sexually assaulted during the hajj," *The Washington Post*, February 15, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2018/02/15/mosquemetoo-what-happened-when-i-was-sexually-assaulted-during-the-hajj/?utm_term=.aeb533a9ea6a (accessed March 1, 2018).

¹⁵ Leah Vernon, "Muslim Women Are Trending but Some of Us Are Still Invisible," *MuslimGirl*, February 20, 2018, <http://muslimgirl.com/47713/muslim-women-trending-us-still-invisible/> (accessed March 1, 2018).

Along with these emerging projects, the creative work in this study attempts to resist the urge to counter negative representations with positive, normalizing images of Muslim Americans. As digital media provide more malleable spaces of expression and access to greater creative tools, Muslim youth are able to present the complexities of their experiences while addressing social injustices that impact Muslims and other marginalized groups. They are also able to debate contentious topics and organize offline political action. Additionally, this creative work within digital media spaces enables Muslim youth to develop their dispositions as political subjects who articulate their own political concerns and how these issues intersect with wider forms of oppression. Muslim American youth use these spaces of cultural production and new creative tools as avenues to contest the dominant dichotomies that structure their identities and instead to formulate their own complex and contradictory expressions.

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