AMERICAN MUSLIM HUMOR, SECULAR AESTHETICS, AND THE POLITICS OF RECOGNITION

Samah Selina Choudhury

A dissertation submitted to the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Religious Studies in the Graduate School.

Chapel Hill
2020

Approved by:

Juliane Hammer

Carl Ernst

Cemil Aydin

Kumi Silva

Harshita Kamath

Sylvia Chan-Malik

ABSTRACT

Samah Choudhury: American Muslim Humor, Secular Aesthetics, and the Politics of Recognition
(Under the direction of Juliane Hammer)

This dissertation focuses on the cultural productions of humor by South Asian Muslim men and the ways in which "Islam" is self-constructed and articulated through comedic performance in a contemporary U.S. context. I argue that humor is a mode of secular discourse, in which the ability to laugh at oneself has been disciplined into a prized personality trait of the ideal subject within secular social schemas. In such a humor regime, the gendered and racialized Muslim body becomes a signifier of communal belonging, exclusion, and religious difference. Through a critical analysis of films, television shows, and standup comedy routines by the comedians Aziz Ansari, Kumail Nanjiani, and Hasan Minhaj, I chart the discursive goalposts that demarcate when humor becomes explicitly marked and/or recognized as Muslim, and when these comedians themselves were named and name themselves as such.

Under a progressive consensus of recognition, these men step into their Muslim identities through the language and hostile implications of racialization. They cultivate a Right Muslim self that upholds secular ideals like multiculturalism by taming bodily comportments that may otherwise affiliate with Islam outside the legible boundaries of racialized difference. The humor that these men stage subverts categorical assumptions about Muslim sedition and violence while also offering a performance of representative resistance to counter the hegemonic order that reads largely as white. This performance does not hold to account the disciplinary demands of secularity and the larger social discourses that have naturalized their difference in the first place.

To Amma and Abba, my first teachers and beloved above all.
Tomader chhayaye ami boshi.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم –

In these acknowledgements I must first name Juliane Hammer. She is my Doktormutter, and every step of this project bears witness to that presence. I am grateful for her wisdom and guidance down this path, one that has never busied itself with doctrinaire browbeating but instead with a critical commitment and rigor for scholarship that has something to say to the world. It is an honor to have my entry to the professorial guild officiated by her. I also owe a tremendous deal to my other professors at UNC from whom I have had the great fortune to learn and study. They, too, always encouraged my pursuit of such work: Carl Ernst, Cemil Aydin, Brandon Bayne, Banu Gökariksel, Michelle Robinson, and Kumi Silva. I have fortunate to have mentors outside UNC in scholars like Sylvia Chan-Malik, Harshita Kamath, Stan Thangaraj, and Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst. Their willingness to advise, promote, and think through my ideas has expanded where I situate my scholarship and to whom I make it accountable.

UNC's Carolina Public Humanities and the Humanities for the Public Good initiative are why this dissertation takes on the subjects it does. My gratitude to Robyn Schroeder, Max Owre, Lloyd Kramer, and Rachel Schaevitz for emphasizing and funding socially conscious scholarship that is at once accessible and meets the demands of the societies we live in. To miriam cooke, Omid Safi, Bruce Lawrence, and Erdağ Göknar who gave me a home (and a job!) with the Middle East Studies Center at Duke University when I arrived in North Carolina in 2014: thank you for keeping me in the game. I have been able to share my research with colleagues due to the financial support of the Fadel Educational Foundation, the Hub Foundation, the Center for Islam

in the Contemporary World, the UNC Graduate School, the Department of Religious Studies, the American Studies Association, and the American Academy of Religion.

My fellow graduate students were the lifeblood of my time at UNC: Israel Dominguez, Hina Muneeruddin, Yasmine Flodin-Ali, Annie O'Brien, Alejandro Escalante, Barbara Sostaita, Micah Hughes, Becca Henriksen, Isaiah Ellis, Brook Wilensky-Lanford, Shannon Schorey, Katie Merriman, John Miller, Shreya Parikh, and Arianne Ekinci. The same goes for my friends Magda Mohamed, Nabil Khan, Atiya Husain, Fatema Ahmad, Julie Gras-Najjar, Nabil Khan, Khadijah and Madiha Bhatti, Rana AlKhaldi, Nathaniel and Fatou Berndt, Daanish Faruqi, Thomas Williams, Siobhan McGowan, Mynti Hossain, Nadia Khan, Sarah Husain, and Anam Tareen. The care you have all taken to kindle community is a fiery beauty to behold. Your friendship has and will always be the best thing about these years of my life.

The abiding support of my family has grounded me, especially in the inevitable moments of doubt that my ideas might matter. My khalas, especially Rupa Khala and Meena Khala, have always taken a genuine interest in my thoughts. My sister and brother, Allysha and Galib, never let my doubts linger for long. They know my true self and are the ones who keep me present in this dunya. My parents, Alamgir and Safina, have enabled my every good fortune, while Jarron has been there to realize those fortunes at my side. He has listened to my reasoning for every argumentative vector that appears in these pages and has read every word to boot. We are two kids from Kalamazoo, now partners in everything. He is my friend, my advocate, my colleague, my comrade, my love. These words are not enough, but there are none that will be.

I set out to write something that recognizes and upholds the joy of Muslims despite the hostile world around us; my Khalil is the living, toddling embodiment of that joy. He is my life's unrivaled delight and great mystery.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

INTRODUCTION: FUNNY MUSLIMS

> We're walking down the hallway, and I see all these photos of the old correspondents that came before me. Steve Carell, John Oliver, Sam Bee, Jason Jones, Ed Helms, Steven Colbert… and me? Keema roti me? Nah, come on, you know we don't end up this far. You know the way it is for us. Middle management till we die. Cube life till we die. We're not on that stage, ever.
>
> - Hasan Minhaj, *Homecoming King*[1]

Why Comedy?

Hasan Minhaj stares at his palms in wild disbelief in this scene, employing his signature harried pacing across the stage of the Mondavi Center at the University of California, Davis. He is back in that moment, bewildered that he is being physically ushered into a world of American comedy greats, where – in his telling – "we" have never been.[2] His audience whoops and hollers, both in recognition of the illustrious roll call but also because they know how this story ends. Minhaj gets the job at *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, then America's premier satire television program. He has, by all accounts, made it. The triumphant demeanor that closes out the special, accompanied by spinning spotlights and an orchestral score, signals that by extension so have "we."[3]

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[1] Hasan Minhaj and Christopher Storer, *Homecoming King* (Netflix, 2017).

[2] The contrast painted between Minhaj and this all-white list of correspondents is blunted by the fact that *The Daily Show* under Jon Stewart's helm employed a number of non-white correspondents prior to Minhaj's hire, including Larry Wilmore, Wyatt Cenac, Al Madrigal, Jessica Williams, and most notably Asif Mandvi (another South Asian Muslim man).

[3] Throughout this dissertation, I have opted to write in the present tense with respect to the performances I investigate as well as my analytical responses to them.

I recall sharing in that air of celebration when I first saw *Homecoming King*, flush with a sense of pride for this man who had the gait and facial hair of my brother. Furthermore, it was not just him: the currency of three South Asian Muslim men (Hasan Minhaj, Aziz Ansari and Kumail Nanjiani) had reached a zenith in 2017. By the end of that year, these men were everywhere on the pop culture scene: Minhaj hosted the White House Correspondent's Dinner during Donald Trump's first year in office, released *Homecoming King*, and left a stint on the *Daily Show* to headline his own political comedy program on Netflix titled *Patriot Act*. After several Comedy Central and Netflix comedy specials, as well as seven seasons as a series regular on the popular NBC sitcom *Parks and Recreation*, Aziz Ansari launched and starred in his own critically acclaimed show *Master of None* on Netflix. Kumai Nanjiani, a mainstay on HBO's *Silicon Valley*, turned the story of his marriage into an Amazon-produced film, the *Big Sick*. He and his wife, Emily Gordon, were nominated for an Oscar the next year for their screenplay.

It was thus a mix of curiosity and shared excitement over the sudden and no longer singular representation of South Asian Muslim men on the pop culture stage that drew me to this project. As a longtime backseat observer (and indeed, a consumer and fan!) of this phenomenon, I found a moment of convergence with my broader scholarly interest in the shifting forms of American Muslim representation. Why was it *comedy* and *comedians*, and ones who were South Asian men at that, who were getting these big breaks? And why was Islam being invoked as a way of identifying themselves and the dynamic in which their work was located? These men are at once incidental and emblematic of something larger.

Representation and Seeing Muslims

Enduring in the study of Islam is a common refrain, picking up steam in the years since 2001, that if people just learned about Islam or saw more positive representations of Muslims in media, then instances of anti-Muslim hostilities would inevitably diminish and end.[4] This hostility exists, the argument goes, because of a lack of knowledge; it is a problem with a simple fix. An outpouring of positive representation would counter the otherwise overwhelming media associations of Muslims and Islam with terrorism, war, and immigration.[5] Yet scholars like Evelyn Alsultany have deftly demonstrated the folly behind such stratagem, arguing that the production of such inverse imagery (in shows like *24*, *The Practice*, and *Law and Order*) lifts up the claim of a "post-racial" society in which the constitutional rights of some Muslims can be legitimately jettisoned in order to maintain the security of a broader populace that includes innocent Muslims.[6] Such simplified representations do not extricate "good" or "bad" Muslims from of the realm of U.S. national security threats, rather insisting upon the demonstration of "diversity patriotism" to ensure one lands in one column and not the other. That there is a list with two columns, however, is not a question. All the while, anti-Muslim hostility pervades

[4] I use anti-Muslim hostility in place of the more commonly recognized "Islamophobia," drawing from Juliane Hammer's reasoning that the etymology of this latter term individualizes discrimination by way of diminishing its broader social and systemic relations to war, racism, patriarchy, and homophobia. She translates the German word Islamfeindlichkeit for its applicability not just in intellectual discourses such as these, but to "empower activist strategies and political interventions." See Juliane Hammer, *Peaceful Families: American Muslim Efforts against Domestic Violence* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2019), 37-38.

[5] Saifuddin Ahmed and Jörg Matthes, "Media Representation of Muslims and Islam from 2000 to 2015: A Meta-Analysis," *International Communication Gazette* 79, no. 3 (2017): 219–44, 238.

[6] Evelyn Alsultany, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation After 9/11*, Critical Cultural Communication (New York: NYU Press, 2012), 45.

across the United States; indeed, rates of such hostility in the form of physical assault were demonstrably worse in 2017 than in the weeks after 9/11.[7]

What and whom, if not just media, are to be held accountable for the production anti-Muslim hostility? Singular focus on just one social institution neglects the highly interwoven nature of anti-Muslim hostility with the issues of popular discourse, state surveillance and entrapment, hate crimes, and war. It is in their conjunction, not individual operations, that anti-Muslim hostility is reproduced. While the public, too, is an active agent in this (re)production, individual acts of physical violence are often referred to as the sole expression of anti-Muslim hostility. Once more, attention is drawn away from the multiplicity that enables such violence. Acts such as these must been reconceptualized as just one end of anti-Muslim hostility because the beginning is just as pernicious. Yet hostilities at the start are named otherwise: sometimes thought of as a logically-derived "distaste" for Muslim beliefs and practices or perhaps as "concern" over safety for oneself and their "own" community.

The pressure for positive media representation as political antidote has not abated. In fact, these efforts have linked up with and become a part of the broader cultural media conversations on minority representation in front of and behind Hollywood cameras. All the while, Minhaj, Ansari, and Nanjiani have seen their stars continue to rise on stages from New York to LA, led by their standup routines and comedic productions that always find a way back to their experiences as South Asian Muslim men. In many ways, standup comedy would seem the obvious home for this type of resistance work; a natural pathway for engaging in cultural critique against broader hegemonic influences. After all, the medium's distinctive history has been

[7] Katayoun Kishi, "Assaults against Muslims in U.S. Surpass 2001 Level," Pew Research Center, November 15, 2017, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/11/15/assaults-against-muslims-in-u-s-surpass-2001-level/.

catalogued as an artistic expression of political commentary, rebellion, and counterculture.[8] Comedians, presaged by the likes of Lenny Bruce and Richard Pryor in the mid-20th century, "took aim at political corruption and corporate greed, made fun of society's hypocrisy and consumerist excess... their point of view - ironic, skeptical, media savvy, challenging authority, puncturing pretension, telling uncomfortable truths - is the lens through which we view everything from presidential politics and celebrity scandal to the little trials of our everyday lives."[9]

Standup comedy has also been a venue for the taboo, the edgy, offensive, and patently absurd. Steve Martin played to sold out 10,000-seat theaters throughout the 1970s wearing bunny ears and poorly twisting balloon animals on stage. In his comedy special, *Fire in the Maternity Ward*, Anthony Jeselnik cooly relates how easy it is to drop babies on their heads and scoop them back up so "no one is the wiser, especially not that baby."[10] The contemporary comedian occupies the position of a provocateur in a jester's hat: inviting their audience to laugh with them, occasionally at them, but always at the incongruity of the situation presented. Says Jeselnik: "The character [I play on stage] is such a monster that you know I'm on the right side of things."[11]

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[8] Richard Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge: How Stand-up in the 1970s Changed America* (Bloomsbury, 2008), 2-3.

[9] Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge*, 3.

[10] Marcus Raboy, *Fire in the Maternity Ward*, Streaming, Comedy (Netflix, 2019).

[11] Jason Zinoman, "His Punch Lines Cross Moral Lines. Anthony Jeselnik Gets Away With It.," *The New York Times*, April 30, 2019, sec. Arts, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/30/arts/television/anthony-jeselnik-netflix.html.

The Limits of Funny

This impulse for the provocation, when coupled with calls for responsible social critique, has been met with revulsion among several of the living bulwarks of American standup today. These individuals bemoan what they seen as a cultural tide of viewer "sensitivity" that seeks to place limits on their subjects of observation. One such elder statesman, Jerry Seinfeld, openly scoffs at the idea of attending to questions of minority representation:

> People think it's the census or something. This has gotta represent the actual pie chart of America? Who cares? Funny is the world that I live in. You're funny, I'm interested. You're not funny, I'm not interested. I have no interest in gender or race or anything like that… To me, that's anti-comedy. To me it's PC nonsense and not "are you making us laugh or not?"[12]

I am fascinated by this conception of the guild: one that positions itself as home to a risible and astute anthropologist wielding a microphone, unbridled by parameters and free to comment on or even embody the incongruity they've observed. Funny, as Seinfeld suggests, is an equalizer. It is also the job's only obligation.

Endemic to the terms set out by *funny*, however, is their own set of restrictions. What makes something funny, anyway? Who decides, and what has given them that command? Turn comedy's self-articulation on its head: what happens if we think of humor not within the mythos of resistance and "punching up," but as a site of secular discipline and limit – a place where regimes of humor determine what is funny and worthy of laughter within the framework of concomitant secular ideas like free speech and equality? A place where the subjects of that humor (especially when those subjects are Muslim) must prove their capacity to joke and take a

[12] BuzzFeedBrews, *Jerry Seinfeld On Diversity In Comedy: "Who Cares? Are You Making Us Laugh Or Are You Not?"* BuzzFeedBrews (BuzzFeed, 2014), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EsEr6xNN8Hw.

joke, especially at their own expense? What happens when the Muslim comedian is both a commentator on the peripheries but also its warden? What does Islam look like then and there?

Zeroing in on the funny Muslim – one who rushes into a literal spotlight, takes up the mantle of humor, enduring caricature, but also refashioning it to elicit laughter – is what Carl Ernst might call a "striking example... cases that do not fit our common expectations, which therefore force us to revise conventional assumptions."[13] At the same time, I also see this isolation as a conscientious engagement with the obvious. Of course these comedians are men. Of course they are South Asian, they are "Brown," they are "Muslim." Of course they are a point of interest because they are funny Muslims. How and why, I ask, did all of this come to be so obvious in the first place?

A Note on Sources

In this project, I specifically examine sources in which these men held creative control over output, narratives they themselves wrote and then enacted on stage and screen. These range from standup specials to television shows to film. Other roles, like Ansari's character in the television show *Parks and Recreation* or Nanjiani in *Silicon Valley*, serve as secondary sources given that they were not written by these men and do not operate as an agential self-articulation, though I do consider these roles for their function in promoting their career trajectories. I couple these primary sources against theoretical insights from race and feminist scholars who have attended specifically to embodied realities and how they are forged by, against, and within historical forces and social institutions.

[13] Carl W Ernst, *It's Not Just Academic! Essays on Sufism and Islamic Studies* (New Delhi, India: SAGE Publications, 2017), xiii.

My archive – by virtue of scrutinizing a contemporary phenomenon within popular U.S. culture – is therefore vast and varied. Given that this project is most interested in the self- and Islam-making of these men through an analysis of discourse and embodiment, I focus less on audience reactions and responses to these productions. When I do utilize them, it is for the purpose of illustrating broader theoretical points on sensation and affect which feeds back into questions of self-making and what "works" so to speak. I employ such first-person narratives from the place people vocalize them in the era I study: social media. This means taking tweets, blog posts, and YouTube comments seriously as interlocuters. Even when written with harried flippancy and non-standard syntax, I am resolute in my decision to include this as literature from which there are conclusions to draw and evaluate. This is particularly useful when thinking about the language of representation and what that has come to mean in parlance that evokes feeling as the primary indicator of value; affective pleasure and "feeling seen."

Drawing the Perimeter

As meaningful as this moment is, it is just as dynamic. I reaffirm that this is, therefore, a historical investigation of an instructive moment in American public life and popular culture. For the purposes of this dissertation, I cut off my analysis in mid-2019. We cannot, I believe, analyze every angle of the moment we are currently inhabit. Ansari, Minhaj, and Nanjiani's careers are ongoing and, as I write, continue to reach new heights. In the year since, Hasan Minhaj has continued to release episodes of his Netflix show *Patriot Act*, many filmed in isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but still tackling issues like paying rent during times of hardship, the cost of a college education, and anti-Black racism within Asian American communities. Though Aziz Ansari's sojourn post #MeToo has only been punctuated by one comedy special titled *Right*

Now, he has reappeared in episodes of David Chang's culinary show *Ugly Delicious*. Ansari travels to India alongside Chang for an episode dedicated to the idea of curry, and also has invited Chang to share a meal with his parents and brother in New York.[14] Nanjiani has perhaps gone through the starkest change: rumors abounded through early 2019 of his casting in a new set of superhero action flicks (alongside Angelina Jolie and Salma Hayek), and in December 2019 he posted a shirtless, oiled photo of himself on Instagram to reveal a transformed physique in service to his role as an immortal god-like samurai in the latest Marvel/Disney film, *The Eternals*.[15] The internet responded with the equivalent of bewildered but enthusiastic applause. In January 2020, he and his wife Emily Gordon produced a short anthology series for Apple TV+ titled *Little America*, made up of eight episodes depicting immigrant narratives ranging from the lives of a Ugandan cowboy to a gay Syrian to a young Indian boy whose parents get deported. Says Nanjiani, "If there is a political agenda in the show, it's just that immigrant experiences are very varied, as are anybody else's experiences. Just saying that immigrants are human beings feels like such a basic thing… Somehow a simple statement of fact has become a radical political stance."[16]

A fair and common question I field when discussing my study in academic settings and among those simply curious about the structure of my research is *where are the women*? Their absence as case studies here should not assume their irrelevance. It also does not preclude the

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[14] Meghan O'Keefe, "Is Netflix's 'Ugly Delicious' Setting Up an Aziz Ansari Comeback?," *Decider* (blog), March 6, 2020, https://decider.com/2020/03/06/ugly-delicious-season-2-aziz-ansari-comeback/.

[15] Kumail Nanjiani, "I Never Thought I'd Be One of Those People...," Instagram, December 16, 2019, https://www.instagram.com/p/B6I7b2bnuJz/.

[16] Brandon Yu, "Kumail Nanjiani on 'Little America' and Hopeful Immigrant Stories," *The New York Times*, January 17, 2020, sec. Arts, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/17/arts/television/kumail-nanjiani-little-america.html.

centrality of gender and women to the ways that I understand American Muslim humor and its significance; far from it. Comics like Zahra Noorbakhsh, Maysoon Zayid, Negin Farsad, Aizzah Fatima, Mariam Sobh, and countless others draw audiences to their shows across the United States. The reality of pop-culture prominence remains, unfortunately, that these men are at the top and in the center.

The specter of Muslim women and the gendered realities of Ansari, Minhaj, and Nanjiani are nevertheless a constant presence in my considerations, from the ways that these men construct their performances of neocolonial masculinity to the content they choose to include in their joke-writing. In fact, the distinct dearth of fully-realized Muslim women in these particular stagings of Islam speak to what I later term a conceit of representative #resistance, which buys the participation of a broader public because the comedian is markedly minoritized in one way, and he is thus permissibly able to stand-in for all types of minoritizations. Studies of gender in Islamic Studies too often have reinforced the frenetic obsession with Muslim women that these studies themselves critique. A focus on masculine subjectivities, however, displaces that onus and instead explores gender from this under-analyzed perspective.

Why It Matters

In this dissertation, I demonstrate how and why these men have been endorsed, and indeed, fast-tracked, in their pop culture ascent by the very regimes of humor that insist on the industry's native candor and openness to those that meet the single standard of funny. Minhaj, Ansari, and Nanjiani construct a specific self on stage that is intended to be and is read as universally funny by way of their adherence to several other cultural criteria. That self and the humor that it employs, especially as it pertains to their experiences and articulations of Islam, are

deeply consonant with broader operative cultural discourses in the U.S. Chief among these discourses, I argue, are those that read Islam as a racial category in the U.S., wherein Islam is something that is read off and onto one's body. by extension, this "mark" of Islam does not influence one's assumed allegiance to American liberal exceptionalism, its capitalist pursuits, and what I am calling a "progressive consensus" of recognition vis-à-vis racially-minded social justice. This staging of Islam similarly reifies a simultaneously hyper/deficiently masculine vision of Muslims, against which the comedians' blithe and non-threatening masculinity constitutes an agreeable, soothing Muslim foil for their American patrons (audience and underwriters). While their humor can, and often does, subvert categorical assumptions about Muslim sedition and violence, it does not do so for the ontologies that naturalized those assumptions in the first place. The secular order that gives them rise simultaneously contains them, ensuring that the comedian has room to critique certain power structures while still very much remaining subject to them.

Thus, while these figures and this moment in the pop culture sun are captivating subjects in their own right, they are principally a conduit for what are the ultimate subjects of my research. At its heart, this project is about recognition and representation. It is about the discipline of American secularism. It is about racial formations and embodiment. It is about hegemonic masculinities that authorize anti-Muslim hostility across perceived political affiliations, and their historical interplay with the daily operations of empire. It is about the muddied waters that categories such as religion and race and gender swim in, and how Muslims affectively perform themselves into legibility out from within that murk. It is about how humor (and the pleasure it generates) creates new modes of meaning-making among Muslims outsides the normative confines of prescribed ritual. Foremost, it is an attempt to use this historical

moment, these men, and their significations to appreciate why religion matters and how Islam, categorically, is capacious in its scope. It is a testament to why religion must be a central node of study in how we interpret contemporary political, racial, and gender formations. What ties these nine chapters together is the idea that none of these concepts – humor, religion, race, Islam, gender, capitalism – can, in isolation, answer for the current predicament of the others. Rather, they all have something collective to say about being, becoming, and being recognized as Muslim.

Biographical Information

It is necessary to situation each of these comedians through a longer introduction to their lives, positionalities, and careers. The biographical sketches below also highlight their most significant works and the contexts in which they were produced. Throughout the dissertation, I refer to these works and their contexts in order to illustrate my broader theoretical interventions.

Aziz Ansari

Aziz Ansari was born in 1983 to parents Shoukath and Fatima in Bennettsville, South Carolina. His father, a gastroenterologist, came to the United States from Tamil Nadu for a fellowship at the University of South Carolina.[17] His mother works in the medical office alongside her spouse.[18] Ansari has said there was not much opportunity for being Muslim during

[17] "Ansari Named Physician of the Year," Richmond County Daily Journal, May 8, 2017, https://www.yourdailyjournal.com/news/73101/ansari-named-physician-of-the-year.

[18] Terry Gross, "Aziz Ansari On Master Of None; And How His Parents Feel About Acting," Fresh Air, NPR, accessed March 15, 2020, https://www.wboi.org/post/aziz-ansari-master-none-and-how-his-parents-feel-about-acting.

his childhood because "there was no mosque or anything like that. So I was never really religious."[19] He went on to pursue a degree in biology and business at New York University, graduating in 2004. Throughout those years in New York, Ansari tried his hand at standup, attending open mics and sketch comedy shows throughout the city.[20]

He joined the Amy Poehler-founded Upright Citizens Brigade Theater, and with a few castmates began to host a comedy night at the theater titled "Human Giant." MTV picked up the premise and filmed two seasons starring the troupe. Ansari and his costars declined a third season, after which he found himself cast in Judd Apatow's 2009 film *Funny People* and as a series regular on Amy Poehler's NBC comedy *Parks and Recreation*. On *Parks*, Ansari took on the character of Tom Haverford, a slick, luxury-indulging government employee that frequently embarked on entrepreneurial hijinks. Haverford always dresses in suits ("Brooks Brothers Boys, it's like the cuts are slimmer, and it's cheaper. Win win!") and unsuccessfully pursues the women he works with ("Think about how much better our friendship would be if we added 'doing it'?").[21]

There was little delay between the end of *Parks* and his next venture. Ansari and comedy writer Alan Yang envisioned shooting their own television show, titled *Master of None*, in New York while still working on the *Parks* set. As *Parks* entered its penultimate season, Yang and Ansari pitched their idea with the backing of *Parks* producer Michael Schur to various networks and sold to Netflix, with whom Ansari had already filmed several standup comedy specials. "I

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[19] Gross, "Aziz Ansari On Master Of None."

[20] Sanneh Kelefa, "Funny Person," *The New Yorker*, November 1, 2010, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/11/01/funny-person.

[21] Tristram Shapeero, "94 Meetings," *Parks and Recreation* (NBC, April 29, 2010); Ken Kwapis, "Galentine's Day" (NBC, February 11, 2010).

had done my stand-up specials with them," he says. "When we went to them, they were just super enthusiastic. They told us we didn't have to do a pilot or anything. We just went straight-to-series - 10 episodes."[22] Ansari had wide creative control over *Master of None*'s script, character development, plot, and direction, unlike his role on *Parks and Recreation*.

Master of None premiered in 2015 to rave reviews. The *New York Times* called it "the year's best comedy straight out of the gate," and it wrapped a successful second season in 2017.[23] The show follows Dev Shah, a struggling (Muslim, though more on that later) Indian American actor, as he navigates the mores of technology, race, dating, and family in New York. Ansari casts his own parents in the roles of Dev's parents, Ramesh and Nisha. Though the show's primary thread is about Dev's love life, each episode dips into a different contemporary social issue that millennials face. Among the topics the show addresses are how one reconciles a workable relationship with one's parents as an adult child, the daily acts of harassment faced by women that men are oblivious to, the limited roles for Indian men on TV and the pressure to play up accents and stereotypes, the complexities of "coming out" to one's family, religious difference among family members, and the racism inherent within dating app algorithms. Both seasons of *Master of None* include romance arcs for Dev that center sustained relationships with white women. During its two-year run, *Master of None* accrued several award nominations and wins, including a Peabody, two Emmys, and a Golden Globe for Ansari's acting.

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[22] Elbert Wyche, "Emmys 2017: Aziz Ansari Talks 'Master of None,'" Screen Daily, accessed March 15, 2020, https://www.screendaily.com/features/emmys-2017-aziz-ansari-talks-master-of-none/5119193.article.

[23] James Poniewozik, "Review: Aziz Ansari, in 'Master of None,' Negotiates Technology and Social Mores," *The New York Times*, November 5, 2015, sec. Arts, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/06/arts/television/review-aziz-ansari-in-master-of-none-negotiates-technology-and-social-mores.html.

Standup remained a constant in Ansari's life, though, and he continued to release multiple specials over the decade, primarily with Netflix: *Intimate Moments for a Sensual Evening* (2010), *Dangerously Delicious* (2012), *Buried Alive* (2013), *Live in Madison Square Garden* (2015) and *Right Now* (2019). In each special, except *Right Now*, Ansari dresses in a suit and tie. He has publicly held up Chris Rock as his main comedic inspiration, telling New York Magazine, "Those two Chris Rock specials, *Bring the Pain* and *Bigger and Blacker,* in high school I knew every single word."[24] In his early specials, Rock's influence on him comes through primarily in Ansari's embodied performance. His rapid pacing on stage, repeating and punctuating specific phrases all harken towards the ways that Rock carries himself on stage. Rock's signature overt and racially oriented content, however, is not present. Ansari's early specials not only avoid politics, but were even overtly anti-political ("I don't do political stuff; I talk about my own life and what I've done and been through).[25]

That initial material mainly dealt with everyday mundanities like the difficulties of dating (he has a lengthy screed against people who do not text back right away in *Dangerously Delicious*), the types of people you meet at bars, and wasting time on the internet ("Man, I wonder if Home Alone 2 made more money than Home Alone 1. I gotta look into this NOW").[26] Later specials, like *Buried Alive* and *Live in Madison Square Garden*, would address social issues, but in vague and deliberately non-controversial fashion. Not until the run-up to the 2016

[24] Jada Yuan, "Chris Rock on Becoming Aziz Ansari's Mentor," Vulture, New York Magazine, May 12, 2017, https://www.vulture.com/2017/05/chris-rock-aziz-ansari-mentor.html.

[25] Express, "Funny Man: Rising Indie Comedian Aziz Ansari Comes to Washington," *Washington Post*, accessed March 16, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/express/wp/2009/09/24/aziz-ansari/.

[26] Aziz Ansari, *Dangerously Delicious* (Comedy Central, 2012).

presidential election and the increasingly antagonistic comments of then-candidate Donald Trump did Ansari begin to work more socially-conscious observations into his routine.

Of course, it was not until 2017 that Ansari became somewhat of a household name as another prominent #MeToo culprit. The website babe.net published an account by a woman anonymized as Grace, who detailed Ansari's aggressive sexual advances and disregard for her discomfort over the course of an evening she spent with Ansari. She ultimately understood this as sexual assault, and the column spurred a spirited debate among the nation's cultural literati ranging from whether Ansari's behavior constituted assault or even misconduct to the insistence that the "ordinary" nature of this date needed to be re-examined for its power dynamics and rules of consent. Ansari released a statement to E! Online, which did not contain an explicit apology to Grace, but did provide his perspective on the night's events and his continued support for the #MeToo movement. He lay low for the following year, re-appearing in late 2018 at comedy clubs in Milwaukee workshopping a new set that maligned "outrage" culture and "political correctness."[27] #MeToo and his scandal were conspicuously absent from that material, though he did finally attend to the episode when this new act was conclusively finalized in the 2019 Netflix special *Right Now*.

Hasan Minhaj

Hasan Minhaj was born September 23, 1985 in Davis, California. His father, Najme, was a chemist while his mother, Seema, was a medical student. She and Najme had married in Aligarh, India, and she returned to finish her schooling while Hasan was still young. Hasan spent

[27] Eren Orbey, "Aziz Ansari's New Standup Tour Is a Cry Against Extreme Wokeness," *The New Yorker*, October 4, 2018, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/aziz-ansaris-new-standup-tour-is-a-cry-against-extreme-wokeness.

the first eight years of his life with his father in Davis. Immigration issues kept Seema from returning to the U.S. until 1993, when she brought with her Minhaj's sister Ayesha, who was four years old by then. At home, they spoke Urdu, and Hasan's interest in comedy was relatively limited (he recounts thinking that standup was "the stuff that Seinfeld did before *Seinfeld*, where he's just like… what's the deal with laundry? And I was always like, oh, I hate that part of *Seinfeld*").[28] Not until his freshman year at UC Davis was Minhaj introduced to Chris Rock's work, specials like *Bring the Pain* and *Never Scared*. Rock's "honesty and candor around politics and race in America" set him on a path for standup, attending open mics around Davis, San Francisco, and eventually LA after graduation.[29]

He calls the routines he was workshopping at the beginning of his career "desperate" and "assimilation comedy," notably distancing himself from the types of jokes he used to make like imitating his father's broken English on the phone.[30] Like Ansari, Minhaj was frequently offered trite and formulaic roles written explicitly for a demure South Asian. Disappointed with the offerings, he and a troupe of three other South and Southwest Asian men formed a sketch group called Goatface in 2012, which began on Youtube in earnest but received a Comedy Central special in 2018 thanks to Minhaj's rapport with top brass at the network. "One night over dinner

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[28] Terry Gross, "Comic Hasan Minhaj On Roasting Trump And Growing Up A 'Third Culture Kid,'" Fresh Air, NPR.org, November 2, 2018, https://www.npr.org/2018/11/02/663389616/comic-hasan-minhaj-on-roasting-trump-and-growing-up-a-third-culture-kid.

[29] Anna Menta, "How Hasan Minhaj Went from Demeaning Auditions to Netflix's 'Patriot Act,'" Newsweek, October 26, 2018, https://www.newsweek.com/hasan-minhaj-patriot-act-profile-1187920.

[30] Menta; Lynn Hirschberg, "For Hasan Minhaj, the Best Part About Making His Show Patriot Act Is Making Trouble," *W Magazine*, July 25, 2019, https://www.wmagazine.com/story/hasan-minhaj-patriot-act-saudi-arabia-interview/.

they were like, 'What are the other things that you're working on or things that you're interested in?'…. Surprisingly, it was one of the fastest green lights that I've seen in my career."[31]

In those interceding years, Minhaj continued with his own independent standup, and was called to interview with Jon Stewart at the Daily Show. He was hired in one of Stewart's final acts as showrunner in 2014. There he stayed as a "Senior Muslim Correspondent" or some other droll iteration of a title for 4 years, during which he continued to amass standup material and was called to give the keynote speech at the first White House Correspondents' dinner of the Trump presidency, after several other comedians had declined before him.[32] And though both the president and his staff all skipped the event, Minhaj's monologue landed with a splash. Poking fun at all the major news networks, he saved his sharpest barbs for the person not in attendance. Said Minhaj: "We have to address the elephant not in the room. The leader of our country is not here. But that's because he's in Moscow. It is a very long flight. Vlad can't just make it on a Saturday. As for the other guy, I think he's in Pennsylvania because he can't take a joke."[33]

At the same time, Minhaj was crafting a one-man show, a step away from his usual standup material because this "allows the performer to show all sorts of different notes: comedic, or pensive, or thoughtful."[34] Working with the Moth storytelling community, he tinkered with

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[31] Jaya Saxena, "Goatface Is Comedy for Brown Americans, and Everyone," GQ, November 27, 2018, https://www.gq.com/story/goatface-wants-you-to-know-theyre-funny-first.

[32] Michael M. Grynbaum, "Hasan Minhaj to Perform at White House Correspondents' Association Dinner," *The New York Times*, April 11, 2017, sec. Business, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/11/business/media/hasan-minhaj-correspondents-dinner.html.

[33] Hasan Minhaj, *Hasan Minhaj COMPLETE REMARKS at 2017 White House Correspondents' Dinner*, Streaming Video (Washington Hilton Hotel: C-SPAN, 2017), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z7oG74nHSTQ.

[34] Scott Meslow, "Hasan Minhaj Still Thinks We'll Survive Donald Trump," GQ, May 11, 2017, https://www.gq.com/story/hasan-minhaj-netflix-special.

versions of the show for two years that eventually resulted in the polished Netflix joint *Homecoming King*. In it, Minhaj relays much of the biography listed here, peppering in old family photos alongside Urdu jokes and highly-specific South Asian American references. He narrates the story of his parents' arranged marriage and journey to the United States, his own experiences growing up in Davis, California, being subjected to anti-Muslim hostilities and hate crimes after 9/11, and falling in love with a white woman in high school only to be denied the opportunity to take her to prom by her kind, but racist parents. For Minhaj, this show is about "love, the American dream, forgiveness" – all soupy themes that get spliced against his honed witticisms and one-liners.

The special premiered to rave reviews and went on to receive a Peabody Award. The program called *Homecoming King* "equally from comedy pioneer Richard Pryor and monologist Spalding Gray… [it] blends soulful intimacy and wry satire, equal parts profound, illuminating, delightful, personable, and witty."[35] The venture with Netflix proved to be enduring – within months, the streaming service offered a 32-episode order for a comedy news show with Minhaj at the helm. *Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj* premiered on October 28, 2017 and has now entered its sixth season. In each 26-minute segment, Minhaj leads his audience through a deep-dive on a given news topic, similar in pacing and format to the other politainment programming like *the Daily Show*, *Last Week Tonight*, and *Full Frontal* (the latter two of which are also hosted by *Daily Show* alumni).

He has taken on a wide swath of personally controversial subject matters: the second episode of the first season looked at Saudi Arabia, the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, and how

[35] "The Peabody Awards - Hasan Minhaj: Homecoming King," The Peabody Awards, 2017, http://www.peabodyawards.com/award-profile/hasan-minhaj-homecoming-king.

Mohammed bin Salman's treacherous political moves affect Minhaj's Muslim faith.[36] Other episodes have explored ICE detention policies, the anti-CAA protests in India, student loan debt, Bolsonaro's logging policies in the Amazon, and the importance of the Asian vote in the 2020 elections. *Patriot Act* is ongoing, and Minhaj was set to host the 2020 White House Correspondents' Dinner once more, though this time alongside *SNL*'s Kenan Thompson. This was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Kumail Nanjiani

Kumail Nanjiani was born in Karachi, Pakistan in 1978. His father, Aijaz, is a psychiatrist in New Jersey. As a child growing up in Pakistan, Nanjiani recounts playing a lot of video games and watching the X-files. He attended the most prestigious and highly selective secondary school in the country, Karachi Grammar School, before matriculating into Grinnell College in Iowa in 1997. There, he studied computer science and philosophy. During his senior year, he attended an open mic on campus and performed for 35 minutes, having also been introduced to Jerry Seinfeld's HBO special by friends.[37] The experience gave him a taste for standup and influenced his decision to move to Chicago after graduation in 2001 to keep performing while maintaining a job in IT to make ends meet.[38] Nanjiani has referred to the fact that he witnessed the rise of the post-9/11 Muslim comedians of AMMF and AoE but made a

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[36] Richard A. Preuss, *Saudi Arabia*, vol. 1, episode 2, Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj (Art & Industry, Comedy Bang! Bang! Productions, Margolis Superstore, 2018).

[37] Daniel Agostino, "Kumail Nanjiani '01 Returns to Grinnell," The Scarlet & Black, Grinnell College, March 18, 2014, https://web.archive.org/web/20140318133944/http://www.thesandb.com/arts/kumail-nanjiani-01-returns-to-grinnell.html.

[38] Andrew Marantz, "Kumail Nanjiani's Culture-Clash Comedy," *New Yorker*, May 2017, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/05/08/kumail-nanjianis-culture-clash-comedy.

conscious decision to not replicate what he saw as their source material; i.e. discussing his Muslim heritage. "I had seen so many jokes about plays on being cabdrivers or working at 7-Eleven or working at Dunkin' Donuts, so for better or worse, I decided I would not talk about that stuff at all."[39] Instead, the material he wrote mostly circled the topics of video games, horror movies, and American pop culture references. "I'll be more like the comedians that I enjoy," he had thought to himself "which at the time were Seinfeld and stuff."[40]

The *New York Times* referred to the aura of Nanjiani's work on the New York comedy circuit as "slightly absurdist and occasionally free-form," though this would change with the increasing success of another production that he had cultivated on the side. *Unpronounceable*, a one-man show, spoke about his upbringing in Pakistan and more potently foregrounded his family, background, and religion.[41] He dissects various hadith and Qur'anic verses, particularly ones on the topic of punishment and the Day of Judgment, and points to the *daraba* verse in the Qur'an (4:34) as the tipping point when he no could longer consider himself a believer.[42] *Unpronounceable* only ran for about a year, with a smattering of performances in LA and New York as well. He caught the attention of several comedy kingmakers and was set to open for

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[39] Ann Marie Baldonado, "For Comedian Kumail Nanjiani, Getting Personal Is Complicated," *Fresh Air* (NPR, June 10, 2015), https://www.npr.org/2015/06/10/413270558/for-comedian-kumail-nanjiani-getting-personal-is-complicated.

[40] Emma Allen, *Kumail Nanjiani on Being a Muslim Comedian After 9/11*, The New Yorker Festival (New York, 2017), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JWad931J5js.

[41] Eric Konigsberg, "For Kumail Nanjiani, a Good Time to Be Funny," *New York Times*, October 23, 2009, sec. Comedy, https://web.archive.org/web/20140328100047/http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/01/arts/television/01koni.html.

[42] Steve Paulson, "Kumail Nanjiani on 'Unpronounceable,'" To The Best Of Our Knowledge, August 17, 2008, http://archive.ttbook.org/listen/6359.

Zach Galifianakis's 2008 national tour. This was canceled when his then-girlfriend, Emily Gordon, fell ill and was placed into a medically-induced coma. They married soon after her recovery, and Nanjiani secured an agent, quit his job in IT to pursue comedy full-time, and moved to New York.[43]

Between 2008 and 2013, Nanjiani worked a series of jobs in the entertainment industry – hosting various podcasts, guest-starring on *Veep*, *Newsreaders*, and *Adventure Time*, as well as earning a supporting series arc on the television show *Franklin and Bash*.[44] He also appeared on Stephen Colbert's *Colbert Report* as the recurring Guantanamo Bay detainee Omar who lived under Stephen's desk, who in his words, "subverts the stereotype... I try to stay away from stuff that's just caricaturish. It's not for me."[45] Nanjiani premiered his first standup special on Comedy Central in 2013, titled *Beta Male*. This springboarded him into his most lucrative position to date, being cast as the series regular "Dinesh" on the HBO sitcom *Silicon Valley*. The show debuted in 2014 and ran for six seasons until 2019. The character of Dinesh Chugtai, as played by Nanjiani, is a lazy, insecure, and venal Pakistani computer programmer who is juxtaposed often against his programming partner Bertram Gilfoyle, a monotone but brutally funny Canadian Satanist. Several jokes over the course of the show picked on Dinesh's foreignness, his penchant for gold jewelry, and his difficulty gaining citizenship.[46]

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[43] Marantz, "Kumail Nanjiani's Culture-Clash Comedy," May 2017.

[44] "IMDb: Kumail Nanjiani," IMDb, accessed March 17, 2020, http://www.imdb.com/name/nm3529685/.

[45] Matthew Imber, "Interview with Comedian Kumail Nanjiani '01," Grinnell College News, September 20, 2010, https://web.archive.org/web/20140318062833/http://www.grinnell.edu/news/interview-comedian-kumail-nanjiani-%E2%80%9901.

[46] *Silicon Valley* (HBO, April 6, 2014).

With Gordon, Nanjiani set out to write a screenplay about their relationship and ultimate marriage, surrounding the episode of her coma. During that time, he had stayed by her side in the ICU for just over a week, met her parents during that time, and told his parents about Emily. They married within months and went on to work together on the podcast *The Indoor Kids* and *The Meltdown with Jonah and Kumail*. Gordon, previous to her coma, had worked as a therapist but switched over to comedy writing and production around the time that she and Nanjiani wed.[47] Together, they penned a script for either television or film that would go on to become *The Big Sick*. Judd Apatow agreed to produce it as a full-length feature, and it premiered at the 2017 Sundance Film Festival. *The Big Sick* was acquired by Amazon Studios for distribution in one of the biggest deals in the history of the festival (to the tune of $12 million). The film has maintained a 98% fresh rating on the film review site *Rotten Tomatoes*, with a general consensus among critics that the film is simultaneously "funny, heartfelt, and intelligent."[48] It collected several nominations on the awards circuit in 2017, including an Oscar nomination for best screenplay.

Chapter Overview

This dissertation moves through an analysis of the literature currently in existence on humor and Islam before offering several theoretical and historical considerations as they apply to the work of these three comedians. Rather than following a linear progression of argument, the chapter outline below demonstrates the highly interlocked and intercommunicative nature of

[47] Marantz, "Kumail Nanjiani's Culture-Clash Comedy," May 2017.

[48] "The Big Sick (2017) - Rotten Tomatoes," Rotten Tomatoes, March 17, 2020, https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_big_sick.

religious, racial, and gendered formations as they are actualized in the performance and consumption humor. These forms are at times overlapping and at other times competing, but they are always mutually constitutive patterns that depend on the agency of various actors and the context in which they operate during those specific moments in time.

Chapter One asks that we (re)examine how humor has generally come to be understood and theorized in a contemporary American context. I chart how humor has gone from describing bodily fluids and what they say about the body's internal goings-on to referring to a state of being and a trait one can cultivate to better fit into a Euroamerican state structure. I also provide an overview of how humor has been typically studied in the United States, from theorizations on what induces laughter (superiority, marginality, etc.) to how incongruities of power have been taken to task by minoritized populations like Jewish, Black, and women comedians. This humor is also disciplinary for its use of public mockery, which provoke changes in social behavior.

Chapter Two considers Muslim humor, especially as it pertains to the commonly assumed baseline that Muslims are unwilling and perhaps even incapable of engaging with humor. There is, of course, a wealth of academic literature to the contrary, thematically ranging from Islamically sanctioned humor during the time of the Prophet Muhammad and the classical age to jokes told in the face of totalitarianism in the modern period to the rise of American Muslim comics after 9/11. Despite the diverse range of Muslim humor that these frames of study encapsulate, they still obliquely reference, in some fashion, the baseline assumption of essential Muslim solemnity, which gets reinvigorated in the wake of episodes like Danish cartoon controversy and the Charlie Hebdo shootings.

Chapter Three lays out my argument that humor operates today as a mode of secular and secularizing discourse. This involves the historical shifts in how we have come to define a

“sense” of humor and its relationship to the increasingly disciplining nature of secularism as a social system. Humor, I contend, is a fundamental pillar within the conception of the modern secular subject and has come to stand in for what makes nonnormative subjects worthy of inclusion within a secular state. This secularization feeds into the racialization of Islam and Muslims, something that is imposed on but also taken advantage of by the comedians in my study. When Islam “acts” like race – a phenotypical marker with limited power over the secular prerequisites for public life – it gains social legibility and accommodation under the broader secular hegemon of multicultural diversity. This racialization is fomented by what I am calling the “progressive consensus” of recognition, impelled by the results of the 2016 U.S. presidential election and high level calls for further institutionalizing anti-Muslim hostilities in federal public policies.

Chapter Four provides specific examples of “humor work” by Ansari, Minhaj, and Nanjiani that align within and reinforces the progressive consensus in addition to pointing out its deficiency in addressing how Islam is understood in public discourses. The language of the master category of race has been lifted up in order to understand and combat anti-Muslim hostility, but also asks us to re-probe Shahab Ahmed’s foundational question: what, then, is Islam within and outside of these confines? When is Islam a collection of experiences, a discursive tradition, but also something embodied? How does this authenticate a vision of Islam in the public sphere? “My” comedians employ a humor that is sanctioned by while also simultaneously sanctioning the progressive consensus. This scaffolds the kind of Islam that they stage, and is further facilitated by the affects of pleasure, laughter, and comfort. How might an affect of joy, specifically, both contain Muslim subjectivities while also offering respite in an overtly-hostile world?

Chapter Five surveys the histories and narratives of embodiment that have culminated in the affective realities that these comedians face in their present day. The Muslimness that inheres to their bodies is historically tied to sexual deviance in the early premodern era, a characterization that finds continuation in the form of fantastical stories meant to inspire fear and dread. As we move through the 20th century and into the 21st, the terrifying Muslim appears within and is made integral to discourses of securitization and protection of the populace as their antagonist. Muslim masculinity bleeds into the dual formations of hypersexuality and effeminacy across South Asian Hindu and Muslim men, tying their intelligibility to the Yellow Peril of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as well as the language of the Black brute and sexual deviance of the Black American man. Taken together, these taxonomies and their inconsistencies result in an essentialized Muslim being who must be distanced and dispossessed.

Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight focus specifically on one of the three respective comedians (Ansari, Minhaj, and Nanjiani) and their attempts to counter-script this essentialized Muslim being out through their own self-articulation by "becoming" the Right Muslim Man. I examine how caricature and impersonation are employed to make and keep the "terrifying" Muslim's sexuality strange, as well as the ways that whiteness is centralized as aspirational and desirable. Alignment with progressive consensus politics similarly undergirds what makes transmutes this Muslim into proper secular subjecthood.

Chapter Nine hones in closer on what – and who – have enabled these comedians' ascent to stardom through the progressive consensus. Here, I introduce the idea of representative #resistance and what consequences this act of universalizing universalism has for other minoritized people, specifically Muslim women and Black Muslims. In staging a form of opposition to a secular hegemonic order that reads largely as white, Ansari and Minhaj's

performance of resistance rely on co-opting and manipulating significations of American Blackness in ways that are meant to authenticate themselves but also reinforce racial logics of hierarchy. Nanjiani's notable refrain from taking on aesthetics of American Blackness speak to another phenomenon at work in his self-stylization, the performance of a "poor" immigrant who is both economically but (more importantly) culturally impoverished. When class gets obfuscated by Islam, by brownness, and (in Nanjiani's case) by accent, so too does the fact that class and capitalism facilitated and these comedy careers in the first place. Narratives of poverty positions America as an attainable economic and political safe-haven, once more erasing the realities that Black Muslims and other working class peoples.

I conclude the dissertation with a brief meditation on what social futures have been opened to Muslims through the comedy and representation of performers like Ansari, Nanjiani, and Minhaj. How, if at all, does one break free of the discipline imposed by secular white consumption and its expectations? The works of Audre Lorde and comedian Ramy Youssef offers some insights.

Decisions on Methodology

Like Lila Abu-Lughod, I am not simply interested in the critique of media representations, nor simply in the ways that popular rhetoric serve political ends.[49] I looking foremost to utilize methods of critical study to read my sources in conjunction with theoretical concepts like discourse, humor, secularism, racialization, gender, and sexuality and how they work through the people and worlds they've created. This methodology is familiar to religious studies by way of gender and queer theory, critical race theory, and postcolonial theory. To

[49] Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 20.

augment Joan Scott's words, I find gender, sexuality, and race to be "useful categor[ies]" of analysis as they enable a complex and intersectional examination of social difference, exposing structures of power and its uneven exchanges.[50] Social phenomena can then be understood as sites of power and knowledge in which conflict, not consensus, creates meaning. Excavating that conflict tells a story that critical race scholars recognize as less grand but more importantly attuned to the systems of inequality that purposefully obscure those already oppressed under their weight. Gayatri Spivak's concerns in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* similarly guide my methods of inquiry on the question of subjecthood, especially in terms of what it means to represent an Other while maintaining "the West as Subject."[51] I model Jasbir Puar's method of assembling and reading sources that veers "away from the instinctual, the natural, or the commonsensical" and instead creates an "alternative historical record, archive, and documentation of our contemporary moments."[52] I also draw on Gary Okihiro's recognition that binaries need breaking, while still remaining conscious of their staying power and of their occasional utility in the face of even more entrenched and systemized hegemonies.[53]

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[50] Joan Wallach Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986): 1053–1075.

[51] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313, 271-272.

[52] Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), xv.

[53] Gary Okihiro, *Common Ground: Reimagining American History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), xiv.

Conclusion

While this study is located primarily within the bodies of religious studies and Islamic studies, it is also an interdisciplinary experiment that takes its cue from scholars like Juliane Hammer, Harshita Kamath, and Sylvia Chan-Malik – my mentors and academic role models – to seek out analytical moments of disruption, contestation, and conflict in order to map out points of departures from the well-worn intellectual trails of what are too often disciplinary silos. Their respective scholarship showed me early on what kinds of insight are possible – and why they so urgently matter – when we embrace the political in our work. To that end, my own affective engagement with the material appears copiously throughout this dissertation. This is a methodological intervention that affirms my positionality and investment in scholarship that does not envision itself as somehow outside of and untouched by the phenomena under scrutiny. My inclusion broadens the scope of encounter. It presents an opportunity to interpret who is afforded representation, legibility, the room to become, and the room to fail.

CHAPTER 1: THE TRAVELS OF HUMOR

> The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them.
>
> - Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*[1]

Introduction

In 2014, the anti-affirmative action organization, Students for Fair Admissions, filed a lawsuit against Harvard University alleging that the college's "race-conscious" admissions process discriminated against Asian Americans in favor of "less qualified" Black, Hispanic, and white applicants. The filing forced Harvard to release hundreds of documents related to its secretive and hyperselective methods for choosing its freshmen class each year. Among the information made public was the college's internal ratings system. This system, broken into approximately 14 categories, included a predictable set of designations ranging from academic achievement to extracurricular activities to teacher recommendations.

But there was also a category for something called the "personal rating," an avowedly subjective assessment of whether the applicant had a personality conducive to promoting "a more robust academic environment with a greater depth and breadth of learning, encourag[ing] learning outside the classroom, and creat[ing] a richer sense of community."[2] Chief among the

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[1] Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), xiii.

[2] Alison Dale Burroughs, Students for Fair Admissions, Inc v. President and Fellows of Harvard College (Harvard Corporation), No. 14- cv-14176- ADB (United States District Court, District of Massachusetts September 30, 2019).

characteristics that would fulfill this slate? Humor, of course.[3] It was here that Asian students were consistently (an in the words of the lawsuit, "systematically") penalized the most, as white, Black, and Hispanic counterparts were rated higher. Five years later, U.S. District Judge Allison Burroughs ultimately ruled that Harvard's overall ranking system had not discriminated against Asian applicants, and the College could continue this form of race-consciousness as there were no viable race-neutral alternatives that would allow it to maintain its accustomed levels of excellence and diversity.[4]

This episode exposes a critical sideshow within a larger portrait of what merits inclusion within a prestigious social hamlet. Humor is not just a distinguishing attribute among a group of already-accomplished young people – it is prized, sought after, and considered essential to maintaining a consummate community that hums along at an ideal and orderly clip. Though Burroughs may deem the "Asian Personality Penalty" inconsequential, the assumption remains that a sense of humor is a quality that some people – the best people – have. Others are deficient, and that deficiency is an impediment to a cultivated social order.

How and why has humor come to be the esteemed personality trait it is here and now? In our common everyday discourses, humor is assumed – much like religion – to be something people everywhere have always participated in. This frequent and routinized desire for individuals to strive towards a "sense of humor" – and here I mean the quality of being amusing or comical in order to induce pleasurable laughter as well as the ability to find something funny – would imply it is a hardwired human property, albeit one that needs nurturing. Yet as a term, as a concept, and as a personality trait, "humor" and the sense of it have a history. That history

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[3] Caroline Engelmayer, "Harvard Ranks Applicants on 'Humor' and 'Grit,' Court Filing Shows," June 18, 2018, https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2018/6/16/harvard-admissions-behind-the-scenes/.
[4] "10/1/2019 Ruling in Harvard Admissions Lawsuit," Harvard Admissions Lawsuit Website, October 1, 2019, https://admissionscase.harvard.edu/ruling.

emerges at a particular time and fills particular social gaps, transforming as social needs themselves transform, gain coherence, and eventually sediment into a presumed nature of things. In the academy, humor has been studied for those very reasons, though often in their efforts to illuminate this history and nuance, scholars have also cast a shadow on other equally instructive issues that emerge from this trait and the larger social system it scaffolds.

This chapter is meant to act as a setup, a foundation for the critical inquiries that will eventually build up and out from it. I bring together relevant materials into a detailed sketch of the terrain of humor studies, so that my readers will be familiar with the background, the particularities, and the overall stakes that accompany my arguments in subsequent chapters. In the pages that follow, I offer an outline of the history of this idea of humor. First, I seek to make strange the familiar notion that humor is a natural human trait while charting the history of its conception in a Euroamerican context, beginning roughly with the early 15th century's medicalized language referring to bodily fluids as humors to the gradual shifts towards its attachment to a person's interior sensibilities, their agency, and its relation to the functions of a broader secular state. Secondly, I lay out the ways that humor, and comedy specifically, have been studied in the United States, ranging from humor's signature observation of incongruities in power to the purported "punch up" politics of American standup to the role of minoritized people in bringing this conscientious form of humor to mainstream (read: white and Christian) audiences.

Humoral Theory, From Body to Personality

The earliest consistent references to humor are traced to medical scholarship in the premodern era, in which theories of the "humors" focus on the balance of bodily elements from

which good health derives. Ayurvedic traditions across South Asia describe a tripartite doṣa shared between vāta (air) pitta (bile), and kapha (phlegm). These humors are linked to somatic processes, related to the environment and influenced by food, climate, seasonal changes, and even social activities.[5] The aggravation of any one or combination of doṣa results in illnesses that manifest mentally, physically, and within one's emotional life. Of course, to even translate the doṣa as "humors" is itself a sort of misleading back-projection of Anglicized terminology. Humoralism, as historically understood in Euroamerica, stylizes its linguistic and conceptual origin with the Greek development of medical thought in the writings of Hippocrates. Yet even within the same Hippocratic corpus, the given definitions of humors are inconsistent. Characterizations slip, change, and are sometimes outrightly contradicted within the same text.[6] Nonetheless, the 4-5th BCE Hippocratic model is argued to have coalesced around a system of four humors; blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile. Similar to Ayurvedic prescriptions, the Greek humors involve notions of hot/cold and wet/dry; here, health is achieved through the regulatory balance of the four fluids which emerged from within the body, intuiting to those on the outside what is happening inside of it. Contemporary scholarship notes a growing consensus that this model lived in a world of other competing humoral theories and was likely a late addition to the Hellenistic and Roman worlds.[7]

This Hippocratic model finds continued life in part due to the Roman physician Galen's commentaries (d. 210 CE). His theory of four elemental qualities (hot, cold, dry, and wet) does

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[5] Jean M. Langford, *Fluent Bodies: Ayurvedic Remedies for Postcolonial Imbalance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 4.

[6] Peregrine Horden and Elisabeth Hsu, *The Body in Balance: Humoral Medicines in Practice* (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2013), 2-5.

[7] Vivian Nutton, *Ancient Medicine* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2012), 207.

draw from Hippocrates, but only in terms of how his four elemental qualities correspond to the humors.[8] Instead, Galen is far more interested in the classification of the mixtures of these qualities in people. He describes only one good mixture in which all qualities are proportionately present alongside eight possible bad mixtures of imbalanced proportions. In four of the bad mixtures, a single quality (either hot, cold, wet, dry) dominates while in the remaining four, two qualities in combination dominate (hot/wet, cold/wet, hot/dry, cold/dry).[9] All of these mixtures result in four temperaments (*De temperamentis*): phlegmatic, sanguine, bilious, and melancholic. The specific physical and moral characteristics associated with each would flesh out over the course of several centuries, writes Jacques Jouanna, "whether this theory was expressly linked with Hippocratic or Galenic teaching or not."[10] In the early days of the Italian Renaissance, for example, the School of Salerno medical tradition painted the melancholic personality as sad, poor, and timid, but also as tenacious in one's goals and even disposed towards trickery.[11]

This longevity is facilitated largely by Muslim medical research beginning in the ninth century, which saw a flurry of translation of Greek medicinal texts into Arabic, some by way of Syriac. These translations served multiple purposes: preservation, education, and ultimately undergirded original medical research throughout West and South Asia for the next several hundred years on topics that were unaddressed in the Greek/Latin writings. In particular, the scholar Ibn Sina's *Canon of Medicine* is a protracted build on the Hippocratic and Galenic theories of humors. In this text, he systemizes Galen's work, formulaically describing

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[8] Jacques Jouanna, *Greek Medicine from Hippocrates to Galen: Selected Papers* (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2012), 229-230.

[9] William V. Harris, *Mental Disorders in the Classical World* (New York: Brill, 2013), 329.

[10] Jouanna, *Greek Medicine from Hippocrates to Galen*, 340.

[11] Jouanna, *Greek Medicine from Hippocrates to Galen*, 256.

corresponding tastes (sweet, salty, sour, and "insipid"), and adds that "even imagination, emotional states, and other agents cause the humours to move," like seeing particular colors when ill.[12] The *Canon* also refers extensively to how the humors are impacted when interacting with herbal or chemical properties, foods, healing regiments, and surgical treatments. As Lawrence Conrad notes, it is thanks to the Latin translations of the Canon that European Galenism would have a basis for the next six hundred years.[13]

In *The Senses of Humor: Self and Laughter in Modern America*, Daniel Wickberg writes that the conception of humor is gradually unmoored from such a bodily-based constitution around the 15th century, following instead a parallel trajectory to developing models of personhood and individualism in which an increasing ontological importance is placed upon the "interiority of persons – the proliferation of senses, the valuation of intuitive and emotional judgment over 'objective' criteria or reason, the capacity for feeling associated with sentimentalism or sensibility."[14] This translates to new potential for what may elicit laughter: where the distance between object and subject collapses, non-derisive laughter becomes a possibility. Instead of laughing at someone, there is a positive ontological value placed upon the capacity to laugh at oneself as well, a "sympathetic perception of incongruity."[15] The self is both

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[12] Avicenna, *The Canon of Medicine of Avicenna, Volume I*, trans. Oskar Cameron Gruner (New York, NY: AMS Press, 1973), 81.

[13] Lawrence Conrad, "Medicine," Database, The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World. Oxford Islamic Studies Online, accessed February 19, 2020, http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236/e0524.

[14] Daniel Wickberg, *The Senses of Humor: Self and Laughter in Modern America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), 8.

[15] Wickberg, *The Senses of Humor*, 8.

subject and object within this new frame of humor, holding a paradoxical valuation of the other in place.

Wickberg believes this to also coincide with a growing "bureaucratic individualism" that comes to dominate modes of thought in the United States in the 18th and 19th centuries. Here, humor transforms into an attitude that can be adopted, not just an object of perception. The word thus begins to appear as a descriptor (not just as an object) in the 1840s, more succinctly articulated as an endorsable personality attribute in American vernacular during the 1870s. This individualism is informed by the pervasive ways in which economic and market forces dissemble within shifting social formations. Engagement with these forces requires an augmented valuation of the self vis-à-vis an increased subjectification and interiorization of that subjectivity. Here, as Charles Taylor and Talal Asad might argue, "choice" or "agency" are marked as distinguishing factors of one's encounter with the dominant social order. This ideology takes on a common-sense appeal, cultivating a deep sense of interiority that constructs the individual as unique prior to his – and it is a he, of course – place within a larger communal setting. This also allows him to stand outside of himself in ways that allow him to see, manipulate, and control that self. It is a quality that he values just as the market values it, an ability to perceive incongruity and adapt – even transcend – oneself against those incongruities so as to balance the sanctioned order put in place by these very bureaucratic market forces. Humor as a distinctive characteristic of a person and self becomes similarly prized alongside the commensurate qualities of morality, choice, and bureaucratic individualism.[16]

[16] Wickberg, *Senses of Humor*, 210-212.

Elsewhere, Philip Deen writes that a sense of humor is a virtue "conducive to the cardinal political virtues of sociability, prudence, and justice."[17] In a study of Donald Trump, Deen contends that the U.S. president's inability to sustain mockery from others or to even mock himself is indicative of deeper foibles – "a dangerous self-seriousness" – which are all the more dangerous when the person in question is politically powerful.[18] More adept political leaders, he writes, would understand their position as custodians that seek to preserve and incrementally change a broad yet unstable order. Contempt for established norms and one's place within them indicates an inability to recognize one's own limits which ultimately means that "one will not be a good citizen or shepherd of the political community."[19] These views were especially shared across commercial industries during the Trump presidency, as witnessed by the 2020 White House Correspondents Association's decision to once more ask comedian Hasan Minhaj (alongside *Saturday Night Live* performer Kenan Thompson) to headline their annual banquet celebrating the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment and freedom of the press. The Association's president, Jonathan Karl, introduced new awards that would recognize accountability journalism and reportorial courage, but insisted that comedy belongs alongside this slate of events: "The dinner has a serious message, but we also believe it is as important as ever to be able to laugh — at ourselves, as well as at the people we cover. I'd argue that humor is more important now than ever."[20]

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[17] Phillip Deen, "Senses of Humor as Political Virtues," *Metaphilosophy* 49, no. 3 (April 1, 2018): 371-387, 372.

[18] Deen, "Senses of Humor," 383.

[19] Deen, "Senses of Humor," 383.

[20] Michael M. Grynbaum, "Comedy Returns to the White House Correspondents' Dinner. Will Trump?," *The New York Times*, February 18, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/18/business/media/white-house-correspondents-dinner-kenan-thompson.html.

The Analytic of a Joke

While the idea of a sense of humor finds itself reconceptualized by the 18th century, its outward manifestation – the joke – gets similarly re-objectified as a commodity and tool within the era's changing commercial market, engendered by the internalization of humor as a mode of seeing. Following the logic set out by bureaucratic individualism, Wickberg understands the joke as a literary form that is "contractive, concerned with abstraction, detachment, formal condensation of meaning, and the mechanistic interchangeability of parts"; now an object of exchange and commodity that is neutral to its surrounding circumstances.[21] This neutrality feeds off of the overall ethos that is cultivated by these distinctly modern notions of personhood and the self. An autonomous individual is universally applicable (an essential "type"), as is the humor that the individual then chooses to exhibit. By the 20th century, the humorless person was caricatured as a useful inverse against which to further cultivate the most correct and modern model of personhood. "The stereotyped figure of the man without a sense of humor provided an image of the incomplete, the deficient, the lacking… described by examples: the ardent patriot, the fanatic religionist, the prohibitionist."[22]

Historically, four general theories of humor have been developed to explain what about a given narrative engenders laughter: superiority, relief, incongruity, and rhetorical marginality. Superiority theory describes derisive or devaluating laughter, built on feeling superior to others' conditions or one's former state (after having overcome it). Wickberg refers to this as the most prevalent mode of laughter up until the 18th century, though its application does not correspond

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[21] Wickberg, *The Senses of Humor*, 10.

[22] Wickberg, *The Senses of Humor*, 89.

with all instances of superiority.[23] Francis Hutcheson offers the example of a man riding in a carriage as he passes beggars in the street. While he may feel better off than them, that superiority does not induce laughter. He is far more likely to feel pity; "in greater danger of weeping than laughing."[24] Relief and incongruity theories then attempt to fill the gaps left behind by superiority theory.

Relief theory assumes internal pressure and is famously taken up by Sigmund Freud in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. Freud contends that laughter releases nervous energy that was previously busy repressing internal emotion. The most repressed among them are in relation to sexual desire and hostility. Thus, upon hearing a lude joke, Freud says one is able to express their libido by way of laughter.[25]

What seems to be the now dominant theory of humor, incongruity theory, supposes we laugh when perceiving something that goes against what we would otherwise expect. This incongruity violates mental patterns or a certain conceptual schema. John Morreall adds that the incongruity must also be an enjoyable incongruity, connecting it to the notion of play carried out in a setting devoid of real-life stakes. In humor, then, "the abilities we exercise in unusual and extreme ways in a safe setting are related to thinking and interacting with other people."[26]

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[23] Wickberg, *The Senses of Humor*, 46-57.

[24] Francis Hutcheson, *Reflections Upon Laughter, and Remarks Upon the Fable of the Bees* (Glasgow: Garland Publishers, 1750), 11.

[25] Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1960), 165-167.

[26] John Morreall has compiled a useful bibliography detailing the history of humor theory in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. For more detail, see John Morreall, "Philosophy of Humor," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2016 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2016), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/humor/.

Mary Douglas reads power and political possibility into the inquiry of humor, adding that the inherent incongruity within jokes lends itself well to acts of subversion, where a normalized or hegemonic pattern is ultimately upended. This requires two elements: "the juxtaposition of a control against that which is controlled, in which the latter triumphs … The successful subversion of one form by another completes or ends the joke, for it changes the balance of power."[27] The reception of subversive jokes relies entirely on the social dimensions in which they are told. Douglas writes:

> In every period there is a pile of submerged jokes, unperceived because they are irrelevant or wrongly balanced for the perspective of the day… Social requirements may judge a joke to be in bad taste, risky, too near the bone, improper, or irrelevant. Such controls are exerted either on behalf of hierarchy as such, or on behalf of values which are judged too precious and too precarious to be exposed to challenge... Since its form consists of a victorious tilting of uncontrol against control, it is an image of the levelling of hierarchy, the triumph of intimacy over formality, of unofficial values over official ones... *The joke merely affords opportunity for realizing that an accepted pattern has no necessity. Its excitement lies in the suggestion that any particular ordering of experience may be arbitrary and subjective.*[28]

The notion of humor that "punches up" builds on what Douglas has offered here. Richard Zoglin views the heyday of this type of comedy as coinciding with the American counterculture movement, in which comedians like Lenny Bruce (d. 1966) led the charge for a new generation of standup comics in the 1950s U.S. to move away from generalized witticisms and instead speak directly to the social ills they witnessed around them. Bruce easily incorporated politics, social commentary, and personal struggles into his act. In one popular bit, he enacts a scenario in which Christ asks Moses why Puerto Ricans are crammed into squalid tenements in Spanish

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[27] Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meanings: Mary Douglas: Collected Works* (New York: Psychology Press, 2010), 151.

[28] Douglas, *Implicit Meanings*, 151.

Harlem while Cardinal Spellman "has a ring on worth eight grand."[29] This type of overt "line crossing" when it came to issues of growing wealth inequalities, suburbanization, white flight (all while being liberal with his language) gained Bruce the reputation of a renegade comedian who paid the price every step of the way. For Bruce, that manifested in a literal rap sheet that eventually swallowed his finances and time. He spent the last several years of his life fighting obscenity lawsuits due to the "indecent" nature of his material and was unable to get bookings at clubs similarly worried about getting busted by the police. His material, however, did not change. Today it is remembered for its intense candor and audacity. George Carlin, who met Bruce twice during the beginning of his career, reflected on how Bruce's influence led him to ultimately take up that mantle in the 1970s until his own death in 2008: "The honesty, the fact that he didn't ignore or avoid unpleasant truths or realities. That told me that you could tell your own truth – and you might even think of it as the larger truth – and that you could make it entertaining and interesting and a bit daring."[30]

Purveyors of Conscientious Humor

Amarnath Amarasingam suggests that these types of comedians – one who wraps astute social observations in a joke – fulfills the conceptual possibilities laid out by Antonio Gramsci's "organic intellectual," a social figure who works to create counter-hegemonies against the sedimented common-sense realities of everyday life.[31] Whereas the traditional intellectual is

[29] Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge*: *How Stand-up in the 1970s Changed America* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2008), 9-10.

[30] Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge*, 11.

[31] Amarnath Amarasingam, "Laughter the Best Medicine: Muslim Comedians and Social Criticism in Post-9/11 America," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 30, no. 4 (December 2010): 463-477, 466.

removed from social life and dominant social groups, the organic intellectual has the ability to convey the needs and desires of a given class of people because they are both part of and representative of that community. The organic intellectual defends the perception of this group in public and works to "inspire its self-confidence as an historical actor and to provide it with social, cultural, and political leadership."[32] Today, those figures can be found in the culture industry, and Amarasingam names Chris Rock, Paul Mooney, Russell Peters, Margaret Cho, and Dave Chappelle as exemplary organic intellectuals for taking a characteristically American activity like standup comedy and using it to critique American institutions such as racism and other "common sense beliefs" about their respective racial or ethnic communities.

Indeed, in the context of American humor and standup, this type of "truth to power" rhetoric has come through most acutely in the work of Black, women, and Jewish comedians. John Limon observes that Jewish men made up the majority of recognizable American standup comedians around 1960; he approximates around 80 percent.[33] Unlike their co-religionists that made up the "borscht-belt" by performing in Catskills hotels in the 1950s and 1960s, comedians in the vein of Lenny Bruce like Carl Reiner, Mel Brooks, Mike Nichols, and Elaine May created acts that responded to the shifting sensibilities surrounding public morality among postwar American suburbanites. Jokes that seemingly teased at their Jewishness easily slipped into sharp critiques of Christian hegemony. In one example, Lenny Bruce enacts an extended bit in which he embodies televangelist Oral Roberts on the phone with the pope, assuring him that "No,

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[32] Walter L. Adamson, *Hegemony and Revolution: A Study of Antonio Gramsci's Political and Cultural Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 143.

[33] John Limon, *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 1.

nobody knows you're Jewish."[34] Elaine May and Nike Nichols's tag-team act made light of concerns surrounding adultery and sin through a shared Jewish sensibility on the topic (in which May would take on the role of an overbearing Jewish mother).[35]

At the same time, Limon writes that the homosocial "odd couple" act of Carl Reiner and Mel Brooks relies on the abjection of queer bodies and black bodies that turns these bodies into a gag. Reiner's low voice and the use of fastidiously-pronounced English makes for a straight (in more than one way) man against Mel Brook's possibly gay but certainly ethnic punch-line. "Whereas Brooks quarantines all possible contagions, Reiner stands next to them, enjoying them on behalf of the audience without infection: suburbanite in commuting relationship to the dangerous (sexual, aggressive, ethnic) city he moved out of."[36] Jewish comics that emerged in later years, characterized best, perhaps, by someone like Jerry Seinfeld have moved into the terrain of observational comedy with muted politics. Rosalin Krieger calls Seinfeld "ambivalently" and "transitionally" Jewish, emphasizing an apparent desire to fully assimilate into a Protestant etiquette of civility. This is facilitated by the fluidity of race and class mobility in the latter half of the 20th century, which culminates in a white-passing or full assimilation into whiteness for "ambivalent" Jews like Seinfeld. Jewishness, argues Krieger, operates largely as a cultural designation in Seinfeld's comedy, in which he otherwise marginalizes or eliminates the appearance of social and cultural differences "in the interest of shared and universal similarity."[37]

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[34] Stephen E. Kercher, *Revel with a Cause: Liberal Satire in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 400.

[35] Limon, *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*, 57-63.

[36] Limon, *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*, 41.

[37] Rosalin Krieger, "'Does He Actually Say the Word Jewish?' - Jewish Representations in Seinfeld," *Journal for Cultural Research* 7, no. 4 (October 2003): 387–404, 390.

Feminist Comedy

Standup is still far from being a gender-neutral meritocracy, and Joanne Gilbert contends that there is an immediate need for women comedians to perform their marginality by way of performing femaleness. Capitalizing on gendered difference and disparities calls immediate attention to one's subordinate status but has historically required "a delicate balance - projecting enough power to take control of the audience and enough vulnerability to be non-threatening."[38] Queer women comedians like Wanda Sykes, Margaret Cho, and Ellen DeGeneres toe the line in their routines that stays within the bounds of risk so as not to alienate audiences due to their already present embodied risk of being both women and queer. Joanne Gilbert sees DeGeneres, for example, take on the rhetoric and diction of a "kid" to remain within her audience's comfort zone: speaking in run-on sentences, using words like "scary" or "squishy," and relating stories in the halting, breathless fashion of a young child.[39] Others will center their marginality as the act itself. Lea Delaria, for example, began her performance on the Arsenio Hall Show in 1993 with "It's great to be here because it's the 1990s and it's hip to be queer and I'm a big dyke!"[40]

Humor by women is decidedly feminist, and has often taken to task their own profession and the men within it for their indifference and complicity within broader social ills like rape culture. Elayne Boosler jokes:

> I'm walking in New York with my boyfriend last week. He says: "Gee, it's a beautiful night. Let's go down by the river." I said: "What are you, nuts?! I'm not going down by

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[38] Susan Horowitz, *Queens of Comedy: Lucille Ball, Phyllis Diller, Carol Burnett, Joan Rivers, and the New Generation of Funny Women* (London: Routledge, 2012), 13.

[39] Joanne R. Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 98.

[40] Newsweek Staff, "The Power And The Pride," Newsweek, June 20, 1993, https://www.newsweek.com/power-and-pride-193662.

> the river. It's midnight; I'm wearing jewelry; I'm carrying money; I have a vagina with me! Tomorrow I'll leave it in my other pants. Then we'll go down."[41]

The woman in this joke is not only the "first person," she is also not the butt of the joke. Rather, the butt is her boyfriend and his "nice guy" obliviousness. Within such feminist routines, both hegemonic forms of masculinity and supposedly "feminist" masculinity are being held to account when it comes to women's realities. The #MeToo movement, which began in earnest in 2006 through the work of Black activist Tarana Burke and became an international phenomenon in 2017, has further facilitated feminist comedy.[42]

In its wake, audiences have seen the rise of women like Hannah Gadsby who use the genre to complicate whether or not this form can truly be liberating for the artist or her audiences. In her 2018 show, *Nanette*, Gadsby splices jokes with deeply personal testimonies of pain, homophobia, and internalized oppression. She breaks down that a typical joke must have a setup followed by a punchline, but that this pattern ultimately does not allow one to tell a full story. A joke about a man thinking Gadsby was hitting on his girlfriend but is ultimately relieved to learn she is a woman does not give space to the full ending of that story – that when he learns that Gadsby is a queer woman, he beats her while bystanders watch. She ends her show by refusing to release this tension with laughter, because "this tension is yours. You need to learn what this feels like because this, this tension is what not-normals carry inside of them all of the time because it is dangerous to be different."[43]

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[41] Lara Cox, "Standing Up against the Rape Joke: Irony and Its Vicissitudes," *Signs* 40, no. 4 (2015): 963-984, 973-974.

[42] Abby Ohlheiser, "The Woman behind 'Me Too' Knew the Power of the Phrase When She Created It — 10 Years Ago," *Washington Post*, October 19, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2017/10/19/the-woman-behind-me-too-knew-the-power-of-the-phrase-when-she-created-it-10-years-ago/.

[43] Jon Olb and Madeleine Parry, *Hannah Gadsby: Nanette* (Sydney Opera House: Netflix, 2018).

Black Comedy and the Endurance of Richard Pryor

Richard Pryor (d. 2005) and his body of work are easily the most transformative and representative of the social possibilities enabled by standup comedy. Pryor's stage presence throughout the 1970s and 1980s is stylized in the mold of Black Christian preachers. Erica Britt notes that Pryor's blend of Southern inflection, working-class speech, and the punctuation of the Black Arts Movement results in a "linguistic subterfuge" that not only witnessed the crossover of Black sacred performance into a supposedly "secular" domain, but saw Pryor become an embodied point of recognition for mixed-race audiences, cloaked with the respect and authority of someone like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as they take on topics of pressing social concern and controversy. In Pryor's case, this recognition invited audiences to actively engage, redefine, and even align themselves with his critiques. Shouts of "take your time," "all right," "yes," "preach," and "for sho" would pepper and ratify his performances and assertions.

The content of his shows reflected on the racial chasms between the fictions white Americans told themselves and the realities that Black Americans lived throughout the 70s and 80s. This jagged forwardness and rage – complete with impersonations of people ranging from "dope dealers, addicts, prostitutes, street thugs, criminals, drunks, racists, and crazed spouses" – meant his audience itself quickly and openly divided into racial proximates.[44] Pryor was among the first to do so unabashedly; other Black comedians like Moms Mabley, Red Foxx, and Bill Cosby eventually settled on routines that downplayed explicit social disparities in favor of commentary on the low stakes, mundane issues of race. Pryor's work only continued to be more and more unequivocal in its messaging: the 1974 release of *That Nigger's Crazy* Pryor took the

[44] Eddie Tafoya, *Icons of African American Comedy: A Joke of a Different Color* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2011), 136.

notion and supposed application of equality and openly teased the mechanical ways in which racism continued to pervade the nation. The final track of his album *Bicentennial Nigger* lampoons the idea of a grateful black-faced slave celebrating the U.S. bicentennial. "We are gathered here today to celebrate this year of bicentenniality," he says, "in the hope of celebrating two hundred years of white folks kicking ass." The parody ends abruptly when Pryor reassumes his own voice and says, "we offer this prayer and the prayer is … How long will this bullshit go on? How long?! How long?! That is the eternal question."[45]

Later Black comics like Chris Rock and Dave Chapelle, performing in the 1990s and early 2000s, draw heavily from the well left behind by Pryor. Terrence Tucker sees the affect of Pryor's rage, in particular, come through in Rock's confrontational approach to politics and his brash allegiance to Black life and culture on stage.[46] In one bit, he addresses the audacity of white privilege, depicting a scenario in which a white person insists that "I don't mean anything bad by it. I've traveled the world. I got a yacht. I fucked Raquel Welch. Now, if I could just say 'nigger,' everything would be complete."[47] In another, he professes a fear of "young white boys" due to the frequency of mass shootings, but adds that "there's not a white person in here that would trade places with me, and I'm rich!"[48]

Similar to Rock, Dave Chapelle's comedy plainly articulates the everyday discriminations Black people face in the United States, but also inserts a clear malaise to his

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[45] Terrence T. Tucker, *Furiously Funny: Comic Rage from Ralph Ellison to Chris Rock* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2018), 233.

[46] Tucker, *Furiously Funny*, 244-248.

[47] Tucker, *Furiously Funny*, 245.

[48] Tucker, *Furiously Funny*, 228.

racial analysis, a wariness about whether the legislative political mechanisms in place can bring about discernable change. Chapelle is most famous, perhaps, for his short-lived television program *Chapelle's Show*, which ran on Comedy Central from 2003-2006. After two wildly successful seasons (which are credited with saving the network at the time) and a $50 million deal for a third season, Chapelle famously walked away mid-production in 2006 and traveled to South Africa. Back in the U.S., a churning media rumor mill implied he had gone on a crack bender. Upon his return, he tells Oprah that "I was doing sketches that were funny, but socially irresponsible. I felt like I was deliberately being encouraged and I was overwhelmed. It's like you're being flooded with things, and you don't pay attention to things like your ethics."[49] When pressed to elaborate, he reveals that while he very much saw an anti-racist ethos running through his work, he was not in control of its reception. This realization culminated when he witnessed a white employee laughing too gleefully at a sketch that featured blackface. "I know the difference between people laughing with me and people laughing at me," he says.[50]

This episode is a glimpse into how the inherent politics and ethics of humor bleed freely into the social and corporeal realties of a performer who – despite his radical attempts to shine a light on the pervasive nature of anti-Black racism – remains a nonnormative subject within a social order that continues to racially overdetermine him as such. For minoritized comedians like Bruce, Chapelle, and Gadsby, humor is most certainly a site of resistance. But it is *also* always a site of violence, epistemic and physical. Chapelle's trip to South Africa was an attempt to remedy that violence by removing himself from an actively antagonistic world and forging

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[49] *Why Comedian Dave Chappelle Walked Away From $50 Million*, The Oprah Winfrey Show (YouTube, 2006), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tlScX2stRuo.

[50] *Why Comedian Dave Chappelle Walked Away From $50 Million*.

connection with another. This came in the form of a South African Muslim community that "don't know anything about the work I do, and they just treat me like I'm a regular dude… They were feeding me and taking care of me… it just made me feel good. It reminded me that I was a person."[51] Yet a fuller picture of his relationship to Islam (which he converted to in South Africa some years before) does not materialize in media interviews before or during his sojourn unless he himself actively brings Islam up on his own. What does come up - and what further drive Chapelle's anxiety – are blindly repetitious questions that are levied about whether he was *actually* smoking crack, had *actually* checked into a mental institution, or even if he had graduated from high school. After a careful explanation of the circumstances surrounding his departure, even Oprah gratifies this racialized over-determinism: "So would you say that you lost your mind, sort of?"[52]

Conclusion

The concept of humor has traveled a long way from its physiological roots, but a common notion pervades the various ways that it has been named and deemed universally present. From Hippocratic humoral theory to conceptions of laughter, tension release, and incongruity, "humor" has historically been employed as a gauge of fitness and suitability for public life. Its tightly policed boundaries, whether they are referred to as "good" or "bad" mixtures and their resultant temperaments or by simply as pointing out what is considered "taboo," indicate a range of permissibility within which one may still contribute to the social

[51] *Dave Chappelle - Being a Muslim and Going to Africa*, Inside the Actor's Studio, accessed February 26, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QJobAaaxUcM; Simon Robinson, "On the Beach With Dave Chappelle," *Time*, May 15, 2005, http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1061415,00.html.

[52] *Why Comedian Dave Chappelle Walked Away From $50 Million*.

order. Yet humor draws attention to the presence of an arbitrary social "line" that dare not be crossed. Of course, every definition of humor is a capsule of its own moment and space, filling a taxonomic and disciplinary need by way of describing a particularity that ascribes to broader constructions of the self, the communal, and their respective interplay.

All of this takes place as social contracts increasingly propose different expectations from those that opt (or are swept) in. I must note, once more, my own positionality in such a survey. As a scholar reviewing these histories for what they divulge about the limitations of this most ardently insisted upon sensibility – to be and to find someone/thing humorous – I am vigilant to its capacity to enact violence on one through another's joy. Through the deployment of humor of the "punch up" variety, however, the social line is teased not for its arbitrary location, but for its deliberate placement and the exclusionary practices that stem from it. When wielded by those whom violence visits with ease in every other social dimension of public and private life, humor is a weapon, albeit one that remains heavily surveilled. It is for such paradoxical possibilities, I believe, as both an enforcer and destabilizer of power, that the genre of humor is an excellent case study for the environment within which Muslims negotiate and ultimately challenge the strictures of the secular.

CHAPTER 2: HUMOR AND/AMONG MUSLIMS

> Muslims are the most peaceful people on the planet Earth. Y'all don't believe it? Think about it. Mike Tyson ain't won a fight since he became a Muslim.
>
> - Azeem Muhammad, *Allah Made Me Funny*[1]

Introduction

There is a presumed dissonance between humor and something as "serious" as religion, which becomes all the more pronounced when religion gets specified to Islam. In an academy still lit up and beckoned by the glow of easy Orientalist tropes and conditions, the role of religion is frequently characterized on the periphery as humor's archnemesis. When religion is configured as a category of analysis directly alongside humor, however, a radically different understanding of the self, the secular subject, and modernity are made evident. This chapter looks specifically at the ways that scholarship on Muslim humor (in English) has emerged over the last fifty years. I am mindful of the ways that authors demonstrate their alignment with dominant humoral boundaries and hegemonic presumptions of religion and Islam, frequently anticipating assumptions of humor's rarity among Muslims. The need for legibility within the field maintains these limitations. While some scholars seek to consolidate Muslim humor into the broader but minoritized category of "ethnic" humor, others affirm an authentic Muslim "archive" of humor. Still other studies enact a drama that bestows autocratic governments and rageful Muslim mobs an oversized role in fostering a reactionary production of humor in Southwest

[1] Waleed Aly, "In a Comedy of Terrors," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, July 8, 2006, sec. Art & design, https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/in-a-comedy-of-terrors-20060708-gdnwot.html.

Asia. Depictions of comics that emerge in the wake of September 11th follow a similar trajectory. This body of "Muslim humor" literature distorts and capitalizes Islam into a singular unit: severe, routinized, and anti-modern in its general practice, while humor is presented as the natural corrective for these danger to modern society. By placing religion at the center of analysis, however, one may more clearly discern how Islam came to occupy this position, and how Protestant Euroamerican conceptualizations of religion, secularism, and their attendant institutions are not the antithesis of humor, but its authors and continued collaborators.

The "Humorless" Muslim

As developed in Chapter 1, Wickberg's humorless subject in the 19th century was viewed as being incomplete and deficient, a useful opposite against which to define "a more appropriate model of personhood."[2] This opposite (overt in their fanaticism but dull in ways of thinking) mirrors the language used to describe Muslims at that time and well into the present day. The simple descriptor of "humorless" betrays how Islam has been historically conceived of and constructed in relation to the secular modern and its "place" in civil life throughout Euroamerica. This vision of Islam, at its core, is of a dry, legalistic tradition bound to desert orthopraxy derived from seventh century text and man.

In 2006, the Warner Independent Pictures studio released *Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World*, in which comedian Albert Brooks is sent to India and Pakistan to "write up a 500-page report on what makes the Muslims laugh" at the behest of President Bush and the U.S.

[2] Daniel Wickberg, *The Senses of Humor: Self and Laughter in Modern America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), 89.

government.[3] It is quickly clear that the title and the setting are not a clever sendup of the fiction of a "Muslim world" a la Cemil Aydin, and instead the film leans heavily and repeatedly on jokes at the expense of "the millions of Muslims around the world that hate our guts."[4] The film's trailer cuts to the seemingly requisite scene of a bewildered Brooks stepping out of a cab onto a bustling South Asian street replete with rickshaws, cars, pedestrians, and cows. The remainder of this mockumentary features cringe-inducing humor, where audiences respond stone-faced to Brooks' various routines, as well as cracks that never rise above the stereotypes they are poking fun at. In one instance, Brooks holds interviews for an assistant and finds one candidate that fits the bill. Just before he can offer her the position, she turns the questions on him. "You're not a Jew, are you?"[5]

The latter part of the film finds Brooks illegally crossing the Indian border with Pakistan to meet a group of hashish-smoking would-be comedians in what is implied to be the Tora Bora mountains (where Bin Laden famously hid away in a cave complex). The jokes throughout this half all rely on the fact that these comedians are likely terrorists, though for what cause is unclear (and ultimately unimportant for the director). The prudish, dogmatic Muslim subject remains intact by film's end. *Looking for Comedy* received a lukewarm response from viewers and critics upon release, though the critics' reasoning for deeming it a weak performance has more to do with the fact that the titular quest remains unfulfilled. "The film is left with a big soft spot in the

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[3] Albert Brooks, *Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World*, Comedy (Warner Independent Pictures, 2006).

[4] Brooks; Cemil Aydin, *The Idea of the Muslim World : A Global Intellectual History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017).

[5] Brooks, *Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World*.

middle," *Variety* critic Deborah Young remarks, "because we never find out what makes Muslims — or anyone else — laugh."[6]

Muslim Jokes and Joking Muslims

Can Muslims take a joke – why is this such a critical question? Comedic traditions among Muslims, oral and written, abound both historically and today. Sabra Webber, in her entry on "Humor and Islam" in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, writes extensively about examples of Islam and humor across centuries, regions, and classes. For the most part, she discloses, Muslim humor follows the logic set out by Mary Douglas, "tend[ing] toward breaking down hierarchies, creating liminal spaces that offer a chance to see facets of the Muslim experience afresh as they are played out in personal and congregational, micro and macro situations."[7] Webber details a variety of ways that humor can be traced across normative religious practices in Islam, as well as oral traditions and literature written. Humor is a resource for those that wield it, she argues – it is a safety valve and provides protection for the sulbaltern, women, children, and minorities, a way to resist those more powerful. The jokes of children, such as those they play while their parents pray, show their outsider status as uninitiated into ritual. They further demonstrate the constructedness of religious practices.[8]

Webber also relates an Egyptian joke about an elderly woman going through a security check in Makkah. A young guard, armed with a gun, finds a bottle of whiskey in her bag. She

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[6] Deborah Young, "Review: Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World," Variety, December 16, 2005, https://variety.com/2005/film/markets-festivals/looking-for-comedy-in-the-muslim-world-1200519650/.

[7] Sabra J. Webber, "Humor and Religion: Humor and Islam," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones, 2nd ed., vol. 6 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 4210–18. 4211.

[8] Webber, "Humor and Religion," 4211.

responds that it is difficult to go around the Kaaba at her age, but after a few sips the Kaaba goes around her! The guard laughs and lets her go.[9] Still another example comes from the Arab American poet H.S. Hamod, who details a story of driving through South Dakota as the sun sets with his father, grandfather, and several uncles. They insist on pulling over the car on the highway to pray the Maghrib salah. Hamod depicts his sheer panic as headlights flash before and behind them, the suns colors growing darker, and the sound of "Allahu Akbar" and "Ameen" ringing against the din of passing cars. Webber sees this humor illustrating a betwixt and between moment, in which the poet is the mediator between two different worlds.[10]

Still then, Webber finds humor through recovery in old Orientalist texts. In Edward Lane's influential survey of Egyptians in the 1800s, he writes of a situation in which a passerby asks him for his watch. Lane's Egyptian colleague responds to the passerby by saying "Verily, the Time will come: I will surely make it to appear." Lane recounts this moment with irritation, declaring that Egyptians always confound the sacred with the everyday. But here, he has missed the joke: his Egyptian friend has made a witticism (watch/time being the same word in Arabic) that points to the stylized humor of the Muslim literati, which requires knowledge of both Arabic linguistics and scripture.[11] In a similar vein, bhānd satire in Pakistan features a popular comic duo composed of a cynical figure juxtaposed against a Sufi wise-fool, both of whom praise and demean each other in their dialogue. This tradition, argues Claire Pamment, stands tall among

[9] Webber, "Humor and Religion," 4212.

[10] Webber, "Humor and Religion," 4212.

[11] Webber, "Humor and Religion," 4213.

the "diverse expressions of comedy in Muslim worlds, past and present."[12] Ignorance of its longstanding presence speaks to a greater desire to imagine Islam as encompassing a bland sedation that is suited to a life of fundamental sobriety.

Frames of Muslim Humor

Given such an illustrative diversity of Muslim humor, it remains curious that the English-language academic study of this subject has largely been confined to what I see as four main, though often interlaced, frames with a single origin story: 1) a subsuming of Islam within a broader category of ethnic humor, 2) "dissident humor" as resistance in the face of authoritarianism, 3) "Islamic humor" sanctioned by the authorities vested within the Prophet Muhammad, the Qur'an, and 4) the rise of Muslim standup post-9/11. Each of these frames derives from the presumptive starting point of a stock figure, the humorless, unmodern Muslim, making each study more or less reactive in its content and theorization. Flashpoints like the 2005 Danish cartoon controversy reinvigorated such studies, and scholars responded by way of counter-narration in one of the four forms above.

The counter-narrative, however, maintains its starting point, thereby re-entrenching the public discourse that imagines unmodern, illiberal Muslims as largely incapable of humor with some notable exceptions. The societal stakes of a sullen – and possibly dangerous – Muslim majority remain operative, without consideration of the role of religion and religiously-informed discourses play in that operation. The *how* and the *why* of this reality are the subject of Chapter 3. For the time being, however, I would like to review the rooted nature of these four frames, the

[12] Claire Pamment, *Comic Performance in Pakistan: The Bhānd* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2017), 2.

utility and omissions of their counter-narrations within the broader purview of humor studies, and how a religious studies lens can retrain the focus of these projects to reveal why we inevitably return to the same civilizational questions as before.

Ethnic Humor

Studies of Muslim humor are often obscured within alternative categories, chief among them being studies of "ethnic" humor. A recent volume on Arab culture contains a chapter on humor in Egypt by Devin Stewart, which relates a bevy of translated jokes ranging from wordplay and double entendre to jokes based on one's identity, stinginess, or stupidity.[13] Reference to Islam is tucked within a small sub-section of the article titled "Religious Jokes" and relay witticisms that find a shaykh or famous discipline of the Prophet Muhammad (like Abu Hurayrah, for example) at the center of the joke. The irreverence of these jokes, surmises Stewart, "may come as a surprise to Western audiences."[14] At the same time, the section reiterates the danger one faces from the state when joking about religion, while also listing out a string of jokes not necessarily about Islam but "Islamists" and terrorism.[15]

Mucahit Bilici refers to "Muslim ethnic comedy" as a communal occupation that develops in the shadow of September 11th, an event that provides a common language to Muslim comedians to come together "like every other ethnic group" and perform in view of mainstream

[13] Devin Stewart, "Humor," in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Arab Culture*, ed. Dwight Reynolds (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 236-240.

[14] Stewart, "Humor," 236.

[15] Stewart, "Humor," 238.

audiences.[16] This is what brings coherence to otherwise racially diverse groups like the Allah Made Me Funny (AMMF) Tour and the Axis of Evil (AoE) Tour, made up of comics like Azeem Muhammad, Preacher Moss, Mo Amer, Maz Jobrani, Dean Obeidallah, Aron Kader, and Ahmed Ahmed. Jaclyn Michael writes elsewhere that such comedy relies on Islam reading as race or ethnicity, as Muslim comedians make light of the vagueness behind "looking" Muslim – dark skin, beard, turbans – which has come to encompass a wide, massified span of people ranging in religious, regional, or ethnic markers, as well as the gendered impositions of a pathologically violent and abusive Muslim man. Azhar Usman, she says, jokes that he wouldn't own 9/11 – "but a 7-Eleven, maybe" – in a way that creates a moment of incongruity that also feeds into another offensive, but certainly less dangerous stereotype for his viewers. The spillover into stereotypes that also capture non-Muslim South Asians with this joke mitigates the solely "Muslim" difference that would otherwise be attributed to him.[17]

Dissident Humor

The frame of "dissident humor" is set up as a narrative of resistance by way of political jokes against authoritarianism, personified by an autocratic Muslim government or strongman. Egyptians, once more, take center stage in this genre for their decades-long string of jokes about Nasser, Sadat, Mubarak, and Morsi for their deleterious expenditures of power. A *Foreign Policy* article published in January 2011 (just days before the first days of the Egyptian Revolution) describes how jokes about Mubarak began in the 80s by poking fun at his boorishness and

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[16] Mucahit Bilici, "Muslim Ethnic Comedy: Inversions of Islamophobia," in *Islamophobia/Islamophilia: Beyond the Politics of Enemy and Friend* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2010), 197.

[17] Jaclyn Michael, "American Muslims Stand up and Speak out: Trajectories of Humor in Muslim American Stand-up Comedy," *Contemporary Islam* 7, no. 2 (July 2013): 129-153, 138.

fellahin (rural peasant) background, a departure from the charismatic and elite leaders Gamal Abdel Nasser and Anwar Sadat.[18] After the year 2000, commentary shifted towards his ruthlessness and liberal use of state security to put down any type of opposition, political or simply playful. Shortly after Mubarak's ouster, the cardiologist Bassem Youssef – commonly referred to as "the Egyptian Jon Stewart" in the wake of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution – began recording satirical responses against state media narratives on a webcam in his laundry room.

In those days, the object of his ridicule was usually the Muslim Brotherhood politicians and their party messaging after their democratic assumption of power in 2012. Youssef clocked a strident following of millions, and within months, the private Egyptian television network ONTV asked him to produce the show under the title *Al-Bernameg* on their network. In its heyday between 2011 and 2013, *Al-Bernameg* was the number one show across the Arab world.[19] Youssef also caught the attention of the muse himself, Jon Stewart, who appeared on the show during a visit to Egypt in 2013. The same year, Youssef was bestowed several honors in the US, including an inclusion in TIME's 100 and the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)'s International Press Freedom Award. Stewart introduced him with the following:

> He hosts his program in a country where freedom of expression is not settled law. He helps carve out space through his show to help that country understand the importance of dissent and satire's role… If President Mohamed Morsi wore a funny hat, that Friday, Bassem would wear a funnier hat... And then the people took to the streets at the end of June, and they drove Morsi from power and the army took over... And Bassem Youssef [still] stood up and did his show, and made fun of the new regime and their funny hats, and that lasted a day. So it turns out that the new regime in Egypt has less of a sense of humor than the MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD. [laughter and applause][20]

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[18] Issandr El Amrani, "Three Decades of a Joke That Just Won't Die," *Foreign Policy*, January 2011.

[19] Amal Ibrahim and Nahed Eltantawy, "Egypt's Jon Stewart: Humorous Political Satire and Serious Culture Jamming," *International Journal of Communication*, June 2017: 2806–2824, 2814.

[20] *Bassem Youssef and John Stuart CPJ International Press Freedom Awards 2013*, accessed March 10, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s-ojkqTHmW0.

Al-Bernameg aired on several different networks until its termination in early 2014, with Youssef explaining to viewers that the political pressure on him and his family had become too dangerous for him to continue. They relocated to the U.S. shortly thereafter, where Youssef was named a resident fellow at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.[21]

Scholars like Amal Ibrahim and Nahed Eltantawy have commented that their study of Youssef emerged out of an interest in how satire can foment social change, and that "poking fun at oppressive regimes has been a fundamental part of Egyptian life since the pharaohs."[22] Their description of the Daily Show (Al-Bernamig's counterpart in the US), however, is contextualized not within the language of oppression, but as "a hybrid blend of comedy, news, and political conversation."[23] The scholarly literature about the *Daily Show* and American political humor is almost exclusively focused on the propensity for what gets termed "edutainment" or "politainment," to expose hypocrisies in media coverage, how young people engage with politics, and whether satire can constitute journalism.[24] Attention to the asymmetrical dynamics of power between the American government and its people is tertiary to these studies.

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[21] "Spring 2015 Resident and Visiting Fellows," The Institute of Politics, Harvard Kennedy School, 2015, https://iop.harvard.edu/iop-now/spring-2015-resident-and-visiting-fellows.

[22] Ibrahim and Eltantawy, "Egypt's Jon Stewart," 2808.

[23] Ibrahim and Eltantawy, "Egypt's Jon Stewart," 2811.

[24] For further elaboration on what makes the *Daily Show*, Jon Stewart, and their particular brand of political humor worthy of academic study, see Ibrahim and Eltantawy, "Egypt's Jon Stewart"; Joe Hale Cutbirth, "Satire as Journalism: 'The Daily Show' and American Politics at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century" (Ph.D. Dissertation, New York, Columbia University, 2011); Jay D. Hmielowski, R. Lance Holbert, and Jayeon Lee, "Predicting the Consumption of Political TV Satire: Affinity for Political Humor, The Daily Show, and The Colbert Report," *Communication Monographs* 78, no. 1 (March 1, 2011): 96–114.

Muslim political humor, both in academic circles and in popular discourses about Muslim comedians like Youssef, settles naturally into the curvatures of David and Goliath, a hyper-sensitive and despotic bad-Muslim man surveilling his jovial and clever good-Muslim jester. "Morsi proved to be more thin-skinned than he promised," write Joel Gordon and Heba Arafa, "but he never shut Bassem Youssef down… however iconoclastic Bassem Youssef may at times appear or however broad his comic sweep, his orientation is clearly secular."[25] Similar studies can be found on Hafez and his son Bashar Al-Asad in Syria, the Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran, and the Saudi royal family, all suppressing humor articulated at their expense through the threat and follow-through of surveillance, imprisonment, and state violence.[26]

Authentic(ated) Muslim Humor

Other scholars have turned to the earliest annals of Muslim history in order to document that figures like Moses, Khidr, the Prophet Muhammad, his companions, even God herself – the

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[25] Joel Gordon and Heba Arafa, "'Stuck with Him': Bassem Youssef and the Egyptian Revolution's Last Laugh," *Review of Middle East Studies* 48, no. 1/2 (2014): 34–43, 37.

[26] It is worth noting that classifying these studies in such a way should not be read as a reduction of the careful and nuanced interpretation of humor that these authors, especially Lisa Weeden and Asef Bayat, bring to their work. Weeden especially dedicates considerable space to unpacking humor's capacity to "shore up a regime's ideology, even as it raises the potential for world-creating openings by pointing out everyday life's absurdities to viewers" while Bayat proposes reading this dichotomy between people and leadership through the lens of an ethics of "anti-fun" which operates as a tool of insulation for moral and political authority. See Asef Bayat, "Islamism and the Politics of Fun," *Public Culture* 19, no. 3 (September 1, 2007): 433–59; Nikahang Kowsar, "Being Funny Is Not That Funny: Contemporary Editorial Cartooning in Iran," *Social Research* 79, no. 1 (2012): 117–44; Karim Sadjadpour, "The Ayatollah under the Bed (Sheets)," *Foreign Policy*, April 23, 2012, https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/04/23/the-ayatollah-under-the-bedsheets/; Mohammad Ali Heidari-Shahreza, "A Rhetorical Analysis of Humor Styles and Techniques Used in Persian Stand-up Comedy," *International Journal of Humor Research* 30, no. 4 (2017): 359–381; Jacques A. Wainberg, "Dissident Communication in Stand-up Comedy: The Case of Arab and Muslim Countries," *Comunicacao, Midia e Consumo; Sao Paulo* 14, no. 40 (August 2017): 158–77; Lisa Wedeen, "Ideology and Humor in Dark Times: Notes from Syria," *Critical Inquiry* 39, no. 4 (2013): 841–73.

undisputed arbiter of Islam – had a sense of humor. Ze'ev Maghen, in his 2008 article *The Merry Men of Medina*, writes that classical sources point to Muhammad and the sahaba as a group of men that were waggish and cheerful in their demeanor.[27] Abu Hurayrah recalled that the Prophet was "unrestrained in his jesting," and served as an example for his people and posterity as someone that lived a balanced life. Maghen notes that record after record demonstrate that the Prophet's humor spanned from simple witticisms to the vulgar. He had nicknames for most people in his life, calling Abu Hurayrah "Father of the Kitten" after noticing his penchant for feeding stray cats on the street from his own plate, Bilal "Big Belly," and all his grandchildren "dirty face." He and his companions would throw watermelons at each other, loosen each other's saddles so they would fall off their camels when riding, and point and laugh when someone's privates were accidentally exposed as a result. Muhammad was not a man above others; he was someone who could be approached with serious questions but would also be found on the floor playing "camel" with young children. This humor was both a personality trait and an instruction to his community.

Wherever the idea that Muslims are humorless originated, Maghen remarks, it did not come from the Prophet. The text of the article itself is vague on its inspiration, but Maghen's very first (and lengthy) footnote makes plain that the 2005 Danish cartoon controversy lays the ground for such a study in the first place. "The caricatures episode is in truth a rather poor argument against Islam's sense of humor. Every religion has hallowed institutions and individuals that its adherents are wary of holding up to ridicule," he writes. "How much greater

[27] Ze'ev Maghen, "The Merry Men of Medina: Comedy and Humanity in the Early Days of Islam," *Der Islam* 83, no. 2 (2008): 277–340.

the sense of affront when those engaged in satirizing a given faith's sacred subjects are not followers of that faith but *outsiders*, members of a different and competing confession."[28]

Maghen's article itself, however, does not return back to this contemporary politic after this initial note. He remains squarely engaged with events and behaviors documented in seventh century Arabia. "Far from laying the foundations for a cult of the somber, solemn and sedate - or the fierce, furious and fanatical - the Apostle of Allah and his followers presented the world with something unprecedented at the time, and never since approximated: a religion that knows how to laugh."[29] Even the reproachful hadith al-qawl – a reprimand attributed to Muhammad that is frequently drudged up to epitomize Muhammad's sober nature ("if you knew what I know, you would laugh little and weep much"), loses its gusto when contextualized against what happened to him shortly after. He narrates that he had made the comment when passing by some of his companions as they laughed, but had taken no fewer than forty steps before the angel Gabriel appeared before him with a reprimand of their own: "it is God who makes men laugh and weep."[30] He had been too obviously a killjoy, Maghen writes, "there is a time to weep and a time to laugh, and God is responsible for, and therefore present in, both activities."[31]

Various other accounts within hadith, sira, tafsir, and the maghazi genres spend considerable time accounting for just how riotous the Prophet's laughter was (though, notably, that he was *not* mirthful was never up for debate). Contentions over the degree of force in the Prophet's laughter hover over etymology, particularly with what, exactly, the Arabic word

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[28] Maghen, "The Merry Men of Medina," 277.

[29] Maghen, "The Merry Men of Medina," 278.

[30] Maghen, "The Merry Men of Medina," 286-287.

[31] Maghen, "The Merry Men of Medina," 294.

nawajidh refers. Does it refer to one's "back molars," "canines," or "central incisors"? Depending on which, one may discern just how wide his mouth opened with laughter. Central incisors would indicate the mouth as barely open and barely smiling. Canines would mean a bit wider of a grin, while back molars might point to a full-mouthed guffaw. Such polemics on dentistry all aimed to understand the Sahih Muslim hadith that narrated "Messenger of God laughed that his *nawajidh* showed."[32] How one translated nawajidh demonstrated a broader deliberation among Muslim thinkers on how Muhammad is remembered and the type of prophetic example he had set. The association of robust laughter skirted too closely against idiocy, or worse, even lunacy. Maintaining that dispositional difference for Muhammad was a matter of whether he and his message were serious enough to speak to circumstances of this world and the next. Maghen brushes these critiques aside, arguing that Muhammad was able to build the grand spiritual movement he did because people liked him, plain and simple. His personality was a passionate one, capacious enough to maintain a jocular cheerfulness as well as an abiding sensitivity to the injustices of this world. "Lest his followers come to conceive of Muhammad in too 'vertical' a fashion, rising to heights unattainable by mere mortals, here he is in full-fledged 'horizontal' mode for all to see forever."[33]

Muntasir Mir returns to the Qur'an itself in order to catalogue the appearance of humor, something he notes is infrequent. He warns, however, that this infrequency demonstrates how precious its presence actually is. Among those occurrences are sayings by Sarah, Abraham's wife, as well as a litany of Khidr's mistakes that test Moses's patience.[34] The comedy is largely

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[32] Maghen, "The Merry Men of Medina," 298.

[33] Maghen, "The Merry Men of Medina," 320.

[34] Muntasir Mir, "Humor in the Qur'an," *The Muslim World* 81, no. 3–4 (1991): 179–93, 181-186.

situational, writes Mir, not deliberate. They appear in the middle of verses or stories, as a buffer to the solemn nature of the Qur'an. Above all, though, they bring into relief the psychology of the prophets. The humor attests that these were real people and not soothsayers; their surprise at the situations they find themselves in illustrates that this was not made up.[35]

While there may not appear to be an overarching technique of humor employed in the Qur'an, Georges Tamer says that the essence of religion can never be solely solemn. "While it is true that there is no religion without God, it is equally true that a religion only with God is unthinkable… Religions therefore bear not only divine but also human components, including a sense of humor and the ability to laugh."[36] The Qur'an characterizes itself as decisive and not meant to amuse in an early Meccan surah.[37] Yet this absolutism is meant to induce both joy and sorrow through laughter and tears. That laughter is referenced as the humor of superiority, triumph and maybe even schadenfreude, where believers will laugh in the face of disbelievers on the Day of Judgment.[38] Elsewhere, Moses demonstrates a strand of absurdist humor when asking his people whether they "worship what you [yourselves] carve," alluding to the perceived irony of praying to their own idol creations.[39]

Livnat Holtzman takes the question of humor to God directly, shadowing a debate across centuries among Muslim thinkers as to whether God can laugh, examining hadith chains and

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[35] Mir, "Humor in the Qur'an," 191.

[36] Georges Tamer, "The Qur'an and Humor," in *Humor in Der Arabischen Kultur / Humor in Arabic Culture* (De Gruyter, 2009), 3-28, 3.

[37] "Surah At-Tariq [86:13-14]," Sahih International Quran, accessed March 12, 2020, https://quran.com.

[38] "Surah Al-Mutaffifin [83:34-36]," Sahih International Quran, accessed March 12, 2020, https://quran.com.

[39] "Surah As-Saffat [37:93-103]," Sahih International Quran, accessed March 12, 2020, https://quran.com.

medieval texts that attest and condemn this idea.[40] She begins with the 14th century scholar Al Gawziyyeh, whose treatise *Hadi Al Arwa* notes that God will greet the believers into heaven with boisterous laughter, a laughter that is joyful and welcoming. He traces this back through a series of hadiths that lead, of course, back to the Prophet. Holtzman follows the isnads of these hadiths and tracks references to hand gestures, tones, and other contextual remarks on God's laughter. For example: the Prophet's companion, Abdallah Ibn Masud, recounts a hadith about the Last Day in which disbelievers are revealed through physical absurdities as they cross a bridge over the Hellfire. For example, they are unable prostrate before God correctly (they "remain on their buttocks like young calves") and carry lanterns on their toes that frequently extinguish.[41] After a series of their ineptitudes are related, Ibn Masud laughs out loud. A listener to the hadith, who had heard it once before, asks why Ibn Masud laughs at this moment, because he had done so at the exact same moment the first time the hadith was recounted, as well. Ibn Masud replies: "I have witnessed the Prophet telling this *hadīt* time and again, and every time he reached this point, he laughed until his last molar was revealed."[42]

Why is the act of God laughing important to know? The stakes of the debate differ depending on which medieval thinker you ask. Ibn Hanbal in the 9th century argued that God sits on his throne, he hears, talks, laughs, and is joyful, though a later Hanbali scholar in the 13th

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[40] Livnat Holtzman, "Does God Really Laugh? Appropriate and Inappropriate Descriptions of God in Islamic Traditionalist Theology," in *Laughter in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times: Epistemology of a Fundamental Human Behavior, Its Meaning, and Consequences*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Walter de Gruyter, 2010), 165–200, 166.

[41] Holtzman, "Does God Really Laugh?" 180.

[42] Holtzman, "Does God Really Laugh?" 182.

century, Ibn Gawzi, argues vehemently against this type of anthropomorphizing of God.[43] The dangers, for him, were two-fold. First, he noted how popular these stories of God's laughter had become in sermons and study circles among ulema and their audiences. He believed that relating these hadith of God's laughter, in the course of the excitement that accompanies giving a popular sermon, had lent themselves to making mistakes in their transmission of the hadith. At the same time, what was the nature of God's laughter? Among humans, laughter could signal joy, yes, but also materialized in moments where the reaction (laughter) was uncontrolled. Was the Prophet uncontrolled in his actions sometimes? Could God be? Holtzman tracks this debate only into the next century, at which point she witnesses the conversation abate and nearly disappear after an intervention by Ibn Taymiyyah. His interpretation, a rationalization of literalist readings of the Qur'an and of laughter, brings about a consensus among medieval male thinkers that proceeded him that yes, God laughs.[44]

Muslim Humor after 9/11

Still others have turned to more immediate examples of Muslim humor, looking particularly through the frame and phenomenon of the September 11th attacks. American Muslim stand-up comedians and collectives emerge as a response to anti-Muslim discrimination and the then-nascent War on Terror. These individual acts and comedic troupes – performers like Dean Obeidallah, Preacher Moss, and Azhar Usman – feed a growing American appetite for Muslims and their (supposed lack of) humor. Mucahit Bilici reasons that 9/11 is what gives rise to the explicitly "Muslim" comedy of Obeidallah, who even works this into his comedy routine, joking

[43] Holtzman, "Does God Really Laugh?" 184-190.

[44] Holtzman, "Does God Really Laugh?" 199.

that on September 10th, he was white (with friends named Rachel, Ross, and Monica), and on September 11th, he "became a (hated) minority."[45] It is this reference point – September 11th – that Bilici argues various ethnic groups made up of Muslims gather around, which brings coherence to otherwise ethnically diverse groups like the Allah Made Me Funny (AMMF) and Axis of Evil Tours (AoE).

These Muslim comedians, Bilici writes, can be seen as cultural entrepreneurs who have knowledge of "both worlds," as seen through their ability to weave between accented and American speech patterns.[46] Their jokes, many of which rely on insider humor, create group solidarities while also policing group boundaries. In those moments, the structure (common view of Muslims) becomes the anti-structure and vice versa, and the audience has been momentarily disciplined into changing their social behavior. Given that a Muslim is an oddity in American life, a Muslim acting ordinary – as these comedians try to prove – is worthy of laughter. "Islamophobia is what has made Muslim comedy a phenomenon of our times," Bilici claims. "They are perhaps the only beneficiaries of the *negative charisma* associated with being Muslim."[47] He also observes the phenomenon of U.S. state institutions promoting these Muslim cultural productions in order to provide outreach and recruitment for their own organizations. He notes that the FBI has sponsored performances of the Axis of Evil Tour in order to "demystify the FBI, show people that we [the FBI] are human, not just cold FBI agents coming out to arrest

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[45] Dean Obeidallah, "15 Years After 9/11, Muslim Americans Are Poised to Overcome Hate," *The Daily Beast*, September 8, 2016, https://www.thedailybeast.com/15-years-after-911-muslim-americans-are-poised-to-overcome-hate.

[46] Bilici, "Muslim Ethnic Comedy," 196.

[47] Bilici."Muslim Ethnic Comedy," 197.

people."[48] Both the Muslims at the center of the performance and the state institutions share the goal of appearing unthreatening, though only one party has the full legitimacy and power of the American government behind them.

Amarnath Amarasingam constructs these comedians as the product of a confrontation between the First Amendment and other tightly-held values of democracy and the "joyless religious strictures" of those who committed the 9/11 attacks.[49] Amarasingam quotes comedian Dean Obeidallah, who notes that all Middle Eastern comedians are engaging in activism through their comedy, while comedian Azhar Usman puts himself in line behind a variety of Black, Jewish, and Latinx comedians – venturing even to include the Blue Collar Hillbilly Tour in that lineup – as examples of speaking truth to power. This is an American lineage, he adds.[50] At the same time, women comedians like Maysoon Zayid are reminded of their peripheral status through their comedy more often than their male counterparts. She recounts an interview with John Stossel in which he insists that her comedy can only exist in a place like the US, and that she would not be able to make these types of jokes "over there."[51] She argues back that she could and in fact does (she has performed across the U.S. and the Middle East). This response was then cut from the interview before it aired.

There are gendered assumptions and insinuations here that Amarasingam does not remark on, especially with respect to Stossel's comments about Zayid's need to be grateful and her assumed inability to perform in the Middle East as a woman. This gendered Islamophobia thread

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[48] Bilici. "Muslim Ethnic Comedy," 204.

[49] Amarasingam, "Laughter the Best Medicine," 464.

[50] Amarasingam, "Laughter is the Best Medicine," 470.

[51] Amarasingam, "Laughter is the Best Medicine," 472.

runs through the works of others that also examine these same comedians. Jaclyn Michael, for example, comments that this popular post-9/11 brand of Muslim humor is not uniformly sharp in its social critique.[52] She gives two examples of comedians, Azhar Usman and Preacher Moss, who employ jokes about naggy wives and polygamy/marrying one woman with four personalities, respectively. These jokes get easy laughs within a larger normative patriarchy that uphold marriage, heterosexuality, and monogamy, and are indicative that humor can be used to promote, but just as easily undercut, social justice orientations.[53]

Studies of AMMF and AoE by and large turn on the axis of 9/11, which stands as a moment of both rupture and continuity. Like Obeidallah's joke, Muslim comedians performed in obscurity and without reference to their affiliation with Islam before 2001. Preacher Moss's comedic career consisted primarily of writing for non-Muslim comedians like Darryl Hammond and George Lopez. When he performed his own standup material, he spoke to his experiences as a Black man. The "common language" of Islam in comedy only emerged as anti-Muslim hostilities ramped up in the U.S. and the War on Terror turned towards predominantly Muslim-populated nations abroad and American Muslim subjects at home.

Munir Jiwa witnesses a similar question of agency in such identifications among Muslim women artists in New York. Works created by these women even prior to 9/11 "were read only in the context of Islam, current affairs and mass media/ news representations in the United States."[54] This moment of translation, in which one could speak acutely to Islam in a way that

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[52] Michael, "American Muslims Stand up and Speak out," 147-148.

[53] Michael, "American Muslims Stand up and Speak out," 148.

[54] Munir Jiwa, "Imaging, Imagining and Representation: Muslim Visual Artists in NYC," *Contemporary Islam* 4, no. 1 (April 2010): 77–90, 82.

would have gotten lost before, also meant reception of one's art would be reduced to only Islam, as well. Attempts at controlling this reception, through gallery talks and artist statements pinned alongside their productions, become obscured in their third person retellings. Shahzia Sikander's watercolor *Utopia*, a meditation on "dislocation" through Muslim and Hindu iconography, makes its way into *O Magazine* as the opposite of its intention. The headline instead reads as a diachronic: "From Pakistan to Providence: Shahzia Learned How to Paint Her Way Out of Traditional Thinking."[55]

A Humorless Sequence

9/11 does not operate as an isolated watershed moment, either. It is compounded, four years later, by the 2005 Danish cartoon controversy which erupts as a subsequent node on the longer confirmatory sequence of Muslim humorlessness. In 2005, the *Jyllands Posten* newspaper, generally considered to be ideologically aligned with the nation's Center-Right movement, ran a contest at the behest of its culture editor Flemming Rose, who invited cartoonists to "draw Muhammad as they see him."[56] Flemming had been riled by the difficulty faced by the children's writer Kåre Bluitgen in finding an illustrator for his book on the life of the Prophet. In September of that year, *Jyllands Posten* published a feature titled "Muhammad's Face."[57] It included 12 caricatured drawings of Muslims and the Prophet Muhammad (the most memorable among them featuring the Prophet's turban as a lit explosive), along with an editorial

[55] Jiwa, "Imaging, Imagining and Representation," 85-86.

[56] Giselinde Kuipers, "The Politics of Humour in the Public Sphere: Cartoons, Power and Modernity in the First Transnational Humour Scandal," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 14, no. 1 (February 2011): 63–80, 65.

[57] Kuipers, "The Politics of Humour in the Public Sphere," 65.

by Rose that the special consideration of Muslim feelings was antithetical to "contemporary democracy and free speech."[58]

Danish Muslims mobilized to oppose this decision in the months that followed. They lodged formal legal complaints, wrote letters to other media outlets and politicians, and organized more publicly visible protests in Copenhagen.[59] Many of these formal criticisms were begrudgingly addressed by Danish leadership, but in their delayed response, news of the cartoons were being translated and disseminated well beyond Denmark. Giselinde Kuipers attributes this spread to a group of Danish imams touring the Middle East in hopes of garnering support for their protests in Denmark itself.[60] Global protests, many led by governments of predominantly Muslim-populated countries, began in late January 2006 and continued into February, leading the news cycle for weeks. Editorializing across news media in Euroamerica cited the protests as "proof" of an outright incompatibility between Muslims and "western" values of "modernity."[61]

A third internationally-magnified node occurred nine years later in France, 2015. On January 7th, Saïd and Chérif Kouachi killed 12 people and injured 11 others at the headquarters of the satirical *Charlie Hebdo* magazine. The motive of the gunmen is said to be the magazine's publishing of an on and off series of satirical cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad since 2006. Following the *Jyllands Posten* controversy, Charlie Hebdo reprinted their cartoons in solidarity and added one of their own. The issue earned triple its usual circulation, as well as a hate speech

[58] Kuipers, "The Politics of Humour in the Public Sphere," 65.

[59] Kuipers, "The Politics of Humour in the Public Sphere," 66.

[60] Kuipers, "The Politics of Humour in the Public Sphere," 66-67.

[61] Kuipers, "The Politics of Humour in the Public Sphere," 67.

lawsuit from the Great Mosque of Paris and the Union of French Islamic Organizations.[62] Another cover image of Muhammad, printed in 2011 during the Arab Spring, depicts him announcing, "100 lashes if you don't die laughing."[63] The offices of Charlie Hebdo were firebombed in the early hours of the next morning.

No one took official responsibility, but the bombing is typically coupled with a Charlie Hebdo website hack the same day that stated "you keep abusing, Islam's almighty Prophet with disgusting and disgraceful cartoons using excuses of freedom of speech."[64] Charlie Hebdo published additional caricatures in 2012, some even nude. Gerard Biard, the magazine's editor at the time, explained the decision was in response to the news of the week: the U.S. consulate in Benghazi had been attacked, and the anti-Muslim film titled the *Innocence of Muslims* had been released on YouTube. "We are a satirical, political magazine, we publish in France, which is a laic [secular] nation and... we are against all religions," Biard told the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC).[65] Stephane Charbonnier, who drew the cover image that week, reasoned that Muslim "extremists" had cultivated a culture of fear that "make[s] everyone afraid" and would "shut us all in a cave."[66] He would be among those killed in the 2015 shooting.

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[62] Grant Julin, "Satire in a Multicultural World: A Bakhtinian Analysis," *Comedy Studies* 9, no. 2 (October 2019): 150–70, 160.

[63] Julin, "Satire in a Multicultural World," 163.

[64] Julin, "Satire in a Multicultural World," 165.

[65] "Charlie Hebdo Editor: 'We're Not the Violent Ones,'" *BBC World Have Your Say* (BBC News, September 19, 2012), https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-radio-and-tv-19650711/charlie-hebdo-editor-we-re-not-the-violent-ones.

[66] "Magazine's Nude Mohammad Cartoons in Charlie Hebdo Prompt France to Shut Embassies," *National Post*, September 19, 2012, https://nationalpost.com/news/magazines-nude-mohammad-cartoons-prompt-france-to-shut-embassies-schools-in-20-countries.

These events have fused themselves to the already present public discourse that opines Muslims as incapable of frivolity, fun, and humor, drawing an unambiguous line towards their overall unsuitability for "modernity" at large. These episodic revelations have calcified an impression that works on Muslim humor are constantly reconfiguring themselves against. Maghen's work on the Prophet and the sahaba 1400 years ago opens his 65-page treatment by setting up "a long-held belief about Islam: that it is a stern, glowering, humorless religion," while Bilici declares that "If someone has a sense of humor, then he is just like us: likable."[67] Even when the Australian news program *Lateline* interviews Bassem Youssef ostensibly about Al-Bernameg, the conversation quickly turned into a predictable *why don't Muslims speak out more?* line of questioning.

Youssef's vocal affect and body language can be interpreted as conveying more than just words he espouses in response. He holds his own in Tony Jones's cross-examination ("Well, there's a lot, but you don't know because they speak Arabic"), but a notable exhaustion escapes from his voice as his shoulders fall. For a brief moment, a Du Boisian moment of double consciousness is visible – a dutiful smile followed by a canned but clever reply, bemoaning having to answer some variation of this demand but measuring himself so as to not offend.[68] The accusation of gravity is ever-present and ever-accusing, despite the presence of active subversion. Muslim humor is always obliquely responding – for then, for now, and for the inevitable affair that will continue the work of categorically fusing humorlessness to Islam.

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[67] Maghen, "The Merry Men of Medina," 277; Bilici, "Muslim Ethnic Comedy," 195.

[68] Tony Jones, "Interview: Tony Jones Speaks with Bassem Youssef, Described as the 'Arabic John Stewart' for His Own Daily Show Style of Program and His Transition from Cardiac Surgeon to Television Personality.," *Lateline* (Sydney: Australian Broadcasting Corportation, October 29, 2015), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k-jgi8OM7GQ.

The Uninterrogated Thesis

This is not to say that these thematic frames of studying Muslim humor are not didactic – indeed, they fill a rich burgeoning corner of the study of Islam and religion at large. They are, however, unsatisfactory for identifying what premises the Muslim humor question from the start. For the most part, these works do not seek to rise above their status as a counter. Some, like Mir and Tamer, "prove" the existence of an "authentically" Islamic archive. Given that the sources derive from originating Islamic texts like the Qur'an, hadith, and premodern Arabic manuscripts, one may assume that there is something inherently true, yet sullied over the course of time in connecting this thread to contemporary social formations among Muslims. It is only because of history or politics, then, that Muslim proclivities have meandered, but are very much capable of (and perhaps obligatorily must?) return.

Bilici and Amarasingham see American Muslim comedy as an opportunity for inversion, turning symbolic structures on their head to undo their Otherness that masquerades as common sense. But even Bilici concedes that the act of undoing is temporary. Why? That there is a relationship between humor and modernity, between humorlessness and Islam, is simply a given. Toni Morrison's logic is particularly apropos in describing this kind of phenomenon:

> It's important, therefore, to know who the real enemy is, and to know the function, the very serious function of racism, which is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language and so you spend 20 years proving that you do. Somebody says your head isn't shaped properly so you have scientists working on the fact that it is. Somebody says that you have no art so you dredge that up. Somebody says that you have no kingdoms and so you dredge that up. None of that is necessary. There will always be one more thing.[69]

[69] Toni Morrison, "A Humanistic View," in *Public Dialogue on the American Dream Theme, Part 2* (Portland State Black Studies Center, 1975), https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/orspeakers/90/.

Let us not be distracted, then, waiting to respond to that next "one more thing." Let us instead interrogate the premise more directly: why has this question of Muslim humor comes to be so frequently and urgently asked in the first place? Why do we assume that the relationship between humor and modernity is, in fact, "a given"? I take up these questions directly in the following chapter. This task requires an approach to the notion of Muslim humor that account for the history and literature laid out in the preceding pages, but differentiates itself through an abiding engagement with Islam beyond the crude fundamentalism it is envisioned as otherwise. As has been made evident here, the study of humor, Muslim or not, involves notions of the interiority of persons and the proliferation of senses – the self, the body, and the ontological relationship between their produced and felt affects. Such beings, becomings, and the imperial infrastructures of discipline that contain them cannot be recognized in isolation from secular and religious discourses in the United States.

Understandings of humor develop alongside these increasingly hegemonic discourses, especially in their encounters with and applications against nonnormative subjects like Muslims through the 20th century into the present day. Furthermore, comedic articulations of the Muslim self do not map onto the ways that the American academy and humor studies have, for the most part, theorized the gendered, raced, and classed dimensions of American stand-up and humor. The existing literature has characterized Islam as a second order categorization of race and ethnicity, a presence that draws surveillance from outside itself. How do we account for and understand humor as conduit towards a religiously-oriented ethic - and perhaps even Islamic – modality of being? Can we read just and moralistic consciousness deriving from being among what the Prophet's companion Anas ibn Malik called the "afkah al-nas" – the merriest of men? Can we call such humor Muslim, and if so, when?

Conclusion

This chapter has surveyed the terrain of Muslim humor and its study. Four key frames emerge for the ways that Muslim humor has typically been conceptualized in academic scholarship: ethnic humor, authentic Islamic humor, dissident humor, and humor drawn out of the experience and accusation of 9/11. Each frame provides useful insights into the dissonance between the ways Muslims are seen in Euroamerica and the ways that they themselves joke among themselves, the myriad of ways that religion links up and even functions as race, and the role humor can play in enacting social change and justice. None, however, take their inquiries to the very premise of the matter: why is it assumed that humor is an essential trait of an ideal person, and why has that fundamental nature come to be tied so closely with modernity and being modern?

A study of humor without an interrogation of this thesis keeps its presumptions in place and further sediments their hegemony, especially as they applies to Islam and Muslims. I propose placing the constructedness of religion and secularism at the center of theoretical registers like race, gender, and sexuality in order to allow a clearer picture to emerge in terms of what is at stake in essentializing the humorless subject as Muslim in a self-avowed secular state like the U.S. This theoretical intervention underpins my study of Aziz Ansari, Hasan Minhaj, and Kumail Nanjiani, who represent what I designate as the second phase of U.S. American Muslim humor in the 20th century, Muslim humor by way of a "progressive consensus."

CHAPTER 3: RACIALIZING MUSLIMS THROUGH SECULAR DISCOURSE

> In the words of the Somali-born Dutch politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the integration of Muslims into European societies has been sped up by 300 years due to the cartoons; perhaps we do not need to fight the battle for the Enlightenment all over again.
>
> - Rose Flemming, editor of *Jyllands-Posten*[1]

Introduction

In February 2006, I was a senior in a suburban Michigan high school. My American history teacher's priority that year had been to sporadically inject global current events into our daily meetings in a noble attempt to demonstrate nothing happened in the U.S. in isolation of the world. That first week of February, we began class with a review of the then-rising tide of protests against the cartoon controversy brewing out of Denmark. As one of two Muslim students in the class, the conversation quickly morphed into an impromptu litmus test from our friends and classmates in the room: what did we think? Did we believe in the freedom of speech or were we, too, "offended"? I recall my face burning as I firmly planted myself in their camp: *of course, free speech! Whoever does find these images offensive doesn't get what the rules of living in a secular society are! They're just images, after all*. The teacher nodded in approval; my confession was accepted, and the class moved on without further incident to that day's lesson.

I mention this anecdote to illustrate the transnational and disciplinarian reach of the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoon controversy, which operates as a confirmatory node in the broader

[1] Flemming Rose, "Why I Published Those Cartoons," February 19, 2006, https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/02/17/AR2006021702499.html.

pattern of global events that demonstrate a deeply entrenched and continued investment in principles such as reason, freedom, critique, and equality, among others, within a larger secular order. These principles are perceived to be under active attack and imminent danger by the vociferous self-appointed guardians of secularism which include individuals and institutions ranging from media conglomerates to politicians to the nation's citizenry. Investment in their protection by way of proliferation is shared just as much in the United States as it is across western Europe ("Europe and her daughters" as classified by one Orientalist).[2] Humor is central to the conception of these notions, insomuch as it helps dictate the boundaries of a subject's legibility and agential capacity within that order. Academics who recount the events of 2005/2006 refer to the line in the sand that this incident drew: where humor comes to "stand for humanity," as Mucahit Bilici puts it.[3] For Fadi Hirzalla, Liesbet van Zoonen, and Floris Müller, humor must be conceived of as a democratically-sanctioned civic practice that will release tension and even create space for political reconciliation when it comes to "a controversial issue and experience like Islam."[4]

This chapter aims to make plain the inherency of humor within disciplining secular narratives of modernity and its attendant norms and institutions like the democratic nation-state. I begin by examining how modernity and secularism have generally been theorized, drawing attention to their recursive vocabularies on religious qua civilizational difference. Who gets

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[2] Bernard Lewis, "The Roots of Muslim Rage," *The Atlantic*, September 1990, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1990/09/the-roots-of-muslim-rage/304643/.

[3] Mucahit Bilici, "Muslim Ethnic Comedy: Inversions of Islamophobia," in *Islamophobia/Islamophilia: Beyond the Politics of Enemy and Friend* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010). 195.

[4] Fadi Hirzalla, Liesbet van Zoonen, and Floris Müller, "How Funny Can Islam Controversies Be? Comedians Defending Their Faiths on YouTube," *Television & New Media* 14, no. 1 (January 2013): 46-61, 59.

attributed what values, and how do those values translate into visible and felt configurations of power? How is humor both value and power? How has it been used to historically and presently discipline? When Foucauldian "regimes of truth" further distill into what Giselinde Kuipers has called a "humour regime" - a systemized discursive control over who can joke about what, where some topics are considered entirely off-limits – some subjects, Muslims in particular, must demonstrate their ability to "take a joke" by enduring caricature at their own expense and with limited recourse to respond.[5] The centrality of a "sense of humor" within modern subjecthood reveals the limited room to exercise agency that Muslims must occupy and contend with in the 21st century across the United States and Europe. Because the expression of humor is a central signifier of the constitution of the "modern" 21st-century American self and subject, its utilization contributes to the construction of legibility for Muslims.

This legibility is produced through what I deem to be a secular process of racializing Muslims. Aziz Ansari, Hasan Minhaj, and Kumail Nanjiani have all come to be represented (and have represented themselves) as Muslim comedians, as opposed to just Indian/South Asian/Brown ones, by way of such racialization. I discuss the ways in which racialization has come to be conceptualized in U.S. scholarship, especially as a historically contingent process that relies on a combination of visually "read" cues emanating off particular bodies and their associations with specific practices, beliefs, and political demands of the state. The endurance and proliferation of racialization as a channel for Muslim legibility in the United States relies on a *progressive consensus* of recognition, a conceptual reordering that foregrounds race and racial

[5] Michel Foucault, *On the Government of the Living: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1979-1980* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2016), 98; Giselinde Kuipers, "The Politics of Humour in the Public Sphere: Cartoons, Power and Modernity in the First Transnational Humour Scandal," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 14, no. 1 (February 2011): 63-80, 69.

categories as a predominant language through which to recognize difference, inequity, and oppression within a secular political apparatus.

Humor as a Secular Discourse

Giselinde Kuipers has called the Danish cartoon controversy "the first transnational humor scandal" to be framed in terms of a clash of civilizations, in which Muslims proved their social exclusion by demonstrating a lack of humor. The cartoons were published alongside an essay which explained that the images were intended as satire and a mockery of Islam, given that "modern secular society is rejected by some Muslims… It is incompatible with contemporary democracy and freedom of speech, where you must be ready to put up with mockery, ridicule and derision."[6] By virtue of their medium, the cartoons were seen as derogatory, flippant, and unserious critique; they were simply meant to ridicule. A then-prominent French Muslim scholar urged fellow Muslims in Europe to retool and accept that such satire was a European cultural tradition dating back to Voltaire.[7]

Kuipers sees a discursive "humour regime" where there are dictates in terms of what can be joked about, endowing some with the capacity to joke while silencing others into simply "taking" the joke. As localized protests were uprooted and supplanted into the global theater, different discursive regimes came up against one another, though the unwritten rule of "punching up" satire went unabided in this case. Instead, global inequalities were simply mirrored, not challenged. "Rather than playing the part of the court jester, critics argued, *Jyllands-Posten*

[6] Giselinde Kuipers, "The Politics of Humour in the Public Sphere," 69.

[7] Tariq Ramadan, "Free Speech and Civic Responsibility," *International Herald Tribune*, February 5, 2006, sec. Opinion, https://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/05/opinion/free-speech-and-civic-responsibility.html.

functioned as a guardian of the social order."[8] Within the rules of this humor regime, Kuipers notes that the only "dignified" response would be to joke back, though this would also require power, access, confidence, and detachment. She gives the example of Iran, which hosted its own cartoon contest to mock that Europe, too, has its own sacred no-go zone – in this case, the Holocaust. These cartoons only further fed the alienation of Danish Muslims, however, and feeds further alienation within their discursive European humor regime. Kuipers has homed in on the key relationship between humor – a seemingly universal value divested of hierarchy – and its very real attachments to regimes of discipline power. Yet where would one position humor within secular discourses? How does one engage Islam and religion beyond crude fundamentalism, beyond racial and racialized identity markers?

Humor, I argue, is a fundamental pillar within the larger conception of the secular modern, and ultimately translates to an avenue of social access and cultural citizenship within the contemporary secular imaginary of the United States. In the chapter 1, I briefly outlined the ways that Daniel Wickberg conceives of humor's voyage from the strictly corporeal to ontological as part of my overview on the history of humor. He pinpoints the 18th and 19th centuries in the United States as a critical juncture for the transitive development of humor as it corresponds with the growth of "bureaucratical individualism."[9] The individual – now an increasingly subjective and interiorized notion of self, separate from the social whole – imagines values and morality to be intrinsic to that self, while economic pursuits come to be understood as "self-interest," penetrating all realms of social living. Indeed, Wickberg argues that "all qualities of objects

[8] Kuipers, "The Politics of Humour in the Public Sphere," 72.

[9] Daniel Wickberg, *The Senses of Humor: Self and Laughter in Modern America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015). 75-78, 94.

either becomes qualities of subjects – individuals – or lose their social character altogether and take on the features of commodities."[10] The world of Euroamerica during the 18th and 19th centuries sees a boon of nascent market imperatives, all working to cobble together a shift away from proprietary capitalism towards a style of economy that is managerial and increasingly corporate.

In this social schema, the individual affirms both the interior self as well as the world of growing industrial production around them, rationalizing service to that world as a gallant civic responsibility. Bureaucratic individualism is thus "the union of apparent opposites: the individual self as the highest value, and the priority of rationalized institutions and social relations to which the individual must adapt."[11] A humorous disposition – conceived of as a desirable characteristic that each person had inherent within them – most easily and expediently enables one to demonstrate their self's best version. This self is so interior as to be separate from one's ego but also adaptable, accommodating, and deferent to the wider needs of the market. The market rewards this now naturalized ethic as a commodity, worthy of individuated praise, to be sure, but also worthy of financial stability and a place in the shifting economy.

The Omission of Religion

This history, as laid out by Wickberg, is immensely useful for moving away from the still ubiquitous assumption that a sense of humor is endemic to human nature, somehow temporally and culturally a priori. Indeed, that the idea of humor can have a traceable history is indicative of the opposite. Such a history of humor and its development, then, acts as a catalogue for coming

[10] Wickberg, *The Senses of Humor*, 15.

[11] Wickberg, *The Senses of Humor*, 78.

to grips with older conceptions of personhood within Euro-America and the emergent ones that take the form of bureaucratic individualism in the 18th and 19th centuries. Wickberg does well to link this model of personhood and the self to the broader sea change of industrial capitalism. However, there is a jarring omission in the history provided here; the absence of another rapidly mounting corporate endeavor that would serve – for many across the world – as their introduction to western modernity: colonial missions and conquest. This is, after all, why capitalist economies were able to expand at the rates they did, though Wickberg makes no mention of this symbiosis and its political ramifications in places like Africa, the Americas, and Asia.

Without that connection, it would appear that Wickberg has failed to recognize this commonality between forces of rampant industrialization and colonial expansion. Whether these forces rely on each other or are in some way mutually constitutive across the grand scheme of modernity is a question other scholars have occupied themselves with.[12] For the purposes of this project, I seek to make plain their discursive connection and correspondence. This occurs within the language of Enlightenment-era notions of religion and secularism mirror the discourses being enacted and reproduced by Wickberg's bureaucratic individual. Without the contextual framing that is activated by such self-articulated conceptions of religion, secularism, and the power

[12] In particular, Sudipta Kaviraj's "Modernity and Politics in India" clarifies the dangers of presuming such mutual constituency across platforms and places. The plurality of processes that make up modernity, he says, do not result in same outcomes across location because the initial conditions of modernity differ between modernities. In the case of modern India, the presence of democratic political practices and capitalist development have produced social structures and institutions markedly different than those found in Europe, rendering the theories put forth by Marx and de Toqueville historically imprecise. Emulation of the west may not be possible or even not desired, as "Western modernity is diverse and not uniformly attractive." See Sudipta Kaviraj, "Modernity and Politics in India," *Daedalus* 129, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 137-162, 137-141.

relationships inherent within them, we cannot fully comprehend how, by the end of the 20th century, the humorless subject was assumed to be and then came to be represented by Muslims.

The Inclusion of Religion

That humor would imagine itself to be universal yet neutral in the larger construction of personhood concedes an inattention to the exchanges of power within its own logical structure. Charles Taylor notes that in line with an interiorized self, secularism as a political doctrine emerged after years of religious conflict in Europe, in which an "overlapping consensus" – absent of any distinct religious favor – would be a net common good and neutral in its application to all.[13] The individuals under that order understand themselves as an Andersonian imagined community within it. A value required for the functioning of such a community, maintains Taylor, is the primacy of citizenship, which must transcend over other classed, raced, gendered, or religious identities – the same type of transcendence a sense of humor is capable of and prized for.[14]

Yet Talal Asad sees secularism not just for its transcending management of identities. It is rather, he suggests, "an enactment by which a political medium (representation of citizenship) redefines and transcends particular and differentiating practices of the self that are articulated through class, gender, and religion."[15] Tracey Fessenden similarly writes that "unmarked" Protestantism finds an easy home in what comes to be legitimated as secularism in an American

[13] Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 105-110.

[14] Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections*, 86-89.

[15] Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 5.

context, in which "good" religion is unobtrusive and fully compatible with the new liberal state while the "bad" or regressive religious practitioners were sequestered and driven out of the national mythos.[16] These subjects are newly classified through the language of empirical secular rationality; they are not religiously different, but racially so. In fact, decolonial scholars of the Americas and trans-Atlantic increasingly appraise an even earlier date of colonial encounter, 1492, that inaugurates the dual advent of coloniality and the modern notions of religion.

Such a form of racialization, speculates Peter Coviello, "has at its core a biopoliticizing calibration of religiosity prosecuted along the axis of an adherence to the many interwoven norms of liberal subjecthood and sociality."[17] Thus, when Muslims were violently initiated into modernity and secularism in later iterations of colonial incursion, they were conferred a notion of the self that saw them, by dint of religion/race, as already deficient in their subjecthood. This secular schema was built directly upon the models of personhood and self that are described by Wickberg. Their maintenance requires the act of prescription out and beyond, a sustained dissemination of those models across empires and within its hinterlands. Secular forms of political economy, government, and memory were erected in the name of liberation and egalitarianism, hard won through the act of "taming" the frontier.

A narrative of liberation and freedom "erases the seizure of lands from native peoples, displaces migrations and connections across continents, and internalizes these processes in a national struggle of history and consciousness," warns Lisa Lowe. The endurance of these profound polarities "are a legacy of these processes through which 'the human' is 'freed' by

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[16] Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 136.

[17] Peter Coviello, "Secularism and Viable Life," *American Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (October 5, 2019): 889-893, 890.

liberal forms, while other subjects, practices, and geographies are placed at a distance from 'the human.'"[18] This larger normative political apparatus distinguishes itself first and principally as modern, all while still reproducing and transforming what Wendy Brown, Saba Mahmood, and Judith Butler say are "religiously inflected (albeit disavowed) modalities of law, ethics, subjects, and consciousness."[19] This religious inflection, of course, is most closely encapsulated by presumptions of Protestant Christianity in the United States.

It is no surprise, then, that during the same critical period of the 18th and 19th centuries, the articulation of the self and its attendant humor are actively erected alongside the rapidly changing social reforms and laws of the nation-state – the secular, democracy, freedom, and choice. Within this reimagination, society is made of persons with subjective rights and moral agency in their decision making. "The extension of universal suffrage was in turn linked—as Foucault has pointed out—to new methods of government based on new styles of classification and calculation, and new forms of subjecthood."[20] Moral agency is meant to be exercised in various fora of social life (including political representation) but also through the interiorization of belief under this secular aegis. Therefore religion, too, is reconceptualized as a social formation: "Insomuch as religion is primarily about belief in a set of propositions to which one lends one's assent," infers Saba Mahmood; it too "is fundamentally a matter of choice."[21] The myth of such visions of modernity also maintain that it spreads out solely from a western center

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[18] Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 3.

[19] Talal Asad et al., *Is Critique Secular? : Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), x.

[20] Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, 24.

[21] Saba Mahmood, "Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?," in *Is Critique Secular? : Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*, ed. Talal Asad et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009): 64-100, 67.

of political power with the aim of reproduction by way of replication. When such replication inevitably fails among societies whose initial conditions of modernity are radically dissimilar from the western models – particularly because modernity arrives in the form of colonialism – those societies are deemed as "choosing" to remain traditional, by extension choosing to remain insufficiently modernized.

The concomitant projects of secularism and the modern nation-state have sought the naturalization qua institutionalization of these values – humor, freedom, choice, equality, democracy, the ability to critique – all of which has resulted in spaces of social exclusion and inclusion in the 20th century. For the most part, the differentiation between these spaces go undetected until they clash with non-normative approaches to religion. Today, says Wendy Brown, this vision of secularism anticipates the clash through its self-articulation, in which it constructs itself and its value through what it also constructs as its opposite: "Islam."[22] Inclusion requires that religion be approached through an immaterial habitus – physically imperceptible, dispossessed of political demands, and privatized into interior belief. Muslims, Asad posits, translate into modernity only "once they have divested themselves of what many of them regard (mistakenly) as essential to themselves."[23] Thus secularism is not just the enactment of liberalism and its principles, it is also a range of naturalized sensibilities that ignore and exclude any affinities in order to deem themselves separate, apart, and superior.[24] These sensibilities are now coherently intrinsic to the self, and are enacted through individualistic social conduct out in the

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[22] Wendy Brown, "Introduction," in *Is Critique Secular?: Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*, ed. Talal Asad et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 7-19, 10.

[23] Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, 169.

[24] Talal Asad, *Secular Translations: Nation-State, Modern Self, and Calculative Reason* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 90-91.

world. Freedom, choice, equality – these are worth personally upholding with conviction against those that threaten them.

The Civilizational Stakes of Humor

In 2006, the *Jyllands-Posten* newspaper editor Flemming Rose wrote to the *Washington Post* during the height of protests against his decision to publish the cartoons. "The cartoonists treated Islam the same way they treat Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and other religions. And by treating Muslims in Denmark as equals they made a point: We are integrating you into the Danish tradition of satire because you are part of our society, not strangers. The cartoons are including, rather than excluding, Muslims."[25] He had acted upon, in his mind, a civic duty to ensure that Muslims and the Prophet Muhammad had been caricatured; this was an act of equality, not discrimination. Within this logic, the humor being offered was an object of exchange and (as Wickberg would call it) "circumstance-neutral."[26] But there was also a test buried within this demonstration of secular values, and it measured Muslims by their ability to endure caricaturing, to "take the joke," and tolerate the moral injury that came with it.[27]

The presence of such a goalpost meant that it was not expected that the conceptions of self in relation to secularism were held among Muslims. Here was a question, not a naturalized given, where humor had been deputized to test for the boundaries of subjective legibility within the sanctioned secular order. Flemming added that he had even offered a broad platform to those

[25] Flemming Rose, "Why I Published Those Cartoons," *Washington Post* (Washington DC, February 2006).

[26] Wickberg, *The Senses of Humor*, 10.

[27] Mahmood, "Religious Reason and Secular Affect," 64-73.

Muslims that recognized and abided by this order, running "three full pages of interviews and photos of moderate Muslims saying no to being represented by the imams," who "insist that their faith is compatible with a modern secular democracy."[28] That there were enough Muslims still registering their lack of interest – or even be an inability? – in transcending their offense was indicative of something far more pathological: what kind of subject is this Muslim? And what of the Muslims who endure and tolerate moral injury: what happens to their essentially endowed subjective agency when they cannot assert it within a secular schema?

Anne Norton identifies this – "the Muslim question" – as a fundamental social question of the 21st century, a repackaged version of the Jewish question that dogged Europe, its philosophy, and its institutions for centuries. The Muslim, here an idea, is today a site upon which the stakes of contemporary Western politics and ethics play out. Are they a danger to politics, Christians, Jews, secular humanists, women, sex, and Enlightenment values and institutions?[29] The idea of the Muslim reveals what is perceived as an innate and pathological tendency towards tribalness, "never having achieved the state, a state that Hegel marked as essential to the fullness of civilization. They are after the state, which is to say they are the rootless cosmopolites of a post-Westphalian order," says Norton.[30]

Humor, its composition made up of a now-coherent and consistent engagement of the subjective and objective self, has ingratiated itself as a discourse of the secular. By Wickberg's definition, there is an imparity between the Western self and the Muslim: an inability to distinguish objective and subjective as it relates to an understanding of this most fundamental

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[28] Rose, "Why I Published Those Cartoons," February 2006.

[29] Anne Norton, *On the Muslim Question* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 227-229.

[30] Norton, *On the Muslim Question*, 5.

state. What I am saying, however, is that society's existential questions no longer need to be so brazenly framed today. Instead, by asking an even simpler question - can't Muslims take a joke? - the stakes of the secular, of the self and the subject, are disciplined and made evident. The coded language plays itself out in state policies, in political jockeying, and basic social interactions between individuals.[31]

Secular Recognition

The Muslim that cannot/will not take the joke occupies an illegible state within the secular schema. This illegibility necessitates vigilance, accounting for the incongruous application of U.S. law and the Constitution for Muslim citizens. The possession of citizenship "has not protected America's Muslim citizens from surveillance, detention, unlawful searches, and the assaults of discrimination."[32] Far from being limited to attention on solely Muslim bodies, the frenetic obsession with the Muslim question has simultaneously swept up those that come close in resembling the essentialized type, those that share the same politics, race, ethnicity, or religious proclivities. In service to a social order that is securitized in the name of secularity, these communities are controlled through deportations, detentions, and overt violence – separated and secured away from the parts of the American citizenry deemed worthy of

[31] See the life and legacy of the Orientalist Bernard Lewis, whose article "The Roots of Muslim Rage" and countless other publications influenced American policy decision-making in the Middle East across multiple decades and presidencies. The U.S. President Donald Trump's claims that "Islam hates us" resulted in the institution of a no longer temporary ban on Muslims entering the US "until our country's representatives can figure out what is going on" in January 2017. See Theodore Schleifer, "Donald Trump: 'I Think Islam Hates Us,'" News, CNN, March 10, 2016, https://www.cnn.com/2016/03/09/politics/donald-trump-islam-hates-us/index.html; Lewis, "The Roots of Muslim Rage."

[32] Norton, *On the Muslim Question*, 3.

protection. The Muslim is an embodied and illegible anxiety, a figure that demonstrates the end limits of secular subjecthood.

While I am wary of naming Muslims living under a U.S. secular system as subaltern subjects, it must be acknowledged that running parallel alongside the category of the rational and cultivated subject is the primitive "raw man" devoid of culture – an axiomatic discourse that formed the contours of and continued to fuel civilizing missions in Africa, Asia, and the Americas.[33] This caricatured colonial Other was generated as Europe pursued colonial projects in line with the demands of shifting market forces, the remaking of economies, and frontier territories. In later years that notion of culture would inverse - white settler culture would become so normative as to go unmarked (the "bland nothingness" of whiteness) in opposition to the "cultures" of people that were also markedly raced.[34] But the subaltern is not an identity that the American Muslim subjects like Hasan Minhaj, Aziz Ansari, and Kumail Nanjiani embody, let alone one that can be taken on and worn today. The subaltern lives in a state of violent displacement and inbetweenness, shuttling within patriarchy, imperialism, and the status of being an object and subject; this is far from the circumstances of Minhaj, Ansari, and Nanjiani.

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[33] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 14.

[34] Historian Nell Irvin Painter refers to as a "toggle switch between 'bland nothingness' and 'racist hatred'," to illustrate how Spokane NAACP chapter leader Rachel Dolezal opted out of her white identity to instead identify as Black in 2015. This toggling logic can be found stretching back into the early 20th century, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against the citizenship of Bhagat Singh Thind in 1923. Thind, an Indian man seeking to demonstrate his whiteness on the basis of Aryan ancestory, offers a case study of the capricious definitions of whiteness that ultimately settled on the authority on empowered white people's own "common sense" about themselves. The court's unanimous decision to reject Thind's claim came after a back-and-forth on inconclusive biology of "Caucasian" and linguistic heritage. They conclude that "common understanding" and "congressional attitude" would not include Indians as white: "the great body of our people instinctively recognize it and reject the thought of assimilation." See George Sutherland, United States v. Thind, 261 U.S. 204 (United States Supreme Court February 19, 1923); Nell Irvin Painter, "What Is Whiteness?," *The New York Times*, June 20, 2015, sec. Opinion, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/21/opinion/sunday/what-is-whiteness.html.

So though the Muslim as a figure is made subjectively illegible through and within hegemonic secular discourses in the United States, these men are not. They very much speak and are heard – to varying degrees – on mixed agential terms. The question, then, is what are those terms and what is being sacrificed in favor of some form of legibility over none? A basic theory of recognition, as described by Charles Taylor, consists of a positive public valuation of a given group identity granted by the state, where identity is a designation of a person's understanding of their own fundamental human characteristics.[35]

Yet what happens in the case of Minhaj, Ansari, and Nanjiani is an embrace of identity-interchangeability, where markers can effectively "stand in" for one another. In this case, an illegible religion is substituted in favor of a more legible "race" or "ethnicity" or "culture." I argue that these are agential moments of "opting in" on the part of these three men, but remain conscious that this agency is enabled by the broader secular power to confer of legitimacy to those identifying categories through racialization over a category like religion. At the same time, Muslimness is still *read from* and *endowed upon* their bodies in what Jasbir Puar calls a "queer perversity of terrorist bodies."[36] Racialization is shown to operate on multiple registers. What determines when Minhaj, Ansari, and Nanjiani are named and produce themselves as Muslim?

Brown, Desi, and/or Muslim

The site of the comedy stage and screen shines a literal spotlight on the comedian's body, training the audience's focus and then asking it to respond with non-derisive laughter. Even

[35] Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994): 25-73, 25.

[36]Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 169.

before the comedian speaks, the body has. It is raced as South Asian/Brown, an allusion to difference that is just unspecific enough that it must prove its legibility within secular social categories. This dynamic is not an unfamiliar one for nonnormative subjects across the United States. Indeed, W.E.B. Du Bois gives it a name in 1903: "double consciousness." He describes "a peculiar sensation… of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."[37] At the turn of the century, this speaks to a deep internal desire to merge two sides into one person, dogging Du Bois as he bears witness to the impossibility of this task in the Reconstruction Era American South. Historically, it has made the American Black man appear weak and without power. It is a fruitless venture of double aims, to ceaselessly abide by the expectations of white people while trying to meet the needs of Black people, ultimately irreconcilable.

The legibility sought by Minhaj, Ansari, and Nanjiani expresses itself through a similar form of double consciousness in their standup material. In his Netflix special *Homecoming King*, Hasan Minhaj recounts how his family responded to 9/11, explaining:

> That's the way our parents are, right? Our parents are like a firewall to the outside world. They disseminate information to us. It's like living in North Korea. My dad is the leader of the household. So when 9-11 happened I was in high school. My dad sits everybody down. He's like, 'Hasan, whatever you do, do not tell people you're Muslim or talk about politics.' Alright, Dad, I'll just hide it. This [pointing to the skin on his arm] just rubs off.[38]

The joke provokes scattered laughter across the wide auditorium, but the reference to "us" is something Minhaj deliberately leaves untranslated, a joke "for us" – references Minhaj deliberately weaves into his standup in order to speak directly to the experiences of being

[37] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Company, 1903), 3.

[38] Hasan Minhaj and Christopher Storer, *Homecoming King* (Netflix, 2017).

Brown/Muslim/Desi. He borrows this move from Black hip-hop artists of the 1990s. Elaborating in an interview with *New York Magazine*, Minhaj says "They wouldn't dumb down their lyrics to make us understand. We had to catch up to them. For me I was like, 'I want to do this poem about bravery that my dad told me, and *you're* going to catch up to me and understand it.' For better or for worse, let's see how this choice works out."[39]

Aziz Ansari does something similar in his monologue for *Saturday Night* Live (SNL) on January 21, 2017, the day after Donald Trump was inaugurated as President. He reflects on the rise of what he calls a "casual white supremacy… this new, lower-case k.k.k. movement." The members of this movement, he reasons, see the election as an open license to abuse racial minorities. "[They're] saying stuff like, 'Trump won! Go back to Africa!' or 'Trump won! Go back to Mexico!' They see me: 'Trump won, go back… [*his eyes narrow with suspicion*] to where you came from.' Yeah. They're not usually geography buffs."[40] In the same vein, Kumail Nanjiani opens his film, *The Big Sick*, with a scene of him performing standup at a club in Chicago.

> I grew up in Pakistan. And people are always asking me, what was that like? Really not that different from here. I mean we played cricket, which is just a spicier version of baseball. And we prayed a lot. Well not a lot, just five times a day. And we marry someone our parents find for us. Arranged marriage, you know. For me, it was probably that we got episodes of the A-Team a little bit later. And by a little bit later, I mean we just got episode two. But other than that, it was exactly the same.[41]

In all three instances, there is an acute perception of how the particular bodies of these men operate and move through public spaces and their attendant social structures. The very

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[39] Mallika Rao, "Hasan Minhaj Took a Job No One Wanted," *New York Magazine*, 2017, http://www.vulture.com/2017/05/hasan-minhaj-took-a-job-no-one-wanted.html.

[40] Aziz Ansari, "Aziz Ansari Saturday Night Live Monologue," *Saturday Night Live* (New York: NBC, January 22, 2017), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Whde50AacZs.

[41] Kumail Nanjiani, Emily Gordon, and Michael Showalter, *The Big Sick* (Lionsgate, 2017).

presence of such bodies evokes tension – they are personified as "matter out of place" and must then make place for their continued presence. This works to the comedian's advantage, of course, whose chosen vocation relies on the release of tension through laughter. This ultimate objective, of eliciting amusement and doing so quickly and frequently, works in tandem with double consciousness by pushing those tensions to the surface and back into a realm of legibility, simplified referents, and even caricature. Laughter is how an audience demonstrates recognition. It makes the place where their matter becomes legible. That legibility, in turn, is produced by way of racial or ethnic nomenclature – a racialization – which has come to stand in for Islam not just in Minhaj, Nanjiani, and Ansari's comedy, but also in academic literature and social justice activist circuits. This triangular relationship feeds its pervasiveness.

The Racialization of Muslims: A Review

This racialization of Islam emanates from the presence of material Muslim bodies which induces apprehension and outright alarm within discourses of securitization, masculinity, and white supremacy in the United States. Much of the scholarship on the racialization of Muslims comes out of the study of anti-Muslim hostility and its deployment. What marks one as somehow "worthy" of this specific kind of discrimination? The impulse to conceptualize Muslims as a collective body has relied increasingly on thinking about them not within a religious category but a racial or racialized one as religion cannot be outwardly perceived due to the "interior nature" of belief. Omi and Winant write that the formation of race signifies "the extension of racial

meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice or group. Racialization is an ideological process, an historically specific one."[42]

That extension has since come to subsume Muslims within such classification, as well. Such a connection, forged in the last several years within the academy, has been brought about specifically to understand anti-Muslim hostility and surveillance as racism towards Muslims. "Hostility to Islam cannot be separated from discrimination against Muslims in neat and unproblematic ways… Religion is 'raced', Muslims are racialized," says AbdoolKarim Vikal.[43] Following this logic, Islamophobia is a set of ideas and practices that form a ring around all Muslims as a group associated with characteristics such as oppression, violence, misogyny, disloyalty, etc. that are assumed to be intrinsic to these bodies. Steve Garner and Saher Selod elaborate:

> This is not due to them all looking vaguely the same, but is because of the *unity of the 'gaze' itself*. In other words those who produce, absorb and reproduce representations of asylum-seekers, and Muslims, can transform the clearly culturally and phenotypically dissimilar individuals who fall into this bureaucratic category (asylum-seeker), or are simply devotees of the same religion (Muslims), into a homogeneous bloc: this is the basis of the racialization of Muslims (the process), and of Islamophobia (the snapshot of outcomes of this process).[44]

Junaid Rana adds that the element of race is what conjures the Muslim as enemy. "The foe is defined in relation not only to democracy and freedom," he claims, "but also to the moral

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[42] Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 3rd edition (New York: Routledge, 2014), 64.

[43] Abdoolkarim Vakil, "Who's Afraid of Islamophobia?," in *Thinking Through Islamophobia: Global Perspectives*, ed. Salman Sayyid (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010): 271-278, 276.

[44] Steve Garner and Saher Selod, "The Racialization of Muslims: Empirical Studies of Islamophobia," *Critical Sociology* 41, no. 1 (2015): 9-19, 14.

precepts of the ideologically motivated formation of a Christian subject that argues for just war as an obligation of secularity and imperialism."[45]

There has been a renewed political urgency to tackle both incidents of and the underlying causes behind anti-Muslim hostility in recent years, further fomented by the explicit and cavalier proposals for Muslim registries and the implementation of what has openly been referred to as a Muslim Ban. A collective reading list compiled in 2017 by several scholars across academic disciplines declares "Islamophobia is Racism" so as to more acutely reflect the intersection of race and religion within the context of empire building, drawing explicit inspiration from similar projects that shed light on Islam and Blackness, the Standing Rock protests in North and South Dakota, and the Black Lives Matter protests in Ferguson.[46] "This syllabus insists on thinking about anti-Muslim racism as a global project that overlaps and intersects with the exclusion of other marginalized groups (e.g. Black, queer, Latinx, immigrant, indigenous, etc)," the preface reads. "It also connects the histories of various racial logics that reinforce one another, including anti-Muslim racism, anti-Black racism, anti-Latinx racism, anti-Arab racism, and anti-South Asian racism." Selod and Embrick echo this charge, adding that such acts of solidarity also ensure that these acts of discrimination are addressed in the first place: "if the Muslim experience is divorced from racism, collective action and public outcry will be minimal."[47]

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[45] Junaid Akram Rana, *Terrifying Muslims: Race and Labor in the South Asian Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 5.

[46] Su'ad Abdul Khabeer, Arshad Ali, Evelyn Alsultany, Sohail Daulatzai, Lara Deeb, Carol Fadda, Zareena Grewal, Juliane Hammer, Nadine Naber, and Junaid Rana, *Islamophobia Is Racism – Resource for Teaching & Learning about Anti-Muslim Racism in the United States*, 2017, https://islamophobiaisracism.wordpress.com/.

[47] Saher Selod and David Embrick, "Racialization and Muslims: Situating the Muslim Experience in Race Scholarship," *Sociology Compass* 7, no. 8 (2013): 644-653, 652.

This urgency has also found solidarity in social justice activist circuits, indebted to the work of Black feminist public intellectuals whose theorizations have sought deliberate utility in lived realities.[48] The popular organizing hashtag #nobannowall joins together issues of the Muslim Ban and Latinx migration at the southern border, while debates surrounding the makeup of the 2017 Women's March leadership committee resulted in new co-chairs that centered Black, Latina, and Muslim activists (though later accusations of anti-Semitism in 2019 resulted in their departures as chairs).[49] Even among the elder statespeople of social justice organizing and Black radicalism, established leaders like Angela Davis draw parallels between the creation of the Department of Homeland Security after 9/11, the militarization of police in suppressing Black Lives Matter protests, and the Palestinian struggle. In *Freedom is a Constant Struggle*, she writes: "the Black radical tradition has to embrace the struggles against anti-Muslim racism, which is perhaps the most virulent form of racism today. It makes no sense to imagine eradicating anti-Black racism without also eradicating anti-Muslim racism."[50]

It is worth noting how the language of race and racialization as governing analytics have come to dominate over a term like "ethnicity" as it pertains to Muslims. Susan Koshy comments on the rise of ethnicity as a marker of difference after 1965 which enabled white ethnicities to

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[48] Brittney Cooper's *Beyond Respectability* studiously profiles this genealogy through the work of Black women activists like Anna Julia Cooper, Pauli Murray, Mary Church Terrell, and others. See Brittney C. Cooper, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017).

[49] Kirsten Gillibrand, "TIME 100: Women's March Leaders," *Time*, 2017, https://time.com/collection/2017-time-100/4742711/tamika-mallory-bob-bland-carmen-perez-linda-sarsour/; Farah Stockman, "Three Leaders of Women's March Group Step Down After Controversies," *The New York Times*, September 16, 2019, sec. U.S., https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/16/us/womens-march-anti-semitism.html.

[50] Angela Y. Davis, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), 48.

also participate in the category. This amalgam upheld an ethos of multiculturalism and worked to ultimately obscure the operations of race and class by forging alliances instead between white people and middle-class and wealthy immigrant communities.[51] Ethnic sameness in this regard rewards abidance to the idea of a "color-blind" American meritocracy, offering those that utilize this rhetoric not access and opportunity to capital but its simulacrum. One is shown to be "fit" within capitalism by "transcending" the language of race and promoting market individualism. This narrative culminates in the myth of the model minority, to which many Muslims subscribe, particularly among those that can trace their presence in the United States to the relaxation of immigration quotas in 1965. The overwhelming force and blind application of anti-Muslim hostility, however, has muted the use of this distinction among both academics and activists working on their behalf.

Muslim community organizations like the Muslim Justice League (MJL) and the Muslim Anti-Racism Collaborative (MuslimARC) position themselves as human rights-oriented Muslim community organizers, driven especially in response to state-sponsored incursions by the FBI, the Joint Terrorism Task Force, and "countering violent extremism" programs, all of which continue to ingratiate themselves in mosques, schools, and community centers. These U.S. government agendas are the latest addition to a long historical precedence of reading religion as race. Young men from Muslim-majority nations were monitored through the Bush-era NSEERS registry, which drew from even earlier legal machinations like the Plenary Power Doctrine and Chinese Exclusion Act. Moustafa Bayoumi identifies an underlying assumption that "a terrorist is foreign-born, an alien in the United States, and a Muslim, and that all Muslim men who fit this

[51] Susan Koshy, "Morphing Race into Ethnicity: Asian Americans and Critical Transformations of Whiteness," *Boundary 2* 28, no. 1 (March 2001): 153-194, 181, 187-189.

profile are potential terrorists."[52] Religion determines race, and there is no escaping from it. This inescapability from the eyes of the state drives the work of MJL, recognizing that "discrimination towards any group endangers the rights of all."[53] MuslimARC similarly offers trainings and workshops that probe the ways that racism has been internalized but also made interpersonal and institutional with respect to, by, and against Muslims. "While the majority of our members are currently in the United States, we stand in solidarity with oppressed people and incorporate global voices because our community is cosmopolitan, reflecting transnational identities with local particularities," their website says.

Cemil Aydin observes a similar phenomenon among Muslims who continue to exercise the use of the geo-civilizational term of the "Muslim world," descending from the racialized colonial discourses that forged this idea into something uniform and universal.[54] This currency is present especially among those postcolonial nationalists and internationalists interested in building global solidarities in the face of western hegemony. Aydin sees the use of this secular essentialism as strategic on the part of its Muslim practitioners then and now, serving some sense of shared humanitarian or political goals.[55] This type of ubiquitous solidarity enables broader and sustainable coalition-building across social justice activist circles. As a feminist ethic, this creates space for a shared dispositional vulnerability, writes Desiree Melton: "an awareness of self-dependence on others for understanding and respect, and an awareness, in turn, of the

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[52] Moustafa Bayoumi, "Racing Religion," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 6, no. 2 (2006): 267-293, 275.

[53] Muslim Justice League, "Our Work," Muslim Justice League, October 17, 2015, https://www.muslimjusticeleague.org/our-work/.

[54] Cemil Aydin, *The Idea of the Muslim World: A Global Intellectual History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 57-64.

[55] Aydin, "The Idea of the Muslim World," 236-237.

other's dependence for understanding and respect."[56] She notes that it is easier for racial minorities to cultivate and condition vulnerable dependence given their own existential awareness of self and the requirement to then de-center that self in the interest of others. This exercise of vulnerability, far from connoting weakness, encourages the type of recognition that empowers racial minorities to resist in the face of white supremacy.

The Progressive Consensus

Taken together, this is indicative of what I have come to call a progressive consensus of recognition, which speaks to a process in the contemporary American moment around the year 2017 that foregrounds sites of racial struggle and the discourse of race/racialization as the primary mode through which to distinguish difference, inequity, and oppression within a secular political apparatus. Like Michael Omi and Howard Winant, I agree that race stands as a "master category" for difference in the U.S. for the otherwise racially unclassified.[57] Though the dominion of race within the progressive consensus conception of difference does not, on its own, displace other categories of distinction like gender, sexuality, or class, the progressive consensus has worked to ensure that they are additionally indexed *by* race. This move draws from Kimberlé Crenshaw's paradigm on intersectionality, which has gained traction across political, academic, and activist discourses albeit in ways that do not always correspond with, and in fact frequently misconstrue, Crenshaw's original intent.[58]

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[56] Desirée H. Melton, "The Vulnerable Self: Enabling the Recognition of Racial Inequality," in *Feminist Ethics and Social and Political Philosophy: Theorizing the Non-Ideal*, ed. L Tessman (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009): 149-164, 150.

[57] Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*.106-108.

[58] Some self-identified leftist opponents of intersectional feminism accuse it creating a "caste system" of oppression wherein "power and privilege are profane." For an example see Bari Weiss, "I'm Glad the

Locating the progressive consensus in this time period (roughly between 2015-2019) should not lead one to believe that cross-racial resistance is a recent phenomenon. Indeed, the *consensus* of the progressive consensus implies its mainstreaming, where race and racialization are deemed legible in and of themselves because the broader system of secularity and its attendant institutions of white supremacy and patriarchy have swelled to accommodate it. Race and racialization are contained and made containable as their demands to be seen and placed in positions of leadership do not require institutional abolition or even significant reform.[59] The utilitarian grip of this regime can sustain the cosmetic changes the mainstreamed progressive consensus asks of it.

I must also note here that the progressive consensus I have proposed is not a clear overlay across the American public.[60] Many quadrants of society remain overtly hostile to raced and racialized peoples, gender justice, and queer rights. Part of that hostility can also be attributed to the regulatory power of this consensus, however, which continues to grow into a form of

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Dyke March Banned Jewish Stars," *The New York Times*, June 27, 2017, sec. Opinion, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/27/opinion/im-glad-the-dyke-march-banned-jewish-stars.html; For Crenshaw's original conceptualization, see Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (1989): 139-167, 140-143.

[59] A final reiteration for my readers that the progressive consensus speaks to a moment in time that has passed; the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 and the pulpit that these solidarities and movement have given to notions of prison and police abolition (as institutional homes of white supremacy) demonstrate that while they are still considered "radical" and "fringe" proposals, the needle of mainstreamed public opinion has nevertheless shifted in their direction.

[60] Jasbir Puar provides a similar caveat in *Terrorist Assemblages*, where she writes: "To aver that some or certain homosexual bodies signify homonormative nationalism – homonationalism – is in no way intended to deny, diminish, or disavow the daily violences of discrimination, physical and sexual assault, familial ostracism, economic disadvantage, and lack of social and legal legitimacy that sexual others must regularly endure; in short, most queers, whether as subjects or populations, still hover amid regimes of deferred or outright death." See Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, 10.

"progressive" political hegemony across multiple social institutions ranging from state infrastructures to corporations to university systems to entertainment studios.

This modality of difference overlaps with the hegemony of secular exception that, by upholding multicultural diversity, equality, and freedom of speech as universally applicable, still manages to exploit and subjugate the very subjects in whose name the progressive consensus aligns. Islam has found a subjective legibility since being subsumed within this categorical understanding, whereby at any given moment, the Muslim can be "seen" as Brown or Desi, accounting for the ways that these comics articulated and presented themselves. In many ways, the progressive consensus inches back towards what Koshy has called "parallel" minoritization over "stratified" minoritization; a prominent organizing strategy of the 1960s among Asian American activists focused so stringently on opposition to white supremacy that the positionality differences among non-white minoritized peoples were undertheorized and even unattended.

The utility of racializing Muslims follows an analogous rationality. The process of racialization opens up rhetorical room to identify as a *racialized* Muslim in order to register resistance to a hegemonic secular order that draws from a similarly unmarked (thus racially white) Protestantism. This progressive consensus affirms grander teleologies of progress and the "valorization of life" as the United States moves towards its eventual demography of destiny: an increasingly "diverse" populace in which white Americans no longer retain their status as the majority racial group.[61] This browning of America means the secular values of multicultural diversity are simultaneously national values, recognizing race as a difference worth celebrating while providing annotation of the otherwise egregious lies and hypocrisies that white supremacy

[61] Rey Chow, *The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 9-10.

has born. The consensus is thus very much a protected product of the secular, but still continues to be buoyed by social justice efforts and academic literature on racialization in an effort to combat the immediacy and prevalence of anti-Muslim hostilities across the country.

Conclusion

To demand legibility not as racial subject but religious ones would otherwise return us to the dynamics laid out by the exclusively "Muslim problem" vis-à-vis its opposition to the secular order and its attendant norms. As a religious subject, the Muslim occupies a place of unique againstness, facing down the secular sentinel alone and without solidarity. Again, this is not to say that coming off as a racialized subject exempts one from registering as a problem against the broader social order; it is simply ceases to be an isolated venture. In the following chapter, I demonstrate ways that this consensus disciplines its subjects through regular embodied and vocalized demonstrations of loyalty to its secular standards of liberalism, democracy, free speech, freedom, and choice.

CHAPTER 4: THE PROGRESSIVE CONSENSUS IN ACTION, ENACTION

As I write, highly civilized human beings are flying overhead, trying to kill me.

- George Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn*[62]

Introduction

The progressive consensus I propose in the previous chapter was symptomatic of the popular culture landscape in the United States between the years 2015 and 2019. This moment is facilitated by the hyperconnectivity between social justice activism and celebrity and further fomented by the added number of publicly available platforms from which one's position on these topics are assessed. In this chapter, I chart the changes in how Aziz Ansari, Hasan Minhaj, and Kumail Nanjiani refer to their Muslimness as the progressive consensus grows in its own authority. I also provide specific examples of the ways that the consensus sanctions and manifests as a profession of fidelity in the comedy routines and the conception of that comedy by these men. These professions not only enable future vocational opportunities and platforms for these men, they reinscribe the authority of the secular by racializing religion into a legible category of identification as well as enabling but also restraining the types of acceptable political comedy these men can perform. I describe how those theoretical limitations extend to common conceptions of religion in American public life, and how they ultimately do a disservice to beliefs and practices of Islam that are not captured by racialized sociality, particularly for Black Muslims. How can one account for an Islam outside this schema? Can we conceive of humor –

[62] George Orwell, *My Country Right or Left (1940-1943)* (New York: HBJ Book, 1971), 56.

of joy, of affective pleasure – in ways that are not beholden to the strictures that secularism demands of its nonnormative subjects and constitute a form of resistance to it? I conclude with the possibilities that Muslim humor is both bound by, and resistant to, the disciplinary gaze of secularism and its institutions.

Islam Makes Its Appearance

Prior to this period, Ansari, Minhaj, and Nanjiani tended towards quieting their Muslim affiliation, though not all in the same way and to the same extent. As described in Chapter 2, Ansari's early public persona and comedy content did not address his Muslim background at all. His Indianness makes peripheral appearances, mostly in reference to his family members ("I'm from South Carolina, but my parents are from India," or referring to Tamil as "this obscure, southeast Asian language that we [him and the British Sri Lankan rapper M.I.A.] both *happen* to speak").[1] Up until 2015, most of his routines spoke to observations and mundanities he had experienced personally, like frustrations with untruthful thread-count claims among various bedsheet brands, using his Blackberry while driving, and recounting his capers with musician Kanye West. Once introduced, the political flavor of his comedy continued to remain mild. A recurring topic, homophobia and gay marriage, is attended to not for its controversy, but as the setup for an absurdist antic:

> I was walking down the street once, and this guy came up to me with a clipboard. He goes, "Hey, man. Do you have a moment for gay rights?" and I went, "Sorry, man. I'm in a little bit of a rush," and then that dude watched me walk into a Jamba Juice. And he was a little upset. He was like, "Really, man? You're in a rush to get to Jamba Juice? I'm out here trying to make a difference." and I was like, "Well, actually, man, there's a guy that works in that Jamba Juice that said some really hateful stuff about a close gay friend of mine and I'm going in there to stab him." Then I pulled out two knives and I tossed him one. I was like, "Do you have a moment for gay rights? Oh, didn't think so. So sit there

[1] Aziz Ansari and Jason Woliner, *Intimate Moments for a Sensual Evening* (Comedy Central, 2010).

> with your little clipboard and judge me. I kill for gay people. I make a difference. You don't do shit!"[2]

A political turn that would account for Islam, however, took a bit longer. In fact, the first public acknowledgment of his American Muslim-ness appeared in a 2016 editorial for the *New York Times*, written in response to the increasing viability of then-candidate Donald Trump's presidential campaign. The letter read:

> Being Muslim American already carries a decent amount of baggage. In our culture, when people think "Muslim," the picture in their heads is not usually of the Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar or the kid who left the boy band One Direction. It's of a scary terrorist character from "Homeland" or some monster from the news… Since 9/11, there have been 49 mass shootings in this country, and more than half of those were perpetrated by white males. I doubt we'll hear Mr. Trump make a speech asking his fellow white males to tell authorities "who the bad ones are," or call for restricting white males' freedoms. One way to decrease the risk of terrorism is clear: Keep military-grade weaponry out of the hands of mentally unstable people, those with a history of violence, and those on F.B.I. watch lists. But, despite sit-ins and filibusters, our lawmakers are failing us on this front and choose instead to side with the National Rifle Association. Suspected terrorists can buy assault rifles, but we're still carrying tiny bottles of shampoo to the airport. If we're going to use the "they'll just find another way" argument, let's use that to let us keep our shoes on.[3]

Though this is an example of Ansari speaking "outside of work hours," he is still a funny Muslim, and his public statements maintain a signature jocularity even when addressing a topic he deems deeply personal. Here, Ansari's acknowledgement of his Muslimness is thoroughly imbricated in the anti-Muslim hostility he and his family have experienced. Yet this acknowledgement does not stand alone; it is linked to the frequency of mass shooting in the US and calling out politicians that have waffled on the introduction and passage of legislation for stricter gun laws. His self-identification is endorsed by the standard progressive establishment talking point on gun restrictions. There is a cover of marginality that has made room for Ansari

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[2] Ansari and Woliner, *Intimate Moments for a Sensual Evening*.

[3] Aziz Ansari, "Why Trump Makes Me Scared for My Family," *New York Times*, June 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/26/opinion/sunday/aziz-ansari-why-trump-makes-me-scared-for-my-family.html.

as a Muslim - a minority who experiences racism more than anti-Muslim hostility – within this progressive corner of America's secular politics.

Hasan Minhaj's comedy prior to 2017 was more forthcoming on the intersection of race, culture, and politics than Ansari's. But even here, Islam is not frequently named as part of his own identity until he joins the *Daily Show.* He is also a member of a sketch comedy troupe, Goatface, which is comprised of all South/West Asian American Muslim men, though their jokes surround being "Brown." In one sketch titled "Indian Spiderman," uploaded to YouTube in 2012, Minhaj stars as a version of Peter Parker who does not manage to sneak out of his window to fight crime because he is constantly being summoned by his parents about taking the LSAT, berated for leaving the window open while the air-conditioning runs, and is pointedly compared to the city-destroying Doctor Octopus who at least "is a doctor."[4] Minhaj's Muslim identity takes centerstage during his time at the *Daily Show*, where he auditioned with a monologue titled "Batman vs. Bill Maher," discussing an episode of the HBO television show *Real Time with Bill Maher*. In this episode, actor Ben Affleck called Sam Harris and Maher's observations about Islam "racist" and "gross" after the two contended that "not all religions are alike" as Islam alone is "the only religion that acts like the mafia that will fucking kill you if you say the wrong thing, draw the wrong picture, or write the wrong book."[5]

The premise of his hiring was with reference to his Muslim background, and it sanctioned many of the news pieces he helmed moving forward with the network. Minhaj would often join Stewart and later host Trevor Noah at the main desk as the "senior religious correspondent"

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[4] Aristotle Athiras, *Indian Spider-Man*, Goatface Comedy (YouTube, 2012), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wW6okVZuN-k.

[5] *Ben Affleck, Sam Harris and Bill Maher Debate Radical Islam*, Real Time with Bill Maher (HBO, 2014), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vln9D81eO60.

(though of course, Minhaj is not asked to report on any religious tradition other than Islam) to review news stories ranging from the welcoming of Syrian refugees into Canada, to the history behind the Muslim ban, to the growing frequency of Muslims getting kicked off of airplanes. "We're crafty, Jon," he says straight into the camera for that final segment. "Anything on a plane is a weapon to a Muslim. The corner of a Dorito chip can slice a neck! You think that seat cushion is a flotation device? You are wrong! That is a smothering pillow. You see a Sky Mall? I see a papercut katana."[6]

As described in his biography, Kumail Nanjiani did not address his Muslim background when initially setting out in the comedy world. While it may have been a consideration, Nanjiani told NPR's Ann Marie Baldonado that "there were all these comedians who were sort of talking about being Muslim or being brown and I just felt like ... so many of them were exploring the same territory… for better or worse, I decided I would not talk about that stuff at all."[7] For about a decade his comedy avoided the topic of his religious and ethnic heritage, but in 2009, a one person show he wrote, titled *Unpronounceable*, centered on solely that. "I made a very specific decision to write one show that was going to be very, very personal, that was going to be very different than anything I had done, that was going to be one story," though it focused primarily on his journey towards the decision to no longer call himself Muslim.[8]

The show premiered in Chicago and went on the road to California and New York, where it was billed as providing "the kind of realization most Westerners are never in a position to

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[6] *Minhaj's Muslim Makeover*, The Daily Show (The Daily Show, 2015), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hSTywVwZCjw&t=317s.

[7] Baldonado, "For Comedian Kumail Nanjiani, Getting Personal Is Complicated."

[8] Baldonado.

experience. *Unpronounceable* will teach you a thing or two about Islam and Pakistani culture; it will also make you appreciate the ideological freedoms New Yorkers take for granted."[9] And while *Unpronounceable* enabled him to quit his second job and concentrate on comedy, Nanjiani slowly softens over time with respect to his Muslim identity, consenting to the label in ways that Ansari still remains hesitant and Minhaj openly welcomes. In an appearance on the talk show *Chelsea* in 2017, Nanjiani laments that Muslims *like him* aren't more visible: "Why do we only think of Muslims on the news when we think of Muslims? Look at me, I'm Muslim, I'm cool! Right?"[10]

Political, But Not Too Political

Even under the shared cover of marginality conferred by way of racialization, the forms of recognition that Minhaj, Nanjiani, and Ansari seek and receive in their humor rely heavily on an adherence to secular regimes of humor. This recognition continues to make limited political inquiries concerning Islam that mainstreamed liberal politics have already adopted. In most cases, the demand does not venture afield from asking for more opportunities for positive visibility or denouncing low-stakes controversies. The three produce jokes that uphold the progressive consensus and are rewarded for it, as demonstrated not just by the jokes they have written but the platforms on which they are performed. During the 2018 Oscars ceremony, the same year he was nominated for an Academy Award, Nanjiani appeared in a video tribute to the #TimesUp/#MeToo movement and a push for more diverse representation of filmmakers, actors,

[9] "UNPRONOUNCEABLE in Time Out NY," Upright Citizens Brigade Comedy, accessed April 1, 2020, https://ucbcomedy.com/media/6030.

[10] *Kumail Nanjiani Explains Pakistani Culture (Full Interview) | Chelsea | Netflix*, accessed March 17, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T_EOB2KE_ys&t=80.

and the stories that end up on screen. “Some of my favorite movies are movies by straight white dudes, about straight white dudes,” he says. “Now, straight white dudes can watch movies starring me and you can relate to that. It’s not that hard. I’ve done it my whole life.”[11] In his early-career comedy special *Beta Male*, Nanjiani relates the experience of being heckled and jeered at as “Kumar” a la the movie *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle,* long the only prominent Indian protagonist in a Hollywood film. In response, Nanjiani said “I want to be so famous that *I’m* the pop-culture reference that people would make to try and be racist to *me*. So I’d be walking down the street and someone would be, like, ‘Hey, look at *this* Kumail Nanjiani. Oh, fuck, that *is* Kumail Nanjiani!’”[12]

The politics that Nanjiani establishes in each bit are separated by at least five years (the Kumar joke had been a part of his repertoire for several years prior). Each are playful and the politics inherent to both are blunted. There is little critique in the commentary he offers beyond an absurdist role reversal and a good-natured call for increased representation. While he does not extricate himself from his comedy, Nanjiani told an audience at the 2017 Sundance Film Festival that he is aware of his representational capacity but is not aiming to rock the boat. ”I don’t go, ‘It is now time to change Americans’ perception of Muslims.’ It’s going to be a long day. I think you just try to be unique and try to be yourself, and if something good comes of that then great.”[13]

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[11] Hollywood Reporter, “#TimesUp: Ashley Judd, Annabella Sciorra, & Salma Hayek Take the Stage at the Oscars,” Twitter, March 4, 2018, https://twitter.com/THR/status/970503132592533504.

[12] Kumail Nanjiani, *Beta Male* (Comedy Central, 2013), http://www.cc.com/episodes/d2pis0/stand-up-specials-kumail-nanjiani–beta-male-season-1-ep-101.

[13] Marantz, “Kumail Nanjiani’s Culture-Clash Comedy,” May 2017.

Ansari, too, is not interested in occupying the position of provocateur. His 2017 SNL monologue quoted earlier continues with the following:

> Is that the plan, by the way? We're all going to move? All the minorities? Forty-some percent of the country? Every minority's going to move? Beyoncé's going to move? Beyoncé ain't moving. I ain't moving, O.K.? My parents… moved from India to South Carolina in the early '80s. They didn't move until nine years ago. You know where they moved? North Carolina. They love it here. They're not leaving.[14]

Ansari draws attention to a racialized dimension of difference that is read off his body. Brown/Indian/Muslim – the complex confluence of what he *is* is less important than what he reads as, and what he reads as is simple: he is foreign and minoritized, a threat against the American citizenry within a white supremacist imaginary. This is the same position, he reasons, as Beyoncé and other racial minorities. But while Ansari may recognize the presence and pervasive operation of that white supremacist imaginary, his solution lacks precision or any insurgent jab that legitimizes Muslims outside of their racial respectability: just treat everyone with respect, he says, and remember that "we are all Americans."[15] This minimization of the racism endemic within the larger movement that elected Trump ends on a comforting note, with Ansari recalling the mollifying speeches by George W. Bush utilized about Islam in the wake of 9/11. The irony of this is not lost on him as he asks bewilderingly: "What the hell has happened? I'm sitting here wistfully watching old George W. Bush speeches?"[16]

The SNL monologue was a smash. The internet was flush with commentary the next morning, calling his performance a "blistering attack," "excellent," "epic," and "scorching."[17]

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[14] Ansari, "Aziz Ansari Saturday Night Live Monologue."

[15] Ansari, "Aziz Ansari Saturday Night Live Monologue."

[16] Ansari, "Aziz Ansari Saturday Night Live Monologue."

[17] Mother Jones New York Bureau, "Aziz Ansari Just Hit Donald Trump Hard in an Epic Saturday Night Live Monologue," *Mother Jones* (blog), accessed March 24, 2020, https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2017/01/aziz-ansari-just-hit-donald-trump-hard-epic-saturday-

The tone was just right for Jay Willis of *GQ Magazine* as well, who wrote in an article titled "Aziz Ansari Helps *Saturday Night Live* Finally Get Its Coverage of Donald Trump Right" that Ansari's remarks were competent and considerate. "Ansari didn't drag or slam or savage President Trump, but instead spoke passionately and eloquently about what comes next for Americans," Willis asserts. "There was no punchline, really - it was a genuine plea for a gesture that, if it were to happen, might actually make a difference."[18] Chris Rock, a long-time mentor to Ansari, later revealed that he had pushed him to foreground Trump, anti-Muslim hostility, and racism in his set. "He was running his set by me and he was going to do all this relationship stuff and I was like, 'Dude, you're insane. You can't be on Saturday Night Live the day after the inauguration and talk about getting a girlfriend. Tonight, you gotta be George Carlin. You gotta be political.'"[19]

After being "voluntold" in this fashion, Ansari took Rock's comments to heart and rehearsed the set over 100 times in the month before his appearance. It remains, to date, the most Muslim of his material and the furthest departure from his customary stomping grounds. Just a few months later in 2017, Ansari admits in a *GQ* cover story interview to deleting the internet browser, email, and all social media off his phone except text messaging. The decision to unplug

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night-live-monologue/; Adam Rosenberg, "Aziz Ansari's 'SNL' Monologue Is a Blistering Attack on the 'Lowercase Kkk,'" Mashable, accessed March 24, 2020, https://mashable.com/2017/01/22/aziz-ansari-saturday-night-live-monologue/; Jen Chung, "Aziz Ansari's Excellent SNL Monologue Addresses New Trump Order," Gothamist, January 22, 2017, https://gothamist.com/arts-entertainment/aziz-ansaris-excellent-snl-monologue-addresses-new-trump-order; Joanna Robinson, "Watch S.N.L. Host Aziz Ansari Deliver Scorching Anti-Racist Monologue," Vanity Fair, accessed March 24, 2020, https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/01/aziz-ansari-monologue-saturday-night-live-racist-lowercase-kkk-donald-trump.

[18] Jay Willis, "Aziz Ansari Helps 'Saturday Night Live' Finally Get Its Coverage of Donald Trump Right," GQ Magazine, accessed March 24, 2020, https://www.gq.com/story/aziz-ansari-snl-monologue.

[19] Yuan, "Chris Rock on Becoming Aziz Ansari's Mentor."

came from the realization that the world's politics mostly did not affect his life: "If you take yourself out of it, you're not infected with this toxicity all the time," he tells Mark Anthony Green. "Also, guess what? Everything is fine! I'm not out of the loop on anything. Like, if something real is going down, I'll find out about it."[20] This is reflected in the material he writes for his acts as well. Most attempts at political material exhaust him, he says. "Because it's like, when you read the news all the time it just kind of puts you in a negative mood. I don't know… that's just such a bummer."[21]

That is not to say that Ansari does not engage political issues in his comedy after the SNL monologue in January 2017. The politics he engages, however, are scaffolding politics. While they do not directly speak to the "news of the day," they are an attempt to position himself in the political moment of progressive consensus. Ansari's much accoladed Netflix show, *Master of None,* stars a semi-autobiographical version of himself. Throughout the various press junkets he took part in, Ansari was particularly proud of the precision that went into casting each part in his show.[22] His protagonist, Dev Shah, begins the first season as a young, down-on-his-luck actor living in New York. Dev's parents (played by Ansari's real life parents Shoukath and Fatima) are named Ramesh and Nisha. All three characters are also shown to speak Tamil, which makes the

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[20] Mark Anthony Green, "Aziz Ansari on Quitting the Internet, Loneliness, and Season 3 of Master of None," *GQ*, August 2, 2017, https://www.gq.com/story/aziz-ansari-gq-style-cover-story/amp.

[21] Ellen E. Jones, "Aziz Ansari: 'I Try to Write Political Material … Then Get Tired of It,'" *The Guardian*, May 27, 2017, sec. Culture, https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2017/may/27/aziz-ansari-interview-master-of-none.

[22] In an interview on NPR's Fresh Air, Ansari describes the long search for actors that could capture his parents' essence and ultimately being disappointed: "We auditioned a few people for these parts of my parents. And when they read, they just didn't feel like my parents. They didn't feel - it felt like people doing impressions of Indian people." See Terry Gross, "Ansari And Yang Explore The First-Generation Experience In 'Master Of None,'" *Fresh Air* (NPR, December 31, 2015), https://www.npr.org/2015/12/31/461502018/ansari-and-yang-explore-the-first-generation-experience-in-master-of-none.

choice of these characters' names all the more curious. "Dev," "Ramesh," and "Shah" would be found more frequently among the populations of northern India, not Kerala where Ansari's parents lived prior to the United States and where he continues to visit extended family members when he returns to India.

This was a frequent enough critique from South Asian viewers that Ansari took to Twitter to address it twice. "RT. Wait. @azizansari is an Indian named Dev Shah with a Tamil father from thirunalveli in Master of None? What am I missing?" asked the user Vivek Shanmugam.[23] "Haha, I just liked the named [sic] Dev. Don't tell white viewers plz. Season 2 his name will be changed to Vivek Shanmugam."[24] Two days later, he posted a version of the same: "@sri__ram I just liked the name but Dev, but you are right it doesn't quite make sense. Don't tell the non-Indians about this plz."[25] Without delving into a debate on what constitutes a "Muslim" name and the hegemony of Arabic over Muslim authenticity, suffice it to say that Ansari's desire to offer a "genuine" take on his life's experiences draws more from a well of generalized identification with "Indianness" (and its hegemonic overlapping with Sanskrit-derived etymologies) than the specific normativities that come with being an Indian Muslim (and the commonplace tendencies towards the use of Arabic language first and surnames).

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[23] Vivek Shanmugam, "Vivek Shanmugam on Twitter: 'RT. Wait. @azizansari Is an Indian Named Dev Shah with a Tamil Father from Thirunalveli in Master of None? What Am I Missing?' / Twitter," *Twitter*, November 8, 2015, https://twitter.com/rvivekshanmugam/status/663501144090681344.

[24] Aziz Ansari, "Aziz Ansari on Twitter: '@rvivekshanmugam Haha, I Just Liked the Named Dev. Don't Tell White Viewers Plz. Season 2 His Name Will Be Changed to Vivek Shanmugam.' / Twitter," *Twitter*, November 8, 2015, https://twitter.com/azizansari/status/663501647654617088.

[25] Aziz Ansari, "'@sri__ram I Just Liked the Name but Dev, but You Are Right It Doesn't Quite Make Sense. Don't Tell the Non-Indians about This Plz' / Twitter," *Twitter*, November 6, 2015, https://twitter.com/azizansari/status/662816015554912256.

Islam does make an overt appearance in *Master of None*, however, in a second season episode titled "Religion." It opens with a montage of different children being dragged to religious services – to a Russian orthodox church, a synagogue, a mandir, and Scientology temple. A young Dev sits next to a friend about to eat breakfast, a sizzling plate of bacon and eggs. Dev's mother calls him at that moment, chastising her son and ordering him home for nearly eating pork when "we are Muslims!"[26] The camera slows down the scene as young Dev deliberates, and then chooses to ignore his mother by biting down, savoring the mouthful as Tupac raps "Only God Can Judge Me" over the scene. The main plotline involves the adult Dev's struggles with telling his parents that he does not follow customary Muslim prescriptions in his personal life like prayer and abstaining from alcohol.

This difficulty is most exemplified by his love for pork. Hiding the fixation makes for much of the episode's situational comedy through Dev's furtive attempts at concealing food, to convincing his cousin to forgo fasting and instead attend a barbeque festival, to an explosive public confession at a Chinese restaurant. "I'm actually not joking," he exclaims in the episode's heroic final moments. "I'm not that religious, and I eat pork. But it's okay 'cause I'm a good person, and I'm 33 years old, and I can make those decisions. I can eat what I want, and I want to eat the crispy pork with the broccoli!" Ansari's agency is the touchstone of the episodic arc, where Ansari goes from making his own decisions in private to doing so publicly. This sense of "being true" to oneself is juxtaposed with jokes about his parents' own hypocritical desire to appear more participatory in Muslim practices than they normally are. Ansari offers simultaneously conscious and unconscious strictures on what public space a Muslim can occupy in *Master of None*. The limited discernability of Muslimness – in name, appearance, and practice

[26] Aziz Ansari and Alan Yang, "Religion," *Master of None* (Netflix, 2015).

– makes for an ideal secular subject that affiliates with Islam by way of racial similarity alone. That Muslim upholds the principle of freely-assented choice and lives this principle without dissonance in public and private life. His interest in politics does not make any demands of the system he benefits from, and in fact, he is uninterested and "tired" by the pursuit of its reform. This is an "authentic" secular Muslim, one who doesn't even have to try to "become" secular but simply is.

Minhaj, meanwhile, has considerably ratcheted up the political depths of his comedy since his early days of standup. While the seasons of *Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj* released in 2019 have taken on increasingly controversial topics like the Indian election, America's policing system, and billionaire "philanthropy," Minhaj's standup routines, White House Correspondents' Association (WHCA) Dinner performance, and *Homecoming King* all coil around the possibilities inherent to the American Dream. In 2017, Minhaj repeatedly returns to his avowedly overwhelming sense of gratitude for the exceptional American investment in principles like freedom, equality, and a leveled playing field that gives his gumption room to roam. "Do you feel fortunate that right now there is such a hunger for the kind of identity-politics-infused comedy that you bring?" asked the *New York Times* reporter Susan Dominus shortly after the release of *Homecoming King*. "Or would you prefer to be sort of liberated from the subject matter altogether?" Minhaj was ready with a deferent response. "What I love about comedy is that we're this group of weirdos, and the only language that matters is 'Are you funny?' And it really is this oddly cool American idea where comedy's the marketplace of ideas. May the best idea win."[27]

[27] Susan Dominus, "Hasan Minhaj Thinks Comedy Is for Weirdos," *The New York Times*, June 21, 2017, sec. Magazine, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/21/magazine/hasan-minhaj-thinks-comedy-is-for-weirdos.html.

This gratitude is also professed as the culminating sentiment of his otherwise sarcastic monologue for the WHCA, where Minhaj returned to the night's theme and paid tribute.

> This event is about celebrating the First Amendment and free speech. Free speech is the foundation of an open and liberal democracy, from college campuses to the White House. Only in America can a first-generation, Indian American Muslim kid get on the stage and make fun of the president. [*applause*] The orange man behind the Muslim ban. And it's a sign to the rest of the world. It's this amazing tradition that shows the entire world that even the president is not beyond the reach of the First Amendment.[28]

That this gratitude is not recognized produces ancillary sentiments of wariness, but not outright anger. Minhaj described such wariness as an experience that he and his family share in a heartfelt segment of *Homecoming King*.

> I know 9/11 is a super touchy subject. I understand. Because when it happened, everyone in America felt like their country was under attack. But on that night, September 12th, it was the first night of so many nights where my family's loyalty to this country was under attack. And it always sucks. As immigrants we always have to put on these press releases to prove our patriotism. We're auditioning. We love this country, please believe me. Nobody loves this country more than us.[29]

In both instances, Minhaj's commentary homes in on the frustration that his sincerity about the U.S. is seemingly always under suspicion. The content of such remarks are earnest, but they are performed as a punctuated grandstand, written to evoke his American audience's applause, which he gets in each instance. "Only in America can a first-generation, Indian American Muslim kid get on the stage and make fun of the president," Minhaj says as the CSPAN camera pans to one of the few Republicans in attendance that year, congressman Darrell Issa, who turned to the man next to him and can be seen sternly, yet proudly, conceding that "Yes, he can."[30] For Nanjiani, Ansari, and Minhaj, their punch-lines force their viewers into a moment of political

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[28] Minhaj, *Hasan Minhaj COMPLETE REMARKS at 2017 White House Correspondents' Dinner*.

[29] Minhaj and Storer, *Homecoming King*.

[30] Minhaj, *Hasan Minhaj COMPLETE REMARKS at 2017 White House Correspondents' Dinner*.

confrontation, but do not allow those confrontations to dangle in isolation. The joke's tension release comes in the form of a warm confession – an honest glimpse in an otherwise prepped and plated performance – that elicits not laughter, but righteous avowal. They are moments that "feel good," an affective response I will return to at the end of this chapter.

The Limits of Racialization and the Progressive Consensus

While the presence of Islam and other Muslims have now become commonplace in the comedic endeavors produced by Minhaj, Ansari, and Nanjiani, the progressive consensus that authorizes that presence ultimately constrains how we understand religion as a social category and enact efforts against anti-Muslim hostility and racism. While "Islam" may corporeally adhere to the racialized body, its stickiness adheres to brown-skinned bodies over white ones and doubly compounds on Black bodies in an overdetermination of racial subjectivity. Brown bodies – be they South Asian, Arab, Latinx – typify a perceived ethos of Islam that slips interchangeably with terrorist. In the words of Kumarini Silva, they are a "metaphorical" Brown that appears deviant and threatening to the social conventions of securitized secular nationalism in the U.S.[31] Within the ruling Black/white racial binary in the U.S., differently browned bodies are thus browned into a pseudo-Muslim particularity.

Over the last several years, the growing alarm over Latinx migration into the United States does not threaten the white American citizenry on its own, it does so as part of a Browned/Muslim massification: right-wing populist screeds parallel one another through a trans-Atlantic looking glass. In Germany, open agitation against the "annihilation of the German

[31] Kumarini Silva, *Brown Threat: Identification in the Security State* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 11-13.

people," "repopulation," and the "the great exchange" finds a home in the increasingly powerful opposition Alternative für Deutschland Party's slogan "We are the People."[32] In the United States, the dog whistles are even more explicit. "Make America Great Again" adorn the caps of the American president's elated supporters as he tweets not just that "the U.S. is ill-prepared for this invasion, and will not stand for it" but also that "'We've found prayer rugs out here. It's unreal.'… People coming across the Southern Border from many countries, some of which would be a big surprise."[33]

At the same time, Black Muslim subjects find themselves overdetermined as Black first and only. This can be seen in the ways that the Nation of Islam continues to be discussed in prominent reference materials as primarily as an "African American movement" and secondarily as "combining elements of traditional Islam with black nationalist ideas."[34] It is also why the comedian Dave Chapelle, as discussed in chapter 2, is read as a Black comedian even when discussing his Muslim faith and his decision to attempt hajj, while a South Asian American/Brown comedian like Aziz Ansari will bristle at the thought of representing Islam but is still pointed to as "a model Muslim-American" in media interviews and pop culture colloquy.[35]

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[32] Titus Molkenbur and Luke Cooper, "We the People? Dangers and Lessons for Europe on the Rise of the AfD in Germany" (LSE Conflict and Civil Society Research Unit, Another Europe is Possible, Europe for the Many, n.d.).

[33] Donald J. Trump, "Donald J. Trump on Twitter: The Mayor of Tijuana, Mexico...," *Twitter* (blog), November 18, 2018, https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1064227483187318784; Donald J. Trump, "Donald J. Trump on Twitter: Border Rancher: "We've Found Prayer Rugs out Here...," *Twitter* (blog), January 18, 2018, https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1086252588088082432.

[34] J. Gordon Melton, "Elijah Muhammad, American Religious Leader," in *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., November 19, 2019), https://www.britannica.com/biography/Elijah-Muhammad.

[35] Christopher John Farley, "Dave Speaks," *Time*, May 14, 2005, http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1061512-2,00.html; Robinson, "On the Beach With

Kayla Wheeler aptly describes how the language of racialization seeks to move away from a Black/white binary, but in a U.S. context contributes unintentionally to further marginalization of Black people and Black Muslims specifically.[36] By conceptualizing anti-Muslim hostilities solely as anti-Muslim *racism*, the particularities of anti-*Black* racism, especially as it exists in other communities of color, are dispersed and flattened into the single, homogenized plane. The emphasis that the progressive consensus places on white supremacy as the primary social ill belies the realities that Black Muslims face from non-Muslims and other Muslims, as well, something I discuss in more depth in Chapter 5. The activist organization MuslimARC has worked this kind of awareness into their programming, developing toolkits on the Black Lives Matter movement and publishing papers that survey intra-Muslim ethnic relations across demographics in order to determine how issues of segregation and mosqued/unmosqued Muslims experience race within Muslim communities.[37]

MuslimARC co-founder Namira Islam notes, however, that activist groups similar to her organization – those that work on issues of Muslim community empowerment and representation – do not. She detects a disproportionate presence of South Asian and Arab activist voices which visually undergirds the public charge that the category of Muslim is and must be Brown.[38] Within Muslim communities, these exchanges further reinforce the invention of Black Muslim

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Dave Chappelle"; Jada Yuan, "Aziz Ansari Wanted to Be the Great Uniter and Ended Up an Activist," *New York Magazine*, May 1, 2017.

[36] Kayla Renée Wheeler, "On Centering Black Muslim Women in Critical Race Theory," *The Maydan, Sapelo Square* (blog), February 5, 2020, https://themaydan.com/2020/02/on-centering-black-muslim-women-in-critical-race-theory/.

[37] "Services," Muslim Anti-Racism Collaborative, accessed June 3, 2020, http://www.muslimarc.org/services.

[38] Namira Islam, "Soft Islamophobia," *Religions* 9, no. 9 (September 2018): 1-16, 1-2.

externality. “The effect of using Muslim as a cultural identity includes reifying South Asian and Arab hegemony in Muslim discourses,” says MuslimARC co-founder and Managing Director Margari Hill, “[T]he cultural category has resulted in the exclusion of Black Muslims in the discussion of Muslim civil liberties or the effects of Islamophobia.”[39] Though it may seem strange to speak of anyone as a beneficiary of an oppressive discourse, it is the Brown Muslim that emerges as so legible that they are emblematic of the category itself. On the pop culture stage, legitimized by the progressive consensus, figures like Ansari, Minhaj, and Nanjiani – Brown South Asian men – stand for Islam.

Rummaging Through the Remains

What, then, is Islam and who, then, is a Muslim if not just a racialized Brown subject? In this secular schema, Islam operates beyond private belief and a declaration of shahada – this alone would not foment social distress. It is not just a sticky corporeal construction either, for what then distinguishes Islam from race or ethnicity? Carl Ernst discerns a notable perplexity among the 8th and 9th century Arab conquerors when approached by their Syrian, Persian, and Egyptian subjects about conversion. “Many apparently considered that Islam was basically a religion for the Arabs, comparable to Judaism as an ethnically based faith. Conversion to Islam was initially only conceivable through the mechanism of adoption into Arab tribes.”[40] This type of early categorical fluidity, along with its ostensible overlap with ethnicity, ritual practice,

[39] Margari Aziza Hill, “What’s In a Name?: Using ‘Muslim’ As a Cultural Category Erases and Stereotypes,” *Margari Aziza* (blog), March 23, 2015, https://margariaziza.com/2015/03/23/whats-in-a-name-using-muslim-as-a-cultural-category-erases-and-stereotypes/.

[40] Carl W. Ernst, *Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World* (University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 120.

linguistics, and sartorial markers, meant religious affiliation was historically dependent on multiple authenticating factors.

Talal Asad's consequential "discursive tradition" situated the object of Islam as being primarily driven by Islamic practices in the present which are understand by practitioners to be within a longer lineage of an Islamic past and future.[41] These sensibilities and obligations are understood in relationship to other Muslim subjects with room for disagreement. Recognition of dynamic sociality, in combination with Shahab Ahmed's notion of a "coherent dynamic of internal contradiction," for me, fortifies a Muslim amalgam. Islam concurrently lives as a collection of experiences, a discursive tradition that comes together in recognition of each other despite the presence of outright contradiction, while also being embodied and felt by individuals that share in a Muslim sociality.[42]

Less critical than a grand conceptualization of Islam, however, is what work this Muslim amalgam does for us as an analytical category beyond "identity," as well as the ways that it is then staged for consumption in U.S. public square. In this location, the Muslim amalgam lives not as the hegemonic norm but as a hyper-detectable anxiety across the broader securitized state. Today in the U.S., the authenticating factors that make one appropriately Muslim under the secular state blend the racialized brown body with the political quietism of the progressive consensus and its ideal secular subject. The Aziz Ansaris, Hasan Minhajs, and Kumail Nanjianis of this world ascend thanks to their selection for more and more visible creative opportunities

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[41] Talal Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," *Qui Parle* 17, no. 2 (2015): 1–30, 20-21; Talal Asad, *Secular Translations: Nation-State, Modern Self, and Calculative Reason* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 92.

[42] Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 109.

that are underwritten by a constellation of obliging industry networks, each eager for the increasingly higher valuations they receive from association with an icon of multiculturalism. They are the type of Muslim worth upholding; a symbol of the institution's self-avowed ethics and a publicly tradeable good. But, as Simone De Beauvoir deftly reasons, the language of public goods or the "general interest" are what society simply wishes to maintain or establish.[43] Thus, when the HBO showrunner for *Silicon Valley* Alec Berg self-effacingly expresses that "it's such a luxury, when you're trying to write a character that feels grounded in reality, to be able to avoid drawing on stereotypes and instead just take Kumail out to lunch and say 'Tell me about your life,'" the inveterate joke about Dinesh Chugtai that emerges from such a secular regime of humor is still always at the expense of his foreignness: accent, a penchant for gold jewelry, and familial curses.[44]

If this is the outfit of the Muslim who fits, then what does this mean for the Muslim who does not? What happens to the Muslim who will not drink at "happy" hour, the Muslim woman for whom her hijab is not an aesthetic, the Muslim that does not think the joke is funny? What of the Muslim who is Black, whose affiliation with Islam offers what Youssef Carter calls "a unique form of marginalization," compounded by the anti-Blackness they must face from those who call themselves spiritual kin and those who would certainly not?[45] This Muslim chafes at the sides of the secular; she is an embodied resistance, subversive by virtue of her being. It would be easy, though circumspect, to merely read Ansari, Minhaj, and Nanjiani as her inverse; to read

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[43] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 16.

[44] Marantz, "Kumail Nanjiani's Culture-Clash Comedy," May 2017.

[45] Youssef Carter, "Critiquing Black Muslim Reason: What Good Is Critical Race Theory for Muslims?," *The Maydan, Sapelo Square* (blog), February 5, 2020, https://sapelosquare.com/2020/02/05/critiquing-black-muslim-reason-what-good-is-critical-race-theory-for-muslims/.

their racialization as gainful and disciplinary despite the limits of its implementation. Is there room to be more capacious in our reading of these men? Can we hold their co-optation in one hand and the possibility for some form of resistance and activism in another? Can both be true, and is there anything Muslim about it?

Affective Pleasure and the Order of Happiness

An answer lies in the affective dimension of humor and the pleasure and happiness it aims to produce. Sara Ahmed has described happiness as "a will, a wish, a want" in which the figure of the feminist openly struggles against and refutes the moral order of happiness.[46] She is seen as "bringing others down," getting "in the way," or creating a "tense" atmosphere by bringing up topics like misogyny, racism, or homophobia, and becomes seen herself as a negative encounter: a killjoy. This moral order is described as authorizing happiness when aligned with the correct object. Misalignment emerges when one does not experience happiness from the right things, things like marriage or mothering. "Feminists are read as being unhappy, such that situations of conflict, violence, and power are read as *about* the unhappiness of feminists, rather than being what feminists are unhappy *about*."[47]

Such a double burden – of not only misattributing the source of unhappiness away from the actual object and instead having that unhappiness attributed to you – is a distant concern for Nanjiani, Minhaj, and Ansari. Once more, they are beneficiaries of an otherwise prejudicial logic due to their presentation as cisgender men and their chosen professions. They are comedians that

[46] Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 2.

[47] Sara Ahmed, "Feminist Killjoys And Other Willful Subjects," *Polyphonic Feminisms: Acting in Concert* 8, no. 3 (Summer 2010), http://sfonline.barnard.edu/polyphonic/ahmed_01.htm#text1, 3.

address social problems including feminism, but they are not perceived as killers of joy but rather as bringers of it. The sore subject itself *is* the source of joy, built up through a joke's tense incline but then quickly released through laughter. The fast pace and lack of lingering on any given topic in a comedic routine additionally means the audience doesn't have to sit in a discomfiting murk for longer than it takes to set the joke up and serve its punchline.

Early in his *Beta Male* set, Kumail Nanjiani reflects on the first time he watched the horror film *Freddy vs. Jason*:

> There's a part where Freddy has to choose between killing a white girl and killing a Black girl, and Freddy says, "How sweet, dark meat!" Yeah! And there's a collective groan in the theater when I watched it. People were *disappointed* in *Freddy Krueger*. Like, we're okay with you murdering children with your needle gloves, but *racism*? You're making it very hard to cheer for you, *Freddy Krueger*. Now we want Jason to win. Mass-murdering monster, but he's no bigot![48]

This joke does several things in the span of the 75 seconds it takes to deliver it. Nanjiani voices himself, Freddy Krueger, and the offended moviegoers. As himself, Nanjiani communicates his own dismay in response to Krueger's "dark meat" pronouncement with a wide-eyed and disbelieving "yeah!" as his viewers laughs incredulously. Nanjiani establishes himself as on the "right" side of the issue before slipping into his personification of the affronted audience member, pouting smugly with narrowed, judgmental eyes. His exaggerated performance lampoons the absurdity of caring about racism in something ostensibly as fantastical as a horror movie – the furthest thing from real life. What this does on the backend, however, is diminish the very real and endemic racism written into scripts and found across writers' rooms to board rooms

[48] Nanjiani, *Beta Male*.

across Hollywood. Black characters in film are written as so peripheral to the main plot that they are dispensable, usually as the first to perish in the horror genre.[49]

At the same time, the brisk tempo of a comedy routine means that Nanjiani can speak of and name the presence of racism in American culture over and over, returning his audience to the topic and compelling their recognition of it over the course of each joke's ephemeral life. During his seven minute and thirty second monologue on Sat*urday Night Live*, Nanjiani obliges a captive, mostly white audience to consider anti-Muslim hostility and its victims from four different perspectives in rapid-fire succession: its recent resurgence, a fantasy scenario of saving someone who was racist towards him, whether Islam has anything to do with the ban on women driving, and the difficult misattribution of Islam to Sikhs.[50]

Hasan Minhaj's *Homecoming King* is set up in a similar fashion, where the frequent "cut to" jokes splice otherwise painful recollections of hate crimes after 9/11, the "collateral damage" of death among Black Americans, and the rejection he suffered at the hands of bigots "even as they were smiling at you."[51] Minhaj descends deeply into such affective wells, but the dives are made possible because of how quickly he re-emerges with a smile on his face and a joke at the ready. Observe the parabolic vault in the following:

> I wish I could tell 18-year-old me, "Hey, man, don't let this experience define you. It's good people and bad people. Irrespective of creed, class, color, find those people. Because love is bigger than fear." I wish I could tell him that. I really believe that. Fox News has taught me that. Fox News is incredible. I've never seen so many people with spray tans hate people of color. It is amazing. And Fox News is in New York. They're in New York. Daily Show, Fox News, five avenues away from each other. That's it. Professor X, Magneto, that close. Every day I walk past their building during lunch. I'll see all the employees, Hannity, Coulter, O'Reilly, leave their building, cross the street,

[49] Xavier Burgin, *Horror Noire: A History of Black Horror*, Documentary (Stage 3 Productions, 2019).

[50] Kumail Nanjiani, *Kumail Nanjiani Standup Monologue - Saturday Night Live* (New York: Saturday Night Live, 2017), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z2X0TaXknVE&feature=emb_logo.

[51] Minhaj and Storer, *Homecoming King*.

> walk past me, and line up for halal chicken and rice. I'm like, "Uh, Racist Randy wants that red sauce!" Your brain can be racist, but your body will just betray you. I love that so much. All morning, they're like, "Mexicans! All lives matter! Arabs... 12:01! Shawarma time!" I love that so much. And I wish I could tell 18-year-old me that, but I can't.[52]

It is worth reiterating how very gendered a privilege it is to pierce the moral order of happiness without the personal liability of killing joy. Hannah Gadsby's comedy special *Nanette* has a remarkably similar tenor and format to *Homecoming King*. A commentary on sexual trauma and self-preservation, Gadsby delivers clever high-wire jokes throughout her set, often at her own expense, amid a descent into her own debilitating history of damage and the damage that men inflict on her and other women. She takes aim at homophobes, hecklers, wife-beaters, Van Gogh, and Picasso, among others ("Picasso suffered the mental illness of misogyny. Split the room, didn't I?... Because if you hate what you desire, do you know what that is? Fucking tense! Sort your shit out!").[53] The story of *Nanette*, unlike Minhaj's *Homecoming King*, does not so cleanly abide by the dictates of the progressive consensus. Gadsby holds her genre to account – the supposedly liberal bastion of standup comedy where only funny matters – but concludes that, as an institution, it cannot be redeemed from its disciplinary grip.

> I don't feel very comfortable in it anymore. Over the past year, I've been questioning it, and reassessing… I built a career out of self-deprecating humor. That's what I've built my career on. And I don't want to do that anymore. Do you understand what self-deprecation means when it comes from somebody who already exists in the margins? It's not humility. It's humiliation. I put myself down in order to speak, in order to seek permission to speak. And I simply will not do that anymore. Not to myself or anybody who identifies with me.[54]

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[52] Minhaj and Storer, *Homecoming King*.

[53] Olb and Parry, *Hannah Gadsby: Nanette*.

[54] Olb and Parry, *Nanette*.

At the same time, Gadsby ends her show with an adamant refusal to indulge her anger despite fervently feeling it: "Anger is a tension. It is a toxic, infectious… And it knows no other purpose than to spread blind hatred, and I want no part of it."[55]

Minhaj, on the other hand, verbally relishes in his vehement investment in America and the American dream. "I actually have the audacity of equality. I'm like, 'I'm in Honors Gov, I have it right here. Life, liberty, pursuit of happiness. All men created equal.' It says it right here, I'm equal. I'm equal. I don't deserve this. [applause]"[56] These two specials premiered on Netflix a little more than a year apart. Both were awarded the prestigious Peabody Award for Entertainment. The A.V. Club, a popular entertainment review site, called Minhaj's special is "hilarious and spell-binding" (complete with pulled quotes of his best one-liners) while Gadsby's was said to "boil [sic] with real anger" into a "free fall."[57] Audience appraisals, below, were even more starkly dissonant.[58]

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[55] Olb and Parry, *Nanette*.

[56] Minhaj and Storer, *Homecoming King*.

[57] Dennis Perkins, "The Daily Show's Hasan Minhaj Crafts a Hilarious, Spellbinding Immigrant Story," *The A.V. Club* (blog), May 23, 2017, https://tv.avclub.com/the-daily-show-s-hasan-minhaj-crafts-a-hilarious-spell-1798191421; Laura M. Browning, "Catch up with Streaming Stand-up, from Nanette to The Comedy Lineup," *The A.V. Club* (blog), July 9, 2018, https://www.avclub.com/catch-up-with-streaming-stand-up-from-nanette-to-the-c-1827370392.

[58] Christopher Storer and Hasan Minhaj, *Hasan Minhaj: Homecoming King | Official Trailer [HD] | Netflix* (YouTube, 2017), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fu-u5VldxVY; Jon Olb and Madeleine Parry, *Hannah Gadsby: Nanette | Official Trailer [HD] | Netflix* (YouTube, 2018), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5aE29fiatQ0.

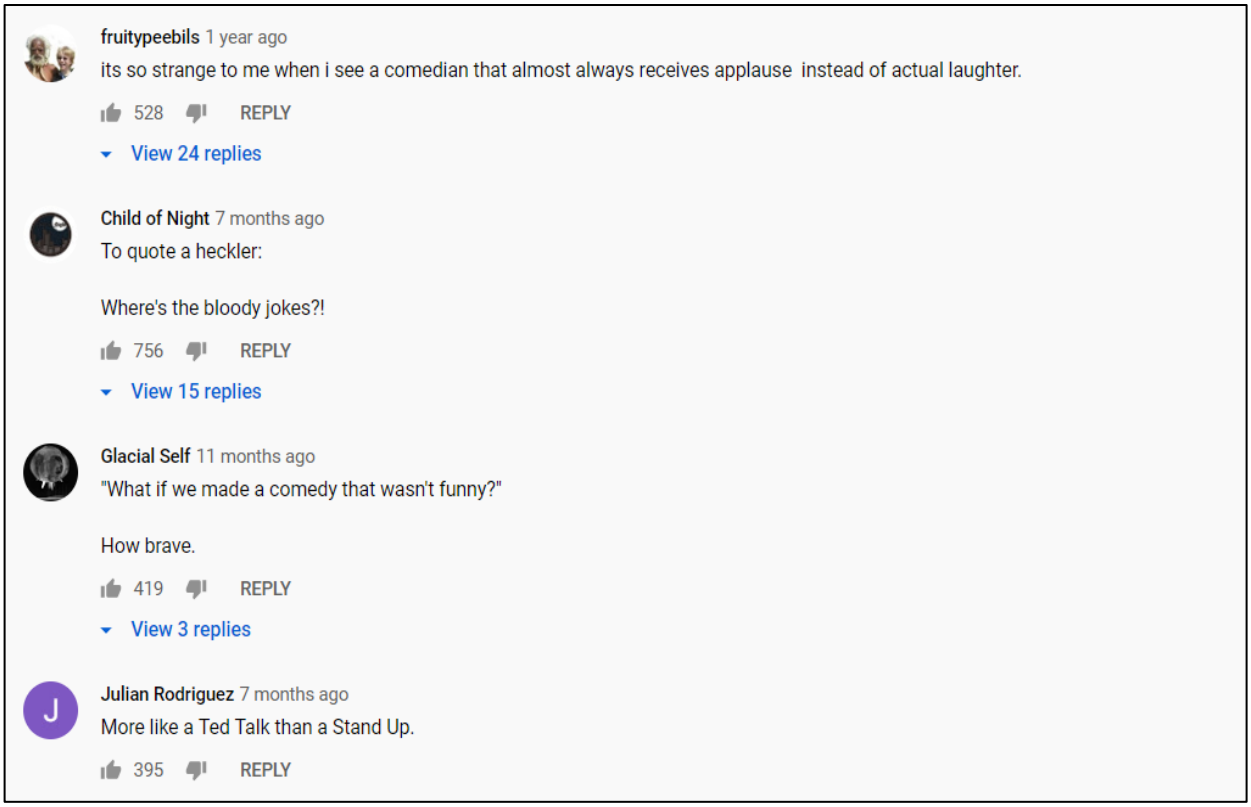

Figure 2: Screenshot of YouTube comments below the trailer for Hannah Gadsby's "Nanette," on April 7. 2020.

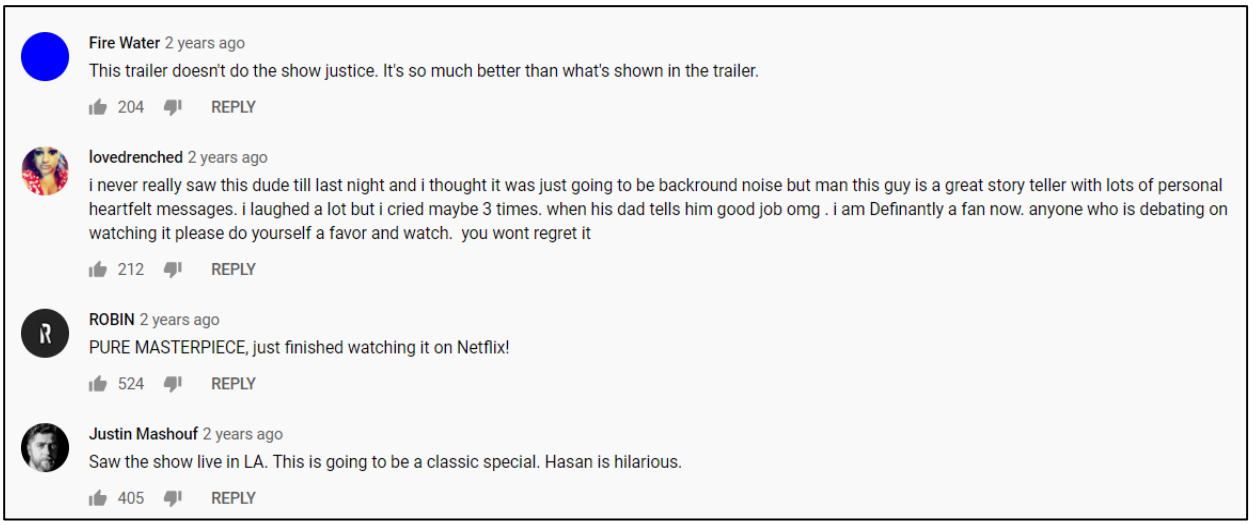

Figure 1: Screenshot of YouTube comments below the trailer for Hasan Minhaj's "Homecoming King," on April 7, 2020.

Gadsby's humor, despite its routine presence throughout the special, is illegible and goes unacknowledged by such viewers. Her whiteness and other secular bonafides do not aid her here;

jokes at the direct expense of men make her a feminist killjoy. Minhaj, though, is both a purveyor of truth who maintain his comedic chops despite the dives into solemn realities. His masculine presence, coupled with his confirmatory politics, authorize the grievances he presents as legitimate. Minhaj does not challenge the *being* of whiteness or the *being* of masculinity – neither, on their own, are ever portrayed as oppressive or as fundamental to the systemized oppressions he cites in his comedy. In fact, he affirms such states of being through an appeal to their idealized better angels as they are documented through the legal enshrinement of principles like equality, free speech, and diversity.

Gadsby's act presents a politic of disavowal – the systems themselves, she says, are irredeemable in the form they were originally conceived, and no piecemeal attempts at inclusion will change that. Departure – from the rules of comedy and patriarchy - are the only way to maintain dignity. "This tension, it's yours. I am not helping you anymore. You need to learn what this feels like. To the men in the room… Pull your fucking socks up! How humiliating! Fashion advice from a lesbian!"[59] This severe accountability, in combination with Gadsby's presentation as a queer woman, illegitimate both her and her comedic craft within the moral order of happiness. Her embodied and vocal challenge to what has been made essential to the being of masculinity preclude her from proper subjecthood. Her humor is illegible because white masculinity does not find reprieve. Gadsby is not a "happiness-cause;" she is its killer.[60] In comparing the reception of Minhaj and Gadsby's work, I wonder about the possibility of reconciliation. Can we accept the "bad" (read: power-conscious accountability) message from a "good" (read: compliant) subject, even when he has arrived to us by way of a deeply flawed

[59] Olb and Parry, *Nanette*.

[60] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 20.

vehicle – built by patriarchy, secularity, and the progressive consensus – that enabled the legibility of both himself and his "bad" message? Can happiness simultaneously raise consciousness? Can moral rectitude be inflected with joy and pleasure?

An Ethic of Affect

The example of the Prophet Muhammad, as portrayed by Ze'ev Maghen, would certainly indicate so. He and the first generation of Muslims in his circle are remembered and recorded for their extensive range of human qualities: kindness, despair, rage, and joy, "swinging back and forth between laughter and tears" as they contemplated the material conditions of this world and how their human tread on it would influence the next.[61] Muhammad preached about the intensely grave – the Day of Judgment and the afterlife, war and revolution in their present – but this, Maghen concludes, was part of a broader method of balance and well-rounded living meant to influence those that came after him. "Refresh the heart from time to time!" he exclaimed.[62] His characteristic levity and solemnity made Muhammad a more humanized paragon, where depending on how he directed his passion, could result in bouts of serious anxiety or frolicsome humor. The social and political inequalities he saw extracted both affective responses from him.

I am cautious about falling into the frame of Islamic authentication by relying on prophetic example. I am relying on an authentication facilitated by Muhammad's masculinity,

[61] Ze'ev Maghen, "The Merry Men of Medina: Comedy and Humanity in the Early Days of Islam," *Der Islam* 83, no. 2 (2008): 277–340, 338.

[62] Maghen, "The Merry Men of Medina," 340.

his Arabic, or his Arabness. That said, to pursue seriously and find guidance from affect and emotion like Muhammad's points towards a Muslim ethic that is also decidedly feminist.[63]

Madeleine Elfenbein similarly recognizes the pragmatism that comes with using the label "Muslim" to refer to an unwieldly and inconsistent whole like Islam. She writes: "The expressly political nature of Islam's ideals—its standards for the just distribution of power and goods, its protocols for collective decision-making and dispute resolution, its continually evolving set of practices for realizing divine justice on earth, and its ability to sanction the disruption of existing political structures in pursuit of that justice—are central to its power to inspire."[64] Robert Orsi sees the importance of such religious idioms emanating not from their essential place in one's being, but in their lived utility; as needed, "invented, taken, borrowed, and improvised."[65] The emphasis on utility through sociality, solidarity, and justice as a governing analytic for the category of Islam melds well with the affective joy and comfort that acts of humor evoke. If we take being a "merry man" as walking along the path of this prophetic example, where humor serves not only at the pleasure of a disciplinary system that wishes to contain it, but instead orients itself towards justice in this world, are Minhaj, Nanjiani, and Ansari producing and giving utility to non-identitarian Muslim humor? I cautiously venture to say yes, though not always, and certainly not in the same ways for each of these men.

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[63] Amina Wadud urges feminist scholars to pursue projects that reinterpret hadith in order "to form gender-inclusive perspectives." See Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld Academic, 2006), 7.

[64] Madeleine Elfenbein, "Political Islam and Emancipatory Politics," *The Immanent Frame* (blog), September 14, 2017, https://tif.ssrc.org/2017/09/14/political-islam-and-emancipatory-politics/.

[65] Robert Orsi, "Everyday Miracles," in *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 8.

The Muslim Synecdoche, "Feeling Seen," and Being Enough

We have established that the world that Ansari, Nanjiani, and Minhaj move through and perform in is overt in its hostility towards Muslims. A joke, a bit, or a story that bears witness to the injury that Muslims sustain from that violence is an act of mixed agency on the part of the comedian, a spurt of critique that comes to fruition through their overall alignment with the secular regimes of humor. For a Muslim viewer, these bursts of pleasure are also bursts of comfort and an affective respite that emerge out of the experience of sharing in Muslim marginality. Because they emerge despite being subjected to the power endemic to regimes of humor, I would argue that jokes that subvert the notion of an inherent Muslim sedition or violence – even while leaving the broader hegemonic discourses that enable them intact – qualify as a middling practice of Muslim resistance against such overt anti-Muslim hostilities.

This low-stakes subversion has linked up with the increasingly pervasive language of diversity and representation, another mainstreamed political goal of the progressive consensus structure that is utilized both by activists outside the entertainment industry as well as in the ways that studios and media platforms market themselves. "Diverse" audiences have long been conceptualized predominantly through the capitalist-oriented mode of consumer spending power, but the last several years have seen entertainment and media studios responding to the call for greater representation by affixing themselves to the affective reactions of their audiences. Films like *Black Panther* and *Crazy Rich Asians* were heralded principally for their representation of long-beleaguered communities of color. In particular, the sensory grammar of "being seen" and "feeling seen" has emerged as a primary idiom through which viewers respond to expanding opportunities for minoritized peoples in film and TV. Minhaj, Ansari, and Nanjiani are not exempt.

In his 2010 special *Intimate Moments for a Sensual Evening*, Ansari presciently remarks on this impulse:

> I was doing an interview once and the guy said, you must be psyched by all this Slumdog Millionaire stuff. And I was like, "Um, yeah! I am! I have no idea why, though, as I had NOTHING to do with that movie!" It's just that some people who kinda look like me are in it, and everyone loved it and it won some Oscars and stuff. And then I was like, "woah, woah, woah, are white people just psyched ALL THE TIME? It's like, Back to the Future – that's us! Godfather – that's us! Godfather Part 2 – that's us! Departed – that's us! Sunset Boulevard – that's us! Citizen Kane – that's us! Jaws – that's us! Every fucking movie BUT Slumdog Millionaire and Boyz n the Hood is us!"[66]

While he may not have been able to place his finger on why he felt psyched, Ansari portended a phenomenon that would come to define subsequent demands for greater diversity in front and behind studio cameras. Social media users in the years since have lauded Minhaj, Nanjiani, and Ansari – in that order of frequency – for their comedy and the ways that the content of those performances speaks to the viewer's personal experiences. In August of 2017, Netflix launched a social media campaign titled #TheFirstTimeISawMe in an attempt to showcase strides towards inclusive media (by showcasing those found on their own platform).[67] As a hashtag, it gained traction with a flood of responses on Twitter. "#FirstTimeISawMe Aziz Ansari in Parks & Rec. Small brown dude who was kinda funny," said Twitter user Rothnik.[68] "#FirstTimeISawMe was watching @hasanminhaj's Homecoming King. An Indian-American who speaks his native tongue, fearless against prejudice," wrote Abhas Misraraj.[69] "The small pox scar joke in THE

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[66] Ansari and Woliner, *Intimate Moments for a Sensual Evening*.

[67] Eric King, "Netflix Launches Powerful Representation Campaign," *Entertainment Weekly* (blog), August 1, 2017, https://ew.com/tv/2017/08/01/netflix-first-time-i-saw-me-campaign/.

[68] @walid182 Rothik, "#FirstTimeISawMe Aziz Ansari in Parks & Rec...," Twitter, August 2, 2017, https://twitter.com/wahid182/status/892655302050447360.

[69] Abhas Misraraj, "#FirstTimeISawMe Was Watching @hasanminhaj's Homecoming King...," Twitter, August 2, 2017, https://twitter.com/abhasmisraraj/status/892604743444422657.

BIG SICK," Murtada Elfadl added. "@kumailn wrote a very specific anectode, happens only to children of the diaspora #FirstTimeISawMe."[70] In one of the slicker promotions for the campaign, Netflix interviewed Revolt TV host Amrit Singh and posted the video online; in it he raves with sincere admiration for the work of Ansari and Minhaj:

> The first time I saw me… I think about people like Aziz Ansari and Hasan Minhaj who have done so much... Aziz has done so much to not just be a face for Indians on TV... he's really taken these issues on. He's Indian. He's a brown dude and American. And that's kind of what we are. We're multidimensional people. If I was 15-year-old me, coming up now, and I could see people like Aziz and Hasan, I'd feel like anything was possible. And that's what these guys are doing. They're heroes for it. I salute them.[71]

Even beyond this Netflix-led campaign, users on the site still surface every so often to tag Minhaj, Ansari, or Nanjiani directly in order to express gratitude for the affective joy of "feeling seen" that their comedy has given them. "This week I read big-name magazine profiles of both @azizansari and @kumailn," exclaimed Maha Atal. "I feel seen." Another user, Asal Helmsly, thanked Kumail Nanjiani for "making entertainment that makes people feel seen, heard, and understood."[72] Minhaj, however, takes the lion's share when it comes to the #representationmatters crowd. A quick search on Twitter reveals an unending scroll of elated audience relatability to *Homecoming King* and *Patriot Act* in particular:

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[70] Murtada Elfadl, "The Small Pox Scar Joke in THE BIG SICK...," Twitter, August 1, 2017, https://twitter.com/ME_Says/status/892384797087211521.

[71] Amrit Singh, "The Folks at @netflix Asked Me about Being an Indian on TV...," Twitter, August 4, 2017, https://twitter.com/amritsingh/status/893567460439281665.

[72] Asal Helmsly, "So, Thank You @kumailn. Thanks for Making Entertainment...," Twitter, July 18, 2017, https://twitter.com/AKHelmsly/status/887162781191081984.

Figure 3: Screenshot of Twitter search terms "feel so seen" and "@hasanminhaj" taken on April 10, 2020.

There are two sensory idioms operative in this context: the desired and satiated "feeling" of a double-pronged gaze that "sees" the viewer. This gaze is simultaneously the gaze of the performer who bears resemblance to the viewer while also constituting the gaze of the hegemonic secular subject that – were it not for this platform and the time spent on it – would otherwise dismiss them as incorrect or an illegibility. Being "seen" offers a stand-alone reprieve

in the form of visibility that for once is not as a racialized anxiety but a glow of legibility and tacit-approval. "Watching Hasan Minhaj on *The Daily Show* and on tour brings me more than a few laughs; they give me a sense of comfort," enthused *The Tempest* staff writer Nelly Kaakaty. "I know that our stories and experiences are in the hands of someone who gets it, someone who understands what it means to be a part of a marginalized group, and someone who is impacted by it every day."[73] There is a desire to see one's own perspectives mirrored back from the screen, but there is an even greater desire for one's hegemon to see, consume, and value that perspective, as well.

Making theoretical sense of this sensory grammar becomes all the more demanding when conceding that, despite my own misgivings about the limitations, sacrifices, and shape-shifting that go into these cultural productions of humor, I too share in the affective pleasure of Nanjiani, Minhaj, and Ansari's visibility and comedy. I initially gave serious consideration to whether this was simply an attempt to demonstrate empathy towards my subjects in the face of my own disagreement with the political work they see their comedy doing. But how would that explain the gust of sincere joy I felt beam across my face as I watched Kumail Nanjiani – in front of the suited Brad Pitts and Martin Scorseses of Hollywood – say that "Now, straight white dudes can watch movies starring me and you can relate to that. It's not that hard. I've done it my whole life"?[74] Why did I cheer out loud, alone in front of my TV? Why, as Aziz Ansari stepped out on the *SNL* stage and mused, "The day after Trump's inauguration… Pretty cool to know, though,

[73] Nelly Kaakaty, "This Comedian Makes Me Feel Seen as a Muslim," *The Tempest* (blog), October 13, 2018, https://thetempest.co/2018/10/13/entertainment/hasan-minhaj-before-the-storm-tour/.

[74] Hollywood Reporter, "#TimesUp: Ashley Judd, Annabella Sciorra, & Salma Hayek Take the Stage at the Oscars."

he's probably at home right now watching a brown guy make fun of him though, right?"[75] did I feel an intense affinity for this person whom I don't normally like? Why did I watch the entire monologue? Why did I seek out the literati's commentary about his performance across the internet the next day? Was this "feeling so seen"?

It is not because these comedians are committing radical acts of resistance. The vision offered by these comedians is not visionary; there are no declarative calls for emancipation or even a reformist re-imagining of the orders that be. Yet as those "highly civilized human beings" buzzard above, listless at the presence of Muslim subjects below, the brief entertainment and recognition provided by one of those Muslim subjects is also a brief victory for the rest. There is room in our scholarly study to stretch what may be considered "subversive" as it pertains to the resistory power to jostle ever so slightly, with a smile and laugh, preserving the self through a cover of shared marginality that ensures some visibility over none. The humor performed by Nanjiani, Minhaj, and Ansari darken the contours of such a middling category as it pushes the needle ever so slightly, driven by an ethical instinct that – when done in the name of preserving Muslim subjecthood and sociality in some small corner of the secular modern – points to a Muslim ethic that drives their aptly named Muslim humor.

Conclusion

This chapter provides examples of how the progressive consensus and its hyper-focus on the racialized subject contains the political possibility within his comedic output and messaging. For Ansari, Minhaj, and Nanjiani the expanded platform to openly perform as Muslim limits their performances to the strictures of secular debate and loyalty, particularly with regards to

[75] Ansari, "Aziz Ansari Saturday Night Live Monologue."

racism, homophobia, and feminism. This racialized sociality limits the categorization of Islam in the public sphere to Brown Muslims at the expense of Black Muslims, while also delegitimizing and reinscribing engagements with theology, belief, and ritual practice as foreign, anti-modern, and outside the bounds of proper secular subjecthood. Conceiving of humor through an ethic of joy and affective pleasure pushes back against these prescribed by accounting for and preserving Muslim sociality as a form of reprieve, though not exactly outright resistance.

CHAPTER 5: EMBODIED HISTORIES AND COUNTER SCRIPTING THE RIGHT MUSLIM MAN

Can't get married, can't have sex, so they blow things up.

- Mark Juergensmeyer[1]

Introduction

Standup comedy is, of course, an embodied performance. Before any given act, a comic has prepared carefully penned jokes as part of an even more carefully storyboarded set. Every beat, every reference, every callback, every personable tangent, and every break to "work the crowd" is calculated and choreographed for minute and mileage. The humor of a joke, however, does not exist simply because the words have been written. Sticking the landing – being funny – depends entirely on how those words are staged, performed by a body already inscribed with imperiled meaning. How do we understand religion, secularism, gender, and cultural critique with and through bodies such as these?

With that, the following chapter contracts in its focus but expands in its scope. Here, I attend directly to the Muslim body, its aesthetics, and its comportment as they are cultivated through medieval, colonial, and neocolonial discourses of the Muslim Man. These embodied histories go on to produce the corporeal realities and fantasies that Hasan Minhaj, Kumail Nanjiani, and Aziz Ansari enact in their comedy. The Muslimness that inheres to their bodies is historically tied to sexual deviance in the early premodern era, a characterization that finds

[1] Bruce Fudge, "The Two Faces of Islamic Studies," *The Boston Globe*, December 15, 2002, http://archive.boston.com/news/packages/iraq/globe_stories/121502_muslims.htm.

continuation in the form of fantastical stories meant to inspire fear and dread associated with a specific geography.[2] This "terrifying" Muslim, when confronted by the capital-driven, anti-immigrant imaginaries, is a site of containment and control, further pathologized in the name of secularity and rationalized security.[3] These men both challenge and preserve that secularity by engaging with the frames of duality of an otherwise singularly-named Muslim masculinity: concomitantly hypersexual and violent or desexed and deprived, but always improperly sexual. This contradiction has roots in the colonial masculinities and gender normativities that are made and remade under the aegis of British colonialism in India, in addition to the Black-white binary and "yellow peril" within American racial logics during Jim Crow through the present day.[4]

While contemporary American scholarship tends towards studying the Muslim figure by way of the touchstone of Cold War-era violence, terrorism, and the leadup/fall out to 9/11, Muslim bodies carry histories that long predate the commonly-ascribed birthdate of September 11, 2001. This chapter seeks to engage these embodied histories and narratives from a longer, transnational perspective that recognizes the sustained historical encounters between the expanding projects of Euroamerican empire and the peoples that were eclipsed in its name. The

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[2] Aydin, *The Idea of the Muslim World: A Global Intellectual History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 1-13.

[3] See Junaid Akram Rana, *Terrifying Muslims : Race and Labor in the South Asian Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 63-65; Kumarini Silva, *Brown Threat: Identification in the Security State* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 155-158.

[4] While I discuss the cultivation of these sensibilities in greater detail throughout the remainder of the chapter, the following works have been particularly instructive in piecing together cohesive histories and their entanglements. See Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity : The "manly Englishman" and the "Effeminate Bengali" in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995); Rana, *Terrifying Muslims : Race and Labor in the South Asian Diaspora*; Ida B. Wells, *Southern Horrors and Other Writings; The Anti-Lynching Campaign of Ida B. Wells, 1892-1900* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1996); Gary Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014); Dorothy E. Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999).

bodily recognition of these histories manifests in how these men position themselves against each other and the specter of the "terrifying" Muslim.

Medieval Scripts of Essential Muslim Being

Numerous scholars, including Carl Ernst and Kecia Ali, have catalogued the criticisms of Islam focused on the Prophet Muhammad, who – through his biography, social interactions, political decision-making, and personal penchants – signified the original Muslim man and authentic Islam within premodern Christian polemics.[5] Ernst notes a keen emphasis on Muhammad's military conquests and marriages in these writings. Any theological sincerity or spiritual appeal that Islam might have had among populations where Islam spread to was disregarded as sole political ambition and avarice on the part of the Prophet.[6] His marriage to multiple wives was considered indulgent lust and sensuality, though Kecia Ali reports that the focus tended towards the total number of women he married and thus had sex with, in addition to the nature of his marriage to Zaynab, who had once been wed to Muhammad's adopted son Zayd. Only later in the early 20th century did criticism of his marriage to Aisha at the age of nine – still an indication of his sexual impropriety – invite attention.[7] As Enlightenment-era ideas spread among those concerned with Islam in Europe, popular discourses maintained their

[5] Such a description does not emerge entirely on its own, of course, as doctrinal references to the Prophet, particularly within Sufi metaphysics, uphold him as "al-insan al-kamil," the perfect person. Perhaps most prominently, this reference can be found in the text *Bezels of Wisdom* by Ali ibn Al-'Arabi, who couples this person with the broader philosophy of the unity of existence (wahdat al-wujud). See Masataka Takeshita, "The Theory of the Perfect Man in Ibn 'Arabi's Fusus Al-Hikam," *Orient* 19 (1983): 87–102.

[6] Carl W. Ernst, *Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World* (University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 13-17.

[7] Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam : Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence* (London: Oneworld, 2010), 136.

concentration on continuing to reveal Muhammad as a charlatan; his political rapacity was otherwise concealed in the language of piety while he openly flaunted his deviant sexual proclivities. Humphrey Prideaux's 1697 *The True Nature of Imposture, Fully Displayed in the Life of Mahomet* returns frequently to the topic of Muhammad's carnal interest, positing that "to have the sovereignty over his country, to gratify his ambition and as many women as he pleased to satiate his lust, was what he aimed at, and to gain himself a party for the composing of this, was the grand Design of that new Religion which he invented."[8]

Colonial Taxonomies

As colonial ventures into South and Southwest Asia escalated and put down roots, an emergent class of Orientalist literature grew in tandem so as to understand these native subjects and how best to restructure, manipulate, and ultimately incorporate them into the broader imperial apparatus. Because of this, Orientalists of the 18th and 19th centuries shifted away from the enterprise of pontificating on any single scion of Islam. Instead, their reflections conceptualized the *homo islamicus* and his "Muslim mind" as a subject of resolute difference, unadaptable to modernity and arrested in their political, social, and cultural development.[9] This, coupled with an environmental determinism that saw the harsh, unforgiving, and violent desert climate as producing a similarly harsh, unforgiving, and violent man who can only comprehend the tenors of aggression and brutality. Romantic Orientalism, observes Sophia Arjana, adjusted this image into "the wild, unrestrained behavior exhibited by Muslim villains," and demonstrated

[8] Minou Reeves and P. J. Stewart, *Muhammad in Europe: A Thousand Years of Western Myth-Making* (NYU Press, 2003), 160.

[9] Sophia Rose. Arjana, *Muslims in the Western Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 9.

both a compulsive lure and repulsion to the Muslim figure that remained fixed on his aberrant sexuality.[10] Those fears attached themselves directly onto "imaginative bodies" that enabled exploiting material conditions and human labor throughout colonial outposts worldwide. Mahmood Mamdani remarks plainly that European imperialism sought to ultimately rid the world of such subjects in service to the future of civilization. This was a "biologically necessary process which, according to the laws of nature, leads to the inevitable destruction of lower races."[11]

That the lower races may strike back was not readily apparent until the mid-17th century when the 1857 Rebellion commenced. An event that stretched across the Gangetic Plain in north and central India, the Rebellion marked a watershed moment for European configurations of the Muslim. This body politic was uniformly united in their resentment and capacity to turncoat. Any loyalty to the crown could easily be annihilated with one call from the Ottomans that lay East, wrote Viceroy Lord Lytton in 1876: "If three Turks from Constantinople landed in Bombay with a message from the Sultan Commanding the Faithful in this country to declare a jehad against the British Government, our most loyal Mohamedans would obey the order."[12] Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst surmises that early forms of Muslim racialization and minoritization coagulated in these years after the Rebellion. The homogenously embodied traits of religious fanaticism and violence were attributed in real-time and in the aftermath of 1857 by British officials, scholars, and the general public. Nominal power residing in the hands of the remaining

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[10] Arjana, *Muslims in the Western Imagination*, 9.

[11] Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim : America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Doubleday Press, 2004), 6.

[12] John Ferris, "'The Internationalism of Islam': The British Perception of a Muslim Menace, 1840-1951," *Intelligence and National Security* 24, no. 1 (2009): 57-77, 60.

Mughal rulers was quickly jettisoned through a concerted exclusion from administrative jobs, most of which went instead to particular Hindu classes of Brahmins. The Muslim's racialization followed a parallel and sometimes intersecting trajectory with the racialization of Hindus. Morgenstein Fuerst argues that for Hindus, this racialization relied on the caricatures of racial weakness and religious sensitivity. The aim of this corresponding racialization, however, was to explain why Hindus were necessarily susceptible to the wiles of the truly unruly and disloyal subject: the Muslim.[13] Their characterization of violence and recalcitrance towards Christian and "secular" sensibilities was further reinscribed by Sayyid Ahmad Khan, the prominent Indian Muslim loyalist and the first to be knighted by Queen Victoria. In his rejoinder to British bureaucrat W.W. Hunter's *Indian Musalmans; Are They Bound in Conscience to Rebel Against the Queen?*, Khan cedes the realm of normativity to Hunter despite his vehement disagreement. His defensive point-by-point refutations continue to utilize the same stakes, terminology, and frameworks laid out by his British adversary without problematizing their function and legitimacy. Khan's engagement "within his [Hunter's] legal landscapes" ultimately upheld a discourse that produced Muslims as racialized.[14]

Colonial Masculinities

Mrinalini Sinha contends that the colonial cliché of sectarian "types," i.e. an effeminate Hindu juxtaposed against the pugnacious Muslim, proliferated across surveys, census reports, and scholarly handbooks written for British administrators by a burgeoning class of Orientalists.

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[13] Ilyse R. Morgenstein Fuerst, *Indian Muslim Minorities and the 1857 Rebellion : Religion, Rebels, and Jihad* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2017), 5.

[14] Morgenstein Fuerst, *Indian Muslim Minorities*, 124.

The production of these texts was part of an "ensemble of political, economic, and administrative imperatives that underpinned the strategies of colonial rule in the late 19th century."[15] In concurrence with Morgenstein Fuerst's assessment of the 1857 Rebellion, Sinha notes British appeal to the concept of racial equality without the actual broadening of native participation in government administration. Rationalized on gendered terms, the masculinity of Indians was depicted as either excessive or deficient – never on par with the "correctly" masculine Englishman. Native elite Hindus were agential partners in the formation of this discourse as it provided them with a means to pursue power and authority, defining themselves as more modern and manly than the traditional aristocracy. Sinha reports that in 1883, the introduction of the Ilbert Bill sparked a "White Mutiny" due to its proposed narrow expansion of judicial responsibilities to Indian judges.[16] This meant, effectively, that Indians could preside over the court proceedings of European settlers, both men and women. White mutineers insisted on the need to benevolently protect white women colonists from the "unmanly" Indian babu (clerk) who had neglected his "own" Indian women. Among Muslims, grand narratives of civilizational decline were tied to the neglect that Muslim men gave to their own corporeal regiments. Abdus Salam's treatise on *Physical Education in India* from 1895 lamented the waning bodily strength of Muslims but, according to Joseph Alter, "may be taken as a more general statement on the condition of all 'Westernized' Indians":

> In contrast with this brilliant past as regards physical vigour and manliness, the lack of physical energy which now more or less characterises the Mahomedans [sic} in India stands out in bold relief. Our one-sided Western education, so far . . . has acted with us like a bad liver: it is making us assimilate what has to be rejected of the Western import, and reject what has to be assimilated. We are rapidly parting with our own national ways and manners.... In the case of a few here and there, there might be visible some surface

[15] Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity*, 3.

[16] Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity*, 33-36.

> Western polish, but it is no more than skin deep; the result being that whilst the sweet guilelessness and gentle suavity of the East is absent, the genuine sturdiness and masculine straightforwardness of the West is also wanting.[17]

The British taxonomies of effeminate Hindus, dutiful Sikhs, and seditious Muslims were not static, Sinha repeatedly points out, and they bled into one another from location to location. There was, for example, similar concern that the Muslims of Bengal were also growing too effeminate – an important distinction from femininity, it was the active process of emasculation which was to be decried. The common denominator of irregular native masculinity, extreme in some fashion depending on religion or geography or some combination of both, said less about the elaborate system of categorization put in place than it did about the colonial consolidation of power: classifying the native "types" better enabled their discipline and assimilation. The formation of improper sexuality, when imposed on the Indian subject (Muslim or Hindu), indicates that racialization did not follow a distinct and solitary course. Overlaps in the racialization of Muslim and Hindu Indians exposed a nexus on the issue of masculinity, where sexual difference signaled ineligibility for self-governance and communal agency. Ashis Nandy sees Gandhi's – and in due course India's – success sprout out of a growing disinterest in synchronizing with the "manly" Englishman's masculinity. In their refusal to engage with the paradigm of colonial masculinity, a new frame of reference emerged in which "the oppressed do not seem weak, degraded and distorted men trying to break the monopoly of the rulers on a fixed quantity of machismo."[18] This, Nandy reasons, oversaw the rise of non-cooperation with crown rule in the 20th century.

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[17] Joseph S. Alter, "Celibacy, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Gender into Nationalism in North India," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 53, no. 1 (1994): 45-66, 55-56.

[18] Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 177.

Oriental Commodities and the Threat of Black Virility

Notions of colonial masculinity were not curbed by geographic borders, something scores of Muslim peddlers from South Asia would find out upon reaching U.S. shores. These patterns were in fact shared, with differing valences, among white populations across the Atlantic. Men primarily from vicinities of East and West Bengal, but also Punjab, Kashmir, and the Northwest Frontier, made their way to the United States in the early 1900s and became willing participants in the romanticized perceptions of the "Oriental" as they sold silks and other "exotic" consumer goods to leisure-seeking Americans across the eastern seaboard and gulf coast.[19] Their initial arrival to the U.S. was already mired in deeply gendered perceptions of their innate masculine inadequacies. Supposed physical "weakness" was reason enough for British shipping companies to hire multiple Indian men (at a lower rate) than a single European man. Positions in the ship's saloon and among catering crews were commonly called "women's work" and given to these "less capable" workers. Illness among Indians was quickly attributed to a "lack of stamina" and served as confirmation of their overall inferiority.[20]

Upon arrival, the dark skin – and seeming Black adjacency - of Bengali men made their assessment in the eyes of the restrictive immigration regime unpredictable and inconsistent, Vivek Bald argues.[21] Their integration into Black working class neighborhoods, often also marrying Black women, allowed them to initially elude the open hostility practiced towards "Asiatic" laborers in the late 1800s (though that would change with the 1917 Immigration Act).

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[19] Vivek Bald, *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 6.

[20] Bald, *Bengali Harlem*, 105.

[21] Bald, *Bengali Harlem*, 52-53.

Within the operative racial binary of the U.S., these men worked to ply white fantasies about a blurry Orient that included India and extended into East Asia. Americans were "unmoored from the daily exercise of colonial power," unlike their British contemporaries, and the Orientalist notions they circulated were primarily in terms of entertainment; an aesthetic to be displayed and consumed.[22]

Despite mostly being Muslim, the South Asian peddlers, along with Hindus, Sikhs, and other religious minorities of the subcontinent, came to be characterized as "Hindoos" by way of an overriding embodied/sartorial likeness. The uniform put on by merchants played up and off of the Orientalist imagination of mystics and wisemen: "clean-cut features and intellectual faces" accompanied a "queer costume" of "turbans or embroidered fezes" that carried "a pack on the back weighing many hundred pounds, consisting of gorgeous East Indian and Oriental stuffs."[23] When this uniform was donned by African Americans across the segregated U.S. South, Bald observes, it had utility in temporarily crossing the color line, to "pass" not as white, but as something not entirely legible within the hegemonic Black/white binary in order to access better jobs and housing accommodations.

The end of Jim Crow and anti-miscegenation laws oversaw a selective dejure re-ordering of racial constructions and the dramatic re-entry of religion into U.S. politics. Nonetheless, white supremacy and its race hierarchies remained formal and informal features of institutions like immigration, urban development, education, and kinship networks. The anxious need to protect white women, in particular, is a racialized fear that extends back historically beyond the figure of a foreign male other. American mythology has long held the Black body as sexually deviant and

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[22] Bald, *Bengali Harlem*, 17-18.

[23] Bald, *Bengali Harlem*, 39.

degenerate. This mythology was lent further authority during the scientifically sanctioned racism of the 19th century, where biological variants determined "natural" superiorities and inferiorities.

This logic maintained that the Black body inherits its predestination, whereby "preserving racial distinctions required policing reproduction."[24] The Black woman, as Dorothy Roberts shows, is therefore viewed not just as the progenitor of the genetic impairment but as also imparting a lifestyle of sexual deviancy and immorality that follows Black men through childhood into their adult lives. Jim Crow-era authors like Philip Bruce bemoaned Black men's regression back into their original immoral state after the abolition of slavery, undisciplined now without the watchful and disciplinary eye of white slaveholders.[25] Original immorality was perceived as a potent sexual promiscuity that placed white women of the day in open danger of rape by Black men. Such hyper-virility was not a problem when directed towards Black women, as they too were considered ravenous in their desire for sex. The bellicose need to protect the progenitors of "correct" sexuality proliferated the American South in the form of lynching of both Black men and women.

Ida B. Wells remains the decisive source on how this institutionalized practice of terror invoked the myth of bestial brutes preying on white female victims in order to retain, curb, control, and disenfranchise Black American populations. In *Southern Horrors*, written at the end of the 19th century, she documented how the insinuation of sexual violence against white women cajoled easy Northern sympathy for the South's "necessity" of lynching, demonstrating how effectively a call to defend white women's honor could diminish or even justify widespread and

[24] Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 9.

[25] Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 11-12.

sustained acts of murder and rape against Black people.[26] White women were thus less people worth protecting and more a useful fiction for white supremacy. There remains a plain path of continuity between the animating rationalities of indifference towards lynchings, the policing of Black activists throughout the 1960s and 70s, and the stunning regularity of police brutality in contemporary Black communities.[27]

Asian Abnormalities

The language of abnormal sexuality has also been extended to East Asian men in the U.S., though here the tropes of non-sexuality and emasculation have historically dominated its application. Yen Le Espiritu writes that the 19th century nativist movement manufactured fears of a militarily efficient "yellow peril" of Asian laborers, by and large men, and oversaw the enactment of anti-Asian immigration laws in the U.S. As Asian women continued to be excluded from passage into the United States, the popular imagery of an "undersexed" and "effeminate" Asian man gained currency into the next century. The 20th century economy that emerged with these immigration strictures in place situated Asian men in "feminized" jobs like laundry work. In Hollywood, Asian masculinity was devoid of creative sexuality: "they could not sexually engage white women, and, when juxtaposed with white men, could not engage Asian women."[28] Legally, Asian Americans continued to be denied access to U.S. citizenship, public schools, and even a presence in the courtroom. Japanese men who dressed themselves in zoot suits – "a

[26] Wells, *Southern Horrors*, 46-69.

[27] Christopher Waldrep, "National Policing, Lynching, and Constitutional Change," *The Journal of Southern History* 74, no. 3 (2008): 589–626.

[28] Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Women and Men: Labor, Laws, and Love* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), 111.

distinctive, working-class urban style characterized by flamboyant fashions and irreverent comportment" – flouted the American war effort during World War II, where fabric was otherwise being rationed, and came to be seen as adversarial to the white middle class and actively propagating the "Japanese Problem."[29] The 1943 Los Angeles Zoot Suit Riots were an open aggression against Chicanx, Japanese, Black, and other people of color by white soldiers, off-duty police officers, and civilians. As immigration laws eased after 1965, Gary Okihiro writes that the "model minority" thesis came to encompass Asian Americans in an assimilatory fashion. The notion that "American" attributes like work ethic, education, family-orientation, and self-sufficiency could shore together immigrants from the margins into a practical and universally-desirable mainstream mitigated the "yellow peril" threat from decades past. That model minority, Okihiro muses, has come to symbolize "a feminized position of passivity and malleability" to a broader regulatory order.[30]

British and French colonial patterns of classification of people continued to find their way into the particulars of American racial syllogisms thanks to what Junaid Rana calls the "Indian Ocean Model," where the Middle East and South Asia retained their designation as "trouble spots" even while new Cold War and globalization interests resulted in neo-imperial interventions in these regions.[31] Mahmood Mamdani links this to the return of Christian fundamentalism to public U.S. American life, a mass mobilization of white Protestant Christians pursuing a declarative political agenda. The rise of the Moral Majority coincided with the rise of

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[29] Elisabeth Hsu and Ellen Wu, "'Smoke and Mirrors': Conditional Inclusion, Model Minorities, and the Pre-1965 Dismantling of Asian Exclusion," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 34, no. 4 (June 1, 2015): 43-65, 55-56.

[30] Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams*, 174.

[31] Rana, *Terrifying Muslims*, 17.

radical Muslim intellectuals who were equally preoccupied with the taking (back) of power.[32] The "violence" of the Muslim was rebranded as "low-intensity conflict" and eventually into "terror" within a broader discourse of "Culture Talk," where figures like the Muslim are not simply incapable of modernity but actively resistant to it. The disinterest in conciliatory interpretation, coupled with "a profound ability to be destructive… is taken as proof that they have no appreciation for human life, including their own."[33] Mamdani mentions a variety of Muslim thinkers – Sayyid Qutb, Ali Shariati, Mohamed Iqbal, Mohamed Ali Jinnah, Abul A'la Maududi – who differed in their political goals but all sought to respond to the questions that modernity posed; not as resistant to modernity but "as modern as modernity."[34] All of them would go on to gain association with terrorism as its "inspiration" throughout a variety of contexts.[35] The designation of terrorist placed upon Muslim bodies congeals in the context of the U.S.'s Cold War interventions in Afghanistan in the 1980s, a nightly vision on American television screens for more nearly a decade.

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[32] Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*, 42-43.

[33] Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*, 19.

[34] Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*, 59.

[35] A small sampling finds Robert Erwin asking "Is this the man that inspired Bin Laden?" in *The Guardian*, while the U.S. and U.K.-designated terrorist group Mujahidin Khalq is said to follow an ideology "with ingredients from the Iranian religious sociologist Ali Shariati." Maududi has a profile on the website for the Counter Extremism Project, a neoconservative American NGO. See Robert Erwin, "Is This the Man Who Inspired Bin Laden?," *The Guardian*, November 1, 2001, sec. World news, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/nov/01/afghanistan.terrorism3; "Abul Ala Maududi," Counter Extremism Project, May 12, 2016, https://www.counterextremism.com/extremists/abul-ala-maududi; Amir Taheri, "Islamist, Marxist, Terrorist," *Wall Street Journal*, June 23, 2003, https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB105633622095767400.

Foreign, Anti-Modern, Haters of Women

The Immigration Act of 1965 enshrined a class-driven opening for migrants from Asia where quotas had previously been in place. American racial logics absorbed these newcomers – primarily highly skilled professionals and students – through the lens of the model minority politic. This reinscribed their place within racial hierarchies as workers who maintained the U.S.'s upward mobility as the world's biggest and "greatest" economy while also threatening that economy by taking employment opportunities away from "real" Americans. Since the formal beginning of the War on Terror, this contradiction is ingratiated further into the U.S. imaginary through the passage of laws that discursively and materially code the "foreigner" or "immigrant" as a threat to the homeland, most visibly identified through the creation of the Department of Homeland Security and the NSEERS program described in Chapter 3. In this system, Arabs, South Asians, Latinx, and other "Brown" men are swept up by the security apparatus through legally pursuant searches, detentions, and deportations. Their dispensability, observes Junaid Rana, betrays a racism that "is not simply the sense of systems of control and hierarchy but also in the sense of determining who lives and dies as a strategy to maintain and legitimize the authority of a colonizing force."[36] The threatening Muslim form has been maximized for a life of precarity, as Judith Butler might say, because he ontologically deserves it.[37]

Today, the Muslim form continues to invite suspicion, distance, and violence through the inscription of a native sexual perversity and anti-moderness in the doings and "innate" nature of this body. Even within the progressive consensus of recognition, there continues to be lowly-

[36] Rana, *Terrifying Muslims*, 4.

[37] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 12.

voiced trepidation over making common cause with those who avow or simply associate with a religious tradition whose legal codes license the persecution of queer people.[38] Louder calls, still, splash across the pages of American newspapers in (ultimately successful) attempts to isolate Muslims from positions of power within progressive movements. This has been justified due to those Muslim leaders' mobilizations on behalf of Palestinian liberation, which are translated as a pretense for underlying anti-Semitism.[39] The focus on non-normative sexualities, however, disciplines well within and beyond the confines of a progressive consensus.

Jasbir Puar surmises that the transnational production of such corporealities results in a Muslim masculinity that is "simultaneously pathologically excessive yet repressive, perverse yet homophobic, virile yet emasculated, monstrous yet flaccid."[40] These paradoxical dualities exist in the same ways that narratives of American exceptionalism hold up both its uniqueness and universality at once. An indispensable image of the United States is created to rationalize violence committed against the Muslim figure in the name of preservation of the lives of proper and made-proper subjects, over those that are not. The exceptional circumstances – an endangering Muslim masculinity – quickly but surreptitiously "become[s] the rule, and the exceptional is normalized as a regulatory ideal or frame."[41] Suspicion thus remains on the

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[38] Sarah Harvard, "Stuck in the Media Spotlight, LGBTQ Muslims Often Feel Exploited," *Bitch Media* (blog), March 27, 2019, https://www.bitchmedia.org/lgbt-muslims-media-spotlight-islamophobia-queer-feminism-hearken.

[39] Bari Weiss, "When Progressives Embrace Hate," *The New York Times*, August 1, 2017, sec. Opinion, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/01/opinion/womens-march-progressives-hate.html.

[40] Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), xxv.

[41] Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 9.

Muslim body because of its capacity for harm and the destruction of other bodies, despite its documented legality or presumed inclusion within the norms of secular multiculturalism.

Those other bodies, depending on the circumstance, invariably tend to be women – Muslim women or non-Muslim white women. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's deduction of "white men saving brown women from brown men" finds easy application in the drummings for the War on Terror.[42] Laura Bush's radio address on November 17, 2001 struck a gentler note in rallying public support for the invasion of Afghanistan than George W. Bush's pugnacious addresses to Congress:

> The brutal oppression of women is a central goal of the terrorists. Long before the current war began, the Taliban and its terrorist allies were making the lives of children and women in Afghanistan miserable... Civilized people throughout the world are speaking out in horror - not only because our hearts break for the women and children in Afghanistan, but also because in Afghanistan, we see the world the terrorists would like to impose on the rest of us. All of us have an obligation to speak out… Because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. They can listen to music and teach their daughters without fear of punishment. Yet the terrorists who helped rule that country now plot and plan in many countries. And they must be stopped. The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women.[43]

Lila Abu-Lughod notices a recurring slippage in this speech between the perpetrators of women's oppression through mandated burkas and the greater enemy of the United States. "The Taliban and the terrorists" slur together as a single word; "a kind of hyphenated monster identity."[44] Elsewhere in the speech, Bush holds these men's misogyny as the cause for other

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[42] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988): 271–313, 297.

[43] Laura Bush, *Radio Address by Mrs. Laura W. Bush, Crawford, TX, November 17, 2001*, 2013, https://www.bushcenter.org/publications/articles/2013/02/radio-address-by-mrs-laura-w-bush-crawford-tx-november-17-2001.html.

[44] Lila Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others," *American Anthropologist* 104 (2002): 783-790, 784.

social ills in Afghanistan, including malnutrition, poor health outcomes, widespread poverty, and illiteracy across the population. People of good conscience the world over are called to join the ideological struggle to save these women from the men who have "long" oppressed them, inferring a fundamental propensity for coercion and cruelty while the stakes of civilization – wrapped up in this toxic masculinity – delicately dangle overhead. These Muslim women, after all, intimately know the violence of Muslim men.

Bush purports that these unique conditions – where "only the terrorists and the Taliban forbid education to women" – necessitated the full force of the American war machinery because of the potential for imposition on "the rest of us."[45] Are white women "the rest of us" for whom Bush so urgently demands preservation? Juliane Hammer remarks that Muslim women have always been at the center of anti-Muslim discourses, necessitated by their intimacy with and proximity to Muslim men. Women who produce these discourses, like Laura Bush, rely largely on their own gender – configured as a deeply shared positionality – to authenticate their political mission.[46] The "exceptional circumstances" of Afghanistan, as we have seen, have never been exceptional.

A Composite Danger

Taken together, we arrive back at the beginning. The monstrous Muslim form has been centuries in the making, constituted and reconstituted in a Euroamerican imaginary that seeks to conjure itself out of that which it is not. That "not" is a Muslim tableaux; a repository for what

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[45] Bush, *Radio Address by Mrs. Laura W. Bush, Crawford, TX, November 17, 2001*.

[46] Juliane Hammer, *Peaceful Families: American Muslim Efforts against Domestic Violence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 38-39.

has been discarded as un/anti-modern but still fascinates in its queerness. Violence, danger, and civilizational threat are rendered through racialized and improperly masculine corporealities, though their categorical edges do not retain the fastidiously documented difference that once accompanied them under colonial rule. The South Asian Muslim's lack of fealty bleeds into the South Asian Hindu's effeminacy, the Oriental's exoticism, the Hindoo's queerness, and the Asian foreigner's economic threat. The presence of Brown skin does not require deeper specificity before triggering an alarm consonant with that triggered by the proximity to Black bodies in the U.S.

By detailing the history and politics behind these scripts, I do not imply for this to be sweepingly comprehensive nor a reductive presumption that "all" Muslims experience these corporealities in exactly the same way. What I do mean to communicate is the longue and intersecting durée of it all. The menace of the Muslim is not a post-Cold War phenomenon of the last 40 years, and the even shorter timeline that takes 9/11 as point A does little to lay bare how these paradoxical attributes will ideologically and allegorically endure into the present. As I argue in Chapter 3, among the most salient features of the Muslim is his unsuitability for modern secularism. The persistence of this condition finds life through bodily re-animation. These sundry points of failure – inheritable sedition, excessive masculinity, deficient masculinity, predation of white women – revive and reify sedimented anxieties, project them onto the Muslim object of concern, and naturalize its misalignment. In turn, the subjects from whom the Muslim object are distanced are reproduced as correct, normal, and worthy of the continuance of life through their securitization away from the Muslim.

In conjunction, these discourses systemize a broader, urgent pattern that maintains secularism, modernity, multiculturalism as the master terms of social legibility. The Muslim

gains recognition only after stripping what has been deemed essential to him. Tracing these discursive shifts for a more plain and clear framing for Nanjiani, Ansari, and Minhaj's diasporic subjectivities as well as the ways that these subjectivities find resonance with notions of a normative "Islam," the Middle East, Shi'ism, India, Pakistan, Asia, and U.S. Blackness. These notions interface and are abstracted out as through affect and comportment, demonstrating an embodied hostility against hegemonic white masculinity but to also mollifying and reassuring it of its dominance within U.S. secularity.

I am aware that these men would likely not articulate the precise historical contours of their embodied experiences in the language that I have used thus far. However, their deliberate choreographies of comedy onstage, as well as their mundane comportment offstage, plainly indicate that the cultural and diasporic weight of colonial and neocolonial scripts is nevertheless affectively realized. This is particularly true when that weight is conspicuously *not* felt, but assumedly *should* be. Ansari has expressed concern that he is "getting off on a technicality" because India is not on the list of nations in the U.S. Muslim Ban, "not one of these other countries where brown people are from." He concedes that it is privilege of celebrity that accompanies him into the lion's den of Homeland Security. "I'm like the luckiest Muslim-born person. Everyone at Homeland Security knows who I am. They tell me they like my work."[47]

At the same time, he tells the talk show host Seth Meyers, "My brother is not recognized, so he has had hilarious instances of racist, Islamophobic stuff happen to him... they make me laugh so hard even though they're very mean things. It's very funny to me! [laughs]." The rest of his brother's experience is recounted through stifled giggles, an innocuous yarn for the in-studio

[47] Jada Yuan, "Aziz Ansari Wanted to Be the Great Uniter and Ended Up an Activist," *New York Magazine*, May 1, 2017.

audience to laugh alongside. “He was in a Dick’s Sporting Goods [store] in Charlotte, and he was walking around and some guy goes, ‘hey terrorist, get out of here!’ And he looks around and he didn’t see anybody. And he’s like, where is this coming from? And the guy goes, [laughing] ‘hey terrorist, get out of here!’ and he looks up, and there’s a guy on a rock-climbing wall, who yelled it down!” The audience claps as Meyers exclaims, “you have to be so racist to take time out of rock climbing!”[48]

Hasan Minhaj opens his White House Correspondents’ Dinner speech with a similarly morbid quip: “Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the series finale of the White House correspondents’ dinner. Oh man. My name is Hasan Minhaj, or, as I will be known in a few weeks, Number 830287.”[49] Elsewhere, he recalls the prickling sting of other comedian friends that were “genuine[ly] leveling” with him as rumors swirled about who would replace Jon Stewart at the front desk of *The Daily Show*. “They were like, ‘They couldn’t give it to you, man. Just imagine saying *The Daily Show with Hasan Minhaj*. How is Doritos gonna put ads up against that?’”

In Nanjiani’s standup, he does not – and arguably cannot – wait long before introducing his Pakistani and Muslim heritage in any comedy routine, not even in *The Big Sick*. The first shot of the film pans over a comedy club audience, as Nanjiani gets up on stage. “Hello,” he introduces himself. “I grew up in Pakistan.”[50] *Beta Male*, in fact, does not go more than 30 seconds before he remarks that the shock of living in Brooklyn was particularly egregious, as “I grew up in fucking Pakistan.” A solitary cheer piques legitimate incredulity: “Really? ‘Woos’ for

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[48] *Aziz Ansari Shares His Brother’s Top Islamophobic Encounters*, Late Night with Seth Meyers (New York: YouTube, 2017), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vKu3gPsQAXY.

[49] Minhaj, *Hasan Minhaj COMPLETE REMARKS at 2017 White House Correspondents’ Dinner*.

[50] Nanjiani, Gordon, and Showalter, *The Big Sick*.

Pakistan? That's new. Pakistan's in the house! Alright… usually we try to keep a low profe [profile]."[51]

Even when compensating for the privilege and release that celebrity status offers, the broad "truth" emanating from their bodies does not de-race or de-brown them. The Muslimness endowed upon Brown skin splays that marked difference interchangeably and homogenously. For these men, it means being read as one another and other supposedly "famous" Brown bodies. Nanjiani, Minhaj, and Ansari have all commented on the quotidian nature of the "mistaken identity" phenomenon. In a 2017 interview with *GQ*, Kumail Nanjiani told editor Anna Peele that "when I started out, I would get confused for Kal Penn. Then it was Aziz Ansari. And last week, within one week, I got confused for Kunal Nayyar, Karan Soni, and Hasan Minhaj. Minhaj and Nanjiani look nothing alike." He concludes, nonetheless, with a sunny rumination: "I guess that's what progress is. If it means they're confusing me for ten people instead of three, I'll take it."[52] The following year, he took to Twitter in a slightly more disdainful disposition (the post has since been deleted but was covered in media). "A day may come when I am not mistaken for another brown actor. But it is not this day."[53] Others, like Kal Penn, Kunal Nayyar, and Hari Kondabolu joined the fray to report how often they had been mistaken for Kumail. "Every time I get recognized for you I think 'man I wish it were true:)'," said Nayyar. "I have taken credit for both of your accolades in the last 2 weeks so I guess I owe you each a photo, half a beer, and an

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[51] Nanjiani, *Beta Male*.

[52] Anna Peele, "Kumail Nanjiani Is the Future of Funny," *GQ* (blog), May 16, 2017, https://www.gq.com/story/kumail-nanjiani-silicon-valley-future-of-funny.

[53] "Pakistani-American Star Kumail Nanjiani Says Gets Mistaken for Other 'brown' Actors," Geo News, March 13, 2018, https://www.geo.tv/latest/185939-pakistani-american-comedian-kumail-nanjiani-reveals-he-gets-mistaken-for-other-brown-actors.

awkward extended hug," responded Penn. The interaction culminated with the comedian Sarah Silverman jumping in to ask innocuously, "Why do you have three accounts?"

Aziz Ansari kicked off his latest comedy special, *Right Now*, with a furtive reference to his #MeToo scandal cloaked in a joke about being mistaken for Hasan Minhaj.

> I was walking around the other day, and this guy, uh, came up to me on the street, and he was like, 'Hey, man. Love the Netflix show!' And I was like, 'Oh, thanks so much.' He was like, 'Yeah, yeah, I really liked the episode you did on Supreme!' I was like, 'What? I didn't do no episode on Supreme.' And then I quickly realized he's talking about Hasan Minhaj. Patriot Act. Different show. Different guy. And he felt horrible, right? He immediately realized his mistake, and he was trying to buy it back. He was like, 'Oh, no, no, Aziz, right?' I was like, 'Yeah, yeah. That's me.' 'Master of None!' 'Yeah, yeah. That's me.' 'Parks and Rec.' 'Yeah, yeah. That's me.' 'Treat yo' self.' 'Yeah, yeah. That's me.' 'And, uh, you had that whole thing last year, sexual misconduct?' 'No, no, no, no, no! That was Hasan!'

When Nanjiani famously "broke the internet" in December 2019 with his shirtless photo showing off his new Marvel movie-ready body, Minhaj tweeted back ruefully that "no one is going to mistake me for Kumail anymore."[54]

Despite the embodied knowledges these men carry – invariably claimed through the performance of levity – I reject the prescription of "false consciousness" when Ansari, Nanjiani, and Minhaj then inevitably seek to demonstrate their modern subjecthood and overall fitness for the secular. I will not deny their exercise of agency in those moments, as well as the possibility of their overall aims changing, which they do over time. I will similarly not retreat from holding them to account and naming the normative and material circumstances that enable and are enabled by such conduct. There is more here than simply a "complicit" masculine and racialized comportment; these are embodied formations in transition and in process seeking to perform away their marginality into what is right, "real," and authentic to them; a secular aesthetic. Let us

[54] Andrew Husband, "Everyone Is Loving Kumail Nanjiani's New Ripped Look For Marvel's 'The Eternals'," *UPROXX* (blog), December 17, 2019, https://uproxx.com/viral/kumail-nanjiani-ripped-twitter-reactions/.

appreciate intention, at the very least to understand how naturally it can be swallowed, manipulated, and regurgitated back as a foot soldier for the continuity of power.

Rendering the Right Muslim Man

It is worth reiterating that the paths taken towards becoming the Right Muslim Man vary between Nanjiani, Ansari, and Minhaj. Minhaj's path, for example, is littered with untranslated alhamdulillahs and inshallahs while Ansari pronounces "Muslim" with the letter Z. Nanjiani's English-medium-school-tinged Pakistani accent demands from him the work of presenting legibility the moment he speaks. The final Right Muslim product varies between them as well, as each requires different inflections of different bodily perceptions. Parameters of exclusion and possibility stretch and contract among the three as they stage versions of Islam on stage. These comedic counter-scripts usually do not pursue overt and rhetorically-vocalized assimilation and/or legibility in the American secular schema. The body primarily does that work as the site of its desired and agential self-articulation, often in anticipation of how it reads absent that desire and agency. Thus, a stylized and assertive impersonation is comparable to what Judith Butler has called "a phantasmatic attempt to approximate realness" – which, in this case, materializes as a rhetorical and embodied distancing from "that" Muslim object which in turn would logically qualify one for proper secular subjecthood; "the site of the phantasmatic promise of a rescue from… delegitimation."[55]

Unlike the drag queens that Butler discusses, Minhaj, Nanjiani, and Ansari's performances do not expose the regulatory processes that expose a "real" Muslim over the Muslim monster. The distance they seek from him, as well as the desire for "realness" is sincere,

[55] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London: Routledge, 2011), 130.

not subversive to the constructedness of both subject and object. Stanley Thangaraj has discerned a comparable trend among Desi American basketball players, whose racial legibility "is accompanied by gendered valences of *what type of man they are*, which results in greater access and maneuverability in and out of various Asian American and Latina/o ethnic categories."[56] For these comics, I see a distilled valence between three points that governs their performances. On one side is the deep-seated and visceral specter of a sexually perverse and terroristic Muslim body that vacillates quickly against and within the effeminate masculinity of the Asiatic Brown Hindoo/Hindu. Both are deficient against the third ideal neocolonial masculinity represented by white men.

If these scripts of race, religion, gender, and sexuality are written onto and read off the essentialized Muslim bodies of Hasan Minhaj, Kumail Nanjiani, and Aziz Ansari, what counter-scripts do these men enact to frustrate, destabilize, negate, or even transmogrify them into a "right" Muslim body? In what ways do the "original" scripts stay in play? The discursive possibilities and enablings brought on by the language of jokes becomes secondary to what the overall comedic performance is trying to communicate. That is to say: what the jokes *do* is not as telling, for the analysis that lies ahead at least, as what they are striving *for*. That secularized Right Muslim Man relies on the performative and illusory nature of various masculine and racial constructions. Alongside the profession of secular loyalty, this racialized masculinity turns on a common axis for all three men: the centrality and desirability of white women. Ansari and Minhaj both also tack on an affect of American Blackness to embody what Su'ad Abdul Khabeer calls "Muslim Cool," a common trend among Desi Muslims to convey American belonging and

[56] Stanley I. Thangaraj, *Desi Hoop Dreams: Pickup Basketball and the Making of Asian American Masculinity* (New York: NYU Press, 2015), 114.

fit while side-stepping aspirational whiteness. This demonstrates an "againstness" to run counter to a hegemonic order that reads largely as white.[57]

These self-articulations aim to stem the tide of fear that emanates from the deceit of an essential/essentialized Muslim masculinity. Its duality – somehow being both excessive and insufficient masculinity –is what weaponizes the South Asian Muslim body as so particularly dangerous. This two-headed duplicity functions against a correct and proper (neo)colonial masculinity. These mechanisms of religion, race, sexuality, masculinity, and humor operate together to authenticate a secular aesthetic that projects an affect of distance and difference. What ultimately gets cultivated – what "becomes" – is an *escape from* "that" Muslim body by way of flattening his own into someone/thing incapable of inflicting harm demonstrated through a desire for union with the most symbolic member of the securitized population – white women. These secular aesthetics create the conditions for the Right Muslim Man.

Conclusion

Moving forward, I find Harshita Kamath's emphasis on impersonation as an act that is "intentional or deliberate" but also unconscious and cavalier useful for thinking through Ansari, Minhaj, and Nanjiani's self-presentation.[58] If *being* Muslim is indelibly embodied, despite an

[57] While I return to this subject in Chapter 9, note that the againstness which these men embody is unlike the againstness that Sylvia Chan-Malik witnesses among Muslim women of color in her book *Being Muslim*. The embodiment of Muslimness is not the "safe harbor" that Chan-Malik describes; rather Minhaj, Ansari, and Nanjiani actively channel such embodiment into an articulation of highly visible and performative "#resistance." See also Sylvia Chan-Malik, *Being Muslim: A Cultural History of Women of Color in American Islam*, *Being Muslim* (New York: NYU Press, 2018). 34-38.

[58] Harshita Mruthinti Kamath, *Impersonations: The Artifice of Brahmin Masculinity in South Indian Dance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019). 6.

active disavowal of belief and ritual, then how far can alternative impersonations – deliberate or not – carry the comic and his comedy towards the self he wishes to achieve? For my purposes, the governing analytic of embodiment is driven by the corporeal processes of being and becoming as they relate to a set of secular aesthetics. Racial and masculine becomings contribute to an overall secular becoming, where the original state of being Muslim can/is not ever fully abandoned.

I am not committed to a Deleuzian sense of "becoming" which leaves behind historical preconditions to "create something new."[59] Rather, the utility of this terminology unfurls in the procession, its ongoing-ness through abstraction and impersonation. An ongoing performance signals less the unfinished work of life and more of a queered failure to arrive at the desired destination at all.[60] What gets abstracted as a "gag" for laughs in order to demonstrate one's authentic "realness"? How does becoming help us understand the inherent precarity and instability of the performance to begin with? The coming chapters consider these questions alongside the counter-scripts that Ansari, Minhaj, and Nanjiani set into motion.

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[59] Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations 1972-1990*, trans. Martin Joughin, Revised edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 171.

[60] Halberstam registers the queer art of failure as "turn[ing] on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being." See Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 88.

CHAPTER 6: AZIZ ANSARI AND COUNTERSCRIPTING FUNNY CUTE

> Indian people could only say something, like, four years ago, okay? We've had a slow rise in the culture. You know who the first Indian person I saw on MTV was? Me! It's taken a minute.
>
> - Aziz Ansari, *Right Now*[1]

Introduction

Aziz Ansari recognizes and responds to the colonial and neocolonial scripts that his body evokes primarily through the production of comedy. He has the most prolific body of work of the three men I study, beginning his career by taking jobs that caricatured his own physicality to the delight of colleagues and audiences. The good will garnered through those performances eventually led to Ansari helming his own show with full creative license, in which the caricatures were displaced from his body onto adjacent Muslim ones. Ansari began earning national accolades as early as 2005, when a narrow side column story *Rolling Stone* magazine deemed his weekly show at the United Citizens Brigade Theater in Manhattan as "the place to catch new talent."[2] His work since then, from individual comedy specials to *Master of None*, have all scripted a self that is referential of Ansari's South Asian Muslim body.

This self has been years in the making, working towards "becoming" a Right Muslim Man. He is not an agency-less sycophant to secularism. Ansari is assertive in his effort to clarify himself through the desirable appearance of a progressive, neocolonial Muslim masculinity. He is also assertive of what he is not; not (so) foreign, not a terrorist, not the tropes otherwise so visible in their industry. "Look," Ansari tells a reporter:

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[1] Spike Jonze, *Aziz Ansari: Right Now* (Netflix, 2019).

[2] Mark Binelli, "Hot Stand-Up," *Rolling Stone*, October 6, 2005, https://web.archive.org/web/20080228180218/http://azizisbored.com/img/rollingstone.jpg.

> If there are kind of like these two visions of America, our show [*Master of None*] definitely takes place in the other America. Most of the time, you're following me, a brown guy, and I'm doing stuff that brown guys don't do in the other vision of America. I'm not just working in a convenience store serving white people sodas. I'm not part of a sleeper cell. I'm not giving my white friend dating advice and totally inept with women, like, "Ooh, I've never seen a bra before!" This show is firmly rooted in the other path the country is headed toward.[3]

Why that "other" America(n) path may be problematic in its own right, especially towards those resemble himself, does not concern Ansari. His labor is spent on cultivating a self, not its backdrop. In this chapter, I examine the ways that Aziz Ansari performs and frames himself through dress, comportment, and affect to respond to the broader discourses of race, masculinity, modernity, securitization, and religion that are elicited through his bodily presence.

Funny Cute and Sartorial Deliberations

This self and its attendant Desi masculinity were the subject of Ali Na's "#AzizAnsariToo?," where she examines the characters Tom Haverford in *Parks and Recreation* and Dev Shah in *Master of None*. Na suggests that the performativity of Ansari's own sexuality merge with Tom and Dev in a performance of "funny cute," where the tropes of effeminate "Desi masculinity" blend with "cuteness" to affirm the appearance of incapacity and helplessness.[4] Funny cute is held in opposition to funny sexy, reifying heterosexual and procreative intelligibilities through whiteness. Ansari's funny cute is produced through the enactment of slapstick humor and his own racialization, where the obstacles he constantly trips over are the sexually encoded norms of white masculinity. "Cutification" converges on

[3] Jada Yuan, "Aziz Ansari Wanted to Be the Great Uniter and Ended Up an Activist," *New York Magazine*, May 1, 2017.

[4] Ali Na, "#AzizAnsariToo?: Desi Masculinity in America and Performing Funny Cute," *Women's Studies in Communication* 42, no. 3 (July 24, 2019): 308-326, 317.

objectification to provoke antagonism and even violence towards Ansari for an underlying yet attributable sexual deviance. Na sees the active denial of Ansari's agency over the course of these performances and his own performativity.

I do not read such a cumulative loss of agency across Ansari's career, however. Na fittingly argues that "funny cute" emerges out of the coupling of sexual effeminacy and sexual threat that are inscribed onto and embraced by Ansari in his performances and person. I also see a deliberate counter-articulation that takes those previous inscriptions into account by quite literally fashioning himself as something distant from them. Ansari's conscious attire, for example, has consistently caught the eyes of magazines like *Gentleman's Quarterly* (or *GQ*), who in 2016 call him "one of the Most Stylish Men in the World Right Now," continuing that "it's not really surprising… His closet is teeming with classic (if high-end) pieces from Saint Laurent and a whole arsenal of pared-down basics from Band of Outsiders" (pictured here).[5] Unlike other comics, Ansari is lauded for "want[ing] to tell you the brands he likes and what he's thinking."[6] All of his recorded comedic work since *Human Giant* (though

Figure 4: Ansari in a high-low outfit, graphic t-shirt and shawl-collar dinner jacket.

[5] Jake Woolf, "Aziz Ansari Is the Unsung Hero of Minimal Style," *GQ*, April 19, 2016, https://www.gq.com/gallery/aziz-ansari-style-pictures-gallery-sneakers.

[6] Max Berlinger, "The Secret to Aziz Ansari's Stylish Master of None Wardrobe," *GQ*, May 17, 2017, https://www.gq.com/story/aziz-ansari-master-of-none-style-interview.

notably not in his post-#MeToo special *Right Now*) have seen him fitted in suits or a "high-low" style, where one pairs a designer piece with another more mass-produced brand. This concerted emphasis on dressing well, he has said, was initially a knock against most comedians that wore t-shirts and jeans as well as a play towards the "showman" type. "Now, when I don't do it, it feels like I'm - not phoning it in, but it just feels more proper when I'm dressed up."[7]

Ansari's clothes are a calculative and differentiating presence in how he stages himself in comedy routines, his television show, and the everyday presence. In *Parks and Recreation*, Ansari's character Tom Haverford was always seen in a variety of suits from the boy's collection at Brooks Brothers Boys ("their cuts are slimmer" - a deprecating joke picking on Ansari/Tom's body frame).[8] The emphasis on suits, however, came from Ansari himself. During a party Ansari himself threw for Band of Outsider's designer Scott Sternberg during New York Fashion Week, he told a reporter "Early in *Parks*, I met with them about like, what is this guy going to be like? And I was like, let's make him really into suits."[9] That penchant was later written into one of the show's most frequently recalled catchphrases, "treat yo' self!," a yearly event in the *Parks and Rec* universe for Tom and his colleague Donna to buy their most extravagant cravings ranging from clothes, massages, fine leather goods, cashmere socks, velvet pants, and even "sushi made from fish previously owned by celebrities."[10] By the show's end in 2015, "treat yo' self!" had

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[7] Kelefa, "Funny Person."

[8] David Rogers, "Media Blitz," *Parks and Recreation* (NBC, February 17, 2011); Shapeero, "94 Meetings."

[9] Alex Frank, "Style Interview: Aziz Ansari," The FADER, February 8, 2013, https://www.thefader.com/2013/02/08/interview-aziz-ansari.

[10] *Treat Yo' Self Through the Years - Parks and Recreation (Mashup)* (YouTube, 2019), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AU0h7TlZGO4.

become synonymous with Tom's profligacy and the acute business sensibilities developed in order to keep up with his purchases.

Ansari's interest in the finer things has also been a recurring subject in early comedy sets like 2010's *Intimate Moments for a Sensual Evening*. Here, he scrutinizes inaccurate bedsheet thread counts.

> All I know about sheets is, the higher the thread count, the better the sheet, right? ... So I'm looking around, trying to find some nice sheets. I see this brand called Hotel Luxury Linens. 600-thread count. That sounds fancy too, right? Got a girl back at your place, she's like, 'oh, my God. Did we just teleport to a five-star hotel?' "Nah, baby. These are just Hotel Luxury Linens. By the way, the technology for teleportation doesn't exist yet, you must be kind of stupid." So I grabbed the sheets and I get them home. And I'm psyched to put them on my bed, right? And I feel them and they feel a little rough to the touch. I get a little suspicious. I do a little googling. I find an investigative report in *Southern Living* magazine, where they investigated thread count claims, an issue that definitely needed delving into. And they had a little chart, and it said "brand, advertised thread count, actual thread count." So it's like, "Brand, Wamsutta, Advertised, 500, Actual, 497. Brand, Soft Sheets, Advertised, 600, Actual, 600. Brand, Hotel Luxury Linens, Advertised, 600, Actual… 296!" Are you shitting me, man? I almost slept on that shit! 296 is sandpaper, as far as I'm concerned. If that was a drug deal, I would have shot Hotel Luxury Linens in the face. Where the rest of my threads? You didn't think I was gonna count that shit, motherfucker?![11]

The lure of prominently indulging has even created a dissonance between what Ansari himself wants to wear and what his character on *Master of None*, an actor without a consistent paycheck, would be able to afford. "I just wore my own clothes. But people have been asking me on Twitter where I got such-and-such a jacket from and I can't tell them it's Saint Laurent… hey, you know what brands look really good on me? The most expensive ones!"[12]

This type of conspicuous consumption quite literally robes Ansari in a secular aesthetic; the trappings of hard-earned luxury and money express a demonstrable investment in the

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[11] Ansari and Woliner, *Intimate Moments for a Sensual Evening*.

[12] Dan Rookwood, "Mr Aziz Ansari," Mr Porter, November 19, 2015, https://www.mrporter.com/en-us/journal/fashion/mr-aziz-ansari-798362.

offerings of late stage capitalism and its "favorite child," the cosmopolitan fashion industry.[13] Mainstreamed clothing choices that signal upward mobility buy Ansari not just a degree of "model minority" social access into the secular, but they temper the Muslimicity that otherwise radiates off his skin.[14]

Overt sartorial displays draw laughter as Tom Haverford. But where Ansari increasingly controls the narrative arc and performance of humor like those in his self-composed comedy specials and *Master of None* the clothes drape and impersonate a desirable masculine form – dressed to the nines, always well-tailored, seemingly ready for a spread in *Esquire* and *GQ* (and often getting one). Indeed, his frequent inclusion in *GQ* – a "flagship of men's fashion and style in America" – would indicate a venerable legibility among the progressive mainstream.[15] The comedy of Ansari's jurisdiction ceases to be slapstick and physical; it no longer resides in the spectacle of his attire against his racialized body. The audience is directed to appreciate what adorns the body instead, orienting their laughter away from the emanating Muslimicity towards what amusing observations Ansari may tender instead; all enabled by distance and impersonation.

Ansari's Right Muslim Man

[13] Valerie Steele, "A Museum of Fashion Is More Than a Clothes-Bag," *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture* 2, no. 4 (December 1998): 327–35.

[14] By *Muslimicity*, I mean an optical gradient of Muslim difference that gets read off of a person at any given moment, which can then be turned "up" or "down" by way of affect, demeanor, and comportment in order to non-verbally communicate one's association with the amalgam we call Islam.

[15] "Condé Nast - GQ," accessed June 11, 2020, https://www.condenast.com/brands/gq.

Vestiges of a similar positional distance appear in Ansari's standup routines, where he appeals to his own modernness in opposition to the men who may otherwise physically resemble him. In *Buried Alive*, Ansari mentions to his audience that he would like to get married, but is not sure when. He immediately cuts to a recollection of a family trip to India:

> I spent a lot of time with a cousin of mine that lives there. He's around my age. And it was really fascinating to me the dichotomy of our two lives. My life is totally different because I was born and raised in America and he was born and raised in this poor part of India where my family is originally from. My family's originally from a poor part of India. They're not from the part of India 'study abroad programs' are based. They're from like the South Carolina of India. It's pretty rough … there was less sexuality there. Women are dressed more conservatively. There's not like sexy posters and magazine covers everywhere. It's a way different vibe. I came back to New York after that trip and I was like, "I wanna fuck everything!"… I don't think he [my cousin] is dating or anything like that. He'll probably have an arranged marriage. A lot of people in India still have arranged marriages. My dad had an arranged marriage. It was to my mom. That's how they arranged it.[16]

In this set, Ansari has rhetorically distanced himself not just from the picture of the undersexed and obviously pent-up Indian Muslim man, he has given him a body to occupy and a place in which to exist in relation to Ansari's own body and his environs. "That" Muslim becomes his cousin, or even his father, set up in comparison to himself. His Americanness – being, in his words, "born and raised" have regulated his sexuality into something both healthy, legible, and relatable to his audience. This is a man that "makes sense," he is the Right Muslim Man. This recognition is scaffolded by the progressive consensus, where Ansari's own relation to Islam functions as a racial affinity and his political messaging stays within the equivocal dictates of secular multiculturalism. The content of this joke lingers in the shallows, acknowledging that arranged marriage might feel strange to those unaccustomed to the practice and reassures them of its ubiquity, though not, notably, why this audience would find it so strange to begin with.

[16] Will Lovelace and Dylan Southern, *Aziz Ansari: Buried Alive* (Netflix, 2013).

Ansari takes an analogous rhetorical dip in his roundly applauded "political" SNL monologue:

> Hate crimes and stuff are on the rise. You know, as far as people in my own skin tone, brown people. I think part of the problem is a lot of these people, they just haven't interacted with any brown people in their normal life. The only people they see are these monsters in the news who are just a drop in the ocean. Maybe what needs to happen is when they do the news report, they should do a second report about some other brown people that are just up to normal stuff — just to calm those people down. So the reports are like: "The suspects are considered armed and dangerous. Not armed and dangerous — these four other Muslim people that are eating nachos in Chicago. Let's go to footage of them. Uh-oh, looks like Nasir just spilled a little cheese on his khakis! Got a little overambitious with that last dip! We've all been there!"… A lot of people are Islamophobic, which doesn't make sense on paper because you know the God in Islam is the same God that was revealed to Abraham. Judaism, Christianity, same God. But people are scared. Why? Because any time they watch movies, and TV shows, and a character is Arabic, or they're praying or something like that, that scary-ass music from *Homeland* is underneath it [intones Arabic], it's terrifying! People are like, "Aah! What are they saying?" Just "God is good"! Normal religion stuff! It's okay! You want to end Islamophobia? Honestly, just change that music. Like, if the music was different, if it was just like [miming salat to the tune of *The Benny Hill Show* theme] people would be like, "Man, Islam's one whimsical religion, isn't it?"[17]

Figure 5: Ansari on Saturday Night Live on January 22, 2016, exclaiming, "Aah! What are they saying?"

The storyboard of Ansari's joke centers and stems from within a secular and racialized logic: the fears of "people" – unmarked in the sketch, but heavily implied to be white and non-Muslim –

[17] Ansari, "Aziz Ansari Saturday Night Live Monologue."

are tenable towards "brown people," but only because of media sensationalism and packaging. He emphatically acts out the situation – voice rising, Ansari impersonates a Muslim praying, eyes squinting as they shift side to side, while intoning Arabic-like sounds that he identifies as "that scary-ass music from *Homeland*" but is more a mangled approximation of the adhan. He recoils with a jump as the terrified viewer, before switching back to his placatory self, briefly an insider assuring the outsider that illegible Arabic translates to "normal religion stuff."[18] The punchline for this setup comes from imagining wacky possibilities to palliate fears of the Muslim "monster."

In each, the Muslim is defanged from the state of being "dangerous," "Arabic," or "praying." The result is mundane, depoliticized, and even clown-like – all incapacitated of their ability to disturb a broader social order. These are not somber policy prescriptions, of course, but Ansari's commentary intentionally moralizes that anti-Muslim hostility is a social ill. But his audience is decidedly not held accountable for its pervasiveness. The brunt of the solution is borne by the amorphous "media," not the audience that enacts and acts on anti-Muslim hostility as its gatekeepers. The figure of the Muslim is unagential or has agency but of no consequence. He is collapsed into a joke.

The Secular Side of Sex

The *SNL* monologue was among Ansari's most timely and risky political material. Ansari's image as a measured political comedian, however, was forged through his foray into topics like gay marriage and feminism in the early 2010s. This was a relatively safe play for Ansari and his target demographic of young people, among whom opposition to same-sex

[18] Ansari, "Aziz Ansari Saturday Night Live Monologue."

marriage was well under 40% by 2009 while broader opposition across the U.S. dipped below the 50% mark the next year.[19] When Ansari declared himself a feminist on *The Late Show with David Letterman*, he frames it as a straightforward, easy-sell clause of the legally-enshrined principle of equality, not the hard-sell of intersectional and otherwise-divisive issues like reproductive rights or violence against women. "If you look up feminist in the dictionary," he reasoned with Letterman, "it just means someone who believes men and women have equal rights. And I feel that everyone here believes men and women have equal rights… The word is so weirdly used in our culture. Now, people think feminist means, like, some woman is gonna start yelling at them."[20] Ansari's vision of feminism is not acrimonious and will not moralize in the ways that killjoys would otherwise. He syncs that progressive but no-trouble-here type of optimism to his performances on stage. In his special, *Live from Madison Square Garden*, Ansari self-identifies by postulating what he is not; in this case, a "creepy dude:"

> Creepy dudes are everywhere, and they're so much more prevalent than I ever realized. And it really sucks, 'cause women have to worry about creepy dudes all the time. And it's very unfair because men never worry about creepy women. Like, men never are concerned about creepy women. That's not a thing. There's never been two dudes, walking alone, late night in a park, like, "Hey, man, I think we should speed up." – "Why, what's going on?" – "I'm pretty sure that woman behind the tree is masturbating to us!" – "Oh, God… Should we get a cab? Should we just keep running? Ahh!" No two dudes have ever faced that dilemma… No guy here has any story like that. Every woman

[19] A 59% majority of young people between the ages of 18-29 years agreed that same-same marriage should be recognized as valid, with 37% opposed in a Gallup poll taken between May 7-10, 2009. More broadly in the same poll, a majority of 57% across demographics remained in opposition. By the next year across the population, 48% opposed same-sex marriage while 42% favored it. The Pew poll also noted that pluralities of white Protestants and Catholics also favored same-sex marriage. See Jeffrey Jones, "Majority of Americans Continue to Oppose Gay Marriage," Gallup.com, May 27, 2009, https://news.gallup.com/poll/118378/Majority-Americans-Continue-Oppose-Gay-Marriage.aspx; Tom Rosentiel, "Gay Marriage Gains More Acceptance," *Pew Research Center* (blog), October 6, 2010, https://www.pewresearch.org/2010/10/06/gay-marriage-gains-more-acceptance/.

[20] *Late Show with David Letterman: Aziz Ansari Is a Feminist*, Talk Show, Late Show with David Letterman (CBS, 2014), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2-5xvpbDN4M&feature=emb_logo.

> in here has at least three stories like that. I promise you they do. Creepy dudes are everywhere, man.[21]

The abstraction *out* of the "creepy dude" demonstrates both positional distance and a feminist understanding of this quotidian experience for women. His concern, coupled with affective horror and an absurdist impersonation, places Ansari squarely in the camp of "good feminist ally" for both highlighting the problem and showing himself to not be a part of it. Much like the *SNL* monologue, Ansari does not push so far as to become disagreeable. The "creepy dudes" are always referred to in third person, never first or second. While they exist somewhere in the social sphere he occupies, he stops short of asking his audience to probe their own participation in such actions. The joke can continue, and Ansari emerges scot-free because no one believes themselves to be in danger or among the dangerous.

In *Buried Alive*, Ansari describes a similar honest bewilderment that (in the year 2013) there was still opposition to gay marriage across the United States.

> All the demographics that are really opposed to gay marriage, they're all gonna be dead soon. Like, whenever they ask young people, young people are like, "What, what are you talking about? All music is free right now. What the fuck are you talking about? Oh, two dudes are kissing? I'm about to watch every movie ever right now." They don't care at all. But seriously, how do you not know you're on the losing team at this point? These are the same people that were opposed to like uh, women voting or black dudes playing baseball. What was the last thing they were opposed to? Interracial relationships. If you're opposed to interracial relationships, guess what? I'm fucking white girls. There's nothing you can do about it. Any time I have sex with a white girl, I think about those people for a few pumps and it's such a great feeling… Seriously, all of you here, next time you have sex with someone of a different race, think about those people for a minute– you really should do this. It's very important. It's your duty as an American, and I promise you, nothing feels better than orgasming while thinking about all the progress we've made in civil rights in this country. I still can't believe it's an issue. It just baffles my mind.[22]

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[21] Aziz Ansari, *Aziz Ansari: Live in Madison Square Garden* (Netflix, 2015).

[22] Lovelace and Southern, *Aziz Ansari: Buried Alive*.

In addition to presenting himself as agreeable and far from what his audience might consider discord, Ansari impersonates a masculine form that hinges on the progressive consensus. He is referential of his racialized Muslim body because it lends further significance to his broadminded politics. He is a minority but not problematic: he is feminist, anti-racist, and anti-homophobic, unlike those incongruous demographics that "are all gonna be dead soon." He is the new all-American, an ideal secular subject forged in the crucible of the political moment. His disbelief – both here towards those opposed to gay marriage and in the Madison Square Garden bit about creepy dudes – conveys such distance in both Ansari's mentality and living arrangements/associations that the very existence of that other is baffling. How is *x* possible when I and everyone I know and mingle with are *y*?

Authenticating Desire

Part of that Americanness hinges on Ansari's explicit foregrounding of white women in this segment. He is projecting himself in political defiance of white supremacy by explicitly detailing his erotic desire of white women, the crowned and protected objects of male desire. The history of lynching, hyper Black male sexuality, and anti-Black racism underlies the setup of this guaranteed applause-line joke. Ansari's performance of masculinity recognizes this history by not only aligning in solidarity with it, but in siphoning some of that sexuality for his public self. His body speaks through triangulation; on one end, Ansari is decidedly not the perverse Muslim of sexual extremes. On the other, he is the Right Muslim Man, a political liberal that, like all other sexually "correct" men, has and enjoys sex with white women. This three-noded conversation speaks and performs masculinity for the gatekeepers of "correct" masculinity, white women, and secular subjecthood: white men.

This conversation is a recurrent feature of Ansari's catalogue and materializes as a common thread in both seasons of *Master of None*. Episode One of the series opens in the dark to the sound of two people having sex. The hushed atmosphere breaks as Ansari's protagonist, Dev Shah, yells "fuck, fuck! The condom broke!"[23] He and his partner, a white woman named Rachel, go back and forth about whether the break warranted purchasing an emergency contraceptive. The remainder of the episode chronicles the awkwardness that accompanies Dev and Rachel, two relative strangers, as they venture into the city to buy Plan B and avoid the possibility of raising a child together. Rachel reappears in episode three and remains Dev's regular love interest (though he does have an affair for a single episode arc with a woman named Nina, played by Claire Danes) for the remainder of the season.

Season 2 follows a similar trajectory, where a tense, will-they-won't-they between Dev and his Italian friend Francesca culminates in her leaving her fiancé for him. The fourth episode of season two, titled "First Date," is a montage of Dev's dates with several different women he met on a dating app. This standalone episode aims to validate the monotony of connecting with strangers while also establishing Ansari's non-particularity when it comes to dating. One of the women he sees, Priya, asks Dev if he only dates other Indians. "No," he insists, "I date people of different ethnicities, skin tones."[24] On another date, he remarks to a Black woman that "I did read somewhere that the people that do worst on the apps are Asian men and black women." She and Dev roll their eyes and clink their glasses. "Well, it's great white people finally have an advantage somewhere. To white people!" A montage follows of Dev being driven home in a taxi, though each cut is with a different woman. In every instance, he leans in for a kiss but is

[23] Aziz Ansari and Alan Yang, "Plan B," *Master of None* (Netflix, 2015).

[24] Aziz Ansari and Alan Yang, "First Date," *Master of None* (Netflix, 2016).

met with uneven success. Some of the women consent, and Dev respectfully retreats when the others do not.

These are moments of distinction from the general arc of the series, a B storyline that signifies a deeply-held tedium and predictability surrounding dating but also illustrates Ansari/Dev's "good-faith" efforts at meeting a wide pool of women. When the show returns to its A story, co-starring Francesca, the love interest, the endurance of white women as the ultimate object of desire feels less stark and obvious, having been punctured by such deliberate standalone plots and accompanying dialogue. During the two-part episode finale of that season, Dev's pursuit of Francesca takes on a dream-like countenance; scenes of them together are filled with joyous scampering, scenic vistas, and Italian music. That evening, the camera captures Francesca through a warmly-hued filter. She wears nothing but an oversized white dress shirt and dances in Dev's kitchen as snow falls peacefully outside the window. In that moment, she is a heightened fantasy. Her whiteness is a component of that picture, not incidental to it.

Figure 6: Screenshot of "Amarsi Un Po," episode 9, season 2 of Master of None.

Racialized Triangulation

Ansari's impersonation of "correct" masculinity in *Master of None* subdues affiliation with the Muslim monster. Through an interchangeability with Indianness and Hinduism, the Islam that would otherwise be read on Ansari's person is modulated and subordinated into a more-legible race that experiences racism in Hollywood and popular media, rather than the more complex nature of anti-Muslim hostility. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Ansari is adamant that he does not consciously try to appeal to white people. "Absolutely not," he avers. "Definitely don't care what white people think. I just try to make stuff that I think is good and hopefully people like it, regardless of their race or gender or anything... If I was trying to please white people I would probably have done a goofy Indian accent early in my career and gotten parts."[25]

Notwithstanding that intentionality of responding to whiteness, Ansari nonetheless takes on the topic of forced accents in the episode "Indians on TV." After declining to do a stereotypical Indian accent for an audition as a taxi driver, Dev runs into his friend Ravi, who is also auditioning, in the waiting room. They get coffee together afterwards and Dev laments that he is sure the role will go to someone else because of his refusal.

> Isn't it frustrating, so much of the stuff we go out for is just stereotypes? Cab driver, scientist, IT guy… Look, I get it. There probably is a Pradeep who runs a convenience store, and I have nothing against him, but why can't there be a Pradeep just once who's, like, an architect, or he designs mittens or does one of the jobs Bradley Cooper's characters do in movies?[26]

Ansari, inadvertently or not, has once more given a name and body to the masculine forms he defines himself against, this time a masculinity that he/his character aspire towards while also

[25] Jones, "Aziz Ansari: 'I Try to Write Political Material … Then Get Tired of It.'"

[26] Aziz Ansari and Alan Yang, "Indians on TV," *Master of None* (Netflix, 2015).

recognizing that racism may preclude that possibility. “Well, I just can’t wait for that. I got to work,” says Ravi. In the remainder of the episode sees Dev accidentally copied on an email chain from a studio executive, Jerry, who enjoyed both Dev and Ravi’s auditions but argues “but there can’t be two.”[27]

The rest of the plot sees Dev threaten to leak the email, earning him an in-person apology from the executive and additional perks like courtside seats to see the Knicks and an invitation to an exclusive party with other industry celebrities. He ultimately concedes to Jerry’s logic that he himself may not be a racist, but two Indians just “wouldn’t be relatable to a large mainstream audience.” Dev rationalizes this to Ravi and their weightlifting friend Anush back at his apartment, declaring:

> There’s more Indians popping up every now and then, but we’re like set decoration. We’re not the ones doing the main stuff. We’re not fucking the girls and all that stuff. We’re just not there yet. There can be one, but there can’t be two, you know? Black people just got to ‘there can be two’ status, you know? Even then, though, there can’t be three, because then it’s, like, a Black show.[28]

In the end, neither Dev nor Ravi end up with the role. Ansari has constructed two parallel narratives through this episode and the overall show. Mikhail Bakhtin might call this a form of heteroglossia, where “a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships... through different languages and speech types” emerge through dialogue of the characters, bodily performance, scene direction, and the overall authorial vision for the work.[29]

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[27] Ansari and Yang, “Indians on TV.”

[28] Ansari and Yang, “Indians on TV.”

[29] Mikhail Mikhaĭlovich Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, University of Texas Press Slavic Series 1 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981). 262-263.

First, there is the "story" of the episode, of Dev and Ravi, of the racism bred into Hollywood that gets reproduced by self-avowed liberals, and of the fascination for a visual performance of the "foreign." But there is also Ansari's own voice and the work of *Master of None* as a package that gives these conversations an honest platform, depicting the disappointment and humiliation of being asked to do an accent while acknowledging that the limited opportunities for Indian actors mean someone else will. As Dev expresses regret that he cannot play the role of someone who "designs mittens" or is "fucking the girls," Ansari chooses to write and portray Dev with a depth the industry would otherwise deprive him of. Dev is always well dressed, he is an actor and eventual gameshow host, he is a foodie who travels to Italy to learn the art of pasta-making – a clear departure from the stereotypes Dev (and Ansari) are asked to play. He is also virile and sexually considerate of his many romantic partners, so much so that those romantic successes result in the A story for both seasons. Dev's relationship with Rachel and the question of when to "settle down" into a pedestrian marriage commands the first season; the second is occupied with whether Dev should pursue a forbidden love with the engaged Francesca given how exhausting and fraught dating in the 21st century has become for the upwardly-mobile millennial. The right to choice, to "choose" love wherever it is found, centralizes the individual and his secular right to self-serve.

As Dev and Ravi argue over "set decoration" in "Indians on TV," their friend Anush does burpees and lifts kettlebells in the kitchen. The scene plays out a non-verbalized joke: lamenting that there cannot be two South Asians in a show when three are simultaneously appearing on-screen together. Ansari inserts an additional subtext to this scene through the inclusion of Anush. The latter's presence throughout the episode, even as a secondary character, is an embodied response to the central premise of racist typecasting in this episode: a tall, handsome, Indian

bodybuilder. The camera lingers on Anush as he completes one pushup after another, sometimes even as Dev and Ravi bicker off screen. The tall, Hollywood-certified version of masculine handsome that Anush embodies (not Ansari's signature "funny cute" but "funny sexy" as Ali Na might say) conveys availability for "the jobs Bradley Cooper's characters do in movies."[30]

Figure 7: Screenshot from "Indians on TV," Episode 4, Season 1 of Master of None.

Ansari's heteroglossia sets out to demonstrate the dissonance that exist between visions of masculinity. But instead of critiquing the values ascribed onto them, he positions himself as eager and ready to meet and return their volley. There is little interest exhibited in lifting up alternatives to the masculinity espoused by white U.S. men, just in pointing out the unfair imposition of perversity on Brown bodies. "This show is firmly rooted in the other path the country is headed toward" – for him, a swapping of skin that need not challenge the hegemony of neocolonial masculinity.[31]

[30] Ansari and Yang, "Indians on TV"; Na, "#AzizAnsariToo?," 318.

[31] Yuan, "Aziz Ansari Wanted to Be the Great Uniter and Ended Up an Activist."

Failing the Secular

These articulations are hard fought; they are conceived, designed, enacted, and reproduced over time. Yet this carefully crafted becoming also rests on precarious ground. The Right Muslim Man is an unstable category in the face of hegemonies like secularism, white supremacy, capitalism, and anti-Muslim hostility and it requires constant maintenance on stage and off. How convincing is Ansari in his act of becoming, and what happens in the event of failure? What is foreclosed when there is a break in maintenance, intentional or unintentional, and they do not to meet the exigencies of this order? Does the Right Muslim Man collapse back into the trenchant *homo islamicus* he has so ardently insisted against?

I believe these breaks are inevitable and, in the case of Ansari, have already come to pass. How a comic like Ansari responds to secular failure enlightens a corner of this religious studies project as we consider what humor can ultimately tell us about Islam as it lives in the world today. The immanence of failure, I would say, derives from its contingency on a set of already unstable projects: that of racial taxonomies, glib binaries, and the temporal assumptions embedded into notions of progress, modernity, and lifecycles. If legibility demands being and becoming within these secular boundaries (especially when one never "really arrives" at the desired destination of subjectivity) then there is little give in terms of alternative possibilities. Failing the secular may very well mean falling back onto the static and entrenched notions of Islam's illegible danger, toxic masculinity, and sexual perversity.

Aziz Ansari had, until 2017, vigorously pursued a proper neocolonial masculine subjectivity in his on and off-stage personas. It was for this reason that the fallout of his #MeToo moment particularly riled corners of the American media literati and progressive-consensus advocates. His #MeToo moment came within a year of the *Master of None* launch. On January

13, 2018, the now defunct website *babe.net* published an account by a woman anonymized as Grace, who detailed Ansari's aggressive sexual advances and disregard for her discomfort over the course of an evening she spent with him in September 2017.[32] She detailed to reporter Katie Way how Ansari quickly wrapped up their dinner and invited her back to his apartment, through there was still food on the plates and wine undrunk. Minutes within entering the apartment, Ansari escalated their interactions sexually, though she repeatedly asked that they "relax for a sec" and "chill." Grace would try to distance herself from Ansari used verbal and non-verbal cues, writes Way, "but he wouldn't let her move away." He continued to put his fingers in her mouth, pantomime sex with her, and gesture for her to touch his penis.

She left his apartment in tears and ultimately understood the evening's interactions to be sexual assault. "It took a really long time for me to validate this as sexual assault," Grace said, "I was debating if this was an awkward sexual experience or sexual assault." The column would go on to spur a national debate ranging from whether this kind of "ordinary bad date" could be lumped into a movement meant to take down serial rapists like Harvey Weinstein to the insistence that the "ordinary" nature of this date needed to be re-examined for its power dynamics and rules of consent. For his part, Ansari released an apology through his agent that all engagements with Grace had seemed consensual, he had taken "her words to heart." He also, the statement said, continued to support the #MeToo reckoning as "necessary and long overdue."[33]

Social and news media responses were prolific. Some pointed out that this allegation of misconduct felt like a way to take down a successful man of color for far less than the likes of

[32] Katie Way, "I Went on a Date with Aziz Ansari. It Turned into the Worst Night of My Life," January 13, 2018, https://babe.net/2018/01/13/aziz-ansari-28355.

[33] Way, "I Went on a Date with Aziz Ansari."

Harvey Weinstein, Louis C.K., and other white men. "As I reflected on the controversy further, I began to feel angry. My thoughts turned to blaming the woman, the journalist, and the website for publishing the piece in the first place," wrote Omer Aziz in The New Republic. "I wanted to denounce the whole thing as a racialized hit job, an instance of a woman trying to bring down a good brown man. Wasn't there a double-standard here?"[34]

Bari Weiss of the *New York Times* penned an aggravated op-ed replete with disbelief that Grace, and her fellow young feminists, did not/do not simply walk away. She added that Ansari did not have the power Grace attributed to him. "He had no actual power over the woman — professionally or otherwise," she says. "And lumping him in with the same movement that brought down men who ran movie studios and forced themselves on actresses, or the factory-floor supervisors who demanded sex from female workers, trivializes what #MeToo first stood for."[35] *The Atlantic*'s Caitlin Flanagan was even more stark in her assessment:

> Twenty-four hours ago—this is the speed at which we are now operating—Aziz Ansari was a man whom many people admired and whose work, although very well paid, also performed a social good. He was the first exposure many young Americans had to a Muslim man who was aspirational, funny, immersed in the same culture that they are. Now he has been—in a professional sense—assassinated, on the basis of one woman's anonymous account… I thought it would take a little longer for the hit squad of privileged young white women to open fire on brown-skinned men. I had assumed that on the basis of intersectionality and all that, they'd stay laser focused on college-educated white men for another few months. But we're at warp speed now, and the revolution—in many ways so good and so important—is starting to sweep up all sorts of people into its conflagration: the monstrous, the cruel, and the simply unlucky. Apparently there is a whole country full of young women who don't know how to call a cab, and who have spent a lot of time picking out pretty outfits for dates they hoped would be nights to remember. They're angry and temporarily powerful, and last night they destroyed a man who didn't deserve it.[36]

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[34] Omer Aziz, "Aziz Ansari and Me," *The New Republic*, January 19, 2018, https://newrepublic.com/article/146663/aziz-ansari.

[35] Bari Weiss, "Aziz Ansari Is Guilty. Of Not Being a Mind Reader," *New York Times*, January 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/15/opinion/aziz-ansari-babe-sexual-harassment.html.

[36] Caitlin Flanagan, "The Humiliation of Aziz Ansari," *The Atlantic*, January 14, 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/01/the-humiliation-of-aziz-ansari/550541/.

In the logics set out by these two editorialists, both of whom openly write from their positionality as white women, holding Ansari's feet to the fire for being "awkward, gross and entitled" signaled that these "modern" feminists are "weak" for allowing such male aggression to go unchecked.[37] Ansari is both belligerent and inept in his sexual pursuit, a special sort of danger because he inhabits both positions. He is not a true predator, but even if he was, you could have easily stopped him. Ansari's masculinity is a paradox that leaves him unaccountable, while his victim is made doubly misguided for the misconduct done unto her and for speaking publicly about it.

Still others simply could not wrap their heads around Ansari possessing any sexual might over women at all. In late 2018, *The New York Times*'s Sopan Deb caught up with two women who went to see Ansari hash out material that would eventually turn into his special *Right Now*. When asked whether it mattered to them that he had been caught up in such a scandal, one woman said Mr. Ansari "wasn't big enough to be a physical threat."[38] The other did not correct her, but felt that Ansari should have stopped with his advances when Grace indicated her unease. This small back and forth among his fans suggests that Ansari's progressive masculine narrative, years in the making, had always been maximized on its precarity. His fall lands on a floor made sedimented by discourses of sexual perversion – both excessive and deficient – that were communicated by his racialized and gendered body. That neocolonial Muslim masculinity is "wrong" in its sexuality (at once guilty of but also physically incapable of assault), despite the

[37] Weiss uses the phrase "awkward, gross, and entitled" while Flanagan's full sentence reads "We were strong in a way that so many modern girls are weak." See Weiss, "Aziz Ansari Is Guilty. Of Not Being a Mind Reader."; Flanagan, "The Humiliation of Aziz Ansari."

[38] Deb, Sopan, "Aziz Ansari, Sidelined by Accusation, Plays to a Big Crowd Back Home," *New York Times*, September 5, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/05/arts/television/aziz-ansari-standup-charleston.html.

persona Ansari has built up to indicate his ideal subjecthood. His pursuit of legibility by other means thus remains fraught, and very much subject to the hegemonic vision that his perverse Muslim body evokes.

Ansari's Misattribution

Neocolonial constructions of masculinity failed Ansari. But he, in response and retaliation, did not forsake and fail them. Ansari went quiet for nearly a year, returning to public life with a set titled *Working Out New Material* in October of 2018. Audiences were required to place their phones in sacs that remained sealed for the duration of his performance in order to avoid leaks. Nonetheless, the *New Yorker* and others reported that Ansari's new set was an angry harangue against "extreme wokeness" and "the ever-changing standards of political correctness."[39] According to those early reports, Ansari never offered an apology during those performances. He did not acknowledge Grace or the internet fallout from the *babe.net* article, though the oblique and exasperated references to "progressive" activism could not be read as anything but reactionary.

Working Out New Material would go on to become his Netflix special *Right Now*, which premiered in July 2019. He noticeably tones down the diatribes from *New Material*; even Ansari's signature cheeriness is replaced by a soft, almost whisper-like measure for much of the show. Gone is his usual stubble, replaced by a clean shave that reveals sunken cheeks. He wears an uncharacteristic ensemble of sneakers, jeans, and a Metallica t-shirt.

[39] Orbey, "Aziz Ansari's New Standup Tour Is a Cry Against Extreme Wokeness."

Figure 4: Screenshot of Aziz Ansari comedy special Right Now, taken on June 25, 2020.

Spike Jonez's filming of the set results in a texturized and sometimes ghostly video feed. He stands intimately close to Ansari throughout the performance and the shots that result are course and granular in their presentation. The closeness is made possible only because Ansari has forgone another distinguishing feature of his comedy. In *Right Now*, he stays seated on a stool, a far cry from his bouncing-off-the-walls persona of previous specials. The routine opens with a conditional apology to Grace, whom he refers to as "that person," admitting:

> I've felt so many things in the last year, so… There's times I felt scared. There's times I felt humiliated. There's times I felt embarrassed. And ultimately, I just felt terrible that this person felt this way. And after a year or so, I just hope it was a step forward. It moved things forward for me and made me think about a lot. I hope I've become a better person. And I always think about a conversation I had with one of my friends where he was like, "You know what, man? That whole thing made me think about every date I've ever been on." And I thought, wow. Well, that's pretty incredible. It's made not just me, but other people be more thoughtful, and that's a good thing. And that's how I feel about it. And I know this isn't the most hilarious way to begin a comedy show. But it's important to me that you know how I feel about that whole thing before we share this night together.[40]

[40] Jonze, *Aziz Ansari: Right Now*.

Ansari presents himself as visibly and even aurally chastened, but also as having played a positive role for the #MeToo movement through his mistake. There is success even in error, having made other men "more thoughtful." The self-reprimand does not last for too long, however, as Ansari turns his focus on rapid progressives who seek to out-know and overperform their politics for others. After telling a fake story about someone drawing out a swastika on a pizza with pepperoni, the crowd laughs when Ansari reveals the ruse. He stops them immediately, hollering, "You're the fucking problem, okay? What are you doing? This is where we're at now? You think your opinion's so valuable you need to chime in on shit that doesn't even exist?" Ansari's distinctive reticence to "call out" his audience has all but vanished here, and he readily lashes out at those that play what he calls "progressive Candy Crush."[41] He also directs contempt towards those that criticize him for dating a white woman.

> Some people don't like it! We kind of get it on two fronts nowadays, you know? One front, we get kind of old-school, classic stuff, you know? Like, "Y'all don't match!" And you also get kind of new school stuff, like "Aziz, you're in entertainment, you shouldn't be dating outside your ethnicity, especially a white person, because that propagates ideas of white beauty being put on a pedestal!" Which is just a fancy way of saying, "Y'all don't match!" Because, look, man, I understand. I get the argument, okay? But I've dated Indian people. I've dated people of many ethnicities. But this is the person I have a deep connection with. That's very hard to find. And I'm sorry we're not the same skin tone. But I'm also kind of tired of people telling me what race person I'm allowed to date.[42]

What stands out as most egregious to Ansari is the infringement on his right to choose. Flouting this right of choice, also a key and shared tenant between secular subjects, leads a collapsing of particularities between the critiques. Denouncing the propagation "of white beauty" is likened to racism, equated as two poles of a country wrought by extremism within which Ansari simply wishes to live as he chooses. The secular aesthetic on display then is the

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[41] Jonze, *Aziz Ansari: Right Now*.

[42] Jonze, *Aziz Ansari: Right Now*.

relationship itself, a "deep connection" to which he assented. Ansari also notes that because his girlfriend is Danish, "she doesn't even understand some of the racism we deal with sometimes." For example, he says, after she found paparazzi photos of the two of them and wondered why the comments referred to her as Becky. He explains that this is "internet slang" for white women, "like the Beyoncé song." She appears tickled: "Oh! Like a slur?"[43] The joke – that this Danish woman does not understand American race or racism – exhibits an apoliticism that, when coupled with her whiteness, positions Ansari, in turn, as the authority and instructor on matters of American race in the relationship as enacted on stage.

In his re-animation, Ansari has not chosen the path of illegibility and the myriad of options within it. Rather, he has opted out of the progressive consensus sanction and continues to pursue secular subjecthood by other means. His frustrations mirror those of Bari Weiss and Caitlin Flanagan – why have the markers of injustice shifted in the direction of the ones that work hard to be "good?" Ansari is not flouting the regime of humor itself; he is flouting the particular corner that gave him rise. He is an established comedian now, though, whose platform no longer needs to model race-conscious feminism. Instead, he has literally refashioned himself to project the masculinity of a socially distanced maverick in the vein of "the classic greats." Now, his masculine self is more interested in offering comedic takes as an onlooker witnessing the absurdity of the petty, not the powerful.

Failing the secular, however, does not presume its omnipotence. In fact, if one can theorize this failure as revelation – in line with Jack Halberstam's "art of queer failure" – then the act of unbecoming unlocks the possibility for a far more capacious self-animation.[44] When no

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[43] Jonze, *Aziz Ansari: Right Now*.

[44] Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 23-25.

longer occupied with the strictures of legibility, the act of failure and refusal can lay bare the secular, the nation, and its attendant regimes of humor for their exclusionary boundaries through cross-ethnoreligious solidarities. Recall that the strictures of legibility carry their own dangers: to be visible and recognized does not prevent secular gaze and scrutiny. Indeed, legibility simply turns that gaze into a surveillance of maintenance, increasingly scrupulous of secular alignment and more exacting in punishment should one fail that alignment. The dangers of legibility link up, in many ways, with the violences that are already faced by Muslims and Muslim approximates. A firm footing in the realm of illegibility, however, enables cross-ethnoreligious solidarities and the promise of resistance, not simply the conceit of its performance. Ansari has not chosen this path, but his failure does not preclude others who tire of the secular gambit and its criteria.

Conclusion

Aziz Ansari's counterscript aims to become the Right Muslim Man and ideal secular subject through comedic affect, comportment, and dispositioning distancing from an un- and anti-modern Muslim subject. His Right Muslim Man is a proper capitalist consumer who indulges and aspires towards material luxury, mostly uninterested in politics though still against any active discrimination like racism, homophobia, and misogyny. He is surprised to learn that these are still common perspectives in the United States, but maintains optimism that they can be overcome through national solidarity. Ansari also styles himself as sexually active and places white women at the center of that sexual desire as a matter of choice and attraction. This is in contrast to "that" Muslim who is drawn as subdued, mundane, and sexually illiterate. Ansari's own persona has shifted in the months since being accused of sexual misconduct, in which the

object of his derision has shifted away from a stock illiberality towards the progressive consensus logic that enabled his rise. The masculinity he embodies is once more focused on sexuality as a matter of choice but has dispositionally distanced himself even from secular politics of multiculturalism and acceptance that he previously avowed.

CHAPTER 7: THE COUNTERSCRIPT OF HASAN MINHAJ'S "NEW BROWN AMERICA"

> Don't you realize what happened in that moment? We got our first A-list celebrity [Ben Affleck] to back the Muslim community. We got Batman, baby! He may not be the hero we want, but he is the hero the Muslim world needs.
>
> - Hasan Minhaj, *Homecoming King*[1]

Introduction

Hasan Minhaj's Right Muslim Man has more specific references to contemporary politics than Aziz Ansari, primarily due to the nature of his audiences and the experiences he draws from. Unlike Ansari, Minhaj was not raised in isolation from South Asian and Muslim communities, and unlike both Ansari and Nanjiani, he claims Islam as a believer and not simply something he was racialized into. This point of origination requires a more refined engagement with the figure of the "terrifying" Muslim. Wat values and affective realisms set "this" Muslim apart from "that" when accounting for the transnational context of Muslims in and between the United States and India?

In this chapter, I examine how Minhaj crafts his Right Muslim Man by defining these divisions most commonly along ethno-religious solidarity lines. Minhaj's secular sensibilities are shown as clarifying his understanding of U.S. racism along racialized lines. This move simultaneously flattens and demeans the particulars of ethno-religious difference outside of a U.S. context, reifying his American exceptionalism outlook. This move abides by the confines of

[1] Minhaj and Storer, *Homecoming King*.

the progressive consensus, presenting opposition to the overt racisms of hegemonic whiteness through the reinforcement of its secular ideals. He also puts forth a normative narrative of the American dream, pictures as unachieved but achievable through a shift in white perspective. Endemic to this dream is also the overt pursuit of economic mobility on the basis of the secular ideal of equality. Like Ansari, he too configures white women to the center of his sexual desire and sets up a cognitive, temporal, and geographic distance between his Right Muslim Man and those that are illegibly wrong in their Muslimness. In brief moments, Minhaj choose to inhabit illegibility through the use of untranslated jokes, something that grows in frequency as his secular platform expands.

Aspirational Whiteness

Hasan Minhaj's *Homecoming King* comes out of two years of preparation with the Moth, a New York non-profit that works with individuals to craft storytelling skills that "dance between documentary and theater."[2] The culminating set is an autobiography punctuated by standup comedy punctuated by Minhaj's life until that point, drawing from childhood memories of growing up in Davis, California to eventually joining *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. In it, Minhaj is accompanied on stage by only a stool. Large screens that take up the length of the stage stand behind him. He wears fitted dark jeans, clean white sneakers, and a button up blue shirt. His beard has been carefully trimmed and lined up, and his hair is coiffed to the back, faded along the sides.

At the heart of this story is a woman named Bethany Reed, whom Minhaj meets in his high school calculus class, the "one bright spot" of his senior year. He and Bethany pursue a

[2] "About The Moth," The Moth, 2019, http://themoth.org/about.

relatively chaste romantic relationship, instant messaging each other online and studying at each other's kitchen tables after school. Minhaj recounts his reticence to invite her to his family home, given that hers was a "white picket fence, McMansion, Ford Expedition, *Eddie Bauer edition*" type of place that materially exhibited that "they made it!"[3] Minhaj relishes the description with both an affective awe and envy as his audience claps with appreciation. Bethany's father, Minhaj notes, is a retired judge. Her mother exudes an open affection that Minhaj does not recognize as she offers home-baked brownies, asks him to stay for dinner, and inquires what interests outside of school he pursues. His response to this final question is drawn out for laughs as he stands onstage agape. "What do I like? Um…" he gulps as a look of wide confusion spreads across his face. "Nobody… Nobody has ever asked me that before."[4] The audience laughs as Minhaj straightens his back and takes a deep breath. "I guess I like acoustic guitar." Mrs. Reed encourages him to "follow your dreams," which he repeats in a stunned, internalizing mantra. "Maybe I will! Maybe I will… follow my dreams!" Bethany then asks to study at his home, which makes him recoil.

> What, invite you over to my house? You walk in, like "Ugh, what language are you guys speaking? What's on the TV? What's that smell?" I'm not going to open myself up to that kind of ridicule. But I was like, no, she's different. I hit her up, and I run down stairs and say, "Mom, Dad, a school friend is coming over. Everyone here, please try to be normal." My dad is like, "What? We are normal! [mimes eating a samosa] He's killing me, you know what I mean? "Hasan, we're normal. Humare khandan [our family] you should be proud!" Who is proud? No one is proud. You're [Minhaj's father] walking around like an Indian rooster. I'm not proud and no one is proud. We get there, we're sitting on my living room table, we're doing integrals. My mom and dad are arguing in Hindi. My mom is frying pakoras, literally the fobbiest thing ever. *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* is playing on Zee TV. Classic! But it's too much. It's all coming at this girl too fast. You've got to ease your way in. She's from Nebraska. You know what I mean? Soul cycle, yoga, and *then* Zee TV. Don't just go into it. So I'm exposed, looking at her like, "Please don't say anything. Please don't say anything." And she looks up from her book and says, "You know what? This is really nice. We should do this more often. This is

[3] Minhaj and Storer, *Homecoming King*.

[4] Minhaj and Storer, *Homecoming King.*

> really nice." And I look at her, and I'm like, "Oh, my God. I love you, my white princess!"

This scene lays out both the rhetorical and material distance between what Minhaj envisions as fundamental to him and his family and Bethany and hers. Her aspirationally "normal" environment is coded in classed terms (her father's occupation, their home, their car, their choice of dessert) as well as a cultural calm and kindness that Minhaj plays as having never experienced. An earlier joke about his parents' "conditional love" (dependent on if he "get[s] all As") substantiates this gap.[5] His family is depicted as chaotic through sensory overload. The smell and feel of pakora oil, the blare of the TV, his "Indian rooster" father, and the sound of belligerent Hindi all incense the atmosphere that he is afraid of bringing Bethany into. While Minhaj makes clear that he finds these aspects embarrassing ("he's killing me… I'm not proud, no one is proud") and relatively distant from the "normal" that he is projecting, he does not deny the stickiness of the Muslim refractions that inevitably adhere to him. The fear is that, despite his efforts at containment, Minhaj will be mocked for "what's on the TV" or "that smell" – a rejection of "that" Muslim that would also sweep up "this" one and prohibit him from the possibility of romance.

Bethany's unexpected assent and acceptance of this disorder, followed by a stolen kiss in the driveway, leave Minhaj head over heels. "Are we getting married?" he thinks out loud. "I have to change my pants. We are definitely getting married. When is the shaadi?" She asks him to attend the prom with her, and he agrees. But as Minhaj arrives at her home, he is turned away at the door, told by Mrs. Reed that they would "be taking photos, so we don't think you'd be a

[5] Minhaj and Storer, *Homecoming King*.

good fit" for the family back in Nebraska to see.[6] Heartbroken, he rides his bike back home. At school the next day, he does not tell anyone the real reason he did not appear at the school dance.

> The sad part is, I felt bad for being there. Who was I to ruin their picture-perfect celebration? You've seen movies. How many times do you see that on screen? And it's not like they were yokels yelling "sand ni**er!" I could let that pass. I'd eaten off their plates, kissed their daughter. I didn't know that people could be bigoted even as they were smiling at you. It's hard when you see people saying they love you but they're afraid at the same time. And I didn't know what that meant.[7]

The duality of Minhaj's Muslim masculinity poses a unique danger to this white family. He is subdued and harmless enough to spend informal, private, and intimate time with their daughter Bethany, but becomes a hypermasculine peril to the family's image of themselves and Bethany during such a formal, iconic, and very public moment in her life. Along the spectrum of normative temporalities, or in the U.S., the prom is typically read as an early rite that mirrors the next "big day" in a young U.S. American person's presumed life cycle. Thus a distinct eroticism lays beneath the surface of the suit, gown, and corsage ensemble. With a white American woman's body at the center of this amalgam, the possibility of visibly pairing it with a dark Muslim body – now, a blatantly unfit virile threat to their daughter – is unthinkable. Even Minhaj "understands" his deficiency in this moment. He does not argue, and does not even take the offer of a ride back home in the Ford Expedition. "Who was I to ruin their picture-perfect celebration?" the 17-year-old ruminates; an implicit recognition of his body as matter out of its prescribed place.

The mundane injustice of the prom rejection is coupled with the hate-crime injustice Minhaj and his family experience after 9/11, when anonymous assailants throw rocks through his family's house and car windows. The two incidents are written by Minhaj as two sides of the

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[6] Minhaj and Storer, *Homecoming King*.

[7] Minhaj and Storer, *Homecoming King*.

same racism coin, one smiling and one sadistic. Minhaj remarks offhandedly that "time has passed, and I don't really think about that day [prom]. I mean, I did write a show about it…"[8] The audience laughs uproariously at the incongruity of the two statements given how long he has lingered on Bethany over the last hour. In this staged self-articulation of his life, Minhaj has set a white woman as the location of denied desire, symbolic of what he later calls "the co-sign" but also of a very real and persistent sexual attraction. That attraction drives the remainder of the show in two ways. A white woman like Bethany does not require validation – she, and the description of her family, are implicitly understood as obvious objects of desire. Through this legible end "goal" of sorts, Minhaj can rely on his audience sharing the affective sting that comes from the denial of this goal. Unable to "become" the subject he desired by way of his own erotic desire, the racism Minhaj experiences is both relatable and unfair but does not dissipate the attraction.

He may claim that "I don't really think about that day," but the interest in Bethany has endures throughout the show. His interest in her makes possible reconciliation and forgiveness for racism in a way that would not be possible for those that smashed in his windows. Such a reconciliation does indeed occur, a few years after Minhaj has begun performing standup professionally. Minhaj describes the scene in *Homecoming King* as a meeting over coffee in New York. As she speaks, he realizes:

> 'You don't give a shit about this person.' I care about what she represents. For all of us. Growing up, we just want that co-sign. To tell them you're good enough. Come sit here. You're good enough. You're valid. But that's not the American dream. It's not asking for a co-sign. It's what every generation did before you. You claim that shit on your own terms… You're not Hasan Minhaj [Americanized pronunciation]. You're Hasan Minhaj.

[8] Minhaj and Storer, *Homecoming King*.

> This is new brown America. The dream is for you to take, so take that shit! Stop blaming other people.[9]

The intense detail and time given to Bethany in *Homecoming King* would indicate her importance to Minhaj lies not just in what she "represents." Throughout the segments that deal with Bethany, Minhaj loiters on how impressive she is, referring to her as "a fucking G" who "knew the rules." After she invites him to prom, Minhaj's glee is so apparent he imagines being caught by his father but dying happily. "You know you're going to die, so put it on the tombstone. 'Hasan Minhaj, 4.3 GPA, kissed a white girl.' What an amazing way to go!"

After discovering Bethany is now dating an Indian man named Rajesh Rengatramanajananam ("this dude is Indian as fuck!"), he runs across the stage, jumping up and down for emphasis, before embarking on an extended bit imagining how Bethany and Rajesh have sex with one another ("Oh, my God, Rajesh Rengatramanajananam, give it to me right now. Rajesh Rengatramanajananam, I want you so bad. Put your Rajesh in my Rengatramanajananam.") The persistence of this eroticism remains palpable to his audience, but naming it as such would not serve the storyline that Minhaj has built *Homecoming King* around. The erotic interest – and any masculine softness that might be conjured alongside it – is swallowed by what he sees as a broader point, which he enacts through a fierce and full-throated re-definition of the American dream.

Until this point, Minhaj had been sitting on a stool, speaking in low and measured tones. "Take that shit!" he bellows to audience applause as he stands up to full height. The American dream is and has always been accomplished, he explains, by taking. His rhetoric and posture recall a European frontiersman, taming the wild and subduing it into submission. Minhaj draws

[9] Minhaj and Storer, *Homecoming King*.

on this hegemonic masculine grammar, but when channeled through his Muslim body, it surfaces as a standing apart and opposition to white supremacy. It is a neocolonial masculinity that attends to racial difference but not the deep intersectionalities of difference upon which he scaffolds himself.

Claiming a "new brown America" with and through a racialized body gives him space in the special to luxuriate in the untranslated, where white people are not the target audience and their total comprehension is not necessary for a joke to land. Minhaj refers to "us" repeatedly in *Homecoming King*, something that eventually comes to be characteristic of his personality beyond the stage. In one instance, he remembers how poorly his Daily Show audition appeared to go, and how intensely personal and monumental that failure felt. This feeling, he argues, is one all of "us" have known: "I'm choking. We've all been there. Everyone's all, 'How did it go?' You're like, 'Prayer hands! Positive thoughts! I.A.!' No, it's not happening. You are choking. MCAT, DAT, you're going to the Caribbean, it's a wrap." Minhaj quickly cuts back to the interview process, but the audience continues to boisterously laugh. "I.A.," the text shorthand for "inshallah" and the widespread practice among South Asians of attending medical school in the Caribbean when one's entrance exam test scores are not high enough for admission into U.S. medical or dental school programs are deeply niche and almost secret experiences.

Minhaj brings such insiderisms into the open and turns many a joke on their axes. Another extended bit deals with being slapped in public by parents. "That's what makes us tough and resilient. It's why we become cardiologists and win spelling bees… It elevates your game. You ever seen an Indian kid win a spelling bee? …That kid won't choke on camera. He's been slapped on camera!"[10] The "us" that Minhaj calls out to is also never consistent, however. At

[10] Minhaj and Storer, *Homecoming King*.

various times throughout *Homecoming King*, "us" includes those who are Indian, South Asian, Asian, immigrant, or even all people of color. The running thread through it all is non-whiteness. Yet the specter of whiteness's normativity looms over these "insider" jokes. Minhaj, for the most part, does not seek to rationalize the dissonance between them. Even Bethany is not named as white until the 60-minute mark of a 73-minute show, her whiteness is so implicitly known that it does not require explicit specificity.

Caricaturing Religious Difference

Minhaj's narrative focus on Bethany comes at the expense of his Indian wife, Beena, whose story is relegated to a B-plotline in the overall story of his life as told through *Homecoming King*. Beena is introduced first as a Hindu, which would presumably give Minhaj an avenue to proffer a nuanced take on religious difference and discrimination in South Asia. This is an insider dynamic he decides to translate for his audience through the language of farce, casting the differences between Muslims and Hindus as entirely superficial. He throws up a chart on the screen behind him, explaining:

> So some of you guys don't know. Hindus and Muslims are like the Montagues and Capulets of India. We've been warring for centuries. You're like, "What's the difference? You look the same." So how do I explain this? Hindus and Muslims. Hindus don't eat beef. "No beef!" Right? And Muslims, we don't eat pork. "Is that pepperoni pizza? No. No pepperoni!" And then Hindus, they like statues. They're like, "Oh! This is a statue of an elephant. I'm going to put this in my car." Muslims are like, "No statues! Calligraphy! We're about the alphabet. We put that in our car. We're different." And then Hindus, they like cartoons. They're like, "Oh, this is a cartoon Ganesh. I'll just put this on the wall." And Muslims… we don't really, uh… [audience laughter] like cartoons. We've got to get better about our cartoon policy. Because of this we've been killing each other for centuries! And I know the older generation doesn't like those jokes. "Pakistan was created for this reason [*exclaimed in a Pakistani accent*]!" I know.[11]

[11] Minhaj and Storer, *Homecoming King*.

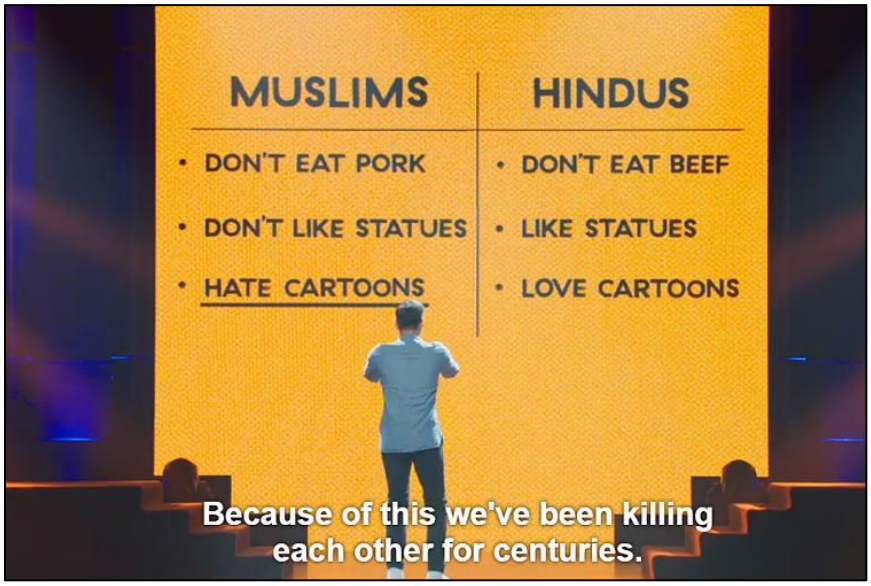

Figure 8: Screenshot of Hasan Minhaj's Homecoming King.

By mocking the notion that there is any axiomatic difference in ritual or affinity between Muslims and Hindus, Minhaj sets himself apart from and above the vacillations between the South Asian Hindu and Muslim fundamentalisms. His teasing tenor throughout the joke shapes the Muslim figure as particularly recalcitrant. Minhaj even impersonates him briefly with stiff shoulders and an indignant Desi accent. It is the Muslims who so problematically insists on difference, who must "get better about our cartoon policy."

The 2005 Danish cartoon controversy makes an oblique appearance here – out of geographic place, no less – and lays responsibility for the implied problem squarely on the shoulders of Muslims themselves. That this is packaged as a joke itself, meant to elicit laugher from Minhaj's audience relies on the audience reading Minhaj's positionality as enlightened above "that" Muslim. His Muslim subjectivity is of the Right Muslim Man, who remains unbothered by and flippant about what are cosmetic ritual variances between South Asian Muslims and Hindus and is thus more "Brown" than "Muslim" in his self-articulation. He does not carry the political baggage that "those" Muslims do, and has actually realized their fundamental sameness with Hindus, in line with the greater principle of multiculturalism.

This is made further evident through Minhaj's (and Netflix closed captioning text's) repeated referral to his mother tongue as Hindi and not Urdu. Despite being mutually intelligible for the most part, the politics behind the choice to name the language spoken in his home is peculiar. According to the prominent map he displays on the screen behind him, his parents hail from Aligarh, a city most famous for inaugurating the Urdu language movement in the 19th century. Even when describing the show in interviews elsewhere, he refers to the triumph of having entire sentences recited in Urdu.[12] So why the conspicuous absence of its name in the show itself? I read this as another instance of muting any overt affiliation with Muslim politics outside the context of the United States. Muslim/Hindu entanglements in contemporary South Asia cannot be reduced to racism in the same way the progressive consensus sanctions in the U.S., especially given how racialization has played out through the rise of Hindu nationalism among those that share close phenotypic similarities. Minhaj also reiterates twice that these (implied to be superfluous) reasons are why "we've been killing each other for centuries."

The lines are delivered incredulously, thus toeing, however inadvertently, the ahistorical colonial line laid out in the aftermath of 1857. Minhaj understands religious differences to be overdramatic and suggests that the contemporary political problems between Hindus and Muslims in India are entirely their own blinded and exaggerated doing. That those problems are perceived as naturalized conspicuously leaves out an actor Minhaj is usually ready to put on

[12] Terra Dankowski, "Hasan Minhaj Plays an Away Game," American Libraries Magazine, March 26, 2018, https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/blogs/the-scoop/pla-hasan-minhaj-plays-away-game/; Amelia Mason, "Hasan Minhaj, Of 'Daily Show' Fame, Tackles Islamophobia And Cost Of The American Dream," WBUR The Artery, November 10, 2016, https://www.wbur.org/artery/2016/11/10/hasan-minhaj; Hershal Pandya, "Hasan Minhaj's 'Homecoming King' Is an American Story, Whether You Get the References or Not," *New York Magazine*, May 23, 2017, https://www.vulture.com/2017/05/hasan-minhajs-homecoming-king-is-an-american-story-whether-you-get-the-references-or-not.html.

blast. Colonial powers that actively sedimented these notions are rendered invisible, leaving this to be seen as a fight among wrong Brown men. Indeed, the act of lifting himself above such a fray disturbingly mirrors the discourse that imperial administrators told themselves: "those" men are incapable of solving their internal squabbles without "our" intervention. This is indicative of Minhaj's superficial appeal to transnationalism; of recognizing longform connections to the peoples and place of India to only read them through secular logics.

Minhaj argues that despite these "differences," he convinces his father to agree to the marriage, but his "racist" and tribalistic anxiety nearly stops the marriage from taking place. Minhaj's sister, Aisha, ultimately convinces him.

> "Dad, I love her, she loves me. Isn't there something bigger that unites all of us outside of race, color, creed, class? This is America. We can choose what we want to adhere from the motherland. Isn't life like biryani, where you push the weird shit to the side? Why do we got to adhere to this weird shit from back over there?"… He says yes. We rally the troops, Me, Mom, Dad, Aisha, we get in the Camry, we're driving to my fiancée's house. And we're about to pull up and we get to the door, and my dad is about to ring the doorbell, when he says the sentence that is the killer of every brown kid's dream. He goes, "I don't think we should do this. Log kya kahenge? What will people think?" I don't know if you know, but every time a brown father says log kya kahenge, a star actually falls from the sky… I bet you, when Mahatma Gandhi told his parents he was going to liberate India, even they were like, "Log kya kahenge! Stop marching. The British are going to talk shit about us. Why are you bald and skinny? You're never going to get married!" And I'm standing there on that doorstep, like, "Wait, you want me to change my life because of log kya kahenge? Come on, Dad. How many times do we complain about racism in our community? All the time. Now the ball is in our court, we're going to be bigoted? Dad, I promise you, God doesn't like bigotry. God's not like, 'You're racist. Good job.' No! Number two, you want me to change my life to appease some aunty and uncle I'm never going to see? You want me to change my life for Naila Aunty? Fuck Naila Aunty! Are you fucking kidding me? My life?" But I can't say that. Because I've played all my cards. So I can't say anything. Now I'm losing hope. I'm, like, "Maybe this is bigger than me. Why can't I put my head down and do what I'm supposed to do? This ain't Jodha Akbar." Have you ever been trapped by the time you live in? It's been going on for centuries. So I'm walking back to the Camry, then I hear a voice behind me. "Oh, my God. You guys do this all the time." And it is Aisha, and she is pissed. And she's like, "Dad, I did not fly out from Philly for this. Beena is so legit. She has a Ph.D. Hasan bhai is a comedian! No one is going to marry him. Get him married before she changes her mind." She stepped up. She laid down one of her cards for me… Because of her, I got to marry the love of my life.

Once more, Minhaj chalks up the historical complexity of contemporary issues between Indian Hindus and Muslims to a hypocritical "racism" on the part of Muslims while insisting on a departure from "this weird shit from back over there." Through this description Minhaj's identity is decidedly not transnational in that moment – he attributes their difference to a generational gap between him and his father that is also temporal ("back"), geographic ("over there") and cultural ("weird shit"), all of which come together around the denial of choice.

Like Ansari, Minhaj seeks to become the enlightened secular subject he sees himself as, unencumbered by what comes from "back over there" and whatever residual appearances it makes in the form of "Naila Aunty" and "log kya kahenge" over here. The influence of transnationalism by way of familial commitment actively staves off his becoming. The power of "log kya kahenge" sticks to his person and orients him away from the choice he wishes to make. Only Aisha's intervention, rationalized in economic and class mobility terms, changes the tide, making room for him to become the subject he pursues.

Affective Idealism

The dispositional distance Minhaj places between himself and the Brown men he wishes to define himself against appears in several other instances during *Homecoming King*. On the topic of Indian uncles, he declares:

> I still can't understand some of you. There are uncles here. None of you guys are smiling. I don't get it. You're going to die. Laugh. Why aren't you laughing? You're always stressed and always tired. You could wake up any immigrant father from a 12-hour nap, and they'd say [angrily yawning] "Why do I have to pay taxes?"[13]

[13] Minhaj and Storer, *Homecoming King*.

He notes that his father shares this underlying ire, as well. “I remember being in the grocery store. And we’d be walking through the aisles, and my dad would pick up yogurt. [annoyed voice] ‘Argh, yogurt.’ Or milk. Just like, ‘Argh, dood.’ And I’d look at him and be like, ‘Oh, man. Dad hates yogurt. He hates milk!’ But I get that look, now. Life is tough and sometimes you don’t know what you’re doing.”[14]

Despite now “get[ting] that look,” Minhaj chooses levity and playfulness as his primary demeanor of choice. Once more, this is depicted on stage as an embodied generational and cultural difference, where Minhaj has chosen agreeability and happiness over what he describes as a constant low-level resentment, though his father is also shown to have a softness about him that Minhaj also veers away from. In two separate instances, Minhaj’s father Najme is personified through his recitation of Urdu poetry; calm, dignified, and as having foresight beyond his son’s hotheadedness. “Ye cheez to hoti hain, aur ye cheez honge [these things happen, and these things will continue to happen],” he tells Minhaj as he cleans up the shattered window glass in their driveway after 9/11. “That’s the price we pay for being here.”[15] After his father’s quintuple bypass, Minhaj confesses what happened with Bethany in high school. His father is disappointed that he has not forgiven her. “Himmat honi chahiye. Apki himmat dar se ziyada honi chahiye. Hasan, you have to be brave. Your courage to do what’s right has to be greater than your fear of getting hurt. So, Hasan, be brave.”

Both times, Minhaj is moved by his father’s words but ultimately chooses the alternate path in from of him. “I honestly don’t know who is more right,” he tells the audience. “Maybe he’s right. Put your head down. Be a doctor, get a house in the burbs, let them call you whatever

[14] Minhaj and Storer, *Homecoming King*.

[15] Minhaj and Storer, *Homecoming King*.

you want. But isn't it our job to push the needle forward little by little? Isn't that how all this stuff happens?" The subject Minhaj wishes to become is, at its heart, confrontational and unruly. His unruliness is made manageable by way of the solidary of the progressive consensus and the critical mass accumulated by intoning Muslimness as categorically Brown (read: raced) first. This performance, intentionally and unintentionally, models notions and performances of American Blackness that project "cool" — a point that I will return to shortly. The fulcrum on which *Homecoming King* rests is the promise of America. That promise, he contends, has appeared unattainable because racism otherwise impedes its reach. In the "new Brown America," however, "the dream is for you to take." That this dream may be exclusionary by design – despite efforts to "take that shit" – is not the operative, applause-earning message.

Minhaj is also invested in a conventional "American Dream" narrative that reads his transnational being as a desired and unidirectional evolution towards the Right Muslim Man. Like Ansari, he performs this being by setting himself up on stage against "that" Muslim man. This joke finds its way into *Homecoming King* only through its setup:

> I'm so grateful for that decision [his parents moving to the U.S.]. Najme marries Question Mark, they come to the States, I come out. Popping out of your mom is like real estate. It's all about location. I popped out here. Anybody brown, we popped out here, we made it. We're the rappers that made it.[16]

The original extended version was a part of a regularly circulating standup set performed at, among other placed, the Montreal Just for Laughs comedy festival in 2015.

> Don't you feel, when you go back [to India], don't you feel like the rapper that made it? Like when I show up, I'm like, "yo this is how you guys are living? What?! Yo, when Hasan's here, everybody eats, son, everybody eats! Yeah, Capri Suns on me, fam! Gushers on me, fam! Fruit Rollups on me! You're welcome!" And they're losing their minds over stale Oreos. They're like, [in a slight Indian accent] "Oh my god, Hasan, it's like one cookie but now it's two!" I'm like, "I'm not even going to give you a Thin Mint, you will shit your pants. If I give you a Samoa you can't handle this, son. This purple box changes everything. Strap in, you will lose your mind." I call my cousin Sahil, he lives in

[16] Minhaj and Storer, *Homecoming King*.

> Aligarh, I call him up, "Yo, Sahil, the prodigal son returns. You name it, I'll bring it to you, what do you want?" He's like, [in slight Indian accent] "Hasan, just bring me Hershey's." And I'm like, "That's it? That's all you want? You could have asked for an iPad Retina and all you want is Hershey's? Hershey's is a bottom barrel chocolate, Sahil. I mean, they just added almonds and stopped." Are you kidding me, Hershey's? We have a Black President and Twix now; give a shit, Hershey's! I do! ... I don't give a shit if you work for the Mars Corporation, we've been to the moon, goddammit, step your chocolate game up. Long story short, I gave my cousin Sahil a Snickers bar, and he's in an insane asylum right now. [In Indian accent] "What is this Hasan?" "It's nougat." "What the fuck is nougat?!" Those were his last words.[17]

Both versions of the "rapper that made it" rely on staging those who did not. For Minhaj, this is vaguely attributed in *Homecoming King* but fully personified, complete with an Indian accent, through the character of his cousin Sahil in his earlier extended bit. Sahil's gamely persona is exaggeratingly portrayed as infantile and retrograde, satisfied easily with baseline treats and unable to fathom the "progress" made in contemporary American chocolateering. The notion of progress as demonstrated by the quality of candy is even likened to watershed moments like the election of Barack Obama and the moon landing. Sahil exists in a time and in a mindset before Minhaj's present – a child versus a man. That child is fortunate enough to taste modernity only fleetingly thanks to the generosity of his American cousin. The image of desperate refugee children comes easily to mind, and Minhaj does wink at the hyperbolic leaps he takes with the description. At the same time, the reuse of the joke speaks to its utility. Becoming American and having access to its riches is a person's final form. Minhaj's Right Muslim Man has "made it" to the achievable American Dream, become the correct secular subject who is now in a position to tender a simulacrum of his "wealth" to those who unvaryingly crave it. The offering is itself a reminder of dissonance; this is a wealth in which they cannot partake. Those "back" and "over" there – accessible only through a time travel portal – would be so lucky.

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[17] *Hasan Minhaj - White People At Indian Weddings*, Just for Laughs Comedy Festival (Montreal, Canada, 2015), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nNx5tnqD9e0.

Stylizing Solidarity and Dissent

After *Homecoming King* dropped on Netflix in 2017, it went on to win several media and entertainment industry awards. The accolades also cleared a path forward on the same streaming platform for Minhaj to host his own news/entertainment show, *Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj*, which began the fall of 2018. Minhaj has referred to the format of the show as a "woke TED talk," and like *Homecoming King*, *Patriot Act* relies almost entirely on Minhaj's bodily performance to carry the humor and content of the program, though he is once more accompanied by large screens behind him and under his feet.[18] These light up with images and citations for the commentary he provides. Minhaj's clothes are deliberately more "stylish" in ways that recall Ansari's *GQ* looks; his pants are cropped, his sweaters are fitted, and he never repeats sneakers. The politics he brings to the stage are also a noted departure from those espoused in *Homecoming King*. The American Dream he presents in these episodes is far hazier and structurally unattainable than before.

Minhaj continues to call out to a broadly-defined "us" and "we" – sometimes South Asians, sometimes Muslims, sometimes Asian Americans. But *Patriot Act* holds these respective communities more deliberately accountable in how they address anti-Blackness, patriarchy, and capitalism in the broader United States. The first episode of the show, which aired on October 28, 2018, takes a deep dive into the state of affirmative action in college admissions. Minhaj bounds up on the stage boisterously, exclaiming "we out here!"[19] Over the course of 23 minutes, he explains both the historical circumstances that ushered in affirmative action policies, as well

[18] Richard A. Preuss, *Saudi Arabia*, Streaming video, vol. 1, Episode 2, Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj (Netflix, 2018).

[19] Richard A. Preuss, *Affirmative Action*, vol. 1, Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj (Art & Industry, Comedy Bang! Bang! Productions, Margolis Superstore, 2018).

as the preponderance of Asian Americans in lobbying for their removal. "Now, Asians, and I am lumping all of us together in this, okay?" he says as he turns away from the camera and towards his audience. "I find it hilarious that this is the hill we're willing to die on. Our entire lives, we get shat on. 'Oh you guys have small dicks. You're bad drivers. You're the color of poop. You smell like curry and kimchi' We say nothing! The moment we can't get into Harvard, we're like 'I'll see you in court, motherfucker!'"[20] I read this joke as an extension and a response to previous commentary offered in *Homecoming King*. Minhaj's father counsels him to "Put your head down. Be a doctor, get a house in the burbs, let them call them whatever you want," which Minhaj prefaces with not knowing "who is more right."[21]

In *Patriot Act*, Minhaj definitively points out that Asian Americans will continue to meet institutional and racist barriers on the other side of that supposed escape and achievement.[22] He lays bare the hypocrisy of Asian American efforts, some co-opted by organizations like the Republican-led Students for Fair Admissions, to deny other minoritized groups benefit from such policy, especially given how Asian American groups (like Chinese for Affirmative Action) have historically lobbied on behalf of the measure to make education more accessible to everyone. Minhaj then broadens the scope to criticize institutions like Harvard University for their complicity in such racialized conflicts. Their maintenance of "white affirmative action" programs like legacy admissions, continue to disproportionately benefit the white, wealthy, and well-connected. "We got played," he insists.

> And for those in the Asian community who keep insisting, "We just want equality! We're American citizens, Treat us like Americans!" then fine. But if you are willing to act like racism isn't a thing, team up with lawyers and then take it to the courts when you don't

[20] Preuss, *Affirmative Action*.

[21] Minhaj and Storer, *Homecoming King*.

[22] Minhaj and Storer, *Homecoming King.*

> get your way, you're right. You truly are an American. You just happen to be the worst kind.[23]

Everyone is asked to be accountable in this episode, and Minhaj holds even his own feet to the fire. Not only does he admit his SAT score on air, but he confides believing the anti-Black advice he received to not check the Asian box on his college application, presuming that "I wasn't going to get into Stanford because some black kid was going to take my spot." It was only much later, he admits, that he realized that "I didn't get into Stanford because I was dumb!"

Minhaj's second episode, titled "Saudi Arabia" went on to gain the most international attention when it was banned by the Kingdom's government for violation of their anti-cyber crime law: "Production, preparation, transmission, or storage of material impinging on public order, religious values, public morals, and privacy, through the information network or computers."[24] Netflix acquiesced to this pressure and removed the episode from its Saudi market. Minhaj's remarks and the self he presents throughout this episode demonstrate how the nuanced and honest tenor he advances through this program is still subject to and disciplined by the powers of a secular U.S. system as it interacts with the ostensibly theocratic nature of the Saudi Kingdom. In the episode, Minhaj details the rise of the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) and his role in the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018, the suppression of activists and potential rivals, his brutal bombing campaign in Yemen, and the open-armed welcome he has enjoyed by American politicians, tech magnates, and entertainment industry powers including Tim Cook, Jeff Bezos, Donald Trump, and Oprah.[25]

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[23] Preuss, "Affirmative Action."

[24] "Saudi Arabia Anti Cyber Crime Law," § Article 6 (2007), https://sherloc.unodc.org/res/cld/document/anti-cyber-crime-law_html/2014_LA_004_E_Anti-Cyber_Crime_Law.pdf.

[25] Preuss, "Saudi Arabia."

Minhaj is attentive to the ways that corporate institutions are eager to get into business with MBS and the Saudi Arabian government, despite their avowal of progressive politics and social values. He also addresses the difficulty of being a Muslim that must, in some way, retain some connection to Saudi because of the physical location of Mecca and Medina. "Our relationship with Saudi Arabia has always been a complete mindfuck for me," he says. "As Muslims, we have to pray towards Mecca. We make pilgrimage to Mecca. We access God through Saudi Arabia, a country that I feel does not represent our values. 'But, Hasan, there are a lot of things people are conflicted about. Look at Amazon, Amazon's messed up.' But I don't pray towards Seattle, okay?"[26] Elsewhere in the episode, he sternly expresses the dissonance as something a U.S. audience inclined towards some nationalistic fervor should also value. "Remember America hates terrorists; Saudi Arabia gave them passports. Saudi Arabia was basically the boy band manager of 9/11. They didn't write the songs but they helped get the group together."[27] This line received the most media attention after Netflix pulled the episode offline, first publicized on January 1, 2019.[28] The removal created a maelstrom across media circuits, raising questions of what position mammoth tech companies like Netflix should be taking as they expand into international markets that seek to limit the availability of content. A reiteration of a clash of civilizations discourse brewed in less bombastic terms.

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[26] Preuss, "Saudi Arabia."

[27] Preuss, "Saudi Arabia."

[28] Abby Ohlheiser, "Hasan Minhaj Speaks out after Netflix Pulls an Episode of 'Patriot Act' in Saudi Arabia," *Washington Post*, January 2, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2019/01/01/hasan-minhaj-criticized-saudi-crown-prince-patriot-act-netflix-pulled-episode-saudi-arabia/.

For Minhaj, the Right Muslim Man is conflicted by the embedded relationship the U.S. maintains with Saudi Arabia, and is obligated to speak out on that conflict, the war in Yemen, and the blatant avarice of the nation's industrial and political leaders when it comes to an opportunity to increase shareholder values. Yet Minhaj's Right Muslim Man, when read by the American media and public is one who neatly folds into the frame of "dissident humor" against the Bad Muslim strongman. MBS's callous political maneuverings, especially in his jailing of women's rights activists and free speech advocates, closely resembles the Asads, Mubaraks, and Talibans of the so-called "Muslim world." They also translate easily into Laura Bush's language of the "hyphenated monster" who places his own mother under house arrest. *NPR*'s coverage of the incident referred to the "potential repercussions of his criticism" and the fears he holds for his and his family's safety.[29] *CNN*, likewise, highlights how Minhaj has come to "personal and spiritual terms with what the repercussions are."[30] "Think 'First Amendment.' Then invert it," the *New York Times* quipped.[31]

The fallout of the episode resulted in a "double bind" for Minhaj, where he was trapped between appearing as an agent for broader anti-Muslim discourses while calling attention to a series of grave injustices committed by a prominent Muslim leader.[32] Nonetheless, Minhaj

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[29] Ian Stewart, "Netflix Drops Hasan Minhaj Episode In Saudi Arabia At Government's Request," NPR.org, January 1, 2019, https://www.npr.org/2019/01/01/681469011/netflix-drops-hasan-minhaj-episode-in-saudi-arabia-at-governments-request.

[30] James Griffiths and Euan McKirdy, "Netflix Pulls 'Patriot Act' Episode in Saudi Arabia after It Criticized Official Account of Khashoggi Killing," CNN, January 2, 2019, https://www.cnn.com/2019/01/01/middleeast/netflix-patriot-act-hasan-minhaj-jamal-khashoggi-intl/index.html.

[31] Jim Rutenberg, "Netflix's Bow to Saudi Censors Comes at a Cost to Free Speech," *The New York Times*, January 6, 2019, sec. Business, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/06/business/media/netflix-saudi-arabia-censorship-hasan-minhaj.html.

[32] The double bind, as described by Rochelle Terman, is the state of being wedged between imperialism and gender injustice, where one seeks to engage in feminist critiques of Muslim women's statuses

continued to walk the fine line between holding his employer responsible and beating back those who saw him as a dissenting hero. In a follow-up update to the Saudi scandal, Minhaj reflects on the peculiarity of the bipartisan support he amassed.

> Let's break down how I became an internet bad boy. Of all the Netflix originals, the only show that Saudi Arabia thinks violates "Muslim" values is the one hosted by a Muslim! For the first time in my life, I was a bipartisan icon. Liberals and conservatives, they both embraced me like I was money from Big Pharma... even Breitbart defended me! Breitbart![33]

Minhaj keeps the mood light – he jokingly calls himself a bad boy and tugs at the collar of his leather jacket before teasing both ends of the American political spectrum for their Citizens United-sanctioned corruption and elevating him and his show as a sign of American "free speech" principles. A January 2nd tweet about the incident ends with a reiteration that the crisis in Yemen is what deserves attention first.[34]

Playful Impersonations

Minhaj has, indeed, pushed the needle from the Right Muslim self he positioned in *Homecoming King* and the Right Muslim self in *Patriot Act*. He has grown bolder in his critique against the progressive consensus that enabled his rise, not simply performing gratitude for the opportunity. The centralizing good that the Right Muslim protects, however, still is not Islam itself. In Minhaj's brasher impersonation, it is still the central tenant of solidarity – attested as

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throughout the world without necessarily undergirding militarized and neo-orientalist narratives of Muslim oppression. See Rochelle Terman, "Islamophobia, Feminism and the Politics of Critique," *Theory, Culture, & Society* 33, no. 2 (July 9, 2015): 77–102.

[33] Richard A. Preuss, *Censorship in China*, vol. 2, episode 1, Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj (Art & Industry, Margolis Superstore, Minhaj, 2019).

[34] Hasan Minhaj, "Hasan Minhaj on Twitter: 'Clearly, the Best Way to Stop People from Watching...,'" Twitter, January 2, 2019, https://twitter.com/hasanminhaj/status/1080540270092005379.

"our" shared principles – that acquire Minhaj's fervent and funny defense. The cover of marginality remains operative. An episode from the fourth volume, filmed on August 12, 2019 and titled "The Two Sides of Canada," featured Minhaj taking on the issue of Quebec's Bill 21. This is the province's secularism law which bans public employees from wearing "religious symbols" on their person. "Bill 21 is legalized discrimination," declared Minhaj on his show. "And Monsieur Values [Quebec's Premier François Legault] here is acting like it's only about enforcing secularism. That's bullshit. It's about denying people their right to free expression. Also, Quebec, you can't talk about secularism when your flag kind of has a cross in it."[35]

Minhaj establishes this point of solidarity before cutting to a video clip from his interview with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, whom he jokingly cajoles into a word-trap shahada.

> Minhaj: What's going on with this secularism bill? What does this mean?
> Trudeau: I disagree with it… I have been very clear that in a free society, you cannot legitimize discrimination against someone based on their religion.
> Minhaj: So you would say you're accepting all faiths and religions?
> Trudeau: I think what we accept as a country needs to be… defending minorities, defending people's rights.
> Minhaj: Accepting Christianity.
> Trudeau: Accepting Christianity...
> Minhaj: Judaism.
> Trudeau: ... accepting Judaism, accepting Islam, accepting all different... why?
> Minhaj: You accept Islam as the one true faith, the Prophet Muhammad, peace upon him, last and final messenger? Don't laugh at that part! You can't laugh at that part.
> Trudeau: [Laughing] I am proudly Catholic, but I have a tremendous respect for all religions.
> Minhaj: I'll play the long game. We have until the Day of Judgment.
> Trudeau: I am Catholic.
> Minhaj: [Turns to camera, whispering] Guys, I tried.
> Minhaj, on stage: He'll come around. Oh, I know it. [Adhan plays in the background][36]

[35] Richard A. Preuss, "The Two Sides of Canada," *Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj* (Netflix, September 1, 2019).

[36] Preuss, "The Two Sides of Canada."

Minhaj is able to step directly into the impersonation of a Muslim monster and play within it – a tricky and covertly proselytizing figure – because he has so concretely established himself as otherwise, both to the in-person studio audience and his general "brand" over the course of four volumes of Patriot Act and the properly secular performance in *Homecoming King*. The joke is possible only because Minhaj has been freed from necessarily playing both sides at once; "this" Muslim has been safely authenticated as decidedly not "that" one.

Conclusion

Hasan Minhaj's efforts at Right Muslim Manhood are constructed through the active and mawkish appeal to the viability and achievement of the American Dream narrative. This narrative contains a capital-centric, and thus deeply classist, aspiration that concurrently upholds racial syllogisms, like the assumption that a nebulous and broad-spectrumed tribalism is what ultimately feeds racialized and anti-Muslim violence in the U.S. His centering of a white woman in his autobiography is itself a performance of racialized desire which communicates the maintenance of those racial hierarchies pertinent to his own class and social upward-trending mobility. This sub-function of white supremacy re-appears in Minhaj's objective to differentiate himself from the unsuitable Muslim subject. Throughout his comedy, he insists that difference, as understood under the emblem of multiculturalism and the progressive consensus, relies primarily on race and racialization.

Those that dispute this charge are depicted as unmodern and the product of a particular geography and environment "over there." Minhaj's Right Muslim is shown to stand in opposition to "that" Muslim as an evolved counterpoint because of his rootedness in a U.S. American geography. The production and reproduction of this performance has landed Minhaj on

seemingly sturdy ground as a correct secular subject. This has resulted in a broader platform and visibility for his brand of comedy, but has also fashioned Minhaj into an image of dissident Muslim humor within the operative regime of humor. Minhaj does not allow the current to take him entirely, however, and has exhibited moments of comedic subversion, possible because of how comfortably he has established himself as the Right Muslim Man.

CHAPTER 8: COUNTER SCRIPTING KUMAIL NANJIANI'S BETA MALE

Well, I'm from Pakistan. We're still fighting some battles you guys have already won.

- Kumail Nanjiani, *The Big Sick*[1]

Introduction

While Minhaj openly identifies as Muslim in his comedy, Kumail Nanjiani's career is scaffolded on his journey away from Islam. This chapter traces that journey of evasion and eventual escape, as well as the tepid ways in which Nanjiani has returned to hold some affinity with Islam and Muslims in the United States. Nanjiani's career as a comic began after his graduation from Grinnell College in 2001, when he traveled to Chicago and worked in IT by day and performed in comedy clubs by night. A big break from a one-person comedy show about his journey away from Islam jumpstarted his Hollywood career. The content and affect that Nanjiani comports in allusion to Islam are hyper-cautious of the ways that they may stick to his own person. He is the lone Pakistani of the three comedians in this dissertation, and his points of temporal and pop culture reference are markedly different than those that Minhaj and Ansari work against in their routines.

I chart how Nanjiani's Right Muslim Man fashions this cultural orientation as a dearth worth joking about after seeking to avoid discussing his Muslimness for much of his early career. This avoidance is tempered by the fact that Nanjiani speaks American English accented by his upbringing in Pakistan, which makes his construction of the Right Muslim Man far more of a

[1] Nanjiani, Gordon, and Showalter, *The Big Sick*.

personal project in his everyday life outside his vocation as a comedian. Like Minhaj and Ansari, Nanjiani pursues this personification by racializing his Muslimicity, demonstrating his sexuality and desire as universally legible, and distancing himself from practices or beliefs deemed explicitly "religious." I am attentive particularly to the ways that Nanjiani utilizes the dynamism of movement and its absence. Where movement towards the secular is depicted as change, self-improvement, and social evolution, the Muslim point of origination is seen as stagnant, simplistic, and stuck.

Becoming Secular, Becoming Pronounceable

Nanjiani's one-person show, *Unpronounceable*, is a mix of comedy and drama and received glowing reviews that ultimately enabled him to leave his day job for full-time comedy. Nanjiani worked with the director Paul Provenza for two months to put together a show that was "personal and truthful."[2] *Unpronounceable* debuted in Chicago but was performed on several comedy circuits between the years 2007 and 2009. The show itself, however, is nowhere to be found on the internet or for purchase. Interviews since *Unprounceable*'s initial run have inferred that "the jokes and opinions voiced within the show were considered blasphemous back home, and it put his parents in danger."[3] Emails back and forth between myself and his managers have thus far yielded only apologies for the delay and no luck in securing a copy for viewing.

There are a few grainy promotional videos that exist online, in which Nanjiani appears in a simple t-shirt and tousled hair almost over his eyes alongside interviews with audience

[2] Glenn Jeffers, "New Territory for Comedian Born in Pakistan: Himself," *McClatchy Tribune Business News*, July 6, 2007, http://search.proquest.com/docview/462079344.

[3] Steve Heisler, "Expat Comedian Kumail Nanjiani Explains 'the Biz,'" *The A.V. Club* (blog), August 20, 2009, https://www.avclub.com/expat-comedian-kumail-nanjiani-explains-the-biz-1798217473.

members outside the venue after the show. “We really enjoyed it!” two women enthuse to the person wielding the camera. “What was his name? Kamel? Kamel.”[4] (Unpronounceable, indeed.) Some published reviews also include quotations and clips from the performance. Its turn in Albuquerque was billed by the theater director as a “collision” in which Nanjiani slammed into “the American Judeo-Christian life” and divulges “really really foreign customs from Pakistan, and how that conflicts with his life here. This is a revealing side of Islam that is foreign to us. And it’s very funny.”[5] Other reviews resonate with this appraisal. Timeout New York called it an example of “an angel get[ting] his wings - a young Pakistani man moves West, loses religion and finds comedy” while the A.V. Club Chicago called it a “transformation” for Nanjiani “from a fundamentalist Shiite Muslim to an atheist.”[6]

These critics are not seeing simply what they want to see. For his part, Nanjiani does little to complicate this straightforward narrative as consumed by his audience. In the evolution of his life story, the impersonations that Nanjiani takes on do not require new characters to portray the “that” Muslim and “this” one – both are already himself, though critically at different temporal nodes of his life. This cleanly places each on one side of the stratifying node (his journey to the U.S) and the other. Unlike Ansari and Minhaj, there is little subtext to the text of his humor. This may account for the near universal praise he accrued for *Unpronounceable* – a story of

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[4] *Kumail Nanjiani’s “Unpronounceable” at Lakeshore Theater* (LakeshoreTheater Youtube Channel), accessed May 16, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OtuSLI_JKuQ&t=5s.

[5] Dan Mayfield, “Finding Laughs in Culture Shock ; Pakistan Native Reflects on Move to U.S. in ‘Unpronounceable,’” *Albuquerque Journal*, January 2008.

[6] Andrew Marantz, “An Angel Gets His Wings,” Time Out New York, March 27, 2008, www.timeout.com/newyork/comedy/an-angel-gets-his-wings; David Wolinsky, “Kumail Nanjiani: Chicago Stand-up Explores His Fundamentalist Upbringing in One-Man Show,” A.V. Club Chicago, August 23, 2007, https://web.archive.org/web/20120205125927/http://www.avclub.com/chicago/articles/kumail-nanjiani,487/.

secularization that ends the way it "should." When recounting his childhood in Karachi, Nanjiani explains that even small joys like music were denied to him by the Qur'an and had to be pursued in secret. Even then, however, Nanjiani turns this micro-tragedy into a silly, though still dark, hypothetical that works to soften the bite of the original Muslim edict.

> We were also told that if you listened to music, we would have molten lead poured into your ears in hell. My cousin had introduced me to "Smooth Criminal" by Michael Jackson when I was about nine years old, and I loved that song. I was secretly listening to it when my parents were away. But I remember hearing about that punishment, and I put my head between my feet and I cried, terrified. And then I remember thinking, "why lead? Why specifically lead?" I would have thought that hell has enough lava, right? That would hurt. But specifically lead. Maybe Satan got a really good deal on lead, like during the heyday of alchemy, and he totally overbought. And now he's like, "Well, we gotta move all this lead. If you listen to music, we'll pour it in your ears. If you dance, we'll encase you in lead."[7]

Other sources indicate that Nanjiani describes additional stories about the Prophet Muhammad that present as fantastical and unrealistic in *Unpronounceable*. He also depicts with brutal detail the practice of self-flagellation among Shi'i Muslims ("it's kind of like a Pride parade") and his obsession with Hollywood movies, which his parents allowed in their home as a sort of virus inoculation: "just enough knowledge of Western culture to ultimately resist it."[8]

Even after coming to the U.S., Nanjiani says he felt like it was "an alien planet" because he had not so much as shaken hands with a woman before the age of 18. In Iowa, he resented his freshman year dorm roommate for having sex on the bunk above him well into the night. "I would be laying there at three in the morning, tired, new to this country, feeling dirty, and thinking that my roommate was going to hell. I'd get him up at five in the morning because I had

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[7] Paulson, "Kumail Nanjiani on 'Unpronounceable.'"

[8] Paulson, "Kumail Nanjiani on 'Unpronounceable.'"; Marantz, "An Angel Gets His Wings"; Sean McCarthy, "Review: Kumail Nanjiani, 'Unpronounceable,'" *The Comic's Comic* (blog), April 11, 2008, https://thecomicscomic.com/2008/04/11/review-kumail-n/.

set the alarm so I could pray. That seemed fair."[9] There is almost a wildlife-documentary feel to this pre-enlightenment self that Nanjiani conjures for his audience. "That" Muslim has been was written to appear as strange, foreign, and incomprehensible, and every feature of the improperly sexual Muslim monster is made manifest. Nanjiani describes violence, festering disloyalty, sexual deprivation and disillusionment. This makes the transition to the next stage – secular enlightenment – the most plausible next step.

This takes place in a philosophy course at Grinnell College, where Nanjiani had been "learning all these things about debate and critical thinking" but he "hadn't really been applying these things [he] was learning to Islam."[10] In the process of writing a paper that contrasted what he called the views of "Islam and the west," he came across the 34th verse of the fourth chapter of the Qur'an, often referred to as the daraba verse.

> And I thought, that can't be right, must be a bad translation. So I looked up other translations all each one said the exact same thing. If your wife doesn't listen to you, you are allowed to beat her lightly. And I knew that was wrong. I knew, I knew, I knew that was wrong. I knew God's final word to his people would not give husbands permission to beat their wives, no matter how lightly. It just wasn't something I could fit in that little room in my brain anymore. I left the computer lab and I walked around. It was two in the morning. And I know it's cliché that my life's existential crisis came at two in the morning. But that's just when they happen! I didn't pick the time. If I had picked the time, I would have chosen, like, an hour after lunchtime, when you're all energized and ready to tackle an epiphany. I remember thinking, the Qur'an is an infallible text. Unchanged and applicable for all time. Well this sentence was never applicable. If I couldn't trust this sentence in the Qur'an, could I trust any sentence in the Qur'an? I went to bed that night and I felt like I was falling fast. I felt like I was in free fall. Could I trust any sentence in the Qur'an?[11]

Nanjiani invites the audience to wallow in his crisis of faith though not for long. The devastation has no productive direction but away, and he quickly converts this wreckage into a moment of

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[9] Claire Zulkey, "The Showoff," Chicago Magazine, June 13, 2007, http://www.chicagomag.com/Chicago-Magazine/July-2007/The-Showoff/.

[10] Paulson, "Kumail Nanjiani on 'Unpronounceable.'"

[11] Paulson, "Kumail Nanjiani on 'Unpronounceable.'"

secular transition and transformation. The shift is performed in sterile fashion; cue words like "debate" and "critical thinking" are commandeered into a straightforward and uncomplicated arrow towards the final goalpost of ideal secular subjecthood. The Islam he describes in this segment is similarly uncomplicated; the translations of the Qur'an he examines are all the same. By applying the logic of deductive reasoning in his epiphany – this all took place because of a freshman philosophy class, after all – Nanjiani arrives at the conclusion that the universal Qur'an was not to be trusted, and nothing can be salvaged from it.

This is the salvationary recognition and certitude that gatekeepers of the secular crave – when spoken by a discontentedly Muslim figure, this crisis of faith functions as a form of native testimonial. It relies on Orientalist notions of a singular Muslim tethered to a literal text, temporally and developmentally immobile. The crossover is thus legitimized, as is the depth and pervasiveness of the secular's reach among colonized populations, churning out its slow and steady work long after the formality of empire has ceased. It is a story that secularly-invested U.S. audiences are eager to hear, welcoming the Muslim identified by their racialization but severed from Islam. This is as an example of their own tolerance and multiculturalism. By the barometer of success for standup comedians, the *Unpronounceable* bought him the next step up: a sitcom pilot. A *New York Times* feature on Nanjiani from 2009 mentions explicitly that "it was largely on the strength of 'Unpronounceable'… that he was able to sell his idea for a sitcom to NBC, said Mr. Kissinger of Conaco [production company]."[12]

<u>Beta Intelligibility</u>

[12] Konigsberg, "For Kumail Nanjiani, a Good Time to Be Funny."

While this sitcom idea ultimately went on to become *The Big Sick* instead, *Unpronounceable* allowed Nanjiani to become a full-time comic. He starred in his own Comedy Central special, *Beta Male*, in 2013. *Beta Male* borrows material heavily from *Unpronounceable* but does not tell a single continuous story the way its predecessor does. The set is recorded in front of a live audience in Austin, Texas, and Nanjiani wears a loose blue hoodie over a similarly colored flannel shirt. As he walks out on stage, a soundbite from the South Asian/Afro-Cuban hip-hop group Das Racist accompanies his stride to the center of the stage.[13] The overall clip of the special is uneven – Nanjiani shuffles across the floor, sometimes mumbling and sometimes assertive. The look fits the perceived mold of a "beta male;" typically imagined as subordinate, effeminate, and generally lacking in the attributes of an ideal American man. And yet, Nanjiani is deliberate in crafting himself not as an impression of that ideal American man, but as one that would be legible within the matrix of sexual intelligibility in which that man reigns. One of the jokes that appears in both *Unpronounceable* and *Beta Male* is about watching porn for the first time on a VHS tape given to him by his cousin.

> I was raised as a very religious Muslim. We were told that - and this is true – we were told when we were little kids that staring at a woman with a lustful gaze was the same sin as stabbing the Prophet's nephew [laughter]... in the back [laughter]... while he's praying [laughter]. Look at a girl, stab the prophet's nephew in the back while he's praying, equal. So I was terrified of women, you know. But then, when I was around 10, I remember… do you guys remember that Cindy Crawford Diet Pepsi commercial? She's wearing the tight white tank top and those hip-hugging jeans and she's in the convertible, her hair in the breeze. She gets out, she walks over to the vending machine, puts in the quarter, picks her drink, then she pops the tab and puts the cylinder to her lips… I remember thinking, "I am stabbing the fuck out of the prophet's nephew right now." [raucous laughter] … At that age though, I didn't know what sex was. I would not even know what I would do if I was in a room with Cindy. Squeeze her mole? That sounds awesome today actually![14]

[13] Nanjiani, *Beta Male*.

[14] Nanjiani, *Beta Male.*

Nanjiani foregrounds sex and sexuality in his recollections of childhood in Pakistan as a precursor for what makes him a "beta male" in the U.S. today. His current condition, where he is still uncomfortable around women, can be attributed to the dense scolding he received as a child where lust or even a "look" was equated with stabbing the first Shi'i imam, Ali. This goes unnamed in *Beta Male*, unlike in *Unpronounceable*. In *Beta Male*, to name his previous Muslim self is specific enough to signify his difference and danger. The joke about seeing Crawford for a mere 30 seconds implies an obvious unsustainability to a Muslim state of being. This is a continuity from *Unpronounceable*, where to be Muslim is to be in a state of complete normative submission or one ceases to be Muslim at all. The textually-compliant Muslim of Nanjiani's yesteryear is sexually repressed and morally cracking because of it. Desire for Crawford is violence for Ali. He continues the bit with the following:

> All that innocence disappears when my cousin gives me a video tape. And I'm like, oh that's what I would do to her. Yeah… it's a porn, I don't know if you guys got that. And it was too early for me to see porn. Like my body wasn't ready. I put it in, I watched it for 30 seconds, I pulled it out, I had a fever for three days. I promised God I would never watch it again. But then a couple weeks later I got curious, I was like, well I didn't really give it a chance, did I? What is the motivation of these characters? And then I put it back in, and then you couldn't fucking stop me. Which is where I still am today … so it's a regular porn, beginning, middle, men, women; you know what a porn is. But there's a two-minute preview before for a different porn… I don't know how to say it, but it's a preview where the people, uh, defecate on each other. [Lone audience member yells, 'yes!'] Uh, security? There's a monster in the room. Other than you, everybody was very awkward. And then you yelled, and everybody was even more awkward! Because I was 10, it was too early for me to see porn, but it was definitely way too early for me to realize that people like her existed. My favorite part is that it's a regular porn but that's the preview. It's like, 'do you like sex? Well, then you might like shitting on people! Do you like driving a car? Well maybe you would like to drown in a submarine that's on fire!'[15]

Nanjiani affirms a normative sexuality through this segment, even though he is retelling a story from his childhood. His sexual rapacity aligns coherently with the world he has built around it.

[15] Nanjiani, *Beta Male.*

When he mentions growing up in Karachi during his *Beta Male* set, a single cheer rings from the crowd. He turns to the woman and asks deftly, "How's Karachi doing? Same as ever? Mostly on fire?"[16] The Karachi that Nanjiani conjures is familiar to other places his audience knows because of how stripped down and embroiled it is in visions of neo-orientalist Islam.

This "IslamLand," as Lila Abu-Lughod has called it, is a mythical homogenous space of inequality and suffering, particularly of Muslim women. It is "the place where things are most wrong today," and authorizes the language of international human rights as a central moral imperative for Euroamerica-sanctioned revolution or escape for those that live "there."[17] Nanjiani unbendingly places himself in the latter camp, undergoing an internal moral revolution and "becoming" commensurate with his new sexually-correct countrymen. That correctness does not tolerate sexual deviance on the other end, which Nanjiani makes clear through the emphasis on how "awkward" the audience member who cheered for the defecation porn (facetiously called a "monster") made the space for every other sexually-right person in the room. Nanjiani thus presents himself as an appropriately sexual Muslim subject – enlightened enough to distance himself from sexual repression and violence but not deviant in the sexual proclivities he finally chooses to indulge.

Muslim Immobility

The Big Sick, released in 2017, tells the story of Nanjiani's courtship to his now-wife, Emily Gordon. The backdrop of the film is his relationship with his parents – stand-ins for Islam

[16] Nanjiani, *Beta Male.*

[17] Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 68-70.

and its attendant cultural expectations – which he successfully extricates himself from by the film's end. Emily, played in the film by Zoe Kazan, is a white woman from North Carolina, whom Nanjiani meets at one of his standup performances when she lightly heckles him from the bar. In the movie, the two date long enough to develop strong feelings for another. They break up when it is revealed that Nanjiani has continued to begrudgingly meet other Muslim women through arrangements by his parents who are trying to get him married. When Emily unexpectedly is placed into a medically-induced coma, Nanjiani stays by her side and develops a relationship with her parents, deciding to ultimately follow his heart and come clean to his family. The film is meant to mirror their real lives, though cinematic licenses were taken to condense reality into and create a more coherent storyline.[18] *The Big Sick* was a hit, earning accolades at Sundance and a release deal from Amazon. It went on to a wide release in theaters during the summer of 2017.

Nanjiani's character, Kumail, retains similarities to the real-life Nanjiani. Both are comedians, and both have experienced pressure by their parents to marry Pakistani Muslim women. For the sake of clarity, I will refer to the real-life Nanjiani as Nanjiani, and his character in *The Big Sick* as Kumail. As the protagonist, Kumail is also the romantic lead. For all the imperfect dispositional layers a lead may possess, his masculine features are also put forth as the ideal within the cultivated universe of the film. Nanjiani's ideal masculinity, as demonstrated through Kumail, retains the soft edges of his precursory "beta" self, but with upgrades. Now, he is a legibly sexual figure not because of masturbation but through the act of having sex.

[18] Andrew Marantz, "Kumail Nanjiani's Culture-Clash Comedy," *The New Yorker*, May 1, 2017, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/05/08/kumail-nanjianis-culture-clash-comedy.

In the film, this is demonstrated by Kumail attending to the accepted rites of accelerated courtship before having sex with Emily at the end of their first date. While he is shown to have commitment issues, a common trope in romantic comedies, this failure is a direct result of his Muslim heritage and the expectations of the Muslims in his life. Kumail's narrative arc, therefore, exhibits his journey in breaking free of Islam's violent chokehold on his own individuality. In the first scene set in the Nanjiani family home, his parents and brother lament another cousin's marriage to a white woman. This is followed up by a request (implied to be the latest iteration of a long-standing demand) that Kumail take the LSAT. When he insists that he is still pursuing comedy, his sister-in-law lights up and advises he simply ask for a job at *Saturday Night Live*.

When his mother, Sharmeen, asks Kumail to go pray before eating dessert, he descends into the family's basement, lays down a janamaz and sets a timer for five minutes. A rapid-fire montage shows him swinging around a cricket bat, examining what items lay on a random shelf, and watches a YouTube video of someone jumping into a frozen pool. The timer goes off in the middle, and he heads back upstairs. His mother, meanwhile, has laid out an additional place setting next to Kumail's and the doorbell rings. "Oh. I wonder who that could be?" she says coolly, avoiding eye contact with Kumail. He sighs. "I'm guessing it's a young, single Pakistani woman who just happened to be driving by our house, which is in a cul-de-sac and I'm also guessing that the phrase 'dropped in' will be said in the next ten seconds." Sharmeen reemerges seconds later with a young Pakistani woman wearing shalwar kamiz at her side, trumpeting, "Everyone. This is Zubeida. She just dropped in."[19]

[19] Nanjiani, Gordon, and Showalter, *The Big Sick*.

The ensuing scene with Zubeida plays out largely in slapstick fashion. Zubeida fumbles as she takes her seat, she makes poorly timed references to the X-Files in an effort to win Kumail's favor and is generally acted out as desperate and over-eager. After she leaves, Sharmeen reminds Kumail that "Kumi, there's not going to be a magic spark, okay? You have to work at it. You have to stay open." A headshot Zubeida gave Kumail gets thrown carelessly into a cigar box, and the camera zooms in to show multiple other headshots – potential rishtas, or spouses – underneath gathering dust. He shuts the box closed unceremoniously. Emily finds the box after they have been dating for four months, and confronts him about it. They have the following exchange:

> Kumail: You know what we call "arranged marriage" in my culture, Emily? Marriage! Okay? We just call it marriage. There's another type of marriage that's called "love marriage" and that's bad. My cousin Rehan married an Irish woman and he was kicked out of the family! And nobody is allowed to talk to him.
> Emily: Why didn't you tell me any of this?
> Kumail: Because I didn't think you'd fucking understand and I was fucking right!
> Emily: You don't think I could fathom your life in any fucking way?
> Kumail: I'm fighting a fourteen hundred year old culture! You were ugly in high school! There's a big fucking difference! [a beat] I'm sorry. I can't lose my family.[20]

In one of the movie's final scenes, Kumail attempts to reconcile with Emily as she recovers from her coma. He hands her a jar of gray powder, declaring "These are the ashes of all the Pakistani women, er, well, not the women, the pictures of the Pakistani women. I thought this was a good idea, but it feels a little stupid."[21]

This final image is almost campishly on the nose: a literal box of Pakistani women burnt to a crisp to appease the white woman Kumail actually desires. Yet far from sitting uncomfortably, this is a laugh line supplied at the expense of Kumail's attempt at dramatic

[20] Nanjiani, Gordon, and Showalter, *The Big Sick*.

[21] Nanjiani, Gordon, and Showalter, *The Big Sick*.

romance. The women in the box were never meant to be considered serious prospects; they are gauche, foreign, and invariably awaiting Kumail's attention. Even the figure of Khadija, the only woman to appear in a second scene, says simply three lines that are not meant to be humorous: "My mom says I'm becoming the bruised apple at the bottom of the apple bucket… people are always telling me what I deserve. It's bullshit."[22] She is a classic Muslim woman in need of rescue from IslamLand, but Kumail has his sights set elsewhere. The fixation on choice, and the pursuit of the white Emily, reigns supreme over the salvation of Muslim women from their ever-eroding conditions as brides-to-be. In distinct comparison, Emily is vivacious, witty, confident, and independent both before and after her coma.

The same can be said for Kumail's family. His parents, Sharmeen and Azmat (the latter played by Anupam Kher, a prominent Indian actor and a vocal supporter of India's Bharatiya Janata Party), are singularly focused on their son's proper religiosity and his marriage.[23] This focus is enforced by fear of isolation and exclusion which Kumail's brother Naveed similarly enforces.

> Naveed: …You should listen to mom and grow a beard.
> Kumail: It gets really itchy, I've tried. It's all patchy.
> Naveed: Try being a man and condition like I do.
> Kumail: What's the whole thing with Muslims growing beards anyway? It's such an arbitrary thing. Like who decided that? Oh, we have to have beards.

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[22] Nanjiani, Gordon, and Showalter, *The Big Sick*.

[23] In addition to his fervent support for the Prime Minister Modi and his BJP Party, Anupam Kher lauded the ruling government's move in 2019 to scrap Article 370 of the Indian Constitution and called for a "Kashmir solution" and the "potential for correction." See Ankur Pathak, "We Asked Anupam Kher About His Love For Modi. It Got Intense," HuffPost India, November 9, 2019, https://www.huffingtonpost.in/entry/anupam-kher-interview-bjp-narendra-modi_in_5dc3d437e4b0d8eb3c8fe496; Anupam Kher, "Genocide to 1990 Mei Hua Tha @bainjal Ji. Kashmiri Pandito Ka...," Twitter, August 4, 2019, https://twitter.com/anupampkher/status/1158193714642194432; Anupam Kher, "Kashmir Solution Has Begun.," Twitter, August 4, 2019, https://twitter.com/anupampkher/status/1158095559061909504.

> Naveed: Yeah. There are a billion of us and you are the only one with the truth. Is that right? The sun is just shining down on you right now. It's just parting like "ahh."
> Kumail: You know, I have to tell you something, Bhai.
> Naveed: Here we go. Yeah?
> Kumail: I've been dating this girl.
> Naveed: Acha.
> Kumail: She's white.
> Naveed: I thought you were going to say you were involved in a hit and run or you got caught forging some checks. But a WHITE GIRL? Such a cliché.
> *A white family stares in their direction.*
> Kumail: It's okay! We hate terrorists!
> …
> Kumail: If I find someone who's as good for me as Fatima is for you, Mom would understand, right? I mean, she wouldn't love me less?
> Naveed: She would definitely love you less. Slowly, you'd sort of -- what's the word when guys stop returning girls' calls?
> Kumail: Ghosting?
> Naveed: Yes. [dead serious] You have to end it now or Mom will fucking ghost you.[24]

Kumail's clean-shaven face is yet another quiet but effective example of the masculinity he seeks to present which also separates him from the Muslim men in his family. Though his brother teases him about it, Kumail's ponderance about this en-masse practice among Muslim men following prophetic sunnah is explained as "arbitrary," loyal to an ancient whim and not something otherwise rational. Naveed does not point out this insinuation; he only retorts that a billion people can't be wrong. The beard commentary is mere seconds and concludes quickly in order to return to the main plotline. On the issue how the rest of the family will respond to Kumail's news of Emily, Naveed's warning bears out.

> Sharmeen: Kumi, if you don't want to be a lawyer, fine. If you want to do the stand-up comedy and embarrass us as a family, fine. There is only one thing that we have ever asked from you: that you be a good Muslim and that you marry a Pakistani girl. That is it, one thing!
> Kumail: Can I ask you something that has never made sense to me? Why did you bring me here if you wanted me to not have an American life? We come here but we pretend like we're still back there? That's so stupid!
> Azmat: Don't you talk to your mother like that!

[24] Nanjiani, Gordon, and Showalter, *The Big Sick*.

> Kumail: You don't care what I think. You just want me to follow the rules. But the rules don't make sense to me. I don't pray. I don't. I haven't prayed in years. I just go down there and I play video games.
> Azmat: You don't believe in Allah?
> Kumail: I don't know what I believe, Dad! I don't know. And I can't marry someone you find for me.
> Sharmeen: And why not?
> Kumail: Because I'm in love with someone. I am. Her name is Emily and she's gonna be a therapist. And right now she's very sick but I couldn't tell you that. It makes me so sad that I couldn't tell you any of that. I really appreciate everything you've done for me. I truly, truly do. And I know Islam has been really good for you, it has made you good people, but I don't know what I believe. I just need to figure it out on my own.
> Sharmeen: You're not my son.
> *Sharmeen turns her back on Kumail and heads towards the door*.
> Azmat: Kumi, you're being selfish. You're not thinking about us. You're not thinking about Khadija. In fact you're not even thinking about that girl that you are in love with. You think American Dream is just about doing whatever you want and not thinking about other people? You're wrong! You are wrong!
> *Sharmeen and Azmat leave.* [25]

These exchanges are depicted as being between Muslim "insiders," where the audience is given silent access to hear their "internal" conversation. In them, Sharmeen, Azmat, Naveed, and the Pakistani women do not flex, let alone grow. As individuals, they underscore the stuckness of a pre/anti-modern Muslim subject in two ways: both in terms of the types of communal praxis and perspective they partake in (prayer, arranged marriage, excommunication) and in the incapacity for "tolerance"/maintaining cordial relations with those that choose to no longer engage in such praxis. Their stuckness precludes the ability to "become" anything than what they already are and always have been. The lack of agency is racialized onto both Kumail and his family; the jolting experience of Emily's coma is what enables his (and only his) escape from it.

Kumail, by film's end, has individuated himself out of this static state and is involved instead in a secular process of becoming: he is "figuring it out on his own" and for himself, but still appreciative of what Islam may offer others. His mother, on the other hand, shows no such

[25] Nanjiani, Gordon, and Showalter, *The Big Sick*.

faculty. She is stone-faced and unmoved: "You're not my son." The last word is given to Azmat, which accentuates the gulf in their thinking. This contrasts with Kumail's secular practice of self-determination and the pursuit of individual choice – in love, in religion – and ultimately demonstrates his proper place in the secular schema and the illegible place of the Muslim who does not. He has moved and changed; a dynamic that is not offered to his parents. Following this logic, there is no need spend screen time on stationary subjects. This is why the characters that are written to flourish in *The Big Sick* are the Right Muslim and the non-Muslims: Kumail, Emily, and Emily's parents, Terry and Beth.

Secular Expansion

When the audience first meets them, Terry and Beth are in the hospital, frantic and scared by the condition their daughter is in. When Kumail arrives, Beth will not even speak to him, though Terry attempts polite conversation. In the hospital canteen, he invites Kumail to sit beside them while they each lunch and await an update from Emily's doctor.

> *Kumail nods. Sits down. They eat. It's awkward.*
> Kumail: How's your sandwich?
> Beth: Best fuckin' sandwich I've ever had.
> Terry: Mine's good. Tuna's always a gamble. You know, we're not by the water. Well, we are by the water, but it's a lake. There's no tuna in the lake. Whatever. I threw the dice. I got the 7's, I guess. Whatever the good dice number is.
> *More silence.*
> Terry: So, uh, 9/11?
> *Blank looks from Kumail and Beth.*
> Terry: No, I mean, I've always wanted to have a conversation about it with...people.
> Kumail: You've never talked to people about 9/11?
> Terry: No, uh, what's your stance?
> Kumail: What's my stance on 9/11? Oh, ummmm... Anti. It was a tragedy. *[a beat]* I mean we lost 19 of our best guys.
> Beth: Huh?
> Kumail: That was a joke, obviously. 9/11 was a terrible tragedy, and it's not funny to joke about it.[26]

[26] Nanjiani, Gordon, and Showalter, *The Big Sick*.

Here, Nanjiani has inserted a daring joke that steps outside the bounds of the regime of humor. There is even an underlying jab at the regime itself - what is and isn't worthy of laughter – though the joke self-disciplines through Kumail's appearance of reproach. It is arguably the biggest laugh line of the movie; one that impressed reviewers so much they mentioned it in the title of their commentary.[27]

According to Nanjiani, the joke works because "my character is quick and makes inappropriate jokes, and he makes the most inappropriate joke possible about the most inappropriate event to make a joke about: 9/11." His explanation, however, only gets at half of the character-building that enables such humor. Like Minhaj and Ansari, a 9/11 joke told by a Muslim messenger is only possible because of how firmly and convincingly Nanjiani has evinced himself as unmistakably not "that" Muslim and a believer of the secular instead. The joke – as it is spoken – is always known to be a fiction. The humor comes from seeing the joke's recipient balk, unarmed with the knowledge the audience already has. As the film progresses, Beth and Terry continue to warm up to Kumail as he takes them back to Emily's apartment to wait for more news and then out to a local bar where they watch him perform his standup routine. While on stage, Kumail is heckled by an aggressive racist.

> Kumail: I want to name my kid Void so he won't be able to cash any of his paychecks.
> *Beth and Terry watch from the audience, laughing.*
> Kumail: I'm sorry, sir, this says Void on it. But that's my name. Curse you, father! (gesturing upwards) I work on the second floor of the bank in this fantasy scenario.

[27] Sam Adam for *Slate Magazine* calls it " what may be the best 9/11 joke ever made" in Sam Adams, "Watch the Trailer for Kumail Nanjiani's Sundance Hit The Big Sick," Slate Magazine, May 2, 2017, https://slate.com/culture/2017/05/watch-the-trailer-for-kumail-nanjiani-s-the-big-sick-video.html; see also Marlow Stern, "Kumail Nanjiani on the Art of Crafting a Masterful 9/11 Joke and That Time He Was Accosted by Trump Supporters," *The Daily Beast*, June 21, 2017, sec. entertainment, https://www.thedailybeast.com/kumail-nanjiani-on-the-art-of-crafting-a-masterful-911-joke-and-being-accosted-by-trump-supporters; Caroline Siede, "The Big Sick Lovingly Updated the Rom-Com Formula with a Coma and a Great 9/11 Joke," The A.V. Club, March 30, 2018, https://www.avclub.com/the-big-sick-lovingly-updated-the-rom-com-formula-with-1824012359.

Heckler: Go back to ISIS!
A hush over the crowd. Kumail not sure how to respond.
Kumail: Toast is a really strange food.
Beth: [to heckler] What did you just say?
Heckler: I said, he should go back to ISIS.
Kumail: Toast is the only food that-
Beth: Well that's a really confusing position. Do you want ISIS to have more people?
Heckler: No, I was saying that to him because...
Beth: Guess what everybody? We've got an ISIS recruiter here.
The crowd laughs.
Kumail: Glad we got to the bottom of that. Toast is like a-
Beth: What is it about him that made you say that?
Kumail: I think we know what the answer is.
Heckler: Lady, I wasn't talking to you.
Beth: What is it about him?
Kumail: We don't have to go down this path. We know what's at the end of it.
Heckler: 'Cuz of how he looks.
Kumail: There it is.
Beth: That is like saying that all frat boys wearing country club hats and Hawaiian shirts have shriveled up, tiny little dicks!
The crowd reacts.
Kumail: Actually, Beth, this is a bad way for you to find out, but he's right. I actually am a terrorist. I just do stand-up comedy on the side to keep a low profile.
Heckler: Fuck you.
Kumail: First of all, very clever. Did you write that at home? Toast is -
Beth: Fuck you!
Heckler: Fuck you.
Beth: No, fuck you![28]

This is a breakout moment for the character of Beth, who until this scene has retained a cold pretense towards Kumail. As the writers of the film, Nanjiani and Gordon noticed a difference in the audience reaction this scene received before and after the 2016 presidential election. "In test screenings, which we were doing before the election, (Beth's outburst) just got huge laughs," says Gordon. Nanjiani expresses apprehension about its reception in 2017 but is pleased that audience responses are not just amused. "It's also righteous anger. People clap as if (it's) almost triumphant."[29] Beth's pugnacious defense of the movie's Right Muslim Man

[28] Nanjiani, Gordon, and Showalter, *The Big Sick*.

[29] Patrick Ryan, "Kumail Nanjiani: 'I Feel More Pakistani than I Have in the Last 10 Years,'" *USA TODAY*, June 22, 2017, https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/movies/2017/06/22/the-big-sick-kumail-nanjiani-feels-more-pakistani-now/103017498/.

protagonist adds a desirable secular component to her politics, while Kumail, too, is shown to experience anti-Muslim hostility despite trying to avoid naming its racialized dimension against him. His passiveness and her feminist bellicosity each take their place within the syllogisms of the progressive consensus.

This works well for the movie's overall plotline, as the heckling incident acts as a bridging event to bring the three characters closer together. They collectively drink over the course of the night. Beth tells the story of how her military family did not initially accept Terry, a teacher from New York who "couldn't even change a tire."[30] Terry confides that he cheated on Beth a non-determined amount of time ago, and while she has forgiven him, his guilt still dogs him. Both parents are given a full backstory, and their character motives draw from seemingly universal affects – abiding love for their child, fear for her health, solidarity for the oppressed, guilt for betrayal. Azmat and Sharmeen have little motive beyond "Islam" and a notion of familial sacrifice.

Scripting Simplicity

A final note on cinematic license. After Kumail's parents leave his apartment angrily, we see them again during a scene in which Kumail interrupts their family dinner to tell them he is moving to New York to pursue his comedy career. None of them speak in response. Finally, as he packs his car full of furniture moments before departing, his parents pull up. Azmat steps out, tells Kumail "You are still kicked out of the family, but because we did not get a proper chance to say bye to you... Your mother is so angry with you. She is not going to get out of the car. She's not even going to look at you… here [handing him plastic container]. Biryani. For your

[30] Nanjiani, Gordon, and Showalter, *The Big Sick*.

trip. Your favorite. She made it herself specially for you with extra potatoes."[31] As Kumail turns to look at her, she turns away. It is the last we see of her. At the same time, the Tupperware represents a crack, a tempered hint towards future reconciliation. But the film does not explore that possibility.

In real life, Nanjiani's parents were far less obstinate in Nanjiani's own retelling of this time in his life. In multiple interviews, Nanjiani admits that while his family had expected to arrange a marriage for him, his confession about Emily was met with great concern. "She was super-sick, and they saw how much I loved her, and they obviously aren't monsters so they were like, 'OK, what can we do? Can we come visit her?'" he says in *Cosmopolitan Magazine*.[32] After her recovery, "they knew there was nothing they could do to stop it, so they were like, 'Well, you have to get married right now.' So that's what happened."[33] On Conan O'Brien's talk show in 2016, Nanjiani relates a funny story about the day of his wedding, which took place within three months of Emily's hospitalization. "So we're Muslim and she's not Muslim," he explains, "but my family was very understanding and very welcoming, so we had this Muslim ceremony at my parents' house."[34] He even quips that Emily did not mind that the nikkah was presided over by an imam (whom O'Brien repeatedly refers to as a "cleric") because "we did both, you know, we did the Muslim one and the wrong one!"[35] And in a 45 minute sit-down with Terry Gross of NPR's

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[31] Nanjiani, Gordon, and Showalter, *The Big Sick*.

[32] Jane Marie, "The Secret Life of Marrieds: Why We Kept Our Marriage Secret for Years," Cosmopolitan, May 20, 2014, https://www.cosmopolitan.com/sex-love/relationship-advice/secret-life-of-marrieds-kumail-emily.

[33] Marie, "The Secret Lives of Marrieds."

[34] *Kumail Nanjiani: The Muslim Cleric Who Married Me Was Into Beyoncé*, CONAN (TBS, 2016), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5oQCkcot9K4.

[35] *Kumail Nanjiani: The Muslim Cleric Who Married Me Was Into Beyoncé*.

Fresh Air, Nanjiani elaborates even further on how unexpected it was to witness his parents' adaptation to his marriage.

> Nanjiani: It's very tricky because I understand my parents - I understand why they wanted me to marry someone within the culture - right? - because they're here and they want to hold onto their identity and they want to hold onto their culture. And one of the most important ways to do it is to sort of pass it on to your kids. And then having your kid choose someone outside the culture, I understand. You know, it's a very – it's a struggle. It's difficult to hold onto your identity in a land where your identity is not valued.
> Gross: So is everything OK now in the family?
> Nanjiani: Yeah, yeah. You know, I realized I had not given my parents enough credit. I just, you know, it's easy to think of your parents as being the people that they will always be and that they're sort of done, you know, that they're always going to be these people. But I had not given them… I had not thought that they would have the capacity to evolve and change in the way that they really have… I just did not give them enough credit.[36]

His mother, Shabana, even gave Emily the jewelry set she had been saving for her son's future wife since his childhood.[37] This "credit" is peculiarly missing from *The Big Sick*. In fact, the small nods of recognition towards what Nanjiani has described here are unambiguously overridden by the space, time, and complications allotted to Beth and Terry over Sharmeen and Azmat. That his parents even welcome Emily with a Pakistani wedding itself gets tucked away in the end credits.

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[36] Terry Gross, "How A Medically Induced Coma Led To Love, Marriage And 'The Big Sick,'" *Fresh Air* (NPR, July 12, 2017), https://www.npr.org/2017/07/12/536822055/how-a-medically-induced-coma-led-to-love-marriage-and-the-big-sick.

[37] Marantz, "Kumail Nanjiani's Culture-Clash Comedy," May 1, 2017.

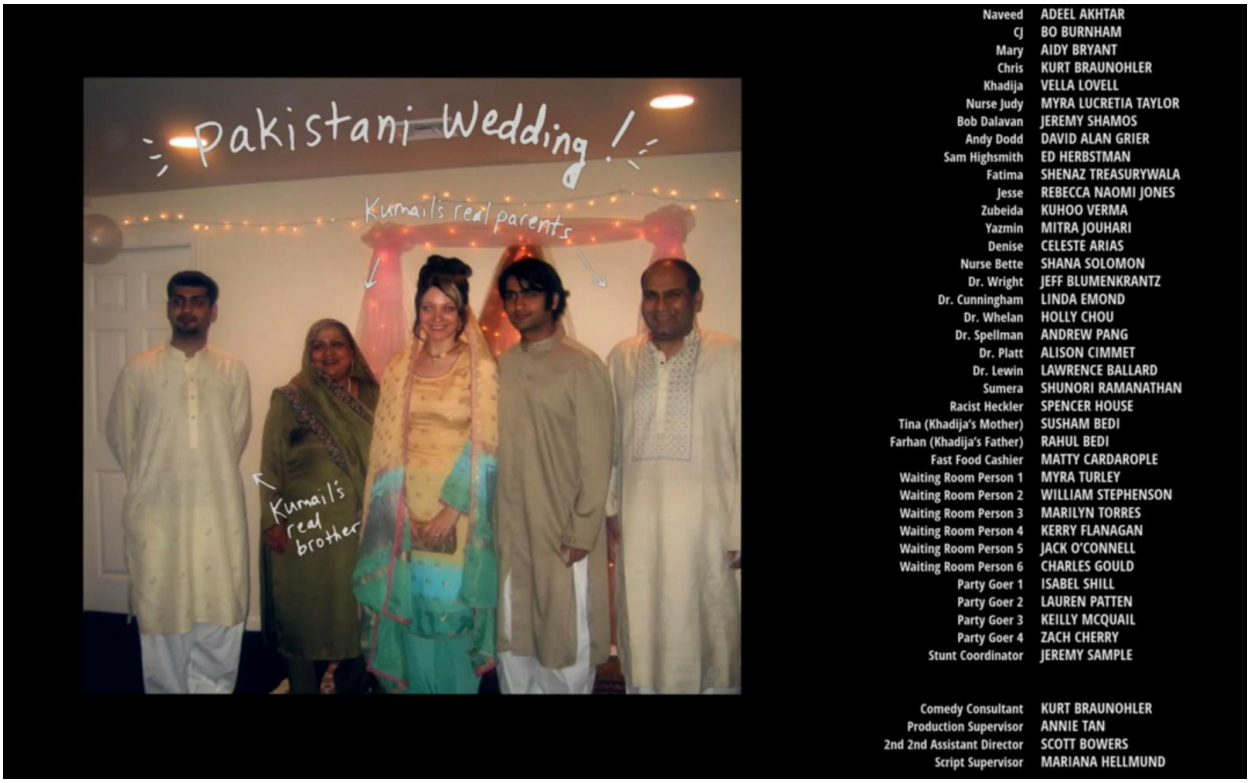

Figure 9: Screenshot of end credits in The Big Sick.

The Big Sick, despite attempts at Muslim depictions that critique and give little currency to presumptions of violence, nonetheless re-entrenches other Orientalist notions about Islam, like inherent illiberalism and cultural intractability. Escape from this IslamLand is presented as a secular act of becoming – forging one's own path unencumbered by the weight of Muslimicity.

A Very Muslim Monologue

After the summer success of *The Big Sick*, Nanjiani was invited to host *Saturday Night Live* on October 14, 2017, only the second Desi (after Aziz Ansari) to host in the show's 45-year history.[38] He performed his opening monologue as a standup set, borrowing jokes from *Beta*

[38] Stephany Bai, "Aziz Ansari to Become First 'SNL' Host of South Asian Descent," *NBC News*, January 10, 2017, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/aziz-ansari-become-first-snl-host-south-asian-descent-n705351.

Male but incorporating new material to stay on theme for the promotion of his film and the then current political milieu. In a manner similar to Ansari, Nanjiani's monologue is compactly centered on being/appearing Muslim.

> I had a movie earlier this summer called *The Big Sick*. People who don't know, *The Big Sick* is the true story of the first year of the relationship between my eventual wife and I. And my wife Emily is a white American person, and my parents wanted me to marry a Muslim Pakistani person, so things didn't quite go their way… I'm getting ahead of myself. I was the second person from my family to leave Pakistan and come to the west. I had an uncle decades before me who was going to Scotland. And the Nanjianis were very excited. And they were like "Hey, remember the deal, be good." And he was like, "Yeah, [wink] got it." And then he got to Scotland, fell in love with a white woman, married her, and then Nanjianis were like, "Never again! Let's regroup, let's tighten this up." And then for decades nobody left. The next person who left was me, forty years later. I came to America, fell in love with a white woman, married her, and then made a movie about it, just to rub it in their face! Nanjianis: 0, White Women: 2. When I called my mom to tell her, she wasn't even upset. She was like, "You know what? This time, shame on us."[39]

This joke sets up whiteness against Islam ("white American" vs. "Muslim Pakistani") and lightheartedly ties the static outlook of his Muslim family to their static geography in Pakistan. The joke works because the premise is one that all can coalesce easily around: *of course* the Muslim family would not accept marriage outside their own. Leaving Pakistan for the "west" is an onboard to marrying white women and all that such a marriage represents. His solidarity has shifted for the purposes of this joke, aligned with the unnamed white women of his premise and her secular scaffold.

The monologue continues with a joke taken from *Beta Male* and updated for the first year of the Trump presidency.

> Islamophobia is really on the rise right now. It never really went away but it's really having a moment right now. Islamophobia is kind of like *Will and Grace*, you know where it was huge a while ago and we thought it was gone and done, and now it's back and bigger than ever: Thursdays on NBC! They made me say that... I saw a guy be like, "Of course all Muslims are sexist. The Qur'an says women can't drive." [eyes widen] Yeah, pretty sure the Qur'an never said that. Because if the Qur'an had said "women can't drive cars" 1400 years ago, I would be at the mosque right now. And so would all

[39] Nanjiani, *Kumail Nanjiani Standup Monologue - Saturday Night Live*.

> of you. ‘Cuz that would mean the Qur’an predicted cars. If 1400 years ago the Qur’an was like, “Someday there will be a metallic box that will carry you wherever you want. And it will have four wheels. And you’d have to put gasoline in it. And it will have a little speedometer to tell you how fast you’re going. And it will have a bluetooth connection. And women shouldn’t drive it,” I would be like, “I know two things for sure: Islam is the only true religion, and women shouldn’t drive.” [Laughter] I am so glad you laughed at that, ‘cuz otherwise it sounds like I’m just giving a very divisive speech. “Islam is the only true religion. Women shouldn’t drive.” That will definitely be the quote on the internet tomorrow.[40]

Once more, Nanjiani swerves in and out of the tenants of the humor regime, but he makes sure to physically and affectively react adversely, in real time, to the words he is saying. Nanjiani’s eyebrows rise and furrow in disbelief at the racist logic laid out by his conversation partner.

Figure 10: Nanjiani’s Saturday Night Live monologue from October 14, 2017, screenshot taken on May 20, 2020.

His response, (“if the Qur’an had said…”) stresses each phrase with an air of dispassionate frivolity in order to communicate both the folly and misogyny inlaid within this fictive clairvoyant Qur’an.

[40] Nanjiani, *Kumail Nanjiani Standup Monologue - Saturday Night Live.*

The "divisive speech" disclaimer he tacks onto the end is present in *Beta Male* as well. In both sets, among audiences that have known him for five minutes or for 50, Nanjiani does not trust a regime-crossing joke like this to stand alone on the strength of his unspoken bodily reactions. He must re-certify his secular aesthetic explicitly, distance "that" Muslim from "this," and follows up with another joke that denotes his clear aversion to racism and its effect on non-Muslims, as well. Solidarity against white supremacy once more places Nanjiani under a shared cover of marginality as distinctly not the danger, but its victim:

> Sikh people get attacked all the time for being Muslim. Spoiler alert: they're not. But they're Brown and they wear turbans so people attack them for being Muslim. Which must put them in such an awkward position, 'cuz they're like, "I'm not Muslim! Not that you should attack Muslims. But if you're looking to attack Muslims, which you shouldn't, I'm not one, there is a Muslim right over there, don't attack him, unless somebody's definitely getting attacked, in which case, get it right, which is wrong!"[41]

Conclusion

Nanjiani's Right Muslim Man is avowedly secular, and (re)produces that self through a processual drama of ascending into the secular. This originates from a point of static and "essential" Muslim being that ultimately erodes and results in a secular Muslim self that is averse to "Islam" as it relates to issues of belief and ritual practice. This production does not dissipate his cultural and racial affiliation with Islam. It imbues him with marginality due to the dominance of anti-Muslim hostility in the U.S. and opens up an avenue for Nanjiani to demonstrate a non-confrontational dimension of difference, where his now-secular Muslimicity blunts his capacity to inflict harm in his interpersonal relationships and across the social spectrum. Nanjiani's secularizing/secularized Muslim man is dynamic in his ability to adapt and

[41] Nanjiani, *Kumail Nanjiani Standup Monologue - Saturday Night Live.*

meet social challenges, and he aligns the rewards of this dynamism as unconflicted sexual union with a white woman and acceptance by/into a greater secular society.

The essential Muslim being – personified by his parents, family, and "Pakistan" – is depicted as woefully static and immobile in their interpersonal growth and belief structure. It is notable that Nanjiani is deliberate in displacing the attribution of innate violence away from the essential Muslim figures in his comedy – instead of being an object to fear they are instead transformed into an object of humor by way of their simplicity and unsophisticated adherence to ritualized imagination. The authenticity of this assemblage derives from Nanjiani's native testimony as a former Muslim of "that" persuasion, one who is now the Right Muslim Man because Islam is only a matter of racialization. In this logic, Nanjiani can be victim to anti-Muslim hostility but cannot make demands of the secular system to accommodate Islam in any other fashion. Taken together, Nanjiani articulates a vision of Islam away from the characterization of 21st century terrorism, though he remains cognizant of that notional embeddedness. In response, he sterilized Islam and Muslims into figures unmodern but ultimately harmless outside of interpersonal divergences. They are unlike the Muslim able to step outside Islam as a "religion," one like himself, who has countless space and opportunity opened up to and for him.

CHAPTER 9: PATRIARCHAL DIVIDENDS, CO-OPTING BLACKNESS, AND THE CONCEIT OF REPRESENTATIVE #RESISTANCE

> The orange lining to the Trump administration is it's united minority groups to be like, "Oh, we're all Black, we're all Muslim, we're all Latino."
>
> - Hasan Minhaj on *Ebro in the Morning*[1]

Introduction

As I come to the close of this project, it is abidingly clear that Aziz Ansari, Hasan Minhaj, and Kumail Nanjiani have emerged as a simulacrum for the progressive consensus and secular subjecthood despite the racialized and epistemic violence they otherwise face as Muslims moving through a racist social schema that names itself as secular. Muslim women comedians, for example, have similarly staged selves that attend to secular sensibilities with nowhere near the same level of success. So why only these men? It feels appropriate to attend to this question directly by shining a final light on ontologies of patriarchy and Blackness in the progressive consensus context, especially as they laid the ground for what I call the conceit of representative resistance. Due in part to what Raewyn Connell names "the patriarchal dividend," Ansari, Minhaj, and Nanjiani have come to represent themselves not just as ideal Muslim subjects but as representative of the *only* feasible Muslim subject under such secular taxonomies.

For Ansari and Minhaj particularly, this is accomplished through their simultaneous appropriation of and disavowal of American Blackness and Black aesthetics. When #resistance is

[1] "Hasan Minhaj Breaks Down What Went Down At The White House Correspondence Dinner," *Ebro in the Morning* (HOT 97, May 19, 2017), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wBBMMsiGo_A&feature=emb_logo.

simply window dressing, what is accomplished in its name? It is my hope that by consciously naming the presence and application of patriarchy and anti-Blackness, we may better understand the stakes of why humor matters and how it is critical for explaining the functions and feats of religion, race, gender, secularism, and Islam in quotidian humor, in the world of comedy, and in U.S. public life.

Paying Out the Patriarchal Dividend

When Raewyn Connell refers to the "patriarchal dividend," she is speaking about material benefits that men gain through the gendered growth of capitalist economies as they result from the division and products of social labor between those identified as men and women.[2] The benefits are accrued through the valuation of labor according to the social construction of gender and masculinity in particular. Labor that men are seemingly "naturally" inclined towards and excel at – i.e. work that is public-facing – has historically been prized above and monetarily rewarded over the labor of women, even when the work is the same.

Standup comedy and the regime of humor is no different. The guild has long been a domain of the old boys' network, epitomized by a literal table at the back of the Comedy Cellar in New York occupied, by and large, by cisgender men. A *New Yorker* article describes the extreme hostility that a remodel of the restaurant upstairs was met with when the comedians' table was slightly moved. Chris Rock thunders the names of those who had previously sanctified this space. "This is not the table where Robin Williams sat, this is not where Ray Romano sat,

[2] R. W. Connell, "New Directions in Gender Theory, Masculinity Research, and Gender Politics," *Ethnos* 61, no. 3–4 (January 1, 1996): 157-176, 172.

this is not where Jon Stewart sat," he berated the owner.[3] Only three women are mentioned in this article, and all at once at that. Michael Che, who is frequently criticized for transphobia and misogyny in his comedy sets, speaks about the sanctuary the table provides.[4] Nick DiPaolo, whose website features him giving the finger to a composite group of "activist" women, is described as a "regular" at the table, and Louis C.K., about whom sexual misconduct rumors had long swirled before his #MeToo moment, is mentioned for his lovable company.[5] The gates of the standup industry are policed to protect the patriarchy.

At the same time, the mere visibility of a Muslim woman incites controversy within normative Muslim and secular discourses, often for similar reasons. From vociferous debates

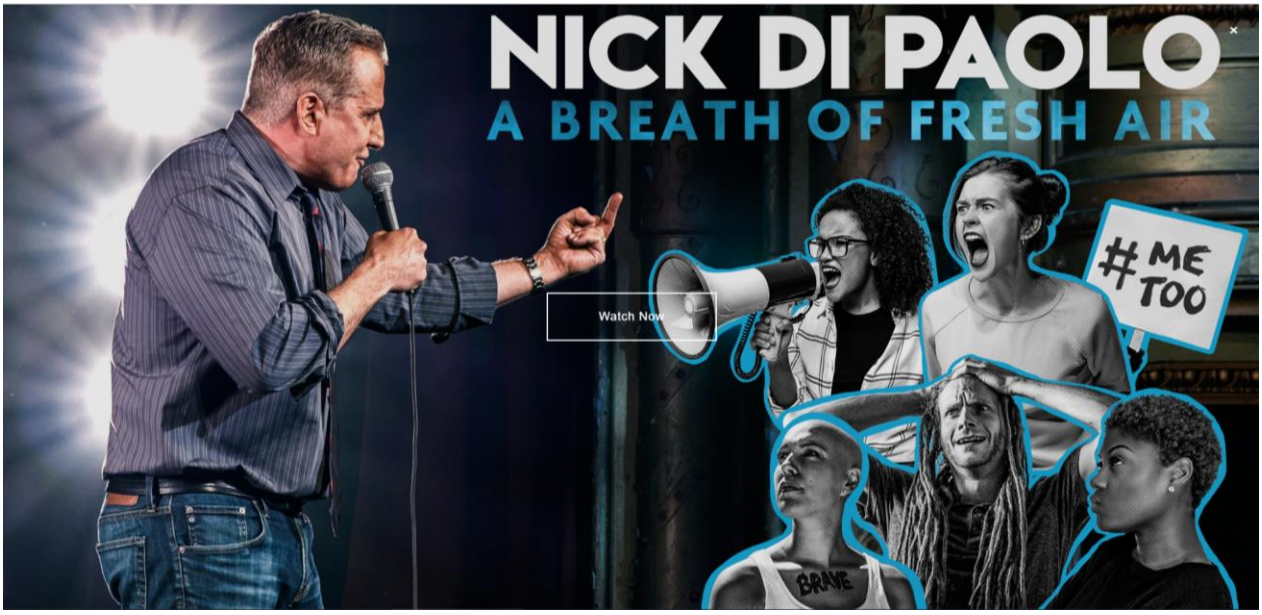

Figure 11: Screenshot of Nick Di Paolo's website, nickdip.com, taken on June 18, 2020.

[3] Andrew Hankinson, "An Upset at the Comedians' Table," *The New Yorker*, August 21, 2017, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/08/28/an-upset-at-the-comedians-table.

[4] Hazel Cillis, "Michael Che (Still) Can't Take Criticism From Women," *Jezebel* (blog), March 31, 2018, https://jezebel.com/michael-che-still-cant-take-criticism-from-women-1823930425.

[5] Hankinson, "An Upset at the Comedians' Table"; "Nick Di Paolo," Nick Di Paolo, accessed June 29, 2020, https://www.nickdip.com.

between male ulema about "appropriate" Muslim women's dress to the obsession with women's liberation from the hijab, scholars like Leila Ahmed, Juliane Hammer, and Lila Abu-Lughod have tracked the ways that anxiety over Muslim women's bodies and how much of them is "seen" draw from patriarchal discourses of consumption and control.[6] On the comedy stage, this becomes an added precondition to the material Muslim women comics write and make light of. Comedian Tissa Hami, for instance, wears a prop chador and hijab that she throws off in the middle of the show because "I was feeling kind of slutty."[7] Jaclyn Michael argues this creates a tense incongruity for the audience, who must grapple with her as someone who (now) seems very much like them. The "modesty costume," in Michael's reading, is meant to indicate that clothing is not central to an American Muslim woman's identity.[8] Hami continues in this reactive vein by later conceding that while women typically may pray behind men in mosque spaces, it is not because they are marginalized. "We're not in the back because we're oppressed," she swears. "We just like the view! We're praying for a piece of that!"[9]

I am less inclined to agree with Michael that Hami's jokes are successful in distancing herself and other Muslim women from the notion that clothes play an outsized role in their

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[6] See in particular the following works: Lila Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others," *American Anthropologist* 104 (2002): 783-790; Leila. Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam : Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 208-248; Leila Ahmed, "The Veil Debate - Again," in *On Shifting Ground: Muslim Women in the Global Era*, ed. Fereshteh Nouraie-Simone (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2014), 154–70; Juliane Hammer, "Center Stage: Gendered Islamophobia and Muslim Women," in *Islamophobia in America: The Anatomy of Intolerance*, ed. Carl W. Ernst (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2013), 107–144.

[7] Jaclyn Michael, "American Muslims Stand up and Speak out: Trajectories of Humor in Muslim American Stand-up Comedy," *Contemporary Islam* 7, no. 2 (July 2013): 129–53, 143.

[8] Michael, "American Muslims Stand up and Speak out," 143.

[9] Michael, "American Muslims Stand up and Speak out," 143.

subjectivity. Rather, I see the production of such sartorial flourishes as reinscribing their importance and centrality – here, recreating a relational "this" Muslim and "that" like those so carefully enacted by Minhaj, Ansari, and Nanjiani. Becoming "this" Muslim (or one that may come off as more "right" in her secular subjecthood) does not close her off from the violence that is enjoined by being a woman. Her mere presence is an act of "againstness" in ways not shared with her male co-religionists.[10] It is not a stretch, then, to recognize that the dividend of public presence for U.S. Muslims pays out regularly to men, even on the micro-stage of the comedy industry.

Visibility is, as demonstrated here, fraught in the face of racialization and anti-Muslim hostility for Muslim men, but it is not the impediment it is for Muslim women, or, for that matter, Black Muslims. The presence of these men, however, has been eagerly marshaled by industry forces that buttress the progressive consensus. Masculinity is reflexively equated with authority. Due to the heightened apprehension that the Brown Muslim amalgam continues to summon and empower as valid, those that resemble the terrifying Muslim are thus also the recipients of the opportunity to confront them. The question of gender is swallowed and sacrificed in this regard, as the notion of "better" representation here is read primarily through the minoritization of race. Thus, racialized Brown Muslim men are made the recipients of a perverse dividend of authority as an image of #resistence, and re-enact patriarchal male normativities through the guise of being representative. Minhaj, Nanjiani, and Ansari have all taken on that mantle of representation with varying degrees of enthusiasm. When they do,

[10] Chan-Malik uses "againstness" to demonstrate how certain embodiments make one immediately outside the presumed dominant modes of being. I return to the concept later in the chapter, as well. See Sylvia Chan-Malik, *Being Muslim: A Cultural History of Women of Color in American Islam, Being Muslim* (New York: NYU Press, 2018), 15-18.

however, their experiences are extended to the experiences of Muslim women, as well. None of these men actually give a platform to such women; they simply speak on their behalf.

To Be Representative

Increasingly, Minhaj, Nanjiani, and Ansari's Muslim minoritization – as it appears on their person and influences their humor – has been called on not just as examples of Muslim humor but as emblematic of it.[11] Nanjiani and Ansari have been keen to engage the role of offering *representation* but demure when it comes to being *representative*. Ansari says this is not from a place of shame so much as "religious people deserve a better representative than a guy who's doing a show about fucking and drinking and eating pork all the time."[12] He did, however, take the platform offered to him by SNL seriously, recalling "Okay, I'm in this position, I have to be somewhat responsible." When they asked for material to cut out of his monologue, he insisted that the Muslim material stay put. "I'm going to keep that Islamophobia thing in because no one else can really talk about that." Nanjiani, too, steps in and out of the position. His Twitter activism on issues like the Muslim Ban are tied to comments on his ethnic background: "I can't imagine what it must be like to be someone who looks like me in other parts," he says. "If there's an ethnicity that is maligned and attacked and demonized ... I'm with you. I stand with

[11] "The daring works by Ansari, Nanjiani and Minhaj are taking powerful steps in redefining the image of Muslims," says reporter Caryn James. See Caryn James, "Critic's Notebook: Un-Demonizing Muslims, One Comedy at a Time," *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 4, 2017, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/critics-notebook-demonizing-muslims-one-comedy-at-a-time-1018564.

[12] Jada Yuan, "Aziz Ansari Wanted to Be the Great Uniter and Ended Up an Activist," *New York Magazine*, May 1, 2017.

you. Because it's unavoidable that people are seeing me a certain way, I kind of want to own it. I feel more Pakistani than I have in the last 10 years."[13]

In an interview with podcasters Dax Shepard and Monica Padman, however, Minhaj is far less ambiguous than the other two.

> I'm not asking anyone to carry some baton that they should have to carry, but for me, I'm very proud to be Desi… I'm very proud to be this guy who, for the most part, through elementary school, middle school, junior high, I had a mustache, sideburns, glasses, and was on the sidelines of the conversation and to now be in the mainstream and say, you know what it is, I'm Hasan Minhaj, this is new Brown America… and I don't care if in the producer's session, they go, 'Hanson Minaja?', it's like 'I don't give a fuck.' Because the Internet is real, and there's more people who look like me than you. I'm sorry to get a little Farrakhan about it, but that's how I feel! … Monica, what do you think? ... Don't you have a cousin named Varun who kind of looks like me? Poofy hair, lined up beard? ... This wouldn't have been possible in 2011, 2012, these kinds of conversations in pop culture? Monica, you know, this sort of unbridled honesty where we're playing offense? Not possible.[14]

Minhaj relishes this representative role, even calling on Monica, the South Asian co-host, to affirm that his increased visibility is actually a symbol of progress that she shares in, as well. This is not something Minhaj has imagined on his own – it is how he is reported on in broader media discourses. The *Hollywood Reporter* describes the combination of these three men as "providing a timely corrective to Trump-era alarmism about Muslims," effectively "touch[ing] universal emotions," and "mak[ing] their points without preaching." Ansari's presumption that "no one else can really talk about it" appears implicitly shared by Nanjiani and explicitly by Minhaj. For Minhaj in particular, this betrays a conceit of representative resistance, whereby the

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[13] Nanjiani and the article author's slippage between ethnicity, nationality, and religion in this article demonstrate the main thesis of the progressive consensus: that the varied dimensions of social difference all amass into a single operative mode of racialized distinction. See Ryan, "Kumail Nanjiani: 'I Feel More Pakistani than I Have in the Last 10 Years.'"

[14] The reference to Louis Farrakhan in this segment is jarring, and I return to it later in this chapter. Dax Shepard and Monica Padman, "Hasan Minhaj," Armchair Expert with Dax Shepard, accessed May 21, 2020, https://armchairexpertpod.com/pods/hasan-minhaj.

Muslim minoritization of these comedians has come to stand-in for all types of minoritization within the progressive consensus.

Minhaj, Nanjiani, and Ansari (up until his 2017 #MeToo confrontation) are/were representative of Muslim resistance, a position made possible through racialization and the patriarchal dividend. But if they are representative of being/becoming Muslim, then how does one account for the experiences of Muslim women and Black Muslims in the U.S.? Sylvia Chan-Malik's theorization of insurgent being, the "unruly and rebellious expression against social, cultural, and political norms of race, gender, and religion," is useful to explain part of what these men advance in their comedy. Yet they seek to tame that insurgency into something more secular, while the Black Muslim women and Muslim women of color that Chan-Malik studies embrace it as a form of againstness. "It is a set of affective responses that emerge out of the ways Islam is consistently lived insurgently by women, responses that arise out of the ways U.S. Muslim women engage, navigate, and counter the ways Islam is imagined as an unruly and insurgent political presence at various moments in history," says Chan-Malik.[15]

For someone like Maya Blow, a Black Muslim woman who now runs Soul Flower Farms with her husband east of San Francisco, Chan-Malik writes that the experience of anti-Muslim hostility was channeled primarily through her gendered and racial presentation. Strangers would hurl objects and spit on her because of her hijab, while rich white mothers at the park would dismiss her as a teen mom. These encounters are part of her person and her "againstness"; they are shaped by her "backbone" of Islam which transmutes back out as "being Muslim" to the world.[16] These are experiences that feed her devotion to fighting carceral injustice, farming, and

[15] Chan-Malik, *Being Muslim*, 16.

[16] Chan-Malik, *Being Muslim*, 217-220.

sustainability practices "because, as Muslims, we are supposed to be living close to the earth."[17] How can the same points of pursuit that Minhaj, Nanjiani, and Ansari share stand for a life like this? That their corners of experience have been elevated and discursively characterized as "representative" of Muslims, ostensibly even for Black Muslim women like Maya, reifies yet another masculine presumption of being unmarked by gender and racially determined as "Muslim."

Co-opting Blackness for "Muslim Cool"

This conceit extends also to the performance and co-optation of American Blackness for Ansari and Minhaj in terms of their bodily comportment, sartorial choices, and representative capacity. This is a performance with multiple aims, among which is yet another refraction of American authenticity – not aspirationally white, having been made minoritized by it, but still desirable and legible within its jurisdiction. Su'ad Abdul Khabeer demands recognition of "the critical importance of Blackness to all U.S. Muslim self-making, including those who move away from Blackness as well as those who… move toward Blackness as a way of being Muslim."[18]

This move towards Blackness particularly by South Asians in the U.S. has been documented by scholars like Nitasha Tamar Sharma, whose ethnographic research on "hip hop desis" reveals a class of young 1.5 generation and second generation South Asians that identify with U.S. American Blackness and hip hop as a way to express their own racialized and

[17] Chan-Malik, *Being Muslim*, 218.

[18] Su'ad Abdul Khabeer, *Muslim Cool: Race, Religion, and Hip Hop in the United States* (New York: NYU Press, 2016), 24.

diasporic identities and connect themselves to Black histories.[19] Typically attributed to the ways that these Desis have experienced alienation and feelings of belonging, Sharma writes that her interlocuters actively "make" race by changing how they define and engage with the hegemonic meanings and categorical specificities of existing structures. Not finding such dynamic engagements among their immediate parental generation, Sharma argues that the young people she studies in the first decade of the 21st century turn to U.S. American Blackness "as a model of an explicitly racialized response to this void."[20]

Out of this emerges a race consciousness based on the shared experience and knowledge of history and global power that shaped the very entry of South Asians and Blacks African diasporas to the Americas. Communities are constructed out of this sameness and a mutual interest and politics. "Analyzing the overlapping processes of racialization enables a perspective that highlights the relational formation of minority identities," Sharma reflects. "These theories inform the lyrics of these artists, who use hip hop to advance a global racial perspective that contests multiple racisms and offers a model for solidarity."[21] Still other South Asians, such as the South Asian youth studied by Sunaina Maira, affiliate with Blackness through sartorial and affective choices like "the style, and the attitude, and the walk" of Black men.[22] The desire for such alignment draws, once more, on the operative notion of Black hypermasculinity and

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[19] Nitasha Tamar Sharma, *Hip Hop Desis: South Asian Americans, Blackness, and a Global Race Consciousness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 4.

[20] Sharma, *Hip Hop Desis*, 89.

[21] Sharma, *Hip Hop Desis*, 119.

[22] Sunaina Maira, "B-Boys and Bass Girls: Sex, Style, and Mobility in Indian American Youth Culture," in *Desi Rap: Hip Hop and South Asian America* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008), 48.

simultaneous danger/allure. Maira observes that such affect is read as contradicting "stability" – financial and psychological – and is discarded in the search for a long-term marital partner.[23]

Anti-Blackness thus remains pervasive across normative Desi Muslim discourses and is coded in racial and classed terms. "Black masculinity and fears of economic instability become a counterpoint to the "traditional" heterosexual family structure," Maira suggests, "and desires for upward mobility that are linked to a nostalgia recalling an imaginary past, yet focused on its fulfillment in an imagined future."[24] Vijay Prashad adds that while it is recognized that whiteness is not necessarily an achievable category, there is nonetheless a strong desire to deny affiliation with Blackness "at least partly out of a desire for class mobility (something, in the main, denied to blacks) and a sense of solidarity with blacks was tantamount to ending one's dreams of being successful (that is, of being 'white')."[25]

Exploitation and Alignment

Minhaj and Ansari both participate in the manipulation of Blackness for comedic ends and their self-articulation. Ansari's 2010 bit about bedsheets in *Intimate Moments* culminates in such intense anger that it can only be captured through the impersonation of a stereotypical gangster: "If that was a drug deal, I would have shot Hotel Luxury Linens in the face. 'Where the rest of my threads? You didn't think I was gonna count that shit, motherfucker?!'"[26] The same set makes Black celebrities the butt of several jokes, such as Kanye West and R. Kelly. These

[23] Maira, "B-Boys and Bass Girls," 51.

[24] Maira, "B-Boys and Bass Girls," 52.

[25] Vijay. Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 94.

[26] Ansari and Woliner, *Intimate Moments for a Sensual Evening*.

segments are written primarily as observation of absurdity or excess. One joke about Kanye West centers on how odd it is that he listens to his own music at home ("that'd be like if I had a stand-up album, you came over to my house, and I was listening to it going, 'hahaha! These jokes are dope'").[27]

At the same time, these jokes rely on the social capital of association with prominent Black figures, given that his audience is primarily white. He turns this into a quick punchline before describing R. Kelly's extravagance onstage.

> I go to his concert with my friend Jason. We get there. Show's sold out. People are psyched for R. Kelly. Jason looks over at me and goes, 'Hey, Aziz, me and you are the only two white people at this concert.' I was, like, 'First of all, Jason, I'm not white. Second of all [lowering his voice ominously], you're the only white guy at this concert. We might kill you, Jason!'[28]

Ansari has continued to cluster his observational comedy around Blackness and Black celebrities. He performs another joke in this vein the following year on *The Late Show with David Letterman*, *Anderson*, and his 2012 routine *Dangerously Delicious*, about seeing 50 Cent at a restaurant.[29] It is told as follows:

> I was eating at one of my favorite restaurants in New York not too long ago, and I was eating dinner with a friend, and he was like, 'Aziz, what have you been up to?' and I said, 'SHUT UP. 50 Cent is sitting over there and I need to hear everything he says.' And 50 Cent did not disappoint. He ordered a grapefruit soda. The waiter brings him the grapefruit soda. And then 50 Cent said the greatest thing anyone could ever say when you see a grapefruit soda… He looks at the waiter and says, 'Why isn't this purple?' And it took me a few seconds, and then I realized, 'Oh my god, 50 Cent has no idea what a grapefruit is! Excuse me, everybody in the restaurant, you need to SHUT UP right now 'cuz a waiter's about to explain to a grown man what a grapefruit is!" You realize how amazing this moment is? There are parents that aren't there when their children learn what a grapefruit is. I am there for that moment in rapper 50 Cent's life. This guy leaves

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[27] Ansari, *Dangerously Delicious*.

[28] Aziz Ansari and Jason Woliner, *Intimate Moments for a Sensual Evening*.

[29] *Aziz Ansari Explaining His Encounter with 50 Cent.*, Late Show with David Letterman (CBS, 2011), https://www.wimp.com/aziz-ansari-explaining-his-encounter-with-50-cent/; *Aziz Ansari Says the "50 Cent" Story Is True*, Anderson, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bCvGJlzBUK8; Ansari, *Dangerously Delicious*.

> the restaurant, he's going to know about a new fruit! And the exchange was just glorious. The waiter, struggling to explain the concept of a grapefruit to a man that just didn't get it… And it just blew my mind, how does 50 Cent not know what a grapefruit is? This guy has been rich for so long. He has to run into a grapefruit every now and then. I do okay, and I see grapefruits every fucking day! What happens when he sees a grapefruit? Is he just like, 'What's up with those oranges? They're all red and shit! And they'e big as fuck! Dude they're looking at me weird! Shoot those ni**as!'[30]

His 2013 special, *Buried Alive*, also featured a rib about Black men reacting to magic tricks.

> I feel bad making broad generalizations about men and women like that, but… I'm pretty confident. To me it's one of those things. It's like saying, black dudes are blown away by magic tricks. Stereotypes are fucked up, but that one's on point. If anyone has footage of a black dude seeing a magic trick and not being blown away, show it to me. I'll never say that again. But until I see that footage, that's my favorite racial stereotype ever. That's the best one! Nothing comes close. What do you got? 'Jewish people are really cheap.' No, no, no. When a black dude sees a magic trick, his mind explodes. 'Bu-bu-but Asian people open up dry cleaning places a lot.' No, no, no, no. When a black dude sees a magic trick, for a few moments, he thinks it's real. Like there's a sorcerer on earth. If you don't know what I'm talking about, this is what happens, all right? They see the magic trick and then this– boosh! – They got to walk away a minimum of 30 feet 'cuz everything they know about reality has just been destroyed. They have to reassess existence from the ground up. But what always happens? They always turn around. [Leaping across stage] 'That's amazing! That's amazing! That's amazing! That's amazing!'[31]

When these jokes are taken together and stacked against the rise of Ansari's overall career – and here, I mean the type of self he assumes on stage and on screen from one role to the next, the gaps and silences he lays over his own experiences of racial difference and racism before 2016 – there is a clear tendency to lean on the conceit of representative resistance through the use of Black aesthetics.

Ansari is willing to tease at the eccentricities and infantilism of prominent Black men while still ingratiating himself in their company and profiting, figuratively and quite literally, from the experience and intimacy with that Black celebrity. He has actively sought to advance himself as an ideal secular subject but vocalizes himself through Southern slang. He has played

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[30] Ansari, *Dangerously Delicious*.

[31] Lovelace and Southern, *Aziz Ansari: Buried Alive*.

the flatly frivolous half of the ostentatious "treat yo' self" duo alongside a Black woman in *Parks and Recreation.* He then transformed himself into a progressive standard-bearer in comedy as a beneficiary of the mentorship of Black comics like Chris Rock. All of this has taken place along a career trajectory that does not acknowledge the place of Blackness in his self-articulation. Once more, I am mindful of Harshita Kamath's intentional/unintentional impersonation. Why is Blackness so often present in Ansari's punchlines, even if peripheral? We are familiar with standup that values the varied experiences of Blackness. So why is that value so muddled in Ansari's comedy?

I venture that this ambiguity of value derives directly from Ansari's conceit of representative resistance. It is clear how exactly Ansari has built a career by telling jokes to white people; this is a matter of both social demographics and cultural hegemony. Though he is adamant that his comedy is not "for" white people, Ansari's career, comedy, and his cultivated Right Muslim self subsist on their consumption.[32] The co-optation of Blackness allows him to speak in a triangular fashion that maintains anti-Black racism while also authenticating him as American in ways that the two-poled effeminate and brutish Muslimicity of his racialized body cannot entirely overcome. Reaching for Blackness, and performing it through impersonation, situates Ansari "here" and not "there" in an incomplete process as he is never so convincing to "be" Black.

That he never arrives at that destination, however, is what ultimately positions him for step two. Ansari keeps secure the supremacy of whiteness through an added performance of derision, where Blackness and Black men are ripe for mockery. Here, Ansari's Brown Muslim

[32] "Definitely don't care what white people think," says Ansari. "I just try to make stuff that I think is good and hopefully people like it, regardless of their race or gender or anything." See Jones, "Aziz Ansari: 'I Try to Write Political Material … Then Get Tired of It.'"

outsiderness and general insistence that his comedy does not play to anyone specifically allows him to then tease Black oddity specifically because it is "on point."[33] He invites his white audience to laugh "at" those that have scaffolded his very presence as someone worth listening to in the first place because it is equal and fair.

Channeling Black Confidence

Hasan Minhaj is arguably more conscious of the ways that Blackness and hip hop influence his own political realities, but it less forthcoming on how heavily he leans on both for his own physical affect and authentication on stage. If we take Su'ad Abdul Khabeer's theorization of hip hop as epistemology, then it is clear how Minhaj's telegenic "look" relies on hip hop to posture himself away "from being 'merely 'artists'' to being actively engaged in acting upon the world."[34] Minhaj's facial stylings utilize aesthetics commonly created in Black barber shops like lined up beards with temple fades. In both *Homecoming King* and his appearances in *Patriot Act*, a key feature of Minhaj's ensemble are his conspicuous sneakers. Sneaker culture, associated with the rise of Michael Jordan and his collaboration with Nike for Air Jordans in the 1980s and 90s, "reigns as the universal icon for the culture of consumption [and] the ingenious manner in which black cultural nuances of cool, hip, and chic have influenced the broader American cultural landscape."[35] In an interview about his sneaker choices on *Patriot Act*, Minhaj calls the shoes an homage to his childhood, which he chose deliberately

[33] Lovelace and Southern, *Aziz Ansari: Buried Alive*.

[34] Abdul Khabeer, *Muslim Cool: Race, Religion, and Hip Hop in the United States*, 29.

[35] Michael Eric Dyson, "Be Like Mike? Michael Jordan and the Pedagogy of Desire," in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 372–80, 378.

as a way to stand out against his peers. “We shoot the show where I’m standing, I’m not behind a desk. You see the shoe in a light—I work the stage, I’m on top of the LEDs,” he says. ““It’s like a little wink. We’re going to do this 25-minute deep dive on student loan debt and it’s this super nerdy comedy book report, but I’m also wearing some ‘Union Los Angeles’ Air Jordan Is.”[36]

The “loop” that Abdul Khabeer traces between hip hop and knowledge of the self is evident in how Minhaj conceptualizes his brand and the image of a “New Brown America” that is posited at the end of *Homecoming King* and carries through in *Patriot Act*. Such a performance of “cool” carries and lends credit to his content and political interventions. Minhaj tells Dax Shepard and Monica Padman that this conceptualization of an authentic self comes to him by way of another hip hop-influenced Asian American writer, chef, and lawyer Eddie Huang.

> One of my favorite authors is Eddie Huang. Eddie Huang says this great thing and it informs my choices in life. He goes, ‘I don’t buy off the sales rack and I don’t wear Reeboks.’ What he’s trying to say in his first book, *Fresh Off The Boat*, ‘I wear Jordans, I wear Nike, I wear the brand that I really fucking love. And now that I have a little bit of bread, I’m gonna go into the store and I’m gonna buy the jacket that I want’… It’s an uncompromised choice. I’m wearing the Air Jordan III White Cement, I’m not gonna get the color way over… I want this one, I’ve been eyeing it for a while so I’m getting it. And that’s the same thing, that’s the approach to Hasan Minhaj.”[37]

Minhaj projects this aesthetic for himself in his Montreal Just For Laughs routine about the “rappers that made it” and in *Homecoming King* when his Hasan-character needs to demonstrate deep generosity, summon a well of courage, or appear unduly vulnerable. The “rappers that made it” bit is replete with boisterous expressions of bounty through the use of African American Vernacular English and Hip Hop Nation Language, a break from Minhaj’s more customary use of what Samy Alim distinguishes as “White Mainstream English,” though

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[36] Ian Pierno, “For the ‘Heads: Hasan Minhaj Flexes a Fire Collection of Kicks on ‘Patriot Act,’” SLAM Online, October 4, 2019, https://www.slamonline.com/kicks/hasan-minhaj/.

[37] Shepard and Padman, “Hasan Minhaj.”

this is often referred to through the limited stricture of "standard" English.[38] Minhaj's affect changes as he slips into "the rapper that made it" – his voice deepens with disbelief ("yo this is how you guys are living? What?!"), his arms pump the air, and he beats his chest with his palm in syncopation with the list of his offerings: "Capri-suns on me, fam! Gushers on me, fam! Fruit rollups on me! You're welcome!"[39] Directly after, his voice rises back to his usual octave, the pace of delivery slows back down, as well. The "rapper" persona is an unsustainable peak but serves the purpose of exhibiting the height of "making it."

Early in *Homecoming King*, Minhaj expresses grief that his mother was only sporadically present during childhood because of immigration delays. "But then she would go back to India. That's when I realized I don't want a toy. I just want my mom. I want to be a family…" here, the crowd awws with sympathy. Minhaj cuts off the sentimentality abruptly – it is a bit mawkish, after all – and launches into a satirical impersonation of the rapper Drake, "I know, I was very emo, I was like Drake. I missed that girl. [affecting Drake] When is she coming back? I need her in my life. I need her. I need that girl. I need that girl in my life. I need her, Dad. She used to call me on my phone!"[40] He dances around with Drake's signature slouch and gesticulation as his audience whoops and hollers, cheers interlaced with laughter.

Later, near the end of the show, Minhaj gives himself a pep talk as he walks towards the café where he will confront Bethany years after the prom jilt. He mumbles to himself: "Walk in there, be cool. Walk in there, be confident. Be like this, dude." Here, Minhaj once more

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[38] H. Samy Alim, *Roc the Mic Right: The Language of Hip Hop Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 54-55.

[39] *Hasan Minhaj - White People At Indian Weddings*.

[40] Hasan Minhaj and Christopher Storer, *Homecoming King* (Netflix, 2017).

instrumentalizes a Drake-like swagger, spinning in a circling, furrowing his eyebrows, licking his lips before offering a breezy, "sup?" The audience laughs when he notices that Bethany is actually sitting outside and witnessed his practice spin. "You know when you see someone from your past, all of a sudden, you're that age again? So all that Kanye juice just goes out of my body. I can't say anything… Dude, are you going to be a darapok again? Say something."[41] The inflection of Black confidence and cool here is channeled as a set up against the Urdu-language darapok, or coward. The aesthetic and affect of Blackness is marshaled by Minhaj as a heightening technique for recognition – of enacting uncompromised legitimacy, demonstrating prowess and control, or communicating a depth of sadness and longing, the aesthetic is a performance punch-up, familiarity turned hypervisibility.

Minhaj relies on this heightening technique again in *Homecoming King* in an attempt to preempt the perceived mundanity of the experiences relayed in the performance before questioning its premise.

> For the most part, I actually think about it the way my dad does. Oh, you couldn't go to prom with a white girl? Who gives a fuck? At least your spine isn't getting shattered in a police wagon, though it's happening to my African-American brothers and sisters to this day. So this is a tax you have to pay for being here? I'll pay it all. 'I can't date your daughter?' I don't give a fuck, Uncle Sam. Take it. But then I realized, wait, hold on. Why is it every time the collateral damage has to be death, for us to talk about this? A kid has to get shot 16 times in the back for us to be like, 'Maybe we have a race problem in this country. Maybe we're afraid of each other.' For every Trayvon Martin or Ahmed the clock kid, there are shades of bigotry that happen every day between all of us. Because we're too afraid to let go of this idea of the Other. Someone who's not in our tribe, you're Other.[42]

Blackness – and specifically Black death – are summoned as an immediate offset for the suburban anti-Muslim hostility and racism Minhaj suffered. But just as quickly as he summons

[41] Minhaj and Storer, *Homecoming King.*

[42] Minhaj and Storer, *Homecoming King.*

the example, he releases it through an insistence that the mundanity of racism, like the racism he has experienced, should also be taken seriously. Minhaj attributes both microaggressive racisms and hate crime killings/police brutality to a collapsed fear "of the Other" across communities of color. This generalization is done to demonstrate solidarity against acts of bigotry, but it blunts the crux of his argument. The "Other" – anyone who is "not in our tribe" as he says – can be extended to white people, as well. Anti-Black racism is displaced, while all other forms of racism are flattened as mere ignorance and disagreement.

Minhaj does not name white supremacy as the underlying institution beneath racism in *Homecoming King*. Recall that Minhaj does something similar in his interview with Dax Shepard and Monica Padman. As he gets worked up recollecting how he continues to experience racism despite his current fame, Minhaj firmly asserts that "I don't give a fuck. Because the internet is real and there's more people who look like me than you." He hastily backs down, extending an apology. "I'm sorry to get a little Farrakhan about it, but that's how I feel!"[43] Minhaj plucks the apparition of Louis Farrakhan as an expression of regrettable excess and incongruent to his ultimate political vision. This moment illustrates a jarring dissonance between the self Minhaj postulates and the self that has arrived in the position he currently enjoys. If Minhaj is accoladed for branding himself and what he calls "new Brown America" as only being possible "because of Black America" and "the struggle that Black America had to endure," then why is an icon of Black Muslims and Black resistance invoked with specification only to illustrate what Minhaj is *not*?

Abdul Khabeer might call this an example of the "baddd" Black man who "has enough swag and anger to make rousing speeches and songs, yet his leadership is rarely relevant

[43] Shepard and Padman, "Hasan Minhaj."

offstage."[44] While Farrakhan and what he represents has certainly diluted in the decades since his height in the 1990s, he is still an American pariah due to his ability to stir and motivate. The fear he inspires comes from the uncontested Americanness of his message. Nation of Islam and Farrakhan, as institutions unto themselves, were brokered by the American condition and therefore speak directly to its flaws. Actions taken towards autonomy and independence stemmed from the Protestant/secular failures of the nation and its vision to accommodate and protect Black people and the lives.[45] It was rarely this content of Farrakhan's, however, that would make newspaper headlines in the 1990s. Anti-Jewish statements, mingled within this larger messaging, meant any work done by the NOI would be tinged by the mark of anti-Semitism.[46]

Association with Farrakhan, even being in the same room, dogged Barack Obama's initial presidential run in 2008 and oversaw the eventual ouster of Tamika Mallory, Linda Sarsour, and Bob Bland from their roles on the board of the Women's March.[47] I am left, in the

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[44] Abdul Khabeer, *Muslim Cool*, 106.

[45] Curtis argues that we must account for how the surging interest and engagement with Islam among Black Americans added to the decline of Protestant authority from the 1950s on. See Edward E. Curtis, *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam, 1960-1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 118-130.

[46] During the Nation of Islam's 2018 Savior's Day celebration commemorating the birth of Wallace Fard Muhammad, Farrakhan made comments referring to the "Satanic Jew" said that Jews had a "grip on the media" and that "the powerful Jews are my enemy." Tamika Mallory's attendance at the event set off wide-ranging accusations of anti-Semitism within the Women's March Leadership Committee. Sophie Tatum, "Nation of Islam Leader Farrakhan Delivers Anti-Semitic Speech," *CNN* (blog), February 28, 2018, https://www.cnn.com/2018/02/28/politics/louis-farrakhan-speech/index.html.

[47] In a post to NewsOne, Tamika Mallory said that though she very much believes in and takes part in the struggle against LGBTQIA oppression, she would not disavow the Nation of Islam. "Where my people are is where I must also be. I go into difficult spaces," she writes. Barack Obama, in his denunciation of Farrakhan's endorsement for president in 2008 said, "I did not solicit his support... I can't say to somebody that he can't say that he thinks I'm a good guy." See Tamika Mallory, "Tamika Mallory Speaks: 'Wherever My People Are Is Where I Must Be,'" *NewsOne* (blog), March 7, 2018, https://newsone.com/3779389/tamika-mallory-saviours-day/; Daniella Silva, "Three Founding Women's

wake of this, wondering why the Desi Muslim Minhaj invokes Blackness for the purposes of performative heightening. Is this easy recognition of Blackness as extreme and hypervisible a ratification of its value? Yes and no. Like Ansari, Minhaj's overt reliance on and occasional slipinto Black aesthetics are meant to authenticate his Right Muslim self within a secular American social sphere. At the same time, the emphasis on heightening cuts in two directions and reveals an enduring tendency to maintain the course of white supremacy and racial hierarchies, even when one's craft seeks to dismantle them.

A deeply-set "ethnoreligious hegemony" of South Asian and Arab notions of Islam continues to reign across Muslim communities and their interactions with non-Muslims in the U.S.[48] This, when tied to the conceit of representative resistance, becomes all the more apparent in Minhaj and Ansari's performances and self-articulation on and off stage. When read in relation to the construction of themselves as the Right Muslim Man and an ideal secular subject, the notions of Blackness that Minhaj and Ansari render do not displace the determined suppositions that reside within operative racial hierarchies in the United States. Within such renderings, Black bodies and Blackness are made hypervisible, "seen but misrecognized," but are ultimately relegated into reproducing the "facts of Blackness": its disavowal and

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March Leaders Leaving Board after Anti-Semitism Accusations," *NBC News* (blog), September 17, 2019, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/three-founding-women-s-march-leaders-leaving-board-after-anti-n1055351; Editor, "Obama Denounces Farrakhan Endorsement," *Wall Street Journal*, February 27, 2008, sec. Politics, https://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2008/02/26/obama-denounces-farrakhan-endorsement/.

[48] Abdul Khabeer uses the phrase "ethnoreligious hegemony" to designate the ways that South Asian and Arab Americans' interpretations and practices of Islam have historically dominated perceptions of what constitutes "authentic" Islam, particularly after the increased settling of middle and upper-class migrants from South and Southwest Asia in the U.S. after 1965. Jamillah Karim also describes a phenomenon of leaning model minority tropes among South Asian Muslims when trying to distinguish themselves away from Black Muslims in the U.S. See Abdul Khabeer, *Muslim Cool*, 13-15; Jamillah Ashira Karim, *American Muslim Women : Negotiating Race, Class, and Gender within the Ummah* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 29-33.

instrumentalization.[49] In the cases of Minhaj and Ansari, conscripting Blackness in their comedy works to authenticate the performer as indelibly American because of their easy and frequent conversance with the indelible Americana of Blackness. This authentication is overlain with the same air of dispositional distancing that the comedians employ with the essentialized homo islamicus who cannot function in conjunction with and in modernity.

Transnational Class Impediments

It is worth noting that Kumail Nanjiani does not attempt such Black significations in his comedy routines. This can be attributed to Nanjiani's presentation and understanding of himself as an immigrant – a trope he leans on heavily and acknowledges with frequency in his sets, likely because his accent cannot be changed or covered. Coupled with his reticence to tackle any racialized politics that do not immediately radiate off his skin, Nanjiani's standup material has taken on a largely observational and absurdist quality in general and then becomes granularly specific when having to do with Pakistan or Islam. This dissertation has not attended closely to the roles and tribulations that class structure introduces to the dynamics of religion, secularism, race, gender, and masculinity. Looking forward, I aim to rectify this gap by arguing in another companion piece to this dissertation that Nanjiani, Ansari, and Minhaj all actively seek to obfuscate their class credentials – all from highly cosmopolitan and economically privileged social positions – in order to slide into a more legible "poor" and working class immigrant casting.

In particular, Nanjiani's decision to consistently center a "conservative Muslim home in Pakistan" as his originating state is read and translated into what I call a "poor Muslim"

[49] Abdul Khabeer, *Muslim Cool*, 79.

sensibility – "poor" here meaning both indigent and culturally impoverished. This is a welcome aesthetic to a broader, pop American audience as the before-and-after vision presented in Najiani's standup aligns him with broader hegemonic discourses that reduce Muslims and Islam as perpetually new and foreign; immigrants with means that were limited *over there* but have found encouragement and sustenance for their American dream *over here*. Nanjiani's humorous recollections of Pakistan rely on painting an image of a poor land and people with no electricity (reminiscent of Lila Abu-Lughod's Islamland), where monkeys attend birthday parties, and movies arrive from America ten years late.

Class is obscured by Islam, by brownness, and, in Nanjiani's case, by accent. The careers and the personas that all three Desi men have created owe a tremendous debt to their class position and the reshuffling of capital in their direction. Far from the popular and comforting imagery of an immigrant saving their whole lives to travel to America with a single suitcase, the realities of these men are far more transnational and cosmopolitan, facilitated by the privileges of familial wealth. This imagined narrative of poverty not only suits the regime of humor that each work within, it is mirrored outside the comedy world by wealthier classes of South Asian and Arab immigrants that arrived in the U.S. after 1965 in an oblique homage to the "American Dream" discourse that positions America as both a place that facilitated economic opportunity and a political safe-haven.

Such discourses, when rehearsed with the frequency of a comedy routine, additionally obscure the class realities of working-class Muslims, the raced realities of Black Muslims, and the corporeal overlaps of the two in the contemporary U.S. Perhaps most critically, however, these discourses and performativities reject and bury the realities that their very presence in the U.S. is coded in racist and classist terms in favor of maintaining an imagined ease of class

mobility and “anyone can succeed” vision of America. This discourse ultimately implies that the problem, then, still resides over there, in Islamland or with Islam itself, which operates as a subjugating force that relates so strongly to poverty that it easily slips into a broader vision of Islam as ultimately responsible for that poverty itself. It also erases the realities of many Black Muslims and other working-class Muslims whose economic ascent has been stymied through the very institutions and policies that authorize the cosmopolitan immigrant Muslim’s entry.

Whither Legibility?

This leads to two enduring questions that circle the drain of this project Why is legibility so desirable in the secular sphere? What does it actually buy? That would appear to be the guiding citation for Minhaj, Nanjiani, and Ansari in their conceit for representative resistance. Given their varied but determined endeavors to present as the Right Muslim Man, “this” and not “that,” these men pursue legibility in the eyes of those who dictate the secular order that gave them rise. The reigning racial logics of the contemporary U.S. mean, inevitably, that those subjects/subjectifiers are white. While these comedians make gestures towards solidarity as a means to demonstrate their againstness to white supremacy, patriarchy, racism, and anti-Muslim hostility, their self-articulations of Muslimness, race, and masculinity are honed to pass muster against the scrutiny of white viewers. The secular regime of humor that facilitates their rise and visibility simultaneously contains them, such that the comedian has room to critique certain power structures while still remaining very much subject to them.

Other Brown and/or Muslim artists have sought to provincialize whiteness and its secular domain through their work and by building cross-racial/religious solidarities that readjust the reference point away from legibility instead towards liberation. Su’ad Abdul Khabeer

distinguishes such efforts as "racial sincerity," which she observes among non-Black U.S. Muslims who are drawn to Muslim Cool as a style paved by anti-racist activism. These solidarities draw on a legacy of similar historical efforts to disrupt the hegemony of South Asian and Arab notions of Islam as well model-minority and anti-minority narratives. Vivek Bald and Nayan Shah's chronicles of Desi migrants in the late 19th and early 20th century, likewise, document a blending into Black and Latinx communities that gain cover within while also unsettling the running racial order. The adoption of South Asian styles of turbans by Black men in the Jim Crow South similarly offered a reprieve from the stark violences committed by way of the Black-white binary.[50]

Conclusion

The cross-racial solidarities that Minhaj and Ansari perform, however, reproduce the hypervisibility of Blackness as a heightened state of extremes. These "facts of Blackness," while gesturing towards shared political and social aims, on occasion veer into the category of caricature and ultimately devalue the experience from which they are originally drawn. Yet the invocation of Blackness is not disavowal in the way "that" Muslim is. The closeness to Blackness, despite its caricatured apparition, is co-opted to form a legible, but subversive secular subjecthood in service to concepts that do not dislodge white supremacy, white women, and anti-Muslim hostility at its core. The distance from "that" Muslim – publicly unruly, disloyal and sexually perverse – maintains and reifies the secular regime of humor. This enables Ansari,

[50] Vivek Bald, *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 49-50; Nayan Shah, *Stranger Intimacy: Contesting Race, Sexuality, and the Law in the North American West* (University of California Press, 2011), 14.

Minhaj, and Nanjiani a path forward in which their embodied foreignness is not the primary clause for engagement and mitigates its presence into something tertiary.

CONCLUSION: UNDISCIPLINED MUSLIM JOY

> The old definitions have not served us, nor the earth that supports us. The old patterns, no matter how cleverly rearranged to imitate progress, still condemn us to cosmetically altered repetitions of the same old exchanges, the same old guilt, hatred, recrimination, lamentation, and suspicion.
>
> - Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*[51]

As I close out this conversation on American Muslim humor and comedy, I would like to reiterate that though what has been analyzed in these pages may very well feel like a description of the present, this is, foremost, a historical investigation. I have drawn a circle around a particular moment in American public life, illustrating the transitory nature of that moment and how animated a reality it was then and for that which has followed. In attending to the dynamism of Hasan Minhaj, Aziz Ansari, and Kumail Nanjiani's comedy, we have here a snapshot of transition. This pixelated blur is one in which regimes of humor, constituted by secularity, whiteness, and the patriarchal dividend, reign and cut the checks. But #representationmatters, quite literally, and by re-injecting religion and secularity as critical categories for considering this moment of transition, I have come away with new insights for how we understand the forms and functions of Islam, race, gender, and sexuality in the United States during the early decades of the 21st century.

Over the course of this dissertation, I assess the how and why of humor studies, with attention to the ways that their underlying mandates map onto historically contingent taxonomies of Islam and Muslims that have been made to appear otherwise static and essentialized. At the

[51] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984), 190.

same time, I argue that the genre of humor – given its alertness to taboo and to social boundary maintenance – is ripe for critique of hegemonic discourses and their place in this genre itself.

The study of Muslim humor has fallen into what I've designated as four primary categories of distinction within the English-language academy: consolidated into the study of "ethnic" humor, an authentic "Islamic archive" of humor, "dissident" humor, and humor in the wake of 9/11. All of these frames remain hypervigilant of the trope of the "humorless" Muslim subject and speak back to it as a presumed point of origin. This presumption requires documentation of its own history, something I offer by charting the historical development of a "sense" of humor as a prized personality trait alongside the historically-contingent notions of interiority, economy, and the imperialism as they postulate what it means to be secular. This vision of secular is not the absence of religion, but a Protestant-informed disciplining of religion. The secular permits the presence of religion in interiorized, Protestant-specific forms; Islam, as a result, is disciplined outside of its bounds.

Secular formations have relied on imperial encounters with colonial subjects, many of whom were Muslim, to further substantiate themselves against this fortified inverse through the makings of race and religion. The conceptualization of race and racialization has reached what I have defined as the progressive consensus in the United States around the years 2014-2016, a paradigm made mainstream from the work of social justice activism and scholars in the 20th and early 21st centuries. It has come to be an overriding mode through which to recognize social difference in the critical years of 2015-2019. In its streamlining, this consensus does not destabilize concomitant secular notions of multiculturalism, equality, and freedom in the pursuit of recognition. The shared cover of marginality racializes Muslims into being "seen" – not

necessarily as unproblematic, but not so problematic that they cannot be accommodated under a secular schema.

Minhaj, Ansari, and Nanjiani strive to use this racialized legibility to become the Right Muslim Man, a performed self that works towards achievement using bodily comportment, dress, joke structure, and the cultivation of neocolonial masculinities. Though the Right Muslim Man differs in the desired end result between them, all three men keep specific racial and patriarchal hierarchies in place in order to console and pacify secular gatekeepers of their own correct secular subjecthood. This subjecthood sits on the conceit of representative resistance, whereby the perverse privileges that accompany Brown men as representatively Muslim mean their experiences stand in for the experiences of all minoritized peoples, particularly Muslim women, but also all manner of Brown (and even Black) men interchangeably. Patriarchy is re-entrenched through its pernicious unnaming and silence. Minhaj and Ansari both perform and perform against significations of Blackness that scaffold their American belonging, albeit in ways that – once more racially – demonstrate disciplined social difference. In such a configuration, anti-Muslim hostility can be directed not at Muslims but at "Islam" the religion, less so the body that presents as American.

The humor and comedy produced by these men has, in the United States at least, relied on secular, white, masculine consumption. I have been dogged, in the course of this writing, by this specter and its seemingly inevitable return at every corner. My apprehension has less to do with finding myself in agreement with the myths that claim these categories as the sole consequence of a pinnacular modernity, and more so with the dangers that accompany reifying their permanence when attending so closely to the ways in which they dominate social institutions like religion in the first place. Feminist scholars like Patricia Hill Collins, Molefi

Asante, and Chandra Mohanty, among so many others, have urged those that study racialized identities to be wary of what Myra Washington catalogues as either a resignation or resistance to whiteness.[52] Within this classification, resistance can only be understood through "anomalous, inconsistent, or shifting counters" to the reconstitution of whiteness, while resignation submits that whiteness is unsurmountable in its power.[53] How, she then asks, can we "move toward somewhere not yet imagined and end with kinships and build solidarities premised on relationships not centered around race"?[54] How do we cede no further ground to the hegemonies that seemingly dictate what we read, what we cite, what we like, what we aspire towards, and even what we deem funny? Can we only ever be, or can we overcome, what has been made inherent to ourselves?

The analysis of Muslim humor provided in the preceding pages can point us towards such a possibility, though it may not exist in such form just yet. It is precisely because of the dynamicism of the progressive consensus moment and the sustained calls for #representation and #resistance that something besides interchangeable figureheads may exist on the horizon. I see this possibility take form in a figure like Ramy Youssef, whose eponymous Hulu comedy series was released in spring of 2019 and loosely follows the real-life spiritual trials of a character based on Youssef himself. Like Minhaj's *Homecoming King* and *Patriot Act*, Youssef incorporates and levies the notion of untranslated jokes "for us," in the expectation that not all of

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[52] The following works take up this question broadly: Patricia Hill Collins, "Setting Our Own Agenda," *The Black Scholar* 23, no. 3/4 (1993): 52–55; Molefi Kete Asante, "A Discourse on Black Studies: Liberating the Study of African People in the Western Academy," *Journal of Black Studies* 36, no. 5 (May 1, 2006): 646–62; Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Boundary 2* 12/13 (1984): 333–58.

[53] Myra Washington, "Woke Skin, White Masks: Race and Communication Studies," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, June 15, 2020, 1–6, 1.

[54] Washington, "Woke Skin, White Masks," 2.

his humor needs to be legible to the mainstream at once. His show *Ramy* was a sleeper hit for the streaming service, which ordered a second season of the show shortly after the success of the first season and he came away with a surprise Golden Globe for Best Actor in January 2020. Jennifer Aniston, who opened the envelope inscribed with his name at the ceremony, struggled to pronounce it and deferred the Reese Witherspoon beside her. Youssef jumped on stage to accept the award and exclaimed, "I'd like to thank my God, Allahu Akbar! And Hulu."[55]

Youssef's show made its way to Hulu after cultivating a standup comedy career for several years, much like Minhaj, Ansari, and Nanjiani. In 2016, he served as the opener for the comedian Jerrod Carmichael's show in Chicago. During that time, he brainstormed with Carmichael, a Black performer and creator of the NBC sitcom *The Jerrod Carmichael Show*, about the idea for a television show in which the main Muslim character grappled explicitly with questions of religion as a believer and not as a skeptic.[56] The resulting program is, in many ways, unprecedented in the history of mainstream American television. The show's title card is entirely in Arabic until the last moment that "RAMY" splashes across the screen, overlain a repurposed version of a 1970s soccer anthem by the Egyptian band Al Massrieen.[57] Unlike Minhaj, Ansari, and Nanjiani, Youssef very much positions Islam as the moral substance of the show, not something that is dealt with in terms of distant relativism or the choice of renunciation. This

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[55] Malcolm Venable, "Ramy Youssef Charms the Golden Globes in Humble Speech: 'I Know You Guys Haven't Seen My Show,'" *TVGuide.Com* (blog), January 5, 2020, https://www.tvguide.com/news/ramy-youssef-golden-globes-speech/.

[56] Antonia Blyth, "Ramy Youssef On Making 'Ramy' A Nuanced Portrait Of His Muslim-American Experience & How He Opposed The Tone-Deaf Concept Of An 'Average Muslim Family,'" *Deadline* (blog), June 10, 2019, https://deadline.com/2019/06/ramy-youseff-hulu-emmys-interview-news-1202626351/.

[57] Gabe Friedman, "Ramy Youssef on How His Sitcom Uses Music to Tell a Millennial Muslim Story," Pitchfork, accessed June 23, 2020, https://pitchfork.com/thepitch/ramy-youssef-music-interview/.

mapping of popular Muslim humor is not bound to the mythos of multicultural secularism the way my subjects are. Islam is unequivocally the aspiration for Youssef and he names it freely and openly – to comedic effect, at times, but always with sincerity. "I'm just, like, trying to be good," he confides to a shawarma shop owner at the end of the pilot episode, the same man who berated him at the mosque earlier in the episode for not properly performing wudu before Jummah prayers. "Do you... do you really think that God cares if I wash between my toes?"[58]

In a similar vein, Youssef's HBO comedy special *Feelings* concludes not with a joke sure to please (as most standup specials tend to wrap up with), but with a daring and unnerving provocation:

> I was thinking that in this weird way, 9/11 made me more Muslim. Because I was told it was my fault. I was told that the most horrible thing that I've ever seen to this day was because of me, because of who I was, where I came from, the language that I speak, and my faith. And I had to find out if that was true. So I looked into it. And I realized that not only was it not true, but this was something that I really wanted to be part of my life. I started praying, I started fasting, I started doing all these things that I might not have done… But because it happened, all this fear happened too. And it elected the dude that we have… and it's not good. Like even the people that voted for him, are like "uhhh" [grimace] You see them, it's like when your friend is drunk at a party and someone's like, "is that your friend?" and you're like "I mean, you know, like… we just went to middle school together." He's dismantling the courts, no one knows what he's going to do next. He's making us weak. But the way I feel about the way I believe, in my faith, that's how all my friends are. And so it's like Islam is stronger. And America is weaker. All because of this one thing. And so the thought I have is: did 9/11 work?[59]

His audience is silent, followed by gasps and muffled laughter across the vast auditorium. He rescues the last several seconds by clearing his throat and intoning deeply, "Now that I have your attention… The ice caps are melting."[60] Moments like this in Youssef's comedy manage to walk a line of levity that simultaneously lampoon and prick the heart of American secularity's

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[58] Harry Bradbeer, "Between the Toes," *Ramy* (Hulu, April 19, 2019).

[59] Christopher Storer, *Ramy Youssef: Feelings* (Chicago Cultural Center, Chicago: HBO, 2019).

[60] Storer, *Ramy Youssef: Feelings.*

sacrosanct. Being Muslim, for once, is not on the chopping block, but the idea of American omnipotence is. His audience, for the most part, cannot recognize it. The contrast between the subjects of Youssef's comedy versus Ansari, Minhaj, and Nanjiani is stark; the willingness to take on this type of material is not a willingness exhibited certainly by Ansari or Nanjiani, and to a lesser extent Minhaj, though he has also moved in that direction. At the same time, their mark is indelible. It is clear that Ansari, Minhaj, and Nanjiani have paved a path for this kind of messy, meditative, and politically-ambiguous comedy, walking in this direction so that someone like Youssef might break into a sprint, blurry and illegible within the regimes of humor.

Of course, the miasma of patriarchy, racism, and disciplinary secularism has not been so quickly displaced by one interloper. For all of his accolades, Youssef has rightfully sustained cutting criticisms of his work that point to the tedious nature of his portrayal of Muslim women's experiences throughout several episodes, as well as the devaluation of Muslim women's voices in his writer's room.[61] Like Minhaj, Ansari, and Nanjiani, Youssef does not depart from the cliché of centering his desire for white women, while a considerable portion of screen-time is similarly dedicated to the sexual exploits of his mother and sister with white men, as well. Activist Zeinab Khalil writes that anti-Black racism pervades the first season without rebuke, while the portrayal of Sufis in a late episode fulfills the trope of the good, "non-threatening" Muslim.[62] The endurance of hegemony remains, but it is less easily assumed in these cases.

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[61] Margeaux Sippell, "Here's What's Going on With the Women Staff Writers on 'Ramy,'" *TheWrap* (blog), September 18, 2019, https://www.thewrap.com/former-ramy-staff-writer-says-no-women-writers-were-asked-back-for-season-2-but-no-men-were-either-exclusive/; Shamira Ibrahim, "What 'Ramy' Gets Wrong About Muslim Women," *The Atlantic*, April 23, 2019, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/04/hulus-ramy-misses-mark-muslim-women/587722/.

[62] Zeinab Khalil, "11 Reasons Why 'Ramy' Doesn't Deserve a Second Season," *Wear Your Voice* (blog), August 12, 2019, https://wearyourvoicemag.com/hulu-ramy-muslim-tropes/.

Capricious attempts at representative #resistance and building up a romance of racialized solidarity are quickly held to account. This shift in humor is not necessarily decolonial, but with persistent and assiduous critique, it could be. Muslim humor can move beyond the desire to achieve legibility through secular fealty. The middling, transitory category that Ansari, Minhaj, and Nanjiani have thus far occupied through their comedy seeks to preserve forms of Muslim subjecthood and sociality. Yet they are undergirded by the conceit of a patriarchal representative #resistance and the co-optations of Blackness, very much still subject to the powers and discipline of the humor regime.

"Somewhere, on the edge of consciousness, there is what I call a mythical norm," Audre Lorde writes in *Sister Outsider*. "Those of us who stand outside that power often identify one way in which we are different, and we assume that to be the primary cause of all oppression, forgetting other distortions around difference, some of which we ourselves may be practicing."[63] The humor produced and enabled by the progressive consensus recognizes this mythical norm, but not for all its distortions. This is where the difference lies between #resistance and resistance, and what a future of secular failure may enable. In this corner of Muslim life, it looks like what Ansari, Nanjiani, and Minhaj have given us on occasion in brief, inspiriting bursts: humor that is for us, undisciplined, unruly, and untranslated. This humor is bound to us in its illegibility. It creates a joy that is ours, shared by those that recognize our distortions as like theirs, as well.

[63] Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, 116.

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