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South Australia



International Centre for Muslim and non-Muslim Understanding

Collective life unbroken

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MnM Working Paper No 10

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i.

America may have finally rewarded a black director for a film about slavery, but it continues to go out of its way to take apart black *collective life*. Black president aside, blacks in all walks of America aside, black billionaires aside, \$910 billion in purchasing power aside, collective black life seems almost gone – something that made modernity and also made it something that need not have been, that could have gone some other way, something that need not be stuck in reiterating that anachronism known as ‘identity’, something that is an affirmation of life that does not have to prove anything. Black collective life, as Mary Patillo (2007) puts it, entails taking the otherwise meaningless commonality of racial identity to which blacks have been ‘condemned’ and using it as a platform to incessantly provoke, experiment, reach out, argue and figure out ways to be together.

Black populations in cities throughout the American north are in significant decline. Where have the blacks gone? Much is made of the return to a cheaper, more hospitable south. But for the most part, blacks are being pushed out into more remote and decaying suburban areas; incarceration rates are taking a larger share of the black male demographic. This disappearance particularly worried Sun Ra and Malcolm X in their own lifetimes. It should worry Muslims too, because too often we act as if we as a ‘we’ are on our way out.

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The great black musician, Sun Ra, whose centenary we soon celebrate, always said that blackness has got to start getting technical. Blacks have to get rid of the old sentiments about freedom. For Sun Ra, freedom was based on building connections between different tools and modes of knowledge. It was about tracing out pathways among discordant sectors and horizons. It was about finding ways to infuse new capacities, no matter how small, into others with whom you would otherwise never work or know. It entailed building *collectives* discovered through trying things out, binding what is human to new, unexpected forms of appearance, no longer standing apart from the world.

Yet shopworn identities – ethnic, religious, national, geopolitical – continue to play themselves out the old fashion way, knocking each other about and getting nowhere doing so. No identity deserves any respect, and we might more productively see them as Sun Ra saw them – as technical devices to be used to take us somewhere else than we already are.

Sometimes, the Muslim world (whatever that is) seems knit together more on the things that we do not do, than what we try to do together. ‘We don’t do girlfriends in this hood’; ‘we don’t play music in this house’; ‘we don’t show no skin; we don’t go beardless’; ‘we don’t eat that kind of meat’. Friday prayers around the world will ritually invoke one downtrodden Muslim people or nation after another; imams will warn of the repercussions of having our identity disrespected. We may rightly be fed up with being demonised and vilified for no good reason, but then again we barely offer up a sufficiently good enough reason for non-Muslims around the world to really take note that we could constitute a collective force more persuasive than their long-ingrained racial privilege. We are overly preoccupied with adding useless drama to human life, note our obsessions with sex and bodily functions, when we should be finding opportunities to concretely blur the distinctions between life and non-life so necessary in order for the earth to avoid the human-induced destruction Sun Ra foresaw so well. We worry about preparing for the ‘afterlife’, but the afterlife is already with us, here and now, and in this time of Anthropocene we cannot live as we have before.

Several districts in Adelaide, where this International Centre for Muslim and non-Muslim Understanding is located, are full of Muslims. But you would hardly know it. Muslim

residents may maintain a range of religious and cultural obligations and try to be good citizens, but there are few signs of collective life. Residents or their forbearers may have come here to escape political turmoil or better themselves economically, but in some ways it seems as if they died in the process. People may argue about which mosque to go to, about who might be deviating from what, and there are often plenty of invocations about brotherhood and sisterhood, but there is little 'hood' itself, little piecing together of different strands and experiences into something that captures attention, changes things around.

ii.

For Sun Ra, blackness was method, and he worked with a complex interweaving of mythology, numerology, space travel, theosophy, nationalism and the occult. Nominally a jazz musician who managed huge 'arkestras' over a long career that folded in every type of music and sound imaginable, Sun Ra's commitment was to a 'black knowledge society' – a technical capacity capable of really *urbanising* the planet, making it a forcefield of actual and potential encounters and collaborations. While the metaphors of outer space permeated the representations of such urbanisation, what was intended beyond such metaphor was the technical realisation of the imaginations and capacities blacks honed in their great migration to the cities of the north from the hardscrabble rural tenancies of the south and the repressive Jim Crow practices that sought to keep them at the peripheries of southern towns and cities.

African Americans had been living in New York, Philadelphia, Detroit, Kansas City and Chicago for a long time by the time of the final surge of migration between 1950 and 1970. The black population in Chicago went from 14 to 37 per cent, Detroit from 16 to 44 per cent, and Newark, 17 to 54 per cent. Blacks infused these cities with sensibilities and stories that linked disparate persons, not only into networks of support and care, but as an extending ocular machine – a collection of ways to pay attention, to witness, to find out what was going on (Wilkerson 2010).

There were disputes between the more gentrified class of long-term black residents with their proper mores and refinements and a new generation of black residents criticised for cavorting around the city at all hours, living here and there with a changing cast of

characters, and generally using the city as a playground for affectations of all kinds. But when Sun Ra showed up in Chicago after the Second World War, there had already been several decades when blacks of different residential histories and class backgrounds had worked hard together to use the sheer presence of black bodies in the city – their looks, voices, movements, rhythms, appetites, sexualities and strivings – to build economies that enabled some measure of autonomy from subservience and resistance to marginalisation. If black bodies had been abused, commoditised and beaten at will, then they might as well be used to build some kind of urban power base.

Racial apparatuses of control came down hard on these efforts, and Sun Ra encountered a Chicago that had put a squeeze on trade unions, the political left, radical organisations as well as outlets of popular culture – show venues, media and radio (Sites 2012). It was at this point that the emphasis on black knowledge as technical operations took hold in Sun Ra's project. Black people did not go through all they went through just in order to be integrated into the terms of an American society that did everything possible to keep them out. After having acquired a substantial history of being in cities, of proving that there could be something like a 'black city' itself, extraordinary 'extra-planetary' efforts were required in order to concretise these attainments.

For Sun Ra, black urbanism referred to an inventive practice of operating in-between having a location in which one is identified and from which one can identify and speak to others *and* the capacity to address others, call upon them and implicate them beyond the specificity of any location. For Sun Ra it did not matter that much if black people were missing from the confines of American urban life; what was more important was that, if they were going to go missing, they went 'missing in action'.

iii.

As Muslims, we are too preoccupied with managing the images of propriety, of having the right style, the right demeanour – which is all fine and good – but too often this is a substitute for really exploring what we could be with and for each other. What kinds of cities and neighbourhoods could we build based on what it is we profess to believe; what kinds of just and egalitarian places to live are needed? We certainly can demonstrate

sufficient political acuity and ruthlessness to seize control of East London, and do so through strategically building alliances among young Muslims of different ethnic and national backgrounds. But then what kind of East London gets built; what kind of budgetary decisions are made; how do we change the calcified styles of urban decision making?

Perhaps one concrete step is to always keep in mind the details of everyday urban life, all of the hundreds of small affordances residents provide to each other and to find ways of building upon them, particularly in circumstances where transitions in how urban residents are housed, employed and serviced seem to fragment and segregate the social fabric.

To inhabit the city means to inhabit the everyday as a multiplicity of possibilities for an individual or household's existence to affect those of others and thus configure, reinforce or alter the concrete means through which shelter, work and influence can be attained. This notion of the everyday points to exertions, initiatives, collaborations, circumventions and contestations about how things, spaces, materials and persons can be used; what can be assembled, taken apart and valued.

It once was important to show how things in the city worked. But now the city is more opaque, acting almost like a ghost. Lives become super-visible: bank details, health and employment histories, behaviour profiles, credit ratings, web preferences, social media accounts, timelines, cell phone records, risk profiles. Lives become visible but not the operations of the city itself. In this context, individuals are compelled to know who they are, to constantly add on to this knowledge, and to be prepared to be many different things simultaneously. But they are also 'instructed' never to forget where they come from, and to articulate all of these possibilities to various forms of emotional and financial indebtedness. But this compulsion is not easy to address in situations where individuals have a good idea about where they are, since everywhere looks pretty much the same, but at the same time so much effort is expended in making that look of similarity deceiving. Any place can be so thoroughly networked to different sentiments, evaluations, ratings and operations that there is no way it can seemingly stand on its own, be itself. Yet, every domain and resident is also implicitly asked to 'be themselves', to have some kind of unique 'address'.

Throughout cities made up of large Muslim populations great attention was once paid to how residents were ‘addressed’ – keeping open various possibilities for how residents would be located, defined and what it was possible for them to do as a result. This keeping open of possibilities was itself maintained through a multiplicity of potential encounters, which meant that the city had to be built in ways that necessitated and facilitated these encounters.

The sheer diversity of the overall built environment and the activities that took place within it, and in close proximity to each other, precipitated discussions, compensations, repairs, alliances, trade-offs and short-term pooling of information, contacts and resources that supplemented official income and earnings. At the same time, the composition of the built environment reiterated a sense of separateness among residents, the unavailability of any overarching reference point of easy commonality and, as such, these were localities of fractures that necessitated the constant reworking of lines of connection.

Now as neighbourhoods are destroyed, sites of work lost, ways of deciding things shifted into impersonal and bureaucratic coding, the sense of being able to know things and to feel a sense of commonality with one’s surrounds is disrupted. If work once was generated through the spatial enrichments of urban inhabitation – the possibilities for residents to interconnect different activities, needs, aspirations and spaces – as these possibilities through residency decline, more intentional mobilisations of effort will have to be generated. Mobilisation of available assets and skills in training, care, repair and service provision will be required. Rehabilitation and retrofitting of spatial assets, local environmental and community management, and various forms of service provision are areas to be developed. These areas require new forms of knowledge, sociality and individual capacity in order to bring them about. They require an ability to circulate throughout different facets of and encounters with city life. They require an openness to the city in all its multiple and messy politics, not a preoccupation with building a city in any particular correct image. If our religion asks us to make a commitment to each other, that entails constantly trying to figure out what it is that we can do together, and this will inevitably entail error. So if we shy away from error, we shy away from each other.

Too often the Islamicisation of contemporary urban life too is simply an excuse for its intensive financialisation. Just witness Istanbul, Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta, Casablanca, Karachi, Cairo and Beirut, to name a few cities, where collusions among developers, politicians, investment banks, management companies, hedge funds and property investors primarily use the built environment as ‘shell’ around which elaborate financial manipulations take place, and then claim to offer ‘pride of place’ to a growing, Islamic-attuned middle class.

iv.

We need to learn from and embrace a fellow Muslim, Malik El-Shabazz (Malcolm X), who considered these dilemmas about *collective life*. Malcolm had a complicated relationship with the larger Muslim world and Egypt in particular, to which he returned several times in the latter period of what would be a short life. Following his renowned making of *hajj* where he rejoined the Sunni Muslim fold after a career ensconced in the singular peculiarities of the syncretic Nation of Islam, Egypt became an important base for him to work out intellectually, politically and spiritually the trajectories of his involvement in both American and international politics. Egypt provided the necessary financial support for Malcolm’s travels in sub-Saharan Africa and his efforts to organise African governmental support for the possible United Nations condemnation of American racism. It provided a base for him to substantiate his theological knowledge and to begin to move the long-term tropes of American black religion away from the exodus narratives. Shifting the focus away from a promised land, Malcolm sought to link domestic American black concerns to the underpinnings of oppression everywhere in a reiteration of the pan-African intertwining of Arab and African liberation (Hartnell 2008).

Egypt for Malcolm was a hinge, not an answer, and the door Malcolm tried to open swung uneasily amongst different polarities. Even before making *hajj*, Malcolm was put on the defensive by immigrant Muslims in America who saw his religious views as simply wrong. His initial receptivity to the Sunni mainstream was less an embrace of doctrine and practice than it was the recognition during the making of *hajj* – that great act where populations are unsettled and turned toward a generosity in each other – that Islam was the religion most capable of materialising the egalitarian. As black religious practice – in



an America that forced its original slave inhabitants to shed any trace of Islamic identity – was a crucial vehicle of resistance and collective affirmation, Malcolm could not disown black renditions of any religion. While he undoubtedly over-romanticised both Islam and the pan-African, both had to constitute important reserves of remaking black life in America.

Malcolm's hinge, and indeed his hedge, was to simultaneously cultivate two distinct organisations, Muslim Mosques Inc and the Organization of Afro-American Unity. The first was intended to find a way of integrating black and immigrant Muslims in the US into a religious organisation that would go beyond ethnic and racial particularisms, and to establish Islam as a faith on equal footing to Christianity in the black community, and even one more capable of embodying its ancestries and aspirations. The OAAU was clearly a secular effort, a vehicle to articulate black American human rights with the decolonising project of African states, to emphasise a mutual imbrication, and as a prospective means of black Americans setting aside religious and other parochial differences in the common cause of black freedom. It was not an easy hinge to manoeuvre. Members of MMI criticised Malcolm's involvement in secular politics, claiming that Islam promised an eventual answer to the liberation of all peoples and that work for the implementation of Islam everywhere was the critical objective. Members of OAAU were critical of the conservative mores of traditional Islam, particularly the ways in which those who were the primary interlocutors in theological questions still tended to be rooted in the Arab world. This brand of traditional Islam was seen as compromising the struggled-for egalitarian constitution and distribution of knowledge.

So the Muslim world by and large did not really get what Malcolm was up to. Nasser largely viewed Malcolm as an instrument to further Arab agendas in the OAU and buttress his anti-imperialism credentials; while *Ikhwan* (the Muslim Brotherhood) saw Malcolm as a way to institute a bulkhead in America. Both tried to force Malcolm into their corners at the expense of the other (Marable 2011). But until he was tragically cut down in the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem in 1965 by hired Nation of Islam assassins, Malcolm insisted that life in the black city needed both religion and politics, and that one did not necessarily inform the other.



As J Kameron Carter stated, black religion is ‘an insurgent movement within modernity’s protocols of religious and theological sedimentation but yet a movement that is not reducible to those protocols inasmuch as it is a movement from the *middle*, a fugitive movement that exceeds the logic of sovereignty’ (2013: 597). For in all of the back fields of cane and cotton, in swamps and tenement basements, black fugitives on the run, not sure where they were headed, could affirm that this *middle* space, this interregnum, this space that lurks in every city between what it was and what it will become, was a space that could be occupied and affirmed. It is from being in the middle of things, where identities are not clear, where the right way of doing things is not clear and needs to be worked out on the spot, and where things that seemingly do not fit – with any agenda or identity – find some kind of use for each other, that collective lives are made.

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