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To Be a (Young) Black Muslim Woman Intellectual

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So much love . . . sometimes it makes me hostile

—AMIR SULAIMAN, “The Meccan Openings”

ALL THE MEN ARE MUSLIM

The first time I heard this verse by Amir Sulaiman, it was as if, for a moment, the world shifted into alignment. It seemed to explain what I had begun to experience too many times to count: my deep love for and unwavering commitment to my community recast as inappropriate aggression. In this verse, I believe Sulaiman describes how love can make the lover unrelenting—in her desire and pursuit for what is best for the beloved. This is a powerful sentiment that made me reflect on my own experiences and observations as a U.S. American Muslim engaged in intellectual work in a raced and gendered body. Like Sulaiman, I am indeed unrelenting in my commitments and love, but what I experience as a result of this passion is not my own hostility but the *mis*-recognition of others. From the ‘hood to the boardroom, Black women encounter the world as “a crooked room . . . bombarded with warped images of their humanity.”¹ Among the stereotypes or myths that circulate around this crooked room is that Black women are uniquely, irrationally, and unnaturally angry, aggressive, and independent. Unique, irrational, and unnatural are the key terms here, because anger, aggression, and independence are typically seen as falling well within what is considered the range of human expressions and are even at times lauded. Yet when Black women express these sentiments, they immediately leave the realm of normal human activity and become Black female pathology. My experience and the experiences of the Black Muslim woman intellectuals who precede me and are my contemporaries speak to the reality that this mythology does not meet its death at the masjid door but is in fact “live and in full effect” inside the walls of U.S. American Islam.²

EXHIBIT A

Some time ago, I attended a religious lecture at a local Muslim community center. The speaker was a young and promising Black U.S. American Muslim scholar, whom I consider a colleague and friend. During his talk, he made what I thought was a somewhat outlandish claim, something to the effect of “most young people no longer actually want to be good people.” During the Q&A session, the topic of youth came up, and I turned to the youth worker in the room to ask him what he thought of that statement—I completely disagreed with it. He did not directly answer but deferred to me. What then ensued was a back and forth between the scholar, who wanted to defend his claim, and me, who critiqued it. The scholar passionately defended his position, but I remained unconvinced. The room got restless, as the audience, multiracial, Muslim and Christian, wanted to move on. I too was ready to move on and was also grateful when the speaker began to take new questions. Immediately after the session was over, the scholar approached me, and we came to a mutual agreement that what he had said was a gross generalization, yet it came from a place of love and frustration with many young people he had recently come in contact with. What is notable about this moment is *not* how the scholar and I engaged each other. Rather, what is notable is that for almost a week after the lecture, at each Muslim event I attended, there was at least one person (sadly, mostly Muslim women of color) who greeted me with “you really went in on [scholar]” or feigned some kind of fear of me in reference to that interaction. I was even approached this way from people who were not at the talk! Why? Had I really “gone in on him”? Doubtful. What I did, however, was to have the audacity to be Black and woman with a voice and opinion, and that was read as a challenge to male authority.

Racist myths about Black women are able to sustain life within U.S. American Muslim communities because patriarchal ideologies structure much of our collective life. U.S. American Muslim communities are entrapped by misguided notions of piety that reify particularized notions of who men and woman could and should be. While these specific gender roles aspire to a model social order through an idealized male authority, they actually result in the infantilization, emasculation, and dehumanization of Muslim men, illustrating the reality that patriarchy damages men as well as women. Men are incapacitated by patriarchal regimes that establish a singular frame through which they are allowed to imagine and interact with women, children, other men, and themselves. This is a frame of power and dominance, which is diametrically opposed to the prophetic framework of

compassion, mutual cooperation, and support.³ Thus, rather than seeing men as fully capable of managing, for example, their heterosexual desire in the model of the Prophet Muhammad, our communities make women responsible for managing male desire. Women must aspire to be neither seen nor heard lest they stoke the fire of the male libido. In this configuration, men are made to be childlike, unable to practice self-restraint, while ironically anointed as the rational authority over women.

Feminist scholars have long noted the many damaging effects of patriarchy for women.⁴ Here I want to briefly focus on its effects for the Black Muslim woman scholar. It is by way of patriarchy that the kinds of qualities of intellect, insight, and passion that are lauded in non-Muslim U.S. American professional settings become liabilities for the Muslim woman who seeks to be an active part of the collective. The moment she/I steps into a U.S. American Muslim community space, these qualities become liabilities. Her/my intellect and insight are immodest and unfeminine. Her passion is irrational and unnatural. Racism and patriarchy intersect to construct the crooked room of the U.S. American Muslim community—a room that is the product of caricature of angry Black womanhood and also reproduces this myth. Identified as Black, woman, and pathological, she/I is ostracized through open hostility, rumors, and/or benign neglect of the expertise she/I seeks to put to the service of her/my community. Critically, she/I is held with such little esteem by men as well as women. Thus the Black Muslim woman intellectual finds herself devalued not only at the hands of men but at those of women as well, women who, either with seditious intent or out of habit, act in complicity with patriarchy. Importantly, these qualities, such as the ability to articulate powerfully and passionately, to critically analyze complex ideas, and to imagine new possibilities, are at a certain level dangerous for any U.S. American woman to embody. The Black Muslim woman intellectual too lives with this danger. She takes on this danger when she challenges those who benefit from race, class, gender, and religious privilege. With her voice, her words, her art, her activism, her mind, her spirit, and her body, she engages individuals, communities, and institutions by pushing them to acknowledge their privileges and participate in dismantling the systems of inequality from which privilege is born, systems under which her Muslim community, male and female, suffers. This is hard work. It is alienating and isolating work. And to have that compounded by her community is heartbreaking.

Heartbreak and deep frustration are what come with living in a context of such psychic and spiritual exclusion. For the Black Muslim woman,

intellectual racism and spiritual patriarchy intersect in deeply perverse ways and on a deeply personal level. Yet the “personal is political,” and thus the experience of the Black Muslim woman intellectual reflects realities of even broader concern.

ALL THE AMERICANS ARE WHITE

EXHIBIT B

Officially, the reality TV show *All-American Muslim* was not “renewed for a second season” because of its relatively low ratings. Many US Muslims were skeptical about this cancellation. The major hardware store chain Lowe’s had just pulled its ads from the *All-American Muslim* time slot. The company had succumbed to pressure from the well-orchestrated campaign of a far right group that claimed the show was a farce. The show, this group argued, failed to show who Muslims really are, namely, a group of brown-skinned fanatics looking to take your women, replace Jesus with Allah, and steal the freedom you won by pulling on your bootstraps. So soon after the Lowe’s fiasco, it left many wondering if anti-Muslim racism won—but over what exactly? See, even without this controversy, the show was not without its critics. Some U.S. Muslims were critical because they believed the show “aired our collective dirty laundry,” so to speak. This was because not all of the show’s characters were religious observant, or they were observant in nontraditional ways. Others, like myself, thought the show should have really been called “Lebanese, American, and Muslim in the D,” since it was hardly representative of the U.S. American Muslim community yet marketed itself as such. Some claimed the demographic was because of location, but word on my Twitter and Facebook news feeds was that the next-door neighbors of one of the show’s families were Black U.S. American Muslims . . . but I get why they would not make the cut. Black, U.S. American, and Muslim really undercuts the Muslim-equals-foreigner story told by Islamophobes and bleeding-heart liberals alike.

The same logics that seek to marginalize and exclude the Black Muslim woman intellectual in the classroom, the public square, and the masjid alike motivate the marginalization and exclusion of Muslims *as U.S. Americans* on the national scene and *as fully human* on the global one. As theorized by acclaimed feminist author bell hooks, white supremacy and patriarchy align with capitalism and imperialism to form “the interlocking political systems that are the foundation of our nation’s politics.”⁵ By grouping these

terms, hooks's theory underscores their relatedness as systems of oppression. They interlock because one can be multiply excluded, based on gender, class, race, nationality, and other markers of identity. They are systems because their effects do not solely or even primarily occur on the person-to-person basis, although this is a potent site of discrimination. Rather, as *systemic*, their effects are reproduced *within and across* our major institutions of influence and power, such as the government and the media. In the specific case of U.S. American Muslims, this can be seen in government rhetoric, both when it is hostile and when it is multiculturalist; in law à la the USA PATRIOT Act; and in the media, such as on *Fox News* and TV serials like *Homeland*, which systematize what I like to call the "facts of Muslimness."

Using Frantz Fanon's "facts of blackness" as a model, I use the phrase "facts of Muslimness" to identify the core assumptions about Muslims that have dominated the Euro-American conversation on Islam in the past century.⁶ The term *Muslim* conjures the image of someone who is "Middle Eastern looking," has an accent, and is irrationally obsessed with violence because of his uniquely fanatical attachment to religion and tradition. Thus, when a white non-Muslim child shouts out, "Look, Mom! A Muslim!" she or he is rehearsing these "facts": the Muslim is Brown, the Muslim is foreign, the Muslim is backward, the Muslim is pathological, the Muslim is dangerous. These assumptions are replayed over and over, reinforcing not only who Muslims supposedly *are* but who they are *not*: white, native, progressive, and peace-loving, that is, U.S. Americans. These "facts" are the products of processes of racial formation that construct and reproduce the normative assumptions of "Muslim as other" and "American as white."⁷ As a result, if Muslims are *always* and *already* "other," then it becomes fairly commonsensical to presume they are outside the nation. Yet if Muslims are *always* and *already* a "dangerous other," it also becomes common sense to seek to exclude Muslims from the nation for the sake of its preservation.

It goes without saying that this process that positions whiteness, specifically heterosexual male Christian white identity, and U.S. American identity as equivalents has been a basic and violent reality for people of color in the United States. This discourse of white normativity persists despite the country's long and increasing racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity. In fact, it persists alongside the multiculturalist rhetoric deployed by the state. The face of U.S.-style multiculturalism embraces "diversity." Native American "nobility," Black U.S. American "struggle," and Asian U.S. American and Latinx "success" are endorsed as proof of the United

States's exceptionalism in the league of nations. Furthermore, U.S.-style multiculturalism positively asserts bonds between different kinds of U.S. Americans. Yet these bonds are "appropriately hierarchal."⁸ Nonwhite Americans are incorporated into the nation, yet only according to terms that do not destabilize the status quo, that is, the basic assumption that privileges whiteness in the United States and around the globe. Thus inclusion is always incomplete. Accordingly, every time a violent public act takes place, U.S. America's Muslims hold their collective breath and pray the alleged perpetrator is anything *but* Muslim. In stark contrast, even in the face of the most recent spate of mass shootings by white men, white men carry no such burden—another violent act by a white male will not result in ramifications for white men either as individuals or as a group.

This normative landscape that marks U.S. Muslims as "other" in relation to the nation is paralleled in the global discourse on Islam, and how we talk and think about Islam and Muslims today is historically rooted in the Western European quest for empire. The labor of Black and Brown peoples played a central role in the empire building of the British, the French, and other European colonial powers. Were it not for slave labor, the triangular trade, the extraction of the natural resources, and violence against local peoples, the world as we know it, including and especially its technological and industrial advancement, would not exist. The hierarchical relationships critical to this kind of domination were also central to the project of modernity, and as such, the growth and development of liberalism and free-market capitalism are also indebted to Black and Brown bodies.

When I use the word *labor*, I include the physical labor of enslaved and colonized Africans, Asians, and indigenous peoples as well as their psychic displacement from subject to object, from human to other. This labor was just as involuntary and just as important. As object and other to be owned and subjugated, they performed conceptual labor in the construction of a "hierarchy of man" that elevated the European. This link between capital, industry, domination, and white supremacy sustains itself today. Our current world system of power and commodities from gold and petroleum to iPads and coffee also would fail to exist were it not for Black and Brown bodies from California to China. Furthermore, capitalism generates false desires—to extract profit from new markets, there must be new "needs." What is critical to underscore is that many of these desires and needs are directly tied to white supremacist and patriarchal notions of what is beautiful, what is good, what is true, what is normal, and what is necessary. This is also part and parcel of U.S. dominance as a world power.

Thus how we talk and think about Islam and Muslims today are also tightly bound to U.S. imperial pursuits. While talk of biological hierarchies between the “races” has fallen out of favor (at least publicly and, at least, for now), *culture*, whether identified as practices (i.e., bikinis or burqas) or worldviews (i.e., secular or religious), is now the determinant factor that distinguishes “inferior” and “superior” human societies. Cultural difference, or rather, to be culturally distinct from the global white normative standard, is deficiency. Within the discourse of the War on Terror, we find well-worn ideologies of racial and cultural superiority and inferiority now cloaked in “culture-talk.”⁹ The world is divided: the Middle East/Orient/“the Rest” is identified as the home of violent, dangerous, antidemocratic, and brown-skinned peoples with the United States/the “West” as home to a peace-loving, powerful, fair, and democratic civilization, in which whiteness is privileged but not everyone is white skinned. Accordingly, Muslims are deficient and in need of a pater to monitor, supervise, and dominate them.

My use of pater, or “father,” here is not incidental. Scholars have identified the ways the patriarchal motif plays itself out beyond the ideal of male-headed households. Patriarchy is an epistemological framework, which means it makes a certain set of claims about the nature of human relationships. Patriarchy constructs a relationship between people based on dominance, authoritarianism, submission, coercion, and violence.¹⁰ This epistemology operates systemically, within and across powerful institutions, and normalizes hierarchical relationships not only between men and women but between whites and nonwhites and the “West” and Islam.

Fundamentally, contemporary Muslims, in the United States and abroad, find themselves confronted with ideologies and systems in which what makes them different is recast as deficiency. This is not only a geopolitical reality but an ethical and spiritual one as well. In an online lecture, Islamic studies scholar Sherman Jackson articulated the possibility that white supremacy could be considered a modern form of shirk (idolatry).¹¹ He argued that white supremacy traffics in notions of white normativity and racial hierarchies in which the loyalty and fidelity that belong only to God are misplaced onto the human beings and human systems that are raced white. This is for the Muslim the ultimate transgression, because it denies God’s oneness and incomparability. For the Muslim, this also transgresses God’s decree. In the Qur’an, God speaks about difference. God states, “We have created you [humanity] all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. Indeed the most noble of you in the sight of God is the one who is most

deeply conscious of him" (49:13). Thus in difference, in distinction, is not deficiency but a divine decree and purpose. Humanity was created to be different, and the purpose of that difference is knowledge. Thus there is an ethical imperative here, because it is impossible to know what you despise, debase, and destroy. There is also a spiritual imperative here, because in the Islamic tradition, knowledge of God's creation is a pathway toward greater knowledge of God.

A similar logic regarding patriarchy has also been articulated by the Qur'anic scholar Amina Wadud,¹² namely, that patriarchy traffics in notions of male normativity and gender hierarchies in which the loyalty and fidelity that belong only to God are misplaced onto human beings and human systems that are gendered male. As with the racial logic of white supremacy, in the logic of patriarchy, what makes women different from men has been recast as deficiency. This argument is probably harder for many to swallow because of their investments in patriarchy. Yet the argument holds: "When a person seeks to place him- or herself 'above' another, it either means the divine presence is removed or ignored or that the person who imagines his or herself above others suffers from the egoism of shirk."¹³ The egoism of shirk and its recasting of difference as deficiency are a divergence from the ethical and spiritual imperatives of knowledge.

Difference becomes deficiency and leads to dominance. It is the interplay between imperialism, patriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalism that enabled past colonial and contemporary domination of Muslim peoples under regimes of neoliberalism and wars of democracy. Muslims know intimately imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. They deeply experience the ways these interlocking systems restrict and limit their movements, possibilities, and opportunities. And as well as they know them, they rightfully seek to dismantle them. Yet when they simultaneously exclude the Black Muslim woman intellectual, they fight against themselves—they reproduce these imperial logics and become complicit not only in her subjugation but in their own.

BUT SOME OF US ARE BRAVE

My subtitles, "All the Men Are Muslim, All the Americans Are White, but Some of Us Are Brave," is meant to enunciate the explicit, which has been obscured by power. This is the reality that the social worlds of the Black Muslim woman intellectual and all American Muslims are defined, in many ways, by two normative assumptions: to be Muslim is to be male and to be American is to be white. I refer to these assumptions as normative not

because they are “normal” or “true” but because they have been normalized and thus given the authority and expectation of common sense. Muslims are not only men, yet it is the male experience that is treated as proxy for the experience of all genders (hence the rarity of a “Men in Islam” panel at the local masjid, community center, or yearly national convention). Likewise, all U.S. Americans are not white, but the advantages and the indisputable claim to U.S. American belonging are still tied to white identity, hence the intense and troubling battles we are now witnessing in the United States over immigration, over gun control, over reproductive rights, and over the country’s religious or secular character.

My title is also deeply citational; it is a riff off a riff. Islamic studies scholar Aminah McCloud contributed to a recent anthology written in tribute to the career and activism of Wadud. In her reflection, she described the attempts to exclude Wadud from the Islamic studies canon in the following statement: “All the Muslims are men, all the Muslim scholars are men from the Muslim world (Arab first and then a few others) and this is the end of the story. . . . Where did/does Wadud fit?”¹⁴ In McCloud’s word play, I hear a riff on the seminal Black women studies text “All the Blacks Are Men, All the Whites Are Women, but Some of Us Are Brave.” This pioneering text made a critical intervention in the marginalization of Black women from feminist theory and praxis and from the narrative of the Black American experience and liberation struggle. Through its collection of Black female scholarship, it rejected the assumption that the Black male perspective was *the* Black experience and that white middle-class woman could represent the realities and struggles of all women, particularly women who lived with race and class discrimination as well as gender oppression. In this riff off a riff, I endeavor to function within and extend a tradition of spiritually engaged intellectual work that challenges hegemony by increasing our collective body of knowledge about the history and life-ways of humanity, especially of those whose lives and ideas have been hidden yet who were brave enough to exist, to speak, to fight, and to thrive despite this. Like them, we must be brave.

EXHIBIT C

On the Saturday evening of New Year’s weekend, the beloved community leader and activist Sister¹⁵ Aliyah Abdul Karim (May God be pleased with her) would open her home for what in some circles might be called a cipher or, in others, a salon. I began attending these gatherings as a child with my mother and through my late teens continued to look forward to it. I recall tables filled

with a potluck of delicious food and desserts, but it was the energy of the conversation that has left its greatest impression on me. My whole community was there and everybody could speak. The elders in the room would speak from their knowledge and experience, but Sister Aliyah was also very intentional about inviting the younger people to speak and share their own perspectives and wisdom. The men would contribute to the conversation, and so would the women. And the topics were serious—racism, structural inequalities, polygamy, parenting, the arts, war. In this all-Muslim crowd that hailed from all parts of the Black diaspora, we would identify our collective struggles, dissect and debate their causes, and envision solutions. In retrospect, this gathering itself was a solution. Everybody had a seat, everybody had a share, everybody gave something, everybody was welcome, and everybody was valued.

U.S. America's Muslims spend a lot of time hemming and hawing over their outside status. Scratching at the doors of power, they plead to be let in—they see a crooked room and tilt their heads. This is unfortunate, but not inevitable. Rather, this community could take its cues from the bravery of the many Sister Aliyahs that were and are still among us, who look at the crooked room and go about setting it aright. Hence bravery becomes a key sensibility to inculcate in this community in these times. What does it mean to be brave? It means to resist and thrive. It means to resist being marginalized and excluded but also to resist complicity in the marginalization and exclusion of others. Yet to do so, bravery also requires knowledge. We have to study the past, our collective histories. We do this to encourage our appreciation and application of the spiritual and ethical imperatives that come from differences within humankind and the natural world. We do this to fine-tune our ability to decipher domination and its effects, which includes our oppression and our privilege. It is critically important that we do not deny the privileges that we may be privy to because of race, gender, and nationality. Rather, we must acknowledge these privileges so that we may use all the resources at our disposal to push forward to build a more equitable world.

Yet bravery comes at a high cost. Bravery is to speak when everyone else has been rendered silent, to speak against the chorus of nays. Sometimes bravery is quiet in its valiance; it can consist of just being there, claiming the space you were given despite all efforts to eliminate your presence.

Bravery can be frightening—but if we do it together, there is security in our solidarity and true success in sight.

NOTES

1. Melissa Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2011), 29.

2. I placed the modifier “young” in parentheses in this chapter title as a reflexive move that acknowledges my status as a new or emerging Muslim intellectual and how that shapes my perspective. I also did so to question if there are in fact significant qualitative differences in the Black Muslim woman intellectual experience over time. If there are indeed any qualitative differences, it is that senior scholars such as Amina Wadud and Aminah McCloud, and others, are mentoring junior academics like me.

3. bell hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2004).

4. Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, eds., *Woman, Culture, and Society* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1974); Combahee River Collective, *The Combahee River Collective Statement: Black Feminist Organizing in the Seventies and Eighties* (Albany, N.Y.: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1986); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2008); bell hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

5. hooks, *Will to Change*, 17.

6. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

7. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

8. Melanie McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East since 1945*, updated ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 259.

9. Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Harmony, 2005).

10. hooks, *Will to Change*.

11. Sherman Jackson, “White Supremacy: The Beginning of Modern Day Shirk?,” *Lamppost*, March 1, 2017, <http://www.lamppostproductions.com/white-supremacy-the-modern-day-shirk/>.

12. Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women’s Reform in Islam* (Oxford: OneWorld, 2006).

13. *Ibid.*, 32.

14. Aminah Beverly McCloud, “Amina Wadud: Scattered Thoughts and Reflections,” in *A Jihad for Justice: Honoring the Work and Life of Amina Wadud*, ed. Kecia Ali, Julianne Hammer, and Laury Silvers (2012), 235, <http://www.bu.edu/religion/files/2010/03/A-Jihad-for-Justice-for-Amina-Wadud-2012-1.pdf>.

15. *Sister* here is used as an honorific, as is commonly done among African American Muslims.