

Review Article

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RACE, RELIGION, AND REINSCRIPTION: THE PARADOXES
AND POTENTIALS OF THE STUDY OF ISLAM IN AMERICA

ERIK LOVE, *Islamophobia and Racism in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2017). Pp. 272. \$89.00 cloth, \$28.00 paper. ISBN 9781479804924.

JOHN O'BRIEN, *Keeping it Halal: The Everyday Lives of Muslim American Teenage Boys* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017). Pp. 216. \$29.95 cloth. ISBN 9780691168821.

SU'AD ABDUL KHABEER, *Muslim Cool: Race, Religion, and Hip Hop in the United States* (New York: New York University Press, 2017). Pp. 288. \$89.00 cloth, \$30.00 paper. ISBN 9781479872152.



“[This] is not a book—not directly, anyway—about the Islamic State, Al-Qaeda, radicalization, or terrorism” (ix). In an ethnography on the everyday lives of teenage Muslims in the United States, John O’Brien opens his book with a disavowal—and his choice speaks to the difficulties of producing scholarship in the emerging field of Islam in the Americas in a political environment characterized by openly Islamophobic campaigns and policies. O’Brien’s teenage interlocutors are not terrorists; rather, as O’Brien writes, “Young American Muslims are as thoroughly and fundamentally teenagers—and American teenagers, at that—as they are Muslims” (xxi). In O’Brien’s *Keeping It Halal*, these teenagers swing from the rebellious braggadocio of the young to the stammering confusion of first-timers in the world of American dating, from passionate debates on hip hop to the

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lamponing of their parents and teachers. And yet O'Brien's introductory sentence—offered as a pragmatic recognition of the politics of contemporary discourse—casts his work in the shadow of the hostile labels that fall upon Muslims in the United States today. Has O'Brien ceded the discursive ground to popular Islamophobia with the very sentence that commences his work?

In *A History of Islam in America*, Kambiz GhaneaBassiri suggests that much literature on Islam in the United States unfolds from a presumption of inherent difference between “Islam” and “America.”¹ As sympathetic scholarship celebrates the “adaptation” of Islamic practices to American settings, such well-intentioned works reinscribe a fundamental opposition. In pursuit of modern adaptations, assimilations, syntheses, localizations, and compromises, we find a body of literature punctuated with questions such as How is Islam faring? and How are Muslims Americanizing? GhaneaBassiri and others have capably demonstrated the historical failure of such projects, assuming as they do that Muslims are but recent participants in American history—that Muslims and an imagination of Islam have not factored in the very making of the Americas since the sixteenth century. Beyond these historical errors, we face theoretical problems as well. As questions of adaptation and comparison emerge (e.g., How are Muslims faring?), “Islam” and “America” are propped up as two entities in tension. The fragility of such a project is dangerous as it demands that we begin our thinking in the broadest of essentialist stereotypes to render the narrative of assimilation convincing. Witness Hillary Clinton's defense of Muslim belonging in the United States during the second and third presidential debates of the 2016 election. In response to Donald Trump's bigotry, Clinton praised Muslims as valued members of the United States who “need . . . to be part of our eyes and ears on our front lines.”² The point is a simple one: a scission between Islam and America circulates in US American scholarship, political discourse, and public activism even for those seeking the full legal and moral belonging of Muslims residing in the United States.

Our terms of analysis are not innocent. As obvious as this problem might be upon reflection, finding meaningful interventions is no less beguiling. GhaneaBassiri warns of the temptation of relying entirely upon emic, confessional voices. In seeking to reject the misinformation and crude caricatures found in mainstream media, some scholars have sought to give Muslim voices space to narrate their own experiences. There is an undeniable good in this, but, as GhaneaBassiri notes, such a strategy risks fetishizing the Muslim

American experience as distinct and inaccessible—as uniquely incapable of being part of larger histories of religion, race, institution, and belonging in the Americas. There is no safe refuge in writing histories of Muslim activists and political critics in the United States, either. As Zareena Grewal, Hisham Aidi, and Su’ad Abdul Khabeer have described, the US government has proved remarkably capable at conscripting Malcolm X, Muslim hip hop artists, and the longer American history of Islam into projects of empire.³ US embassies abroad have repackaged the righteous critiques of Malcolm X and the musical protests of A Tribe Called Quest and used these as evidence of American exceptionalism, as tools to sort “good Muslims” from “bad Muslims.”⁴

It is this conversation and anxiety that connects the three books reviewed in this essay: Erik Love’s *Islamophobia and Racism in America*, John O’Brien’s *Keeping It Halal*, and Su’ad Abdul Khabeer’s *Muslim Cool*. All of them speak to the urgent need to reject the narratives of “Islam and America” that govern our scholarship and reify current Islamophobic systems of empire abroad and surveillance and suspicion at home. How is it possible to speak *to* the moment without being *beholden* to the moment? If our inherited language is not innocent, is it still possible to use this language to tell alternative stories of Muslim experience? Does engaged, activist scholarship need to acknowledge the poverty of current theory with such explicit denials as we find in O’Brien’s first line: *this is not a book about terrorists?*

ADVOCATES BETWEEN RELIGION AND RACE

Here is the rub: simply knowing that Islamophobia is in fact racism provides no guidance to navigating the racial dilemma. In other words, even after recognizing that racism is inherent in Islamophobia, it does not follow that Islamophobia should be described as racism by advocates (116).

Love’s book introduces his readers to a central dilemma that confronts groups that advocate on behalf of US American Muslims: should the language of “race” shape the way these groups resist Islamophobia in the contemporary United States? As Love writes, “Strategically, does it benefit civil rights advocates to call out Islamophobia as racism? Or would it be wiser if they avoided the controversial issue of race?” (23). This is *the racial dilemma*, the response to which will shape the future of civil rights activism in the United States. The alternative—preferred by

representatives of advocacy groups such as the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) and Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC) — is to avoid the discourse of race altogether and frame Islamophobia as an issue of religious persecution.

The focus of Love's book is on this central strategic question confronting Muslim American and Middle Eastern American advocacy groups (Race or religion?), but the question itself reveals the other thrust of Love's book: Islamophobia is best understood as racism and as a "racial project" (84). Love lucidly guides his readers through the stakes of this racial dilemma with chapters detailing sociological theories of race (with an especially clear description of "racial formation theory"), developments of Orientalism and Islamophobia in the United States, the history of Middle Eastern American advocacy groups, and an analysis of the approaches of advocacy groups to issues of Islamophobia and race. Love's conclusion issues a call to scholars, advocates, and activists to acknowledge the ineluctably racial quality of Islamophobia and respond with broad, "transformational coalitions" organized around racial justice and equity. This is an impressively clear and ardently argued monograph that braids together Love's extensive interviews with advocacy groups and recent scholarship on the history of Islam, immigration, and Orientalism in the United States. As I will suggest, there are critical absences in Love's analysis, but *Islamophobia and Racism* offers a necessarily startling and chilling view of the pervasiveness of Islamophobia and the effectiveness of the state in co-opting and fettering the language of advocacy in the United States.

Despite the nominally "religious" nature of Islamophobia, Love insists that Islamophobia is fundamentally a racial project characterized by bigotry and discrimination against "Middle Eastern Americans." Including people of Middle Eastern and South Asian descent, "Middle Eastern American" is a racial group that is already operative in American culture, regardless of its obvious imprecision (8). Without acknowledging the saliency of "Middle Eastern American" as a racial project, we cannot understand the patterns of violence that characterize contemporary Islamophobia. As Love emphasizes, Islamophobic discrimination and violence is a recurring experience for Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, and other non-Muslims of South Asian and Middle Eastern descent (81). Moreover, the racism of Islamophobia is not a matter of individual bias. To the contrary, Islamophobia is a "racial project . . . that distributes resources in service of maintaining the race-based subordination of marginalized groups"

(84). Orientalist films, personal acts of violence, governmental practices of surveillance, and the openly bigoted rhetoric of recent political campaigns all converge to create, iterate, and instantiate the category of *Middle Eastern American* regardless of the religious commitments of those who fall under the canopy of this racial thinking.

Love is at his most provocative when he describes the paradox of this racial project. Even while the concept of “Middle Eastern” is a matter of ascription *upon* Middle Eastern Americans, the concept is also a matter of self-identification and the effective grounds for demanding legal protection. For instance, advocacy groups in the years following the attacks of 9/11 found success in petitioning the Department of Justice for protection against racial discrimination. As Love writes, “The DOJ saw the racial nature of Islamophobia, and they moved decisively to bring resources to these disparate communities because of race. The DOJ, in short, was encouraging race-based thinking to solve race-based problems” (180).

Given the salience of race and racism in Islamophobia, Love argues that such “race-based thinking” is necessary. He conveys the hesitations of leaders from MPAC and CAIR, noting, for instance, that they “insisted that the best strategy for tacking Islamophobia was showing Muslim Americans deserved the same rights as Christian and Jewish Americans – not showing how Muslim Americans suffer from racist oppression as communities of color” (188). But as Love continues: “By actively trying to avoid framing Islamophobia as racism, there is simply no foundation for coalitions between diverse and disparate groups – Arabs, Muslims, Sikhs, and South Asians” (192). There is a tragic note to Love’s description of these advocacy groups. Their inability or unwillingness to cultivate transformational coalitions mobilized against Islamophobic racism – this insistence on the seemingly ineffective language of religious persecution – accentuates the success of the reactionary political ideologies that emerged in the wake of the activism of the 1960s (145–47). The ideology of “colorblindness” has so thoroughly saturated the environment of American politics and advocacy organizations that some of his interlocutors hardly acknowledged the continuities between desecrations of mosques and the violent murder of Sikhs, for instance (188). Despite Love’s sympathetic depiction of the concerns confronting advocates, there is a note of critique: allow the discourse of race to expand your imagination of what is possible, of what transformations and coalitions can be birthed to resist the violence and oppression of this broken American system.

While Love urges these advocacy groups to reimagine the discursive grounds available to them, this insistence could apply to Love's book itself. There are strong boundaries around Love's scholarship—an act of boundary drawing that I presume emerges from the closeness of Love to the logics and discourses of the studied advocacy organizations. Love not only reconstructs their dilemmas, but he also seems to be addressing these groups directly. For instance, he frequently notes how counterintuitive it is to link Islamophobia and racism, but this is certainly not the case if we consider recent works by GhaneaBassiri, Grewal, Moustafa Bayoumi, Arun Kundnani, Junaid Rana, and many others. All of these scholars attend to the racialized nature of Islamophobia. There is also the striking absence of analysis of African American Muslims and the place of Islamophobia in anti-black racism. While Love addresses this absence, his focus upon the category of Middle Eastern American suggests the experience of African American Muslims to be tangential (31). As Khabeer's *Muslim Cool* suggests, this is simply not the case. Love's axis of inequality goes in one direction, but what it means to be Middle Eastern American (and Muslim American) emerges not only from the tension between "whiteness" and "Middle Eastern-ness." Rather, the racial project in which Middle Eastern identity takes shape implicates American imaginations of whiteness and blackness.

Moreover, the stridency of Love's argument occasionally forecloses generative areas of inquiry. He introduces his book with a blunt declaration that there is no way to "look Muslim" (2). Given the spectacular diversity of Muslim expressions of belonging, this statement rings true. As we read on, however, it seems the logic that motivates Love's declaration is a definition of religion as a matter of private belief. Instead of parsing Islamophobia as a matter of religious persecution *or* racial oppression, what if we plot contemporary Islamophobia in a longer American history of religio-racial identities?⁵ What if we move beyond consideration of the strategic significance of petitioning for civil rights along religious or racial terms and attend to the ways that agonistic definitions of religion and race contribute to projects of state discipline, imperial expansion, and white supremacy? These are questions that are not posed in *Islamophobia and Racism* as Love chooses instead to adhere to the discursive frames of his interlocutors among Middle Eastern American advocacy organizations. Within these terms, Love's work is effective, insightful, and pulsing with urgency and compassion. Nevertheless, to escape the fetters of an impoverished American discourse, Love's book must be

read alongside O'Brien's account of everyday teenage life and Khabeer's analysis of blackness in the formation of Muslim belonging in the United States.

TEENAGE TENSIONS

Muhammad: . . . "I don't have to prove to you that I'm an American. I don't have to prove to you shit, I don't have to teach . . . tell you that I'm a peaceful person, you know, that my religion is peaceful. I don't have to teach you none of that" (146)

If Love's book explores the national stakes of our language (and the projects opened and closed to us based on our language), O'Brien's *Keeping It Halal* concentrates on the quotidian: the interactions and negotiations of a small group of ethnically diverse, urban, male, teenage Muslims called the "Legendz." The modest, even intimate, scale of O'Brien's ethnography of teenage life does not limit its analytical power, for it is in small displays of charm, humor, anger, and bravado that these young Muslim Americans find creative means to negotiate "culturally-contested lives."

Like Erik Love, O'Brien must attend to the contests experienced by his interlocutors—a contest between "Islam" and "American culture," in this case—even if we as scholars might prefer to scrap such a dichotomy altogether. As O'Brien writes,

Issues of ethnicity and nationality were rarely at the forefront of group members' exchanges. For the most part—and perhaps not surprisingly, given their active identification as Muslims—the young men's shared Islamic practice and identity seemed far more salient during the time they spent together than did their various ethnicities or nationalities (xxi).

Caught between the perceived demands of American culture and those of living as pious Muslims, O'Brien describes his teenage interlocutors as engaged in a daily negotiation of divergent "cultural rubrics"—"the competing sets of schemas, habits, symbols, and practices that such people face" (10). Before we roll our eyes at another reinscription of the antipathy between Islam and America, O'Brien reminds us that living in "cultural contest" is an exceedingly common experience for US Americans, be they "working mothers, first- and second-generation

immigrants, upwardly mobile working-class people, gay suburbanites, [or] highly religious scientists" (11). Among those negotiating such cultural contests are most American high schoolers who, according to O'Brien and other sociologists, are adept at recognizing social poles (e.g., "jock" and "nerd") while "maintain[ing] a more complicated identity and status located somewhere" in between such binaries (13). It is precisely the Legendz' experience of being *torn* that O'Brien believes will familiarize the Legendz to non-Muslim readers. O'Brien's theoretical commitment to interaction and relational identity shines as he guides us through a number of sites of negotiation. O'Brien devotes chapters to the ways in which the Legendz balance their perception of Islamic piety with their love of hip hop, their desire to date, their yearning for independent decision making, and the pressure of being Muslim in a fraught US American public.

As we may expect from an intimate view of teenage life marked by "cultural contest," the Legendz often struggle to find moments of balance between their perception of competing cultural rubrics. There is no *solution*; there are constant negotiations that leave feelings of anger, anxiety, confusion, humor, and pride in their wake. O'Brien's analysis proceeds by offering his readers a typology of the various attempts made by the Legendz to navigate a particular situation. In his chapter on dating, for instance, O'Brien describes two styles of dating he witnessed among the Legendz: "keeping it halal" and "dating while Muslim." In keeping it halal, teenage Muslims draw clear boundaries around permissible physical contact and emphasize the similarities between religious and romantic emotions (84–95). The young couples, however, often struggle to meet the high standards of keeping it halal, and O'Brien suggests that the Legendz' dating habits were less fraught when they avoid active labels and maintain "interactional ambiguity." O'Brien labels this "dating while Muslim" (95–105). When Abdul notes that he and his girlfriend are "keeping it halal" – and he does so with *considerable* irony and a laugh – Abdul's utterance is a remarkable bit of cultural negotiation. He simultaneously demonstrates his familiarity with the pressures of "Islamic" dating (as he understands it) while he uses his irony to separate himself from anyone else's cultural norms. There is a valuable ambiguity in Abdul's statement (*Will they keep it halal?*). What is clear, however, is this: if Abdul avoids certain forms of physical intimacy with his girlfriend, his ironic tone insists that this will be *his choice* for he is not a mindless follower of a set of rules. This is a prime example of *discursive individualism* which O'Brien argues is central to the Legendz' habits—a rhetorical demonstration of

individual choice that is especially important as the Legendz follow behavior encouraged by religious leaders (54).

O'Brien's ethnography is at its most thrilling when these interactions stop being a negotiation between two given cultural rubrics and instead become something new, something surprising. In the tumult of teenage emotions, there is a seething creativity, and O'Brien offers us glimpses of the ways in which the Legendz fashion new ways of being Muslim and being American in the most quotidian of acts. In O'Brien's chapter on "Islamic listening," for instance, the Legendz improvise new lyrics of popular hip hop songs, singing their creations while hanging out in the mosque. Fuad and Abdul transform Snoop Dogg's "Sensual Seduction" into "Spiritual Connection." Muhammad deftly handles the volume dial to mute Jeremih's "Birthday Sex" at crucial moments while adding his own words. The chorus thus becomes: "Birthday *astaghfirullah* [God forgive me!], Birthday *astaghfirullah*, birthday *astaghfirullah!*" (35-37). In O'Brien's analysis, these acts of creativity and rhetorical flourish serve as a counterexample to Robert Bellah's old lament of "Sheilaism." Here, the exaggerated individualism of the Legendz is what allows them to participate and thrive as full participants in the mosque community without relinquishing their desire to be an "American teenager" (77).

But as we asked regarding Love's *Islamophobia and Racism*, does O'Brien's commitment to the experiences of his interlocutors bind the book to the same oppositions, binaries, and polarities that O'Brien seeks to trouble? I have no doubt that the Legendz feel torn between their understandings of Islam and American culture, but is it O'Brien's responsibility to frame the book according to their perception of fundamental tension? Perhaps it is, but the consequence is that *Keeping It Halal* rarely moves beyond the line drawn between the rubrics of "Islam" and "American culture." As noted, O'Brien offers sparse analysis of race and ethnicity because the Legendz rarely discussed such matters. Fair enough, but might it be the discursive absence of race, for example, that helps maintain the perceived antipathy of "Islam" and "American culture"? O'Brien's foundational argument is that the Legendz demonstrate that Islam and American culture are not "essentially or irrevocably in conflict" (164). He capably proves this point, and yet I wonder if we truly move beyond such a binary by *refuting* it. With this in mind, *Keeping It Halal*'s most radical moment occurs when Muhammad rejects an invitation to teach some non-Muslims about the harmony of American culture and Islam. In Muhammad's anger, we find the yearning for a new set of rubrics, a

new set of terms, with the potential to tell a new story not beholden to the need to “prove” Islam’s place in the United States: “I don’t have to prove to you shit” (146).

MUSLIM COOL

Muslim Cool and its techniques of Blackness also reiterate race’s sincerity; it is unsettled and unsettling. Race is a tie that binds, in all the possible senses of the term (138).

Su’ad Abdul Khabeer’s *Muslim Cool* distinguishes itself with the theoretical boldness of its chosen subject matter. While Love focuses upon a dilemma facing contemporary advocacy groups (Race or religion?) and O’Brien examines the interactions of a small group of Muslim teenagers, Khabeer aims to analyze something much more elusive: “Muslim Cool” (2). Muslim Cool emerges from the intersection of Islam and hip hop as “a discourse, an epistemology, an embodiment” and “a way of being Muslim that draws upon Blackness to contest two overlapping systems of racial norms: the hegemonic ethnoreligious norms of Arab and South Asian US American Muslim communities on the one hand, and White American normativity on the other” (2). We should immediately note that Khabeer’s book is not about African American Muslims. Rather, it is about contemporary means by which young, racialized, gendered Muslims fashion their selves in relation to Blackness—in relation to hip hop, in relation to Black fashion, in relation to the history of Black subjection in the United States, and with a yearning for activism and transformation (22). Khabeer’s interlocutors—or teachers, as she prefers—are primarily young Muslims participating in the Inner-City Muslim Action Network (IMAN) of Chicago, “a Muslim-run nonprofit that provides services, community organizing, and arts-based activism” with an explicitly anti-racist mission (2 and 17). While IMAN is a primary site of Muslim Cool, Khabeer’s focus upon Muslim Cool as a “way of being,” rather than upon IMAN as an institution, grants her work a deft theoretical flexibility. Throughout the book, she offers meditations on intersections of Blackness and Muslimness in the United States with chapters on hip hop; interethnic intra-Muslim relations; the entanglement of race, class, gender, and style; and the complicated (and contradictory) relationships between Muslim Cool and the state.

Muslim Cool discusses much-neglected topics in the field of Islam in America; Khabeer’s discussion of Muslim masculinity in the

United States, for instance, is a contribution to a shockingly small bibliography on the topic. The value of *Muslim Cool*, however, rests more fully with the theoretical stances that she models. Describing her work as “performative ethnography,” Khabeer allows the phenomena she studies to mold her own thinking on the subject. She theorizes, for instance, the existence of a “loop of Muslim Cool.” Invoking the hip hop practice of sampling or *looping* previous songs, Khabeer uses the concept of the loop to model the epistemological paths by which young Muslims encounter and explore the contributions of Blackness to US American formations of Islam. A young Muslim might begin by listening to hip hop and hear in a particular track a reverberation of Black Muslim history which then gives way to an exploration of Blackness and the history of Islam. This examination redirects back to hip hop, thus completing and restarting the loop (27–76). But the loop is more than a metaphor. This is a theoretical frame that represents a generative contribution to how the fields of religious studies and anthropology might approach self-fashioning and cultural reproduction as a process that is both mimetic and innovative—as a process of “non-identical repetition” that renders *Muslim Cool* a capable conversation partner for Søren Kierkegaard’s *Repetition*.

Khabeer’s work stares directly at the central tension of this review essay. There is an urgent need to reject the naturalized opposition between “America” and “Muslims”; but how do we speak back to this opposition without allowing this binary logic to shape our own thinking and without allowing the state to co-opt the “American Muslim” for its own imperial purposes? Khabeer’s solution is to not turn away from the limits of “Muslim Cool” but to emphasize its potential to be folded into racialized, gendered, classed, and imperial hierarchies. Yes, “Muslim Cool” offers a way of being Muslim that draws upon hip hop to contest white supremacy and sustain interethnic relationships between the diverse Muslims of Chicago. The artists and activists of *Muslim Cool*, however, have seen their own performances conscripted into the US State Department’s efforts to counter “fundamentalism” among British Muslims. Khabeer served as an advisor for a documentary called *New Muslim Cool* that depicts the life of a Puerto Rican Muslim artist and his brush with discriminatory policing and surveillance. While Khabeer notes that the film was intended to serve as a critique of American incarceration and Islamophobia, it has been shown at US embassies to celebrate the exceptionalism of American diversity and music (202). State resistance has become a tool to distinguish the “good Muslims” from those

resistant to American intervention and political efforts abroad. Muslim Cool always bears the potential to reinscribe “neoliberal regimes of knowledge and power as well as US imperialism” (23).

We thus learn from the frankness and clarity of Khabeer’s book that there is no “solution” that will undo and unmake the popular perception of the difference between “Islam” and “America.” These terms are too deeply entangled into ever-shifting formations of class hierarchies, white supremacy, and imperial politics for us to simply find our way to innocent terms of description and analysis. Rather, the task of rejecting the scissions that score American culture will have to be continually re-earned and renewed through the choices facing advocacy groups, the quotidian negotiations of Muslim youth, and through following the loop of *Muslim Cool*.

As we ponder the stakes and futures of the study of Islam in America, Khabeer’s conclusion provides a more fitting end than anything I can offer:

The future of Muslim Cool, and of Muslims in the United States more broadly, lies in its investment in its alterity – the ability to imagine, articulate, and participate in alternate choices for resistance and political vision. This is a prospect that comes at high risk; but we have nothing to lose but our chains . . . we gon’ be alright (231).

NOTES

¹ Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, *A History of Islam in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 4–8.

² “Transcript of the Second Debate,” *New York Times*, 10 October 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/10/us/politics/transcript-second-debate.html>.

³ Zareena Grewal, *Islam Is a Foreign Country: American Muslims and the Global Crisis of Authority* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); Hisham D. Aidi, *Rebel Music: Race, Empire, and the New Muslim Youth Culture* (New York: Vintage, 2014).

⁴ Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Pantheon, 2004).

⁵ Consider: Judith Weisenfeld, *New World A-Coming: Black Religion and Racial Identity during the Great Migration* (New York: New York University Press, 2017).