

Precarious Exceptions: Representations of Visibly Muslim Women in Western Media

by

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ABSTRACT

The trope of the oppressed Muslim woman has been preeminent in Western visual and literary representations of Muslims. Its ubiquity made the proliferation of Muslim women boasted in media headlines as “empowered” and “stereotype-breaking” in the mid-2010s so striking. Suddenly, there were more visibly Muslim women showcased in mainstream media, and more products catered to Muslim women by mainstream brands. Alongside this new media inclusion, Muslims were also experiencing more violence and exclusion by Western states through Donald Trump’s “Muslim Ban” and European veil/burqa bans. *Precarious Exceptions: Representations of Visibly Muslim Women in Western Media* assesses this paradox and seeks to understand: Why are Muslim women being incorporated into the media in this way, and why now? Why *this* shift in representation in *this* political moment? I turn a critical eye to this sudden inclusion, noting that these media headlines often also involved the naming of a Muslim woman in a hijab who was celebrated as “the first” to do something—a phenomenon I call “Muslim firsts.” Reading widely circulated visual representations of Muslim women alongside the political moment in which they are produced, I utilize the framework of exception to argue that Muslim firsts were mobilized to reaffirm US exceptionalism and multiculturalism as these purported values were challenged by rising tides of white supremacist violence that left Muslims particularly vulnerable. Further, I show how they are mobilized in the global market through neoliberal multiculturalism as subjects who can sell (and buy) commodities, regardless of the precarity of citizenship.

In *Precarious Exceptions*, I evaluate visual representations of journalist Noor Tagouri in *Playboy* magazine to understand how Muslim firsts function in the media; the Shepard Fairey poster of Munira Ahmed in *We The People Are Greater Than Fear* and the memoir of political activist Linda Sarsour who was a co-chair for the 2017 Women’s March on Washington to understand patriotic Muslim icons; the Nike Pro Hijab and its Middle Eastern and US advertisements to understand how Muslims are marketed and marketed to; and Iman Meskini, Norway’s first hijabi actress, in the Norwegian teen drama *Skam* to understand how Muslim fans are understanding “authentic” representation and grappling with feelings of belonging through media. I argue that Muslim firsts are a gendered visual formation, focusing not only on Muslim women but specifically those Muslim women who are visually identifiable as Muslim in public through wearing a hijab or headscarf. Importantly, I argue that the incorporation of Muslim firsts into Western media does not fully destabilize hegemonic assumptions or beliefs about Muslims being foreign threats and does not undermine the oppressed Muslim woman trope; indeed, these Muslim firsts, through being rendered exceptional and distinct, affirm these tropes. Using discourse analysis, I further unpack the ways Muslims are talking about such representations, revealing how these communities are understanding this new, massive platforming of Muslim women and how they are consequently reproducing and perpetuating a burden of representation onto Muslim women—a burden I name as “representational responsibility.”

INTRODUCTION

One month after the United States' invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, First Lady Laura Bush made a radio address to the nation where she equated the fight against terrorism as a fight for the rights and dignity of women. She described that Afghan women faced beatings if they dared laugh out loud, leave their homes by themselves, or wear nail polish. In naming such brutal oppression of women as a central goal of terrorists, these Afghan women's lives were used to represent what would happen to the women and children of America if these terrorists imposed *their* world on the "the rest of *us*."¹ She assured the American people that while these women and children had long been subject to brutal oppression and cruelty, the US military was already making gains that allowed them to rejoice with newfound freedoms like listening to music. Still, she emphasized that "the terrorists who helped rule that country now plot and plan in many countries."² This deterritorialized the enemy, suggesting terrorism could be happening in any or "many" countries that posed a threat to the US way of life. Reminding Americans of Thanksgiving the following week, Bush's juxtapositions of the US and Afghanistan—of us and them, of freedom and oppression, of civilization and terrorism—was meant to inspire patriotic gratitude for "the blessings of American life."³ Altogether, the First Lady evoked pity, outrage,

¹ Laura Bush, "Radio Address by Mrs. Bush," The White House - President George W. Bush, November 17, 2001, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/11/20011117.html> (emphasis added).

² Bush, "Radio Address by Mrs. Bush."

³ Ibid.

and fear for women, an affective cocktail that enlisted bipartisan support for the continued occupation of Afghanistan in the burgeoning War on Terror.

This radio address is significant because women's rights was publicly articulated as justification for military intervention in Afghanistan; this justification would be taken up again for the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003. This discourse, when utilized by the US security state, appeals to its masculinist role as protector and mimics an Orientalist rescue fantasy in which the Western man rescues the Arab/Muslim woman from the Arab/Muslim man. Consequently, the centuries-old trope of the oppressed Muslim woman who needs to be saved was persistently mobilized in news and entertainment media after 9/11 to authorize US power in "protecting" and "saving" these women. The repeated nature of this trope asserted a particular truth about Muslim women (they are oppressed and passive) and about Muslim men (they are oppressive and violent); through this lens, the US was not an aggressor in a sovereign nation but a protector and freer of women.

The regular depiction and discussion of Muslim women's plight in Western media was contrasted with that of Western women's freedom and independence. After 9/11, this contrast harmed all women, the latter because they believed themselves relatively free and postfeminist in a way that normalized Western patriarchy and empowered it to remain unseen. George W. Bush could position himself as a champion of women's rights and use the flagrant 2004 reelection slogan "W stands for Women" because of this contrast, despite his attacks on reproductive freedom and on policies supporting women domestically. As political philosopher Iris Marion Young argues, the masculinist logic of the security state as protector of women and children

actually positions those protected in a subordinate position of dependence and obedience.⁴ Even more poignantly, Nadjé Al-Ali and Nicola Pratt write, “The War on Terror is not only a war waged in ‘uncivilized’ lands. It is also a war at home that empowers governments at the expense of individuals.”⁵ By turning the gaze to the East, the Bush administration was able to weaponize feminist rhetoric to support the state’s increasingly authoritarian domestic and foreign policies while remaining deeply tied to conservative gender ideology.⁶

The ubiquity and power of the oppressed Muslim woman discourse is what made the proliferation of Muslim women boasted in headlines as “empowered” and “stereotype-breaking” *Americans* in the mid-2010s so striking. Suddenly, there were more and more visibly Muslim women featured in headlines and ad campaigns, and more products catered to Muslim women by mainstream brands. These headlines also often involved the naming of a Muslim woman in hijab who was “the first” to do something. For example, Nura Afia was named as the first hijab-wearing CoverGirl brand ambassador; Ibtihaj Muhammad as the first hijab-wearing US Olympian; Ilhan Omar, the first hijab-wearing representative in Congress, and many more. I developed the term “Muslim first(s)” to reference this phenomenon, which I discuss more in Chapter 1. An important contingent of Muslim firsts’ celebration seems to be their visibility; it wasn’t that there had never been Muslims on the US Olympic team or in Congress, but that their particular mark in the visual field *as* Muslims is cause for commentary and/or celebration. This naming of “firsts” renders these Muslim women exceptional by virtue of doing something

⁴ Iris Marion Young, “The Logic of Masculinist Protection: Reflections on the Current Security State,” in *W Stands for Women: How the George W. Bush Presidency Shaped a New Politics of Gender*, ed. Michael L. Ferguson and Lori Jo Marso (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 115–39.

⁵ Nadjé Sadig al-Ali and Nicola Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation? Women and the Occupation of Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

⁶ For more on feminism, gender, and security during the Bush administration, see Michael L. Ferguson and Lori Jo Marso, eds., *W Stands for Women: How the George W. Bush Presidency Shaped a New Politics of Gender* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

supposedly unprecedented for their identity category. This proliferation of visibly Muslim women into the public sphere as figures to celebrate and as people who can buy and sell products was really striking because it seemed to shift the focus away from the trope of the oppressed Muslim woman that had dominated Western literature and visual media for so long. Muslim firsts seemed to break away from hegemonic discourses that have raced and gendered Muslims in particular ways. Why are Muslim women being incorporated into the media in this way, and why now? Why this shift in representation in this political moment? These seemingly simple research questions demanded investigations that are both temporal (why now) and thematic (what shift in themes, tropes).

Controversy, crisis, and moments of institutional change are productive sites for understanding developments in representation. Ethnic studies scholar Evelyn Alsultany has shown that it is not unusual for the media to respond to social and political events by developing new representational strategies.⁷ She argues that Donald Trump's explicit hostility and hate, and his Muslim Ban, led some of Hollywood's writers and producers to diversify their representations in a gesture of social responsibility.⁸ Many media pundits had not anticipated that Trump would rise to such popularity and not only win the Republican ticket, but the presidency. Once treated as a joke, Trump inspired a base who felt empowered by his unfettered xenophobia, racism, sexism, heterosexism, and Islamophobia. The anti-Muslim racism that he was espousing was not new—decades of domestic and foreign policy targeting Muslims affirm this—but the very explicit nature of his language shocked many liberals who insisted that this kind of hate was un-American. Such media commentary about Trump as illiberal and authoritarian was

⁷ Evelyn Alsultany, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11* (New York: New York University Press, 2012) for representational trends of Arabs and Muslims post-9/11.

⁸ Evelyn Alsultany, *Broken: The Failed Promise of Muslim Inclusion* (New York: New York University Press, 2022).

meaningful because it reaffirmed ideas of US exceptionalism and Orientalism, which assumes authoritarianism can only happen elsewhere, never here.⁹ Geographer Natalie Koch offers that “the implication is that there was some more ‘pure’ state of democracy that is presently under assault by Trump and his supporters.”¹⁰ As the election neared, America was charged with anxiety over what calls and responses to “Make America Great Again” meant about and for the United States. I argue that Muslim firsts are a new representational strategy that was mobilized as a consequence of this anxiety, as the US is grappling with its self-image.

In this dissertation, I analyze new representations of Muslim women from the 2010s. More specifically, all of the representations I examine first came out in 2016 or 2017, at the cusp of Barack Obama and Donald Trump’s presidencies. Notably, 2016 was an unprecedented year for hate; the Pew Research Center recorded that 2016 marked the greatest number of reported hate crimes against Muslims since right after September 11, 2001.¹¹ Even as Muslims were being incorporated into US visual culture in new and less limiting ways, it was clear US Muslims as a whole, living and breathing community were still not being included in the nation-state or imagined as “real” Americans. Rather, they were targeted, with individuals and communities subject to bodily harm. The paradox of this vulnerability experienced by US Muslims who are viewed as un- or anti-American and the celebration of some Muslims in mainstream media *as* Americans is what inspired the content of this dissertation. In this introduction, I offer more of the context preceding these representations’ development, understanding that representations are not created in a vacuum but used to service or resist power. I also reveal the frameworks critical

⁹ Natalie Koch, “Orientalizing Authoritarianism: Narrating US Exceptionalism in Popular Reactions to the Trump Election and Presidency,” *Political Geography* 58 (May 2017): 145–47, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2017.03.001>.

¹⁰ Koch, “Orientalizing Authoritarianism,” 145.

¹¹ Katayoun Kishi, “Assaults against Muslims in U.S. Surpass 2001 Level,” *Pew Research Center* (blog), November 15, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/11/15/assaults-against-muslims-in-u-s-surpass-2001-level/>.

to my study, which contributes to scholarship in critical Muslim studies, cultural studies, and women's studies.

The Post-9/11 US Context

The post-9/11 period is the era people referenced most when talking about the problem of mounting anti-Muslim racism around the 2016 elections—e.g., even the framing of the Pew Research statistic above marks hate crimes in accordance to this preceding era. Understanding the discourses and policies leading up to September 11 and the cultural response to it is critical; the context I detail here helps us understand the culture and events in the mid-2010s that I attend to in the body chapters of this dissertation. In particular, I attend to how Muslims figure into US race and gender schemas after 9/11 to understand the particular forms of exclusion experienced by US Muslims that would then make Muslim firsts' inclusion in the mid-2010s so novel.

In the post-civil rights era, the US has pictured itself as multicultural and post-racial, as a liberal democracy no longer beholden to the logics of race and racism that defined Jim Crow and prior arrangements of racial domination. Any new iteration of racism or racial inequality thus considered “merely an unfortunate echo of a residual but fast fading legacy.”¹² However, the post in post-racial, just like the post in post-colonial, is misleading. Racism and colonialism persist. The matter is to assess “*all racisms* of the present... by how they are instantiated in a time when it is claimed to be over.”¹³ Scholars like David Theo Goldberg and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva

¹² Sivamohan Valluvan, “What Is ‘Post-Race’ and What Does It Reveal about Contemporary Racisms?,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39, no. 13 (October 20, 2016): 2241, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2016.1202430>.

¹³ Valluvan, “What Is ‘Post-Race’ and What Does It Reveal about Contemporary Racisms?,” 2242.

understand the “curtain call on race and racism”¹⁴ as actually producing unique and subtle mechanisms, conditions, logics, and subjects of racism.¹⁵

For example, Arab Americans are officially classified as white by the US Census—which renders them invisible in contemporary racialized discourses—but they still experience exclusion and racism on cultural and political grounds. The United States’ unequivocal political, military, and economic alliance with Israel following World War II forged Israel as part of the Western imaginary and cast Arab Americans as marginalized others. As US interest and intervention in the Middle East increased, the US media increasingly conflated Arabs, Middle Easterners, and Muslims as a monolithic category and pre-eminent enemy of the West.¹⁶ This Arab-Middle Eastern-Muslim conflation obfuscated the fact that most Arab Americans had been Christian historically, and invisibilized the long, rooted history of Black Muslims in the United States. Ethnic studies scholar Nadine Naber theorized “the racialization of religion” to describe how Arab Americans become racially marked through the assumption that all Arabs are Muslim and that Islam is an uncivilized, backward religion.¹⁷ Associations with Islam in this way casts Arabs as distinct from white Americans because, within liberal humanist discussions of religion, “non-Western” religions like Islam are regarded as antagonistic to modernity, even pathological.¹⁸ Political events like the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, Iran Hostage Crisis, Iranian Revolution, Gulf War, and more, which littered US-Middle Eastern relations in the second half of the 20th century, were explained through cultural, civilizational, and religious frames that divided the

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Goldberg, for instance, names Muslims and Palestinians, and more specifically Muslim-Gazans as iconic subjects that the post-racial works through, emphasizing the culturalization and politicization of racism. For more, see David Theo Goldberg, *Are We All Postracial Yet?* (Malden: Polity Press, 2015).

¹⁶ Nadine Naber, “Ambiguous Insiders: An Investigation of Arab American Invisibility,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 23, no. 1 (January 2000): 41, <https://doi.org/10.1080/014198700329123>.

¹⁷ Naber, “Ambiguous Insiders,” 52.

¹⁸ Ibid., 52-53.

world between those who are modern (the West) versus anti-modern (Islam). These frames continue to conceal and obscure the racializing effects of such discourses.

Orientalist policy scientists like Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington amplified such essentialist modes of thinking into “armed social science”¹⁹ as US policy advisors. Lewis’s 1990 article, “The Roots of Muslim Rage,” inspired Huntington’s Clash of Civilizations thesis; both became highly influential in supplying the culturalist framework of the early War on Terror a decade later.²⁰ (Huntington is also the second most cited author in political science classes, according to the Open Syllabus project—one mark above Karl Marx.²¹) Huntington argued that the post-Cold War era would be defined by conflicts that take place between so-called civilizations across cultural lines instead of ideological lines, as with capitalism versus communism. He assumed that there were discrete civilizations (e.g., Western, Muslim, Hindu) in which people identify themselves and their values. In this thesis, cultures—not economic, social, political, or historical relationships—are rendered responsible for how people act. Muslim culture and Islamic extremism, Huntington argued, was the biggest threat to Western domination. Anthropologist Mahmood Mamdani defines discourses like this as “Culture Talk,” or the cultural interpretation of politics:

Culture Talk assumes that every culture has a tangible essence that defines it, and it then explains politics as a consequence of that essence. Culture Talk after 9/11, for example,

¹⁹ Amira Jarmakani, *An Imperialist Love Story: Desert Romances and the War on Terror* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 74.

²⁰ For more on the culturalist and reformist modes of thinking that have pervaded the War on Terror, see Arun Kundnani, *The Muslims Are Coming! Islamophobia, Extremism, and the Domestic War on Terror* (London ; New York: Verso, 2014).

²¹ “Open Syllabus: Explorer,” Open Syllabus, accessed January 2, 2023, <https://opensyllabus.org/results-list/authors?size=50&fields=Political%20Science>.

qualified and explained the practice of “terrorism” as “Islamic.” “Islamic terrorism” is thus offered as both description and explanation of the events of 9/11.²²

This talk served as the ideological underpinning that validated the US in profiling, surveilling, detaining, and torturing Muslims in the War on Terror. While the War on Terror is not the origin point for anti-Muslim racism, the contemporary process of Muslim racialization is tied to this era when cultural, political, and biological ascriptions onto the Muslim body result in sustained, institutionalized violence against a whole host of ethnicities, races, and nationalities classified under the monolithic category of Muslim.²³

The War on Terror functions as a state of exception, and as such, the US government assumes the right to do anything in the interest of national security. Those considered unequal by pathological, sexual, or cultural differences can be excluded from law and citizenship on the grounds that they pose a threat to the nation.²⁴ In discussing states of exception, Giorgio Agamben writes about the US policy aftermath following 9/11 that affirmed such so-called exceptional measures were actually increasingly a technique of government to abolish distinctions between legislative, executive, and judicial powers.²⁵ The USA PATRIOT Act—aka “Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism” Act—that was issued by the Senate in October 2001 allowed the government to take any “alien” suspected of endangering national security into custody. They

²² Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Three Leaves Press, 2005), 17-18.

²³ For more on anti-Muslim racism and Islamophobia, see Steve Garner and Saher Selod, “The Racialization of Muslims: Empirical Studies of Islamophobia,” *Critical Sociology* 41, no. 1 (January 2015): 9–19, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920514531606>; Erik Love, *Islamophobia and Racism in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2017); Nadine Naber and Junaid Rana, “The 21st Century Problem of Anti-Muslim Racism,” *Jadaliyya - جدلية*, June 25, 2019, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/39830>; and Junaid Rana, “The Story of Islamophobia,” *Souls* 9, no. 2 (June 6, 2007): 148–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10999940701382607>.

²⁴ Sherene Razack, *Casting out: The Eviction of Muslims from Western Law and Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 11.

²⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

could hold them for up to seven days, in which time they either had to charge them with violating US immigration or criminal law or release them. However, in November 2001 the President issued a military order that functionally erased the legal status of any individual taken into custody. Agamben writes, “Neither prisoners nor persons accused, but simply ‘detainees,’ they are the object of a pure de facto rule, of a detention that is indefinite not only in the temporal sense but in its very nature as well, since it is entirely removed from the law and from judicial oversight.”²⁶ Muslim men were the primary targets of this de facto government rule and Guantánamo Bay prison is a potent reminder of this. In January 2023, the ACLU reported that 779 Muslim men and boys have been held at Guantánamo since its first detainees were brought there in 2002, almost all without charge or trial.²⁷ Of the 35 men who remain indefinitely detained there today, 23 have never been charged with any crime and 20 have been cleared for transfer and release, some for years.²⁸

In addition to rhetoric promoting Muslim women as oppressed and in need of rescue, much of the rhetoric after 9/11 emphasized how dangerous Islam and Muslim men were. This functioned to generate support for extreme government measures meant to, as far-right talk radio host Michael Savage put it, “save the United States.”²⁹ The US has spent decades (even prior to 9/11) fashioning the term “terrorist” to mean something specific. Women’s studies scholar Amira Jarmakani argues that the terrorist has been configured as a racial formation that is codified through Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim phenotypes and embodiments; thus, “terrorist” has become one proxy for race.³⁰ These embodiments may be shaped by “racially marked,

²⁶ Agamben, *State of Exception*, 3-4.

²⁷ “ACLU Statement on the 21st Anniversary of Guantánamo,” *American Civil Liberties Union* (blog), January 10, 2023, <http://www.aclu.org/press-releases/aclu-statement-21st-anniversary-guantanamo>.

²⁸ “ACLU Statement on the 21st Anniversary of Guantánamo.”

²⁹ Lori Peek, *Behind the Backlash: Muslim Americans After 9/11* (Pittsburgh: Temple University Press, 2010).

³⁰ Amira Jarmakani, *An Imperialist Love Story: Desert Romances and the War on Terror* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

habitually worn clothing (like a hijab or turban) as well as habitually performed movements (like *salaat*...).”³¹ Alsultany notes that while most actors that play Arab or Muslim terrorists in film and television are actually Latinos, South Asians, and Greek, “casting lends itself to the visual construction of an Arab/Muslim race that supports the conflation of Arab and Muslim identities.”³² The construction of a conflated Arab/Muslim “look” invisibilizes the heterogeneity of US Muslims, including Black Muslims who constitute about one-third of all Muslims in the United States. It also supports policies that depend on racial profiling and leaves many Muslims, and those mistaken for Muslim, vulnerable to anti-Muslim racism.

Anti-Muslim hate crimes increased 1600% from 2000 to 2001, and nearly all of those the FBI recorded in 2001 happened within the less-than-four-month period after September 11.³³ Men were the primary targets in these official statistics. Unofficially, visibly Muslim women in the US were and are vulnerable targets to anti-Muslim racism because of their visual tie to Islam and its entrenched stereotypes. Studying Muslims’ PTSD effects after 9/11, social work scholars Wahiba Abu-Ras and Zulema Suarez found that a significantly larger proportion of women (86.3%) than men (54.9%) had experienced hate crimes in the US.³⁴ Literature on Muslim women and gendered Islamophobia have found that visibly Muslim women who wear the hijab are more vulnerable to anti-Muslim racism and frequently have their citizenship questioned.³⁵

Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad writes,

³¹ Jarmakani, *An Imperialist Love Story*, 128.

³² Alsultany, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media*, 10.

³³ Peek, *Behind the Backlash*, 28.

³⁴ Wahiba M. Abu-Ras and Zulema E. Suarez, “Muslim Men and Women’s Perception of Discrimination, Hate Crimes, and PTSD Symptoms Post 9/11.,” *Traumatology* 15, no. 3 (September 2009): 48–63, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1534765609342281>.

³⁵ Saher Selod, “Citizenship Denied: The Racialization of Muslim American Men and Women Post-9/11,” *Critical Sociology* 41, no. 1 (January 2015): 77–95, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920513516022>; Barbara Perry, “Gendered Islamophobia: Hate Crime against Muslim Women,” *Social Identities* 20, no. 1 (January 2, 2014): 74–89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2013.864467>; Mariam Durrani, “The Gendered Muslim Subject: At the Intersection of Race, Religion, and Gender,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Language and Race*, ed. H. Samy Alim, Angela Reyes, and Paul V. Kroskrity (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 342–66, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190845995.013.14>.

[I]n an America traumatized by 9/11, many Americans began to identify the hijab as the standard of the enemy. No more a marker of piety and obedience to God, it came to be seen as an affront and the flaunting of an identity associated with those who have declared war on the United States. Muslim women who wore the hijab bore the consequences of blatant stereotyping. They became the objects of both harassment and pity as Americans began to wonder what kind of women they were that they participated in their own oppression. The harassment restricted women's freedom and stripped them of their anonymity. Public catcalls of "I hate you," "Go home," "America is for Americans," and "Death to Muslims" had a devastating effect. Many women stayed home to avoid the public defamation.³⁶

At the same time, Haddad shows that even amidst this vulnerability, many Muslim women actually started wearing the hijab and assuming a public Islamic identity in increasing numbers right after 9/11.³⁷ She argues this trend happened for two reasons: 1) some Muslim women and girls were publicly displaying trust in the American system that promises freedoms of religion and speech, and/or 2) some wore it to defy and resist efforts to eradicate Islam in the US, viewing it as a symbol of refusal and anti-colonial solidarity. There is tension between these—that some sought recognition in support of the state and others in spite of it. Such tension is productive for showcasing diversity within Muslim communities, something I highlight throughout this dissertation. It complicates the notion that the hijab is only a reflection of religious belief, or that it is something forced on Muslim women instead of taken up by them, and it enables us to discuss in more depth the historic dynamism of the veil.³⁸

³⁶ Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, "The Post-9/11 'Hijab' as Icon," *Sociology of Religion* 68, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 263.

³⁷ Haddad, "The Post-9/11 'Hijab' as Icon."

³⁸ In "Algeria Unveiled," Frantz Fanon delineates how the adoption and forsaking of the veil were acts of political participation in the liberation of Algeria from French colonial rule. He narrates that when Algeria was colonized, women held fast to the veil as a symbolic assertion of tradition and custom since the colonizer was bent on unveiling them. When they would unveil,

It also enables us to see that these state policies and everyday hate were meted out along racial lines and along gendered ones. In this dissertation, I align with the approach taken by Rabab Abdulhadi, Evelyn Alsultany, and Nadine Naber in *Arab & Arab American Feminisms*, which assess the distinct forms of racism against Arabs and Muslims as gendered racialization. This “assumes that racial logics are flexible and mutable to accommodate imperialist power in different temporal and spatial contexts,”³⁹ and accounts for how racial logics are shaped by gender and have gendered consequences. (i.e., These racial logics differentially impact Arabs and Muslims marked by different genders and sexualities.) They contend that while an Arab American woman may face disciplinary action after showing support for Palestine, a man, or queer or transgender person of the same ethnicity, may face even harsher or more violent consequences. Thus, they argue that analyses of gender oppression and racial oppression must be thought about relationally at all times.⁴⁰

The election and reelection of Barack Obama as the 44th President of the United States seemingly recemented the notion that America had moved beyond race. Arun Kundnani writes that Obama era liberalism effectively normalized the War on Terror to the point that mainstream journalists stopped asking questions about it altogether.⁴¹ In part, this can be attributed to him signing Executive Order 13492, ordering the closure of Guantánamo Bay, on his very first day as

Algerian women would do so to pass as properly assimilated modern subjects and actively confront power. When those women became suspects, the veil was taken up again with weapons of resistance concealed in the folds. He describes this as the historical dynamism of the veil, whereby the historical conditions of the moment created a whole new meaning and purpose for the veil. The French saw the presence or absence of the veil as indicative of their power over Algeria. Because of this, the veil took on a new meaning—whereas before colonialism, the veil was worn as a mundane, everyday uniform for many Algerian women; after, it became a mechanism that could be used and manipulated to resist the colonizer. See Frantz Fanon, “Algeria Unveiled,” in *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 2007).

³⁹ Rabab Abdulhadi, Evelyn Alsultany, and Nadine Naber, “Arab and Arab American Feminisms: An Introduction,” in *Arab and Arab American Feminism: Gender, Nation, and Belonging*, ed. Rabab Abdulhadi, Evelyn Alsultany, and Nadine Naber (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011), xxii.

⁴⁰ Abdulhadi, Alsultany, and Naber, *Arab and Arab American Feminism*, xxi.

⁴¹ Arun Kundnani, *The Muslims Are Coming! Islamophobia, Extremism, and the Domestic War on Terror* (London ; New York: Verso, 2014).

President of the United States.⁴² In actuality, the executive order did not “promptly” close the prison in the “interests of justice,” as the order stated. Still, Obama’s immediate and swift response to the Bush-era War on Terror that marred the US’s image, lulled the US public into believing that the past was behind us.

During the Obama era, the liberal government argued that extremism was not a product of Islam but rather, its perversion and misinterpretation. “Radicalization” became the lens through which Americans viewed and suspected Muslims. The administration used academic models that claimed to have special knowledge regarding how Muslims become radicalized to bolster counterterrorism strategies like Countering Violent Extremism (CVE). CVE is painted by the state as a community outreach initiative that recruits community leaders, teachers, public health providers and social workers to assist the government in identifying people who are “at risk” of becoming radicalized.⁴³ In actuality, this embeds surveillance within Muslim communities and creates cultures of distrust that isolate Muslims and mitigate their political activism, which is the goal. Kundnani writes, “[T]he liberal caveat is that Muslims are acceptable when depoliticized: they should be silent about politics, particularly US foreign policy and the domestic national security system, and not embrace an alien ideology that removes them from the liberal norm.”⁴⁴ Thus, alongside the hard power that defined the Bush era War on Terror, Obama used soft power that worked through appropriating suitable Muslim leaders to promote government messaging. I maintain that the subtlety of the violence and control that happens through conditional inclusion fuels the continuation of anti-Muslim racism and its erasure *as*

⁴² “Executive Order 13492—Review and Disposition of Individuals Detained at the Guantánamo Bay Naval Base and Closure of Detention Facilities,” The American Presidency Project, accessed January 31, 2023, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/executive-order-13492-review-and-disposition-individuals-detained-the-guantanamo-bay-naval>.

⁴³ “Why Countering Violent Extremism Programs Are Bad Policy | Brennan Center for Justice,” September 9, 2019, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/why-countering-violent-extremism-programs-are-bad-policy>.

⁴⁴ Kundnani, *The Muslims Are Coming!*, 16.

racism. In these ways and more, Muslims have been rendered as exceptional enemies to the state, exceptionally suspect, and exceptions in US law and society, and the government has worked to manage these exceptions in various ways.

Theoretical Frameworks

Whereas Muslims have generally been marked by political exception, I understand Muslim firsts as exceptions in their own right. Carl Schmitt understood that the condition of exception is a political liminality that intervenes in the logic of ruling and being ruled. While the Schmittian exception is invoked to delineate friends versus foes in the context of war (i.e., Muslims are enemies in the War on Terror), Anthropologist Aihwa Ong thinks more broadly of exception:

as an extraordinary departure in policy that can be deployed to include as well as to exclude. As conventionally understood, the sovereign exception marks out excludable subjects who are denied protections. But the exception can also be a positive decision to include selected populations and spaces as targets of ‘calculative choices and value-orientation’ associated with neoliberal reform.⁴⁵

In this way, I understand Muslim firsts as calculative choices introduced at a moment of national transformation. Muslim women have been rendered as racial others and gendered others, meaning she has been marked by multiple processes of exclusion. Including one of the most excluded subjects into the fold and incorporating visibly Muslim women into US visual culture works in service of US exceptionalism, or functions to *re*stabilize hegemonic narratives about the United States—notably, about its liberalism, multiculturalism, and distinction from the rest of the world—amid rising tides of white supremacist, patriarchal violence in the US and in Europe.

⁴⁵ Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 5.

Some Muslim firsts might explicitly advocate for US exceptionalism but often, it's the images and accompanying headlines that frame the success of exceptional Muslim women *as* Americans or succeeding *in* America that mobilizes this common sense. However, I contend that this status is highly precarious because if she does or says anything that does *not* conform with this narrative, she loses her exceptional status and is cast out of the liberal limelight as US Muslim subject par excellence.

As I detail in this dissertation, it is not that any Muslim has the potential to be a first, but that certain, select US Muslim women are incorporated to exemplify and maintain US exceptionalism. Through being rendered exceptional, Muslim firsts still mark out the excludable subject or political exception—other non-normative Muslims. Their image works for US interests, generating a different degree of protection to those who would otherwise be excluded by being Muslim. Subsequently, a key theoretical framework that I enlist in this dissertation, which threads together conversations about feminism, multiculturalism, and neoliberalism in the body chapters, is that of exceptionalism—specifically, US exceptionalism and US gender exceptionalism.

US Exceptionalism

“American exceptionalism” or “US exceptionalism” references a discourse produced and deployed by the state to justify its extralegal behavior. This discourse—carefully crafted and recrafted to suit the geopolitical demands of the moment—advocates an unwavering belief in the uniqueness and superiority of the United States, and ordains it to serve as the only political, cultural, and economic model for the rest of the world.⁴⁶ Typical national desires to work

⁴⁶ Meghana V. Nayak and Christopher Malone, “American Orientalism and American Exceptionalism: A Critical Rethinking of US Hegemony,” *International Studies Review* 11 (2009): 260.

towards a better, ideal nation are displaced in US exceptionalism, which defines the United States as having already fulfilled this task and as serving as the world's ideal nation, such that the only work left is to propagate their national model.⁴⁷ International Relations (IR) scholar David Hughes writes that US exceptionalism “provides a cultural mechanism for legitimating foreign policy decisions and practices that the United States would normally condemn in other countries. It implies that the United States is somehow unlike other nations and does not have to follow the same rules as everyone else.”⁴⁸ What happened directly after the attacks on September 11, 2001, has been rendered as an exception to what happens in the US; the hate, violence, and torture experienced by Muslims and people mistaken for Muslim is framed as an unfortunate but uncharacteristic mark in US history.

While American exceptionalism is often imagined and indeed described by many scholars and political figures as a long-standing US cultural tradition with origins rooted in America's founding, I understand “US exceptionalism” through Hughes's work that locates its beginning in 1945 as a product of the US's new great power status, not as tied to an American ethos/identity. Hughes notes in his critical genealogy that, yes, the US had various messianic visions of itself from the Massachusetts Bay Colony as a “City upon a Hill,” to Manifest Destiny and westward expansion in the nineteenth century, but argues that US exceptionalism as a discursive formation began in the postwar era.⁴⁹ In fact, the utterance of “American exceptionalism” is attributed by Donald Pease to Joseph Stalin in the 1920s when he was criticizing the Lovestoneite faction of the American Communist Party for deviating from Party orthodoxies. In this fate of ironies, Hughes writes, “‘American exceptionalism’ proves not to be

⁴⁷ Donald E. Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 22.

⁴⁸ David Hughes, “Unmaking an Exception: A Critical Genealogy of US Exceptionalism,” *Review of International Studies* 41, no. 3 (July 2015): 528, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210514000229>.

⁴⁹ Hughes, “Unmaking an Exception: A Critical Genealogy of US Exceptionalism,” 533, 534.

the product of a pristine, self-contained national tradition.”⁵⁰ Pease offers that the use of the term in this context as a heresy is helpful in understanding how and why exceptionalism was appropriated into Cold War orthodoxies:

Since Stalin had excommunicated the Lovestoneite sect for having described the United States as exempt from the laws of historical motion to which Europe was subject, cold war ideologues transposed American exceptionalism into the revelation of the truth about its nature that explained *why* the United States was exempt not merely from Marxian incursions but from the historical laws that Marx had codified. As the placeholder of a communist heresy, American exceptionalism named the limit to the political provenance of the Soviet Empire. As the manifestation of economic and political processes that negated communism at its core, this “heresy” constituted the primary means whereby U.S. citizens could imagine the nullification of communism.⁵¹

This distinction from Europe is primary to the formulation of American exceptionalism whereby Europe serves as the United States’ Western Other.

IR scholars Meghana V. Nayak and Christopher Malone argue that there is a relationship between American exceptionalism and American orientalism which both help to construct the US as exceptional in meaningful ways through distinguishing Western and non-Western Others.⁵² Europe is not associated with danger or fear the way that the East is—its differentiation from the US functions as an othering *between*, not and othering against. It is not doubted that the US and Europe are both civilized, it is about who sets the standards of civilization and power, and how they do so; the United States and Europe both exercise normative power but have used

⁵⁰ Ibid., 544.

⁵¹ Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism*, 10.

⁵² Nayak and Malone, “American Orientalism and American Exceptionalism: A Critical Rethinking of US Hegemony.”

different means to secure it. American studies scholar Melani McAlister argues that American Orientalism—the US’s appropriations and representations of the Middle East—did not follow a simple Orientalist paradigm because “the project of separating the United States from European imperialism, or distinguishing the Middle East from the rest of the Orient, functioned strategically” in the postwar era and relied on the US power discourse of benevolent supremacy.⁵³ European power/knowledge and direct colonial rule over the Orient was replaced by American power which was framed as “inevitably global in its scope, benevolent in its intent, and benign in its effect.”⁵⁴ Thus, the US is rendered exceptional from Europe.

In the context of US Muslims today, the US contrasts itself from many European countries by lauding itself as embracing religious diversity through its commitments to the US Constitution’s first amendment right to freedom of religion. The ability of Muslim women to veil in public is used as an example of this.

US Gender Exceptionalism and the Politics of the Veil

Gender has been a crucial technology of empire through which the West imagines itself as superior. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said explicates that the West understands itself in binary opposition to the East and it is only through this formulation that it can situate itself as positionally superior. Sociologist Meyda Yegenoglu further contends that Orientalism is a phallogocentric discourse that Western feminism inevitably becomes caught up in, with Western women empowered by its masculinism and imperialism.⁵⁵ In colonial projects, Western women were instrumentalized because they were able to transcend the public/private boundaries that

⁵³ Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 40.

⁵⁴ McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, 46.

⁵⁵ Meyda Yegenoglu, *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

Western men could not (i.e., enter the harem), which allowed them to generate authority through making statements about Eastern women and their race.⁵⁶ The Muslim woman who veils is thus constructed as the ultimate other in the Western imagination, not only by virtue of being the gendered subordinate to the Muslim other who is already feminized, but because she is further subordinated by the excluded other of Western men—Western women.⁵⁷ In *Terrorist Assemblages*, Jasbir Puar argues that the embrace of Afghan, Iraqi, and Muslim women generally in the War on Terror generated many forms of US gender exceptionalism—a missionary discourse that positions American feminists as paramount by alluding to the unsalvageable nature of Muslim women, who are seen as unsavable.⁵⁸

Part of the mission to unveil Muslim women seeks to shuttle them into modernity. The veil is critical to this construct as a contested site where the politics of modernity and power play out. In the West, the veil is understood to be the visible symbol of female oppression and Islamic patriarchy; veiling is sometimes understood as a pathology or perversion where Muslim women who refuse to unveil are seen as brainwashed or suffering from a distorted psyche, in need of intervention.⁵⁹ Joseph Massad writes that Western liberalism is understood to be the only sane value system, such that any Muslim resistance to this benevolent mission is seen as rejecting modernity itself.⁶⁰ (In Chapter 3, I note that veiling has actually been taken up as a distinctly modern practice in places like Indonesia.) Ethnic studies scholar Sylvia Chan-Malik argues that a distinctly US-based discourse of the veil emerged through US media representations of the

⁵⁶ Nima Naghibi, *Rethinking Global Sisterhood: Western Feminism and Iran* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), xix.

⁵⁷ Yeğenoğlu, *Colonial Fantasies*, 12.

⁵⁸ Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

⁵⁹ For more on this, see Sara R. Farris, “Figures of Femonationalism,” in *In the Name of Women’s Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

⁶⁰ Joseph Massad, *Islam in Liberalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

Iranian Women's Revolution of March 1979.⁶¹ US media's reporting of the movement used the veil as a central trope to paint a firm dividing line between Ayatollah Khomeini's "Islam" and "modernity."⁶² Iranian women who would not veil, who were "defiant" to Khomeini's particular flavor of Islam, were painted in the same terms as white, second-wave American feminists, while those who veiled were painted in heightened contrast. She argues that this forged a new binary, "Islam" versus "feminism,"⁶³ which made the veiled woman a foil to American women and liberation.

As the US looked to its next presidency in 2016, many were optimistic that the United States would finally get its first woman president in Hillary Clinton, which would affirm what many already believed about the US also being postfeminist. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra identify postfeminism as a cultural process that marks the "pastness" of feminism, in part through promoting selective definitions of feminism that are anchored in consumption and individualism.⁶⁴ Any antagonisms between feminism and consumption are displaced through "remaking feminism into desires and identities that are accomplished through consumption."⁶⁵ Postfeminism is a critical lens through which I analyze representations of visibly Muslim women in popular culture because it focuses on the female subject who is rendered and actualized through individualism and consumerism, and whose difference is neutralized and capitalized upon—all prerequisites for Muslim women's incorporation into the mainstream. Writing about the idealized Muslim woman, Shelina Kassam argues

⁶¹ Sylvia Chan-Malik, *Being Muslim: A Cultural History of Women of Color in American Islam* (New York: New York University Press, 2018).

⁶² Chan-Malik, *Being Muslim*, 161.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 165.

⁶⁴ Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, eds., *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

⁶⁵ Cheryl L. Cole and Amy Hribar, "Celebrity Feminism: Nike Style Post-Fordism, Transcendence, and Consumer Power," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 12, no. 4 (December 1995): 356, <https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.12.4.347>.

Representations of the idealized Muslim woman are focused on individual empowerment and achievement, the ‘modern’ Muslim woman, who is beyond affiliations to particular communities, one who aspires to be the idealized citizen. Such representations both challenge and confirm stereotypes of Muslim women, a dual process which sometimes evokes ambivalent responses.⁶⁶

My dissertation examines this very process.

US gender exceptionalism has historically marked Muslim women as outside of or distinct from US women and feminism. The incorporation of Muslim firsts suggests that US gender exceptionalism now works, in part, by also including some exceptional, veiled Muslim women. Muslim firsts serve as evidence of US gender exceptionalism by showing that Muslim women can flourish and succeed by virtue of being in and being loyal to the United States. The pervasive adoption of the American flag in these Muslim firsts’ images—either alongside them or worn as an actual hijab—symbolically ties the exceptional Muslim woman to the US nation. The veil, in its visibility, is critical to such incorporation. Whereas Muslim women are granted particular forms of visibility through being explicitly tied to Islam through the headscarf, Muslim men often only enter acceptance into mainstream media as the nominal Muslim, who Alsultany defines as culturally Muslim, not religiously Muslim.⁶⁷ It would seem that one’s religion is amplified while the other is quieted, but in actuality, both are quieted in different ways.

⁶⁶ Shelina Kassam, “Marketing an Imagined Muslim Woman: *Muslim Girl* Magazine and the Politics of Race, Gender and Representation,” *Social Identities* 17, no. 4 (July 2011): 546, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2011.587308>.

⁶⁷ Alsultany, *Broken*.

Chapter Outline

This dissertation examines how representations of visibly Muslim women are produced, circulated, and received in the public and the competing meanings therein. I use critical discourse analysis and close reading to evaluate these representations. When relevant, I have incorporated these women's voices as critical references for understanding their perspectives amid these greater discussions. For example, I use Noor Tagouri's public letter in Chapter 1, Linda Sarsour's autobiography in Chapter 2, and Tua El-Fawwal's podcast interview in Chapter 4. I am most interested in what public circulation of certain images and public conversations say or reflect about changes in representation, as unwieldy as that has been to ascertain at times. The sources that I use throughout this dissertation include visual representations of Muslims in Western media (photos, posters, ads, and television), op-eds, news reports, social media posts, and more that can be accessed online. One primary aim of this dissertation is to de-naturalize these new tropes by deconstructing how Muslim women are being represented and marking the contextual and relational aspects of their representation. Through tracing public conversations Muslims are having about these representations, I seek to amplify their voices. My dissertation showcases the diversity in Muslim thought regarding the politics of Muslim representation.

Each chapter in this dissertation plays on the concept of firsts in some way to think about new ways that visibly Muslim women are incorporated into Western media. My first chapter, "Wrapped in Controversy: theorizing Muslim firsts and representational responsibility," centers the controversy of Libyan-American journalist Noor Tagouri appearing in *Playboy*. Tagouri is featured in the magazine as one of the "Renegades of 2016," which includes a few photographs of her fully-clothed and a short interview with *Playboy* editor Anna del Gaizo where she talks about trying to become the first hijabi anchor on commercial US television. In this chapter, I

theorize about Muslim firsts and their function amid changes in the US government and at *Playboy*, which was in the midst of rebranding. I also reflect on how Muslim firsts are received by their communities. Her presence in a magazine notorious for soft porn inspired blowback from Muslims who read the tension between hijab and *Playboy* as antithetical, and published copious comments, op-eds and think pieces reflecting on her decision to appear in the magazine. Most responses assumed that Tagouri acts as a de facto representative of Islam, irrespective of her consent to be one, because the hijab she wears visibly marks her identity—the idea being, she is always already known as Muslim and should act as such. What that “should” look like is highly contested, given the incredible diversity in Muslim life. Consequently, I coined the term “representational responsibility” to explain the burden of representation put on visibly Muslim women by Muslims and non-Muslims alike, showing that even today, women’s bodies are the battleground on which civilizational debates and ideological battles play out.

In Chapter 2: “The New Patriotic Muslim: on racial icons and parameters of Muslim inclusion,” I evaluate the two most visible Muslim women in the first Women’s March on Washington (WMW) to analyze the instrumentalization of patriotic Muslim icons and the development of what I call “the new patriotic Muslim.” The first is the iconic poster, *We The People Are Greater Than Fear* by Shepard Fairey, which depicts freelancer Munira Ahmed wearing an American flag hijab. This image was so widely circulated that it became known as the “face of anti-Trump resistance.”⁶⁸ The second is Palestinian-American activist Linda Sarsour who served as one of WMW’s co-chairs. As an activist who openly critiques US empire but also buys into its myths and remains dedicated to the nation-state (especially through electoral

⁶⁸ Edward Helmore, “Munira Ahmed: The Woman Who Became the Face of the Trump Resistance,” *The Guardian*, January 23, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/23/womens-march-poster-munira-ahmed-shepard-fairey-interview>; and, Michelle Garcia, “Meet the Muslim Woman Who’s Become the Face of Anti-Trump Resistance,” *Vox*, February 10, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/identities/2017/2/10/14508820/muslim-poster-protest-munira-ahmed-ridwan-adhami-shepard-fairey>.

politics), she exemplifies the trope of the new patriotic Muslim. I put these in conversation with each other because the tension between the embrace of an iconic image versus ambivalence toward a real Muslim woman reifies liberal investments in changing how things look, as opposed to actively changing oppressive structures.

My last two chapters, and Chapter 3 in particular, think about Muslims in a more global or transnational context. In my third chapter, “Going Pro: the commodification of the hijab in fashion and retail,” I address the increasing incorporation of Muslim women into Western fashion and retail markets as consumers who can buy and sell products. I use the Nike Pro Hijab, released in 2017, as a case study. The Pro Hijab won awards as an “invention” and was lauded by some as the “first” sportswear hijab. In reality, sports hijabs had already existed and been sold for many years. Such misnaming begs the question, first for whom? This chapter investigates the relationship between Muslims, social movements, and neoliberalism. In it, I reveal the paradox whereby, 1) Muslims are recognized as consumers and thus increasingly included in commercial visual culture (i.e., advertisements, runways, sponsored social media posts), and 2) Muslims are recognized as threats to national security and national cultures and thus increasingly excluded from public view, rights, and citizenship. I help us understand this paradox through investigating how Muslim women are taken in by neoliberal multiculturalism.

My final chapter, “‘For Muslim girls like us’: fandom and Muslim representation in the Norwegian teen drama *Skam*,” looks at the show *Skam* and its Muslim fandom. This series was a transnational success, reaching audiences globally through online fan labor. As the first Western show to have a hijabi main character played by Norway’s first hijabi actress (Iman Meskini), *Skam* was a novelty that inspired a lot of affective responses from its Muslim fandom who had never seen a representation like it before. Many fans lauded this representation as the most

realistic, authentic and relatable representation of a Muslim woman they had ever seen in fictive media. At the same time, their emotional investment in the series and its representation also produced a lot of criticism and fans took to Tumblr to express their frustration. I argue such vigilance regarding authenticity, mistakes, and the like reveal a structure of feeling wherein fans identify *Skam* as both disruptive to tropes of gendered Muslim representation and beholden to them. Through charting the online discourse of Muslim fans on Tumblr, I reveal how they are grappling with feelings of belonging or exclusion through media, and how their disavowal of certain storylines as correct or inauthentic (re)asserts representational responsibility.

CHAPTER 1

Wrapped in Controversy: Theorizing Muslim Firsts and Representational Responsibility

Flipping through the October 2016 issue of *Playboy* magazine, the eye catches headlines on Asian cuisine, electric cars, and a column answering, “is it ever okay to send a dick pic?” (spoiler: only when someone asks for one), before landing on photos of a fully-clothed Muslim woman halfway through the magazine (figures 1 and 2). In it, the Libyan-American journalist Noor Tagouri wears a white t-shirt with “USA” in blue lettering. The acronym is covered and barely noticeable under her black leather jacket. Her face is framed by a sage green hijab and she bares her teeth in that irreverent way that’s reminiscent of punk rockers; others also described Tagouri’s expression as an “Elvis snarl,”¹ “feisty kitten growl,”² and “twisted into a scowl.”³ She is shown sitting on a workbench in front of an aluminum wall that is painted over with a large American flag mural that’s decidedly weathered—painted bullet holes, a peace sign, a horseshoe and some numbers are visible as embellishment, adding to the worn look. She sits in black jeans with her knees bent, legs spread open casually, her off-white Converse set on the workbench’s lower rung and her hands falling between her legs, pulling her posture forward, informal. Every part of this photoshoot is intentional. The stage with the American flag, her body language, and the saturation of the photo with its heightened contrast does political work to reconcile imagery

¹ Julia Suryakusuma, “Hugh Hefner and Hijab, Controversy and Commodification,” *The Jakarta Post*, October 4, 2017, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2017/10/04/hugh-hefner-and-hijab-controversy-and-commodification.html>.

² H.A. Sharifah, “Noor Tagouri and Playboy - Empowerment, Assimilation or Colonialism?,” *altmuslim* (blog), October 3, 2016, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/altmuslim/2016/10/noor-tagouri-and-playboy-empowerment-assimilation-or-colonialism/>.

³ Hannah Allam, “A Muslim Woman in Playboy. What Could Go Wrong?,” McClatchy Washington Bureau, September 27, 2016, <https://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/national/article104347981.html>.

that has otherwise been deemed incompatible in dominant orientalist and anti-Muslim discourses—that of the Muslim woman and Americana, and that of the Muslim woman and personality.

Tagouri was featured in *Playboy* as one of the “Renegades of 2016,” making her the first hijab-wearing Muslim woman to be featured in the magazine since its inaugural issue in 1953. As the first hijabi in *Playboy*, Noor Tagouri is an example of who I identify as a “Muslim first”: a media phenomenon that involves the practice of naming visibly Muslim women as ‘the first’ to do something, often specifically ‘the first hijabi’ to do that thing. This naming practice emphasizes the alleged novelty of their success for their identity and embodiment, and concomitantly, their individualism and exceptionalism. Naming someone as “first” connotes a turning point, a new moment that offers possibilities that had not existed before. While many chapters in this dissertation reference Muslim firsts, I use the first half of this chapter to explicate why they are important and their function amid rapidly changing political and social climates. The presence of a visibly Muslim woman in a magazine notorious for nude centerfolds and scantily clad women was highly controversial. This remained true despite *Playboy* Enterprise’s decision to remove nudity from the magazine beginning earlier that year in March 2016. Many read the veil and *Playboy* as antithetical, and commentators responded online in disparate waves of criticism and/or support.

What most of the comments, blogs, and editorials about this *Playboy* feature had in common was that they addressed assumptions that Noor Tagouri acts as a de facto representative for Islam and Muslims, irrespective of her consent to be one, because of her marked status in the visual field. The understanding of Tagouri as an ambassador, not to herself but to Muslims broadly, is rooted in a longer history of how the Western colonial gaze has looked at and

managed the bodies of the Muslim Other and how the colonized have interiorized and projected that gaze. In the last part of the chapter, I unpack the Muslim discourses surrounding the *Playboy* controversy and contend that these gazes, ever present and cumulative, assert what I call representational responsibility onto visibly Muslim women. Representational responsibility refers to an assigned or internalized responsibility to represent Islam and Muslims—in Muslims' everyday lives or in media—in a way that counters longstanding hegemonic narratives and stereotypes of Islam and Muslims. The question of how one appropriately counters these narratives and stereotypes is central to Muslims' discourses about the *Playboy* feature; there is considerable disagreement over who should represent these communities, how they should represent, where and in what they should represent. The controversy itself has to do with *where* Tagouri was represented (in a notorious soft porn publication) and the photos therein (few people talked about the content of the interview itself), but the conversation in general reflects opinions about Muslim representation as a whole and its gendered dimensions. Such a debate reveals that US Muslims are grappling with a crisis of meaning regarding cultural and national belonging and visual culture is one place where this is playing out.



Figure 1: Nour Tagouri in Playboy magazine and playboy.com, photographed by Kate Warren (2016)



Figure 2: Nour Tagouri in Playboy magazine and playboy.com, photographed by Kate Warren (2016)

Muslim Firsts

Noor Tagouri is an award-winning journalist and producer, and also famously the first hijab-wearing Muslim woman to appear in *Playboy* magazine. With Muslim firsts like Tagouri, headlines celebrate or highlight select Muslim women through the naming of “the first hijabi” or “first hijab wearing Muslim woman” to do something. These women are not only selected by virtue of being or doing something first, but by being a first whose success or novelty maps onto US-valued institutions like beauty, fashion, sport, or liberal politics, which functions to emphasize the alleged progress and inclusivity of said institutions. These women are often of the influencer class, who are approachable, knowable, or familiar, and do not pose a threat. Still, the incorporation of Muslim firsts into mainstream media does not fully destabilize hegemonic assumptions or beliefs about Muslims being un-American and anti-American foreign threats; indeed, these Muslim firsts, through being rendered exceptional, prove this rule. I argue the distinction of “firsts” as a status functions as a dialectic wherein we are meant to celebrate these accomplishments while also not questioning why, amid longer histories of these institutions, they had not been incorporated or recognized sooner. But the timing of this phenomenon is suspect—why did Muslim firsts arise with such quickness in the mid-2010s?

Exceptionalism and more specifically US exceptionalism, is a productive framework through which we can think about Muslim firsts, why the phenomenon burgeoned when it did, and what it means for US culture and US Muslim communities. American studies scholar Donald Pease offers that as a discourse and classificatory scheme that sets America apart from other national cultures, when one version of American exceptionalism is no longer suited to the geopolitical demands of the moment, policymakers reconfigure its elements to corroborate the

belief in American exceptionalism.⁴ Whereas issues of the veil and Muslim women were once used to set America apart from the East—i.e., those women are unfree while our women are free—and to corroborate US initiatives in the War on Terror—i.e., we must save the oppressed Muslim women from the oppressive Muslim men—I argue the figure of the visibly Muslim woman has been reconfigured as an asset to the US’s image. Including her in a cultural moment when vitriol toward Muslims was at its peak sought to prove the United States as all-inclusive and accepting, that Muslims *do* belong here, despite what Donald Trump was saying on the presidential campaign trail. In his run for president, he notably claimed that “Islam hates us” and that there is a “Muslim problem” that requires the “total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States.”⁵ When Anderson Cooper asked if he trusts Muslims in America, Trump went as far as to say, “We have a problem, and we can try and be very politically correct and pretend we don’t have a problem, but, Anderson, we have a major, major problem. This is, in a sense, this is a war.”⁶ Hate crimes against Muslims spiked, evidencing that proclamations of war leave a body count, with 2016 boasting the highest number of anti-Muslim hate crimes on record.⁷ The attitude that Trump had towards Muslims is in no way novel, but the explicit nature of his hateful language led many to declare that it was un-American and categorically opposed to the United States’ core democratic values. Tagouri and other visibly Muslim women arrive in surprising spaces like *Playboy* as the US is questioning the tenacity of its purported values of multiculturalism, and freedom and justice for all.

⁴ Donald E. Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

⁵ TimelineJS, “In His Words: Trump on Muslims & The Muslim Ban,” accessed March 20, 2021, https://cdn.knightlab.com/libs/timeline3/latest/embed/index.html?source=1gfZKsKBPPzFyICptTEvY3-JVK2HHoyhCOONeCB5MrwM&font=Default&lang=en&initial_zoom=2&height=650.

⁶ TimelineJS, “In His Words: Trump on Muslims & The Muslim Ban.”

⁷ Katayoun Kishi, “Assaults against Muslims in U.S. Surpass 2001 Level,” *Pew Research Center* (blog), accessed November 15, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/11/15/assaults-against-muslims-in-u-s-surpass-2001-level/>.

Namings of “the first” is obviously not a unique or exclusive phenomena tied to Muslim women; this kind of status-making is omnipresent in media which regularly identify and celebrate firsts in other marginalized communities—e.g. Barack Obama as the first Black President of the United States in 2008; Katheryn Bigelow as the first woman to win the Oscar for Best Director in 2010; Bowen Yang as the first Asian American cast member on *Saturday Night Live* in 2019, and so many more. “The first” in US culture, when tied to an identity marker along the lines of race, gender, and sexuality reaffirms who is understood as a proper, normative subject—those always present, never “first,” whose identities are invisibilized as natural: who are white, male, straight, secular/Christian, and non-disabled, and thus, who are the proper subjects of belonging in the US nation state. (An exception to such naming is the “first man on the moon,” Neil Armstrong, whose celebration functioned similarly—because man was not understood as the proper subject in/for space in 1969 and to prove in the space race that the US is exceptional.) “The first” may serve to mark the Other who is celebrated for succeeding in those institutions where they were not meant to succeed in the first place, as made evident by these longer histories and the mechanisms employed to gatekeep it. Institutions and the hegemonic order that organize them is subsumed in “the first,” and masked by new media representation, which hinges on recognition and celebration.

Similarly, there are notably Muslims who are not women, or women who are not veiled, who have been celebrated for their achievements. However, the visibility of Muslim firsts, distinguished because of the veil and its marked difference in the visual field, is what makes them particularly potent for the project of showcasing the United States’ exceptional status. Tagouri stands out visually from the other six renegades in the magazine, not just because she is the only visible Muslim, but because of all the portraits taken, hers is set outside of a studio or an

environment that would make sense for her as a journalist. Skateboarder Jason Dill is captured in the air over a sidewalk with a cityscape behind him and punk rocker Laura Jane Grace is photographed standing on top of an old black and white Ford police car parked in front of a white brick wall. Both of these photographs are placing their subjects in contexts that cement their identities, not unsettle it. Writer Paul Beatty is shown with his arms crossed, an out of focus rooftop as his background, and porn star Stoya, comedian Ali Wong, and game developer Sean Murray are shown amid single-color, unidentifiable backgrounds that allude to a studio shoot or a portrait taken on a blank wall. In contrast, Tagouri is completely enveloped in Americana. The aesthetic, her clothes, her stance, and expression are all familiar. It is her headscarf that is posed as the challenge to the non-Muslim, American viewer. They are not additionally challenged by her gender expression, sexuality, size, or sartorial choices.

This is a meaningful stipulation for Muslim firsts—that their difference is minimal and never a challenge to the actual sociopolitical systems that rendered Muslims as Other in the first place; that they serve as what Sara Ahmed references as the familiar stranger who is assimilated into the multicultural nation for the purpose of supporting the nation’s claim *to be* and *to have* difference.⁸ Ahmed argues that strangers are beings already recognized as out of place, with ambivalence functioning to establish and define boundaries of belonging where some bodies are already recognized as strangers who are more dangerous than other bodies.⁹ Whereas the concept of ‘stranger danger’ expels the stranger as the origin of danger, multicultural discourse welcomes the stranger as the origin of difference. Therein, Otherness is valued to the extent that it can be commodified and used to accessorize the norm, operating as a visual economy that involves *seeing the difference* between familiar and strange Others, a differentiation based on how they

⁸ Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2000), 107.

⁹ Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, 22.

appear.¹⁰ The incorporation of certain Muslim women and not others recognizes some Muslim women as familiar and others as strange—i.e., we are not seeing women in niqab and jilbab celebrated as empowered or anarchist Muslims celebrated. Such limits to incorporation delineate who is allowed to be a Muslim first and who is always outside consideration or celebration. Dissonant from prior representations of Muslim women in Western media, Tagouri enveloped in Americana reconfigures her as part of the frame instead of in opposition to it. She is symbolically tied to the US nation through these visuals.

Reifying the hijab as the challenge, the photos of Tagouri are complemented by a short write-up about her by *Playboy* editor Anna del Gaizo who describes Tagouri as provoking “the sort of confusion we could use right now, in part by making a surprisingly bold case for modesty.” Tagouri is identified by some people like writer Assma Youssef as one of the trendy “hijabi fashionistas” who seek to undermine stereotypes about Muslims in the context of rising Islamophobia.¹¹ If people in the West predominantly assume that Muslim women dress in colorless shrouds, the fashionable re-styling of hijab in Western clothing becomes disarming. However, modesty itself is never discussed. The word “modesty” is only found twice: in the *playboy.com* headline (“Media Wunderkind Noor Tagouri Makes a Forceful Case for Modesty”) and the aforementioned quote. In the feature, Tagouri speaks about how being a hijabi Muslim woman helped her gain trust as a journalist and helped a 6th grader who looks up to her wear the hijab with confidence; she mentions that she “may dress a little different—I’m a reporter who happens to wear a head scarf and I live in my hoodie,” but the interview does not mention modesty.¹²

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Assma Youssef, “‘Epitome of Feminism’: The Rise of the Social Phenomenon of Trendy Hijabistas,” *Allegra* (blog), October 31, 2016, <https://allegralaboratory.net/epitome-of-feminism-the-rise-of-the-social-phenomenon-of-trendy-hijabistas/>.

¹² Anna del Gaizo, “Media Wunderkind Noor Tagouri Makes a Forceful Case for Modesty,” *Playboy*, September 22, 2016, <https://www.playboy.com/read/renegades-noor-tagouri>.

The elision of an actual discussion about modesty and Tagouri’s relationship to it—or her “surprisingly bold” or “forceful case” for it—cements the headscarf as a stand-in for modesty. This is not dissimilar from how the veil is taken up as a stand-in for piety. Anthropologist Saba Mahmood’s critical work, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, moves discussions about the practice of veiling beyond theories of representation alone; she argues that to understand a bodily practice like veiling as a symbolic act “presumes a different relationship between the subject’s exteriority and interiority from that entailed by an understanding in which a bodily act is both an expression of, and a means to, the realization of the subject.”¹³ To distill the headscarf down to the representation of already formed and understood conceptions, meanings, and beliefs about modesty (or piety) is to deny how the bodily practice is essential to the acquisition, development, and expressions of these. When asked by *The Islamic Monthly*, “Did the hijab represent something for the magazine that was critical to the identification as a renegade? How important was the scarf versus any other type of modesty?” del Gaizo replied,

To me, speaking for myself, it’s a pretty dedicated form of modesty. It’s something that, if you choose to wear, you wear it from maturity, at a time when you’re in public or are in the company of certain men. It’s a little more of a rigid form of modesty, as opposed to, I like to wear high collars and long sleeves. It’s a step beyond that. It inspires a certain dedication.¹⁴

When the robust concept and practice of modesty is symbolically tied to the headscarf, what does it do for how we imagine and know hijab and/or modesty? *Playboy* and del Gaizo’s formulation of hijab *as* (forceful, dedicated) modesty is a slippage that subsumes the subject wearing it into

¹³ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), xi.

¹⁴ The Islamic Monthly Editors, “So I Interviewed a Muslim Woman and Published It in Playboy — So What?,” *The Islamic Monthly*, September 30, 2016, <https://www.theislamicmonthly.com/i-interviewed-a-muslim-woman-published-it-in-playboy/>.

the headscarf's already-understood (or more so, already-assumed) significations. Ahmed's point regarding Otherness being valued along axes of commodification and accessorization comes into relief with the "Renegades of 2016" feature, which showcases people from groups not typically highlighted in the magazine like Tagouri. The visual incorporation of a hijab-wearing Muslim woman into the publication is already doing the work of asserting difference without having to adequately address or understand that difference in accordance with the individual they are profiling.

Playboy Enterprises Makes Big Changes

It is notable that Tagouri was the first hijabi in *Playboy* for the first (and only) year that *Playboy's* print magazine did not feature full-frontal nudity. It was this shift away from what initially gave the publication its notoriety that Tagouri would reference to assuage her critics; that even as *Playboy* had a legacy of objectifying women, they were heralding a new era that amped up the journalism and cultural relevance. *Playboy's* association with pornography as a form of glossy, bourgeois soft porn is what made Tagouri's presence in the magazine particularly controversial. *Playboy* was what ignited the spectacle, despite the interview itself being similar to what Tagouri had already done on sites like *Marie Claire* earlier that year.¹⁵

In August 2014, *playboy.com* relaunched with a new strategy: editorial content would be safe-for-work, meaning there would be no more full-frontal nudity (though women were still shown in various stages of undress). *Playboy* had already started to alter their content in order to have a presence on apps like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter which have their own censorship rules about nudity. SVP of Digital Content and Digital Media Cory Jones said they hoped to shift

¹⁵ Jennifer Chowdhury, "This Is What the Future Looks Like: Noor Tagouri Is on Track to Become America's First News Anchor in a Hijab," *Marie Claire*, January 8, 2016, <https://www.marieclaire.com/culture/a17853/noor-tagouri-hijabi-anchor/>.

toward having a bigger focus on writing about men’s lifestyles—“We’re just trying to get guys to act more civilized.”¹⁶ The long-running joke that men read *Playboy* for the articles was becoming more of a reality. Within a year, that strategy proved to be a success on multiple fronts. There was a four-fold increase in ad proposals and requests; a 258% year-over-year lift in global unique visitors; video views increased from 50,000 to 6 million views; and the average visitor age dropped from 47 to just over 30.¹⁷ In light of this success, Playboy Enterprises announced in October 2015 that they would also eliminate full-frontal nudity from its print magazine starting with the March 2016 edition. Like it had online, they hoped this shift would attract more advertisers and help secure better placement on newsstands. During the first six months, newsstand sales increased 28.4%, and while old subscriptions fell 23.2%, new subscriptions grew, indicating that the magazine was starting to generate interest with a new group of readers.¹⁸

However, that branding shift was short-lived and *Playboy* reintroduced full-frontal nudity back into the magazine exactly one year later. This reversal happened after Cooper Hefner, son of the infamous *Playboy* founder, returned to the company as the Chief Creative Officer in 2016. Hefner tweeted the announcement on Twitter with a quote superimposed on a photograph of himself that read, “I’ll be the first to admit that the way in which the magazine portrayed nudity was dated, but removing it entirely was a mistake. Nudity was never the problem because nudity isn’t a problem. Today we’re taking our identity back and reclaiming who we are.”¹⁹ The

¹⁶ Michelle Castillo, “Playboy.Com Has Grown 258% in a Year Thanks to Its Safe-for-Work Strategy,” AdWeek, March 23, 2015, <https://www.adweek.com/performance-marketing/playboycom-has-grown-258-year-thanks-its-safe-work-strategy-163637/>.

¹⁷ Castillo, “Playboy.Com Has Grown 258% in a Year Thanks to Its Safe-for-Work Strategy.”

¹⁸ Alex Lauer, “The First Year of Playboy Magazine Without Nudity,” InsideHook, November 28, 2016, <https://www.insidehook.com/article/arts-entertainment/first-year-of-nude-less-playboy-magazine>.

¹⁹ Sydney Ember, “Playboy, Shedding a Policy Change, Brings Back Nudes,” *The New York Times*, February 13, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/13/business/playboy-magazine-nude-pictures.html?emc=edit_nn_20170214&nl=morning-briefing&nid=70540432&te=1&r=0.

revamped March/April 2017 issue boasted the major headline, “Naked is normal,” and headline article, “Free the Nipple” by Scarlett Byrne. Hefner’s rhetorical framing and the new issue’s theme capitalized on popular feminist discourses about nudity and the sexualization of women’s nipples.

I understand “popular feminism” through Sarah Banet-Weiser’s framing of it in *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*. Therein, she outlines that feminism is “popular” in at least three senses: popular as in, 1) feminism’s circulation in popular and commercial media, 2) feminism as admired by like-minded people/groups, and 3) a terrain of struggle where competing demands for power battle out (as argued by Stuart Hall).²⁰ It is this third sense that enables us to understand how some feminisms become more visible than others. The mid-2010s was host to hearty popular feminist movements that emphasized women’s empowerment primarily through neoliberal market logics where capitalism becomes increasingly infused with narratives of meaning. Buying products from companies with ostensibly good politics becomes meaningful and a reflection of one’s own political alignment and value. To maintain relevance and profit in light of this changing landscape, *Playboy* had to rebrand and worked to do so initially by eliminating full-frontal nudity, then by incorporating nudity through co-opting feminist conversations around body autonomy. Further, the magazine, which had always explicitly labeled itself as “entertainment for men,” de-privileged the male gaze and changed its slogan to “entertainment for all” in 2018 to increase audience outreach.

del Gaizo ends the profile of Tagouri by stating, “Americans have a long way to go when it comes to how we regard Muslims, but with Tagouri burning down stereotypes and blazing new paths, we’re a healthy stride closer.”²¹ The language of burning and blazing, badass and

²⁰ Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 1.

²¹ del Gaizo, “Media Wunderkind Noor Tagouri Makes a Forceful Case for Modesty.”

unapologetic which litters the write-up, reinforces Tagouri's irreverent expression in the photographs and is characteristic of girlboss feminism's empowerment rhetoric. Girlboss feminism, the pop-feminism trending when Tagouri appears in *Playboy*, was a neologism that gained notoriety after Sophia Amoruso, founder of the fashion retail website Nasty Gal, published her business memoir *#Girlboss* in 2014. Like Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Work* published the year prior, Amoruso's book presented "gender disparities in the workplace as a war to be fought on a personal level," which author Leigh Stein writes, "allowed women to feel like they were activists whenever they advocated for themselves."²² Girlboss feminism, which centers the market as the battleground for women's equality works in service of capital, not against it. Rather than dismantling the system which ushers such inequality, girlboss feminism influences women to make the system work better for them, and to do so by excelling to the top. By becoming the boss, they will have achieved something for women; by being renegades, they will have rejected that women don't belong in the boardroom but confirm individualism's ethos that if every woman were to just work hard enough, she too could be the boss.

The individual nature of Muslim firsts further emphasizes their exceptional nature because it invisibilizes the community they belong to and separates them from their collective effort or impact. Journalist Alex Abad-Santos writes, "The implicit promise was that if consumers made these girlbosses successful, it would mean better working conditions for women, and with that, maybe empowerment for all."²³ Tagouri's incorporation into *Playboy* as a renegade does important political work at this juncture where girlbosses are en vogue. Her

²² Leigh Stein, "The End of the Girlboss Is Here," *GEN* (blog), June 26, 2020, <https://gen.medium.com/the-end-of-the-girlboss-is-nigh-4591dec34ed8>.

²³ Alex Abad-Santos, "The Death of the Girlboss," *Vox*, June 7, 2021, <https://www.vox.com/22466574/gaslight-gatekeep-girlboss-meaning>.

representation follows the logic that one person’s visibility is imagined as a win for everyone who shares in that identity or embodiment; we are meant to believe her incorporation into the mainstream leads to better conditions for other Muslim women by virtue of their shared visibility. Tagouri frames her representation in this way, too:

I did it for Muslims, for women, and for everyone misrepresented in mainstream media today. I did it for young women everywhere that are struggling with their identity and feel misunderstood. I did it for the 10,000 who came before me that were bullied in private or publicly humiliated because they didn’t conform to societal standards of how a woman should present herself. I did it so that the 10,000 who come after me will reclaim their power to kick down closed doors and break through glass ceilings. I did it for YOU, the person who read the interview and thought it was inspirational, the person who was confused, the person who was disappointed in me and the person who wasn’t sure what to think. I did it to demonstrate that there is nothing more powerful than a woman being unapologetically herself and standing firm in what she believes—no matter who is listening.²⁴

Tagouri wrote this in an open letter titled, “Salam... I know, right?” where she responds to the vitriolic hate she received from Muslims for appearing in the magazine and addresses why she decided to be in *Playboy*. While she was initially nervous and unsure if she should do the interview, she appreciated the magazine’s overhaul and mission to put social justice and cultural progress at the forefront. She said society needs to hear Muslim voices and see their light, and she was proud “a fully-clothed, 22-year old Muslim American Libyan woman took an iconic magazine and used it to spread a positive and much needed message.”²⁵ The message in question

²⁴ Noor Tagouri, “Salam... I Know, Right?,” *Noor Tagouri* (blog), accessed April 20, 2017, <http://noortagouri.com/blog>.

²⁵ Tagouri, “Salam... I Know, Right?”

is implied within the representation itself; that by appearing as herself, being recognized for her achievements, and using her voice, she is communicating something meaningful about what Muslims can look like and what they can do. It is a notable step forward to see Muslim women speak about their perspectives and lives when, for so long, they had only been spoken for and about. Still, when you read her representation amid the greater cultural context of increased Muslim visibility, you find that only some Muslim women are granted their own voice. In a later interview with the *Independent Journal Review*, Tagouri shared that “this interview was NOT for people to start reading Playboy. It was for people who already do, to see a new look and narrative they aren’t used to seeing.”²⁶

Playboy contacted two other visibly Muslim women for the same feature prior to Tagouri; author and founder of muslimgirl.com Amani Al-Khatahtbeh and activist Linda Sarsour both declined their invitations. Even at Tagouri’s insistence that she was representing herself on her terms—“I wore what I wanted, I stood for what I believed in and I was unapologetically myself”²⁷—these additional invitations suggest she was also responding to a call to represent. In the email sent to Sarsour, writer Zaron Burnett III mentioned their interest in interviewing her “about the current Muslim woman renaissance underway, and about your work as a legal advocate and activist.”²⁸ The phrase “Muslim woman renaissance” signals their awareness of a new, heightened form of visibility for Muslim women and implies their desire to tap into the trend. Burnett III’s use of ‘renaissance’ is notable because orientalist and anti-Muslim tropes treat Islam and Muslims as anachronisms, forever trapped in the dark ages. To suggest that

²⁶ Kayla Brandon, “Muslim Journalist Who Landed Playboy Feature Explains Modesty Is So Much More Than Clothing,” *Independent Journal Review* (blog), October 4, 2016, <https://ijr.com/muslim-journalist-who-landed-playboy-feature-explains-modesty-is-so-much-more-than-clothing/>.

²⁷ Tagouri, “Salam... I Know, Right?”

²⁸ Linda Sarsour, “My Thoughts on the Controversy Surrounding Noor Tagouri’s Interview With Playboy.” *IImFeed*, September 25, 2016. <http://ilmfeed.com/my-thoughts-on-the-controversy-surrounding-noor-tagouris-interview-with-playboy/>.

Muslim women are in a period of “rebirth,” only now moving into modernity, assumes that they (and their potential) had otherwise been latent. What is elided in the media’s recognition of a burgeoning hijabi presence is its own complicity in their prior absence and its maintenance of facile tropes like that of the oppressed, victimized veiled Muslim woman which has dominated in the United States most markedly since the 1970s²⁹ and in Europe for much longer. In *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman: From Termagant to Odalisque*, literary scholar and author Mohja Kahf showed that Muslim women were between myths in literature produced during the actual European Renaissance.³⁰ Whereas medieval Western literature represented Muslim women as powerful figures, often as a queen or noblewoman wielding power or succor over the hero, Renaissance literature began to include foretastes of the helpless damsel that would come to define representations of Muslim women during the modern era and into the twenty-first century. This is ironic given that, in this contemporary “Muslim woman renaissance,” Muslim women also seem to be between myths—still often represented as or assumed to be the oppressed victim, but more and more recognized in media, often through a “first hijabi [to do xyz]” who is an “empowered,” “stereotype-breaking” force.

Sarsour, a widely known Arab American Muslim activist, said that she declined the interview because “for generations [*Playboy*] made billions of dollars off the objectification of women (*I know some will say they no longer show nudity but that shouldn’t be the benchmark*) and I couldn’t shake that off.”³¹ Sarsour, whose statement was published on the Muslim website Ilm Feed, posted the screenshot of the email sent to her to contextualize how the offer was framed. In it, Burnett III elaborates, “My editors and I would like to call attention to what you’re

²⁹ See Sylvia Chan-Malik, “Chadors, Feminists, Terror: Constructing a U.S. American Discourse of the Veil,” in *Being Muslim: A Cultural History of Women of Color in American Islam* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 151–81.

³⁰ Mohja Kahf, *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman: From Termagant to Odalisque* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999).

³¹ Sarsour, “My Thoughts on the Controversy Surrounding Noor Tagouri’s Interview With *Playboy*.”

doing as part of our series on hijabi [*sic*] who are shaping their own narrative and revealing falsehoods of the common stereotypes about Muslim women.”³² Here, the onus for corrective representation is put on the visibly Muslim woman who is now invited to share her side of things, but through the frames supplied by *Playboy*. Al-Khatahtbeh initially agreed to *Playboy*’s offer and completed the full interview before eventually backing out. At first she saw it as “an opportunity to make Muslim women prominent to a new audience and make a powerful statement in the assertion of our modesty.”³³ She ultimately turned it down because she felt that she represented not just herself, but the entire brand she built, which she says “has been called a ‘cultural phenomenon’ for Muslim women’s empowerment.”³⁴ She imagined Muslim Girl readers being directed to playboy.com to read the article where they would find sexy photos or the link to an online application to pose for the website, which she had noticed while doing her research. Would linking her readers to this website “potentially give [them] a second thought to the acceptability of selling our bodies to a patriarchal society that profits off of them while simultaneously seeking to destroy them”? Al-Khatahtbeh also considered what having a hijabi in *Playboy* meant for sales and how her body, “covered or not,” would be used to sell the magazine.³⁵ Even as *Playboy*’s invitation centered around the possibility for Muslim women to reclaim their representation, their wide recruitment to incorporate a visibly Muslim woman (no matter if it was Sarsour, Al-Khatahtbeh, or Tagouri) into the magazine was driven by market logics as it worked to solidify its rebrand. In an interview with *The Islamic Monthly*, del Gaizo shared,

³² Ibid.

³³ Amani Al-Khatahtbeh, “I Turned Down Playboy and Still Support Women’s Choice to Do It,” *Muslim Girl*, September 25, 2016, <https://muslimgirl.com/turned-playboy-still-support-womens-choice/>.

³⁴ Al-Khatahtbeh, “I Turned Down Playboy and Still Support Women’s Choice to Do It.”

³⁵ Ibid.

I definitely think it's an attempt to broaden the scope. As Playboy rebrands itself, to assert itself and say we're not just about peddling flesh or showing young girls in more stereotypically compromising positions. That renegades come in all forms. It's not just about being attractive. If you look at the array of people they chose, it really runs the gamut. I think Playboy is trying to reassert itself as more than just a sexy magazine but also one of substance. I think that was what they were thinking of choosing the people they picked... It's just another sign of them trying to show they're not just with the times, but maybe even ahead of it, hopefully successful. I think the reason I was happy they picked her was because the Muslim rhetoric, it really bothers me, especially with the upcoming election, a lot of things that are being said from the Republican end of things, it is really terrifying.³⁶

Featuring a visibly Muslim woman in a moment where Muslims were regularly center stage in the news made *Playboy* timely and relevant. The commonality between Sarsour, Al-Khatahtbeh, and Tagouri was very simply that they were visibly Muslim women who had captured the public eye, not necessarily their work specifically or in particular. This sort of interchangeability (“Any hijabi will do?”³⁷), which realizes Muslims are marketable, caused many to be concerned about exploitation and tokenization. Writer Nour Saudi argued that Western media and brands are “comfortable with shining light on one single ‘hijabi,’ while not really having to worry about representation of Muslim women as a whole,” thereby reinforcing monolithic representations where “one woman equals the whole.”³⁸ Saudi notes that the very naming of the “first hijabi woman” does the work of reducing Muslim women to the hijab as

³⁶ The Islamic Monthly Editors, “So I Interviewed a Muslim Woman and Published It in Playboy — So What?”

³⁷ Tamim Mobayed, “Noor Tagouri Is Featured in Playboy – And Everyone Has An Opinion About It,” *Muslim* (blog), September 28, 2016, <https://mvslim.com/first-hijabi-featured-playboy/>.

³⁸ Nour Saudi, “How the Headscarf Is Being Exploited to Serve the West,” *Muslim Girl*, September 26, 2016, <http://muslimgirl.com/headscarf-exploited-serve-west/>.

“the be-all-end-all of their existence” and obfuscates the work they do and the individual that they are.³⁹ Instead of asking Tagouri about modesty or the headscarf she wears as one part of her subjecthood, they approach her subject *as* a hijabi. Ultimately, Muslims commentators also sometimes replicated this objectification in their commentary.

Representational Responsibility

Responses to Noor Tagouri in *Playboy*

Tagouri’s decision to be featured in *Playboy* and her highly publicized status as the “first hijabi in *Playboy*” inspired an explosive response from Muslims online. Across social media platforms, mainstream news sites and Muslim websites and forums, Muslims were engaging in discussions of what it meant for there to be a hijab-wearing Muslim woman in *Playboy* and what that meant about and for Muslims in the West. Cultural studies scholars Ella Shohat and Robert Stam argue that within hegemonic discourses, representations of every subaltern become allegorical and synecdochical.⁴⁰ Muslims understand the monolithic nature of their representation and its consequence—that one, especially one bad representation, becomes a stand-in for many—which makes them hypervigilant of representations that may affirm or disrupt that narrative precedent. However, because there are so many Muslims in the world and in the US, there are extremely varied opinions on what Muslim representation “should” look like and what this particular representation might mean.

There were many people who wholeheartedly supported Tagouri and were excited by the representation. On Twitter, #LetNoorShine trended once again as people adapted the hashtag to

³⁹ Saudi, “How the Headscarf Is Being Exploited to Serve the West.”

⁴⁰ Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London ; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014), 183.

show her support amid the backlash. The hashtag was originally created after a photo of Tagouri behind a CBS news desk with her caption “This is what my dream looks like” circulated on Facebook. Talking about the hashtag, Tagouri shared:

My cousin and I decided to come up with a hashtag, and she suggested #LetNoorShine. My name Noor means "light," so [it would be about] inspiring others to let their lights shine. The idea was that the color of my skin, what I'm wearing on my head, my sex, my sexual orientation—none of that will stop me!⁴¹

Tweets praised her for being so bold and for doing the interview on her terms. fatima (@yafatoosh) said, “@NTagouri’s feature in playboy focuses on her goals, her career and her passion. she’s not sexualized. that is badass. that is history.”⁴² Even those who weren’t fond of where she was featured were happy to support her, like laras puspasari (@larspuspasari) who tweeted, “I’m not saying yes to Playboy thingy. But this woman? Certainly YES. #letnoorshine...”⁴³ Writer Aymann Ismail advocated that Muslims should praise Tagouri for her decision because Muslim women should be encouraged to share “their unique experiences representing the most misunderstood faith on the planet—not just for the betterment of the average Muslim, but for the advancement of dialogue.”⁴⁴ Those like Ismail see Tagouri as just one Muslim woman of many Muslim women, but one who had the opportunity to share her story.

⁴¹ Jennifer Chowdhury, “This Is What the Future Looks Like: Noor Tagouri Is on Track to Become America’s First News Anchor in a Hijab,” *Marie Claire*, January 8, 2016, <https://www.marieclaire.com/culture/a17853/noor-tagouri-hijabi-anchor/>.

⁴² Rayana Khalaf, “Why Was This Hijabi Featured on Playboy?,” StepFeed, September 26, 2016, <https://stepfeed.com/why-was-this-hijabi-featured-on-playboy-4779>.

⁴³ “#LetNoorShine – Muslim Popular Culture,” accessed January 4, 2023, <https://wp.nyu.edu/muslimpop/2017/04/29/letnoorshine/>.

⁴⁴ Aymann Ismail, “Muslims Should Praise Hijabi Journalist Noor Tagouri, Not Criticize Her,” *Slate*, September 27, 2016, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2016/09/playboy-photographed-muslim-american-woman-noor-tagouri-in-her-hijab.html>.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, commentators like Hussain Makke argued that Tagouri's *Playboy* feature was a symptom of a larger issue rooted in the pathology of US Muslims who he perceives as desperate to be humanized by the West. Makke—who has branded himself as a spiritual warrior and student of the Islamic sciences on social media—penned “Why as Muslims We Can't Support Noor Tagouri's Decision to Feature in Playboy” on the website The Muslim Vibe, a platform that aims to help Muslims reclaim their narrative and cultivate a confident Muslim identity.⁴⁵ The language in this headline, denoting “we,” assumes there is a singular, monolithic Muslim community (as opposed to *communities*) that is tied to one way of thinking and being, such that ‘Muslims’ as entire religious group can't, as Makke says, support Noor Tagouri's decision. Writers like Makke are deeply invested in the same civilizational frameworks I mentioned in this dissertation's introduction that are weaponized against Muslims; they just invert them so that ‘modernity’ is the evil infringing on Islamic principles and traditions.

In another essay, writer Salma El Naggar wrote that Tagouri had fallen prey to “the guise of progression in ‘modern’ western society.”⁴⁶ Her formulation also mimics Orientalist discourse which assumes Muslims and the West as existing and ideating in binary opposition, such that embracing Western dress, comportment, makeup, and concepts like living a life where “men and women are free to do as they wish,” is cast as Islamically inappropriate.⁴⁷ Here, there is no room for nuance or syncretism; Islam is not imagined as a lived religion but codified.⁴⁸ Makke argues

⁴⁵ Hussain Makke, “Why as Muslims We Can't Support Noor Tagouri's Decision to Feature in Playboy,” The Muslim Vibe, September 25, 2016, <https://themuslimvibe.com/muslim-current-affairs-news/why-as-muslims-we-cant-support-noor-tagouris-decision-to-feature-in-playboy>.

⁴⁶ Salma El Naggar, “Noor Tagouri: Does She Represent Me?,” Inspired Minds, October 21, 2016, <http://inspiredmindsmag.com/2016/10/21/noor-tagouri/>.

⁴⁷ El Naggar, “Noor Tagouri: Does She Represent Me?”

⁴⁸ For more on the concept of lived religion, see David D. Hall, ed., *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

that “Muslims attempt to integrate into the wider modern society at the expense of their Islamic principles” and people like Tagouri “[use] the religion of Muhammad (s) to further their personal agendas and positions in society – whilst not only knowing/practicing next to nothing of the religion of Muhammad (s) but ironically jeopardising the principles of the religion of Muhammad (s).”⁴⁹ This latter assertion, that the integrity of an entire religious tradition is in jeopardy because of representations like these, is a cruel burden to place on women like Tagouri. I define representational responsibility, or the responsibility to represent Muslims and Islam, as something that is both assigned and internalized. This is an example of how this responsibility is assigned and how multiplicative its assignment can be—that Tagouri is not just representing herself or some Muslims, but Islam itself. The instrumentalization of such civilizational rhetoric disguised as theology works to shame people and manage their public lives; it shows the consequence of public performances that do not adhere to certain people’s expectations, such that you may be blamed for jeopardizing a religion altogether.

There were also different perspectives articulated in response to the tension specifically between the hijab and *Playboy*. In *The Washington Post*, founder of *altnuslimah.com* Asma T. Uddin and journalist Inas Younis argue that using *Playboy* as a platform for Muslim representations takes away the agency that the hijab grants women, and instead imposes its own frames and agendas to make the hijab sexy and relevant.⁵⁰ They began their article with a quote from Hugh Hefner which “made clear that he opposes ‘religiously mandated, chastity-centered codes of sexual morality.’”⁵¹ This framing aims to guide the reader to an understanding that hijab and *Playboy* are incompatible, as if to say, ‘if it weren’t already obvious, here’s the words of the

⁴⁹ Makke, “Why as Muslims We Can’t Support Noor Tagouri’s Decision to Feature in Playboy.”

⁵⁰ Asma T. Uddin and Inas Younis, “Playboy’s Interview with a Muslim Woman Mocks Modesty and Offends Women,” *The Washington Post*, September 28, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/09/28/playboys-interview-with-a-muslim-woman-mocks-modesty-and-offends-women/>.

⁵¹ Uddin and Younis, “Playboy’s Interview with a Muslim Woman Mocks Modesty and Offends Women.”

publication's founder to remind you.' They offer that the hijab is "a repudiation of the voyeurism *Playboy* is fundamentally about," so that pairing the two causes the feature to "mock through cognitive dissonance."⁵² Uddin and Younis understand *Playboy*'s feature as capitalizing off of this moment of visibility for Muslim women and argue *Playboy* does so on their own terms, not on the terms of "Muslim women, as purportedly represented by Tagouri." The language of 'purportedly' gestures towards an already understood slippage in which the most visible stands in for the few, and/or is represented as expressively distinct from the others.

H.A. Sharifah also argues that regardless of Tagouri's intention, her presence in the magazine and the images produced therein for *Playboy*'s readership disallows her to play by her own rules, only consent to *Playboy*'s. Subsequently, they associate hijab's presence in *Playboy* as a corruption of hijab at its core. Sharifah writes, "If banning won't bar us from our hijabs, then let's remove the power from hijab by corrupting it from the inside out. In other words, if Islamic practices want the approval of the American public, they have to show how they too can be vehicles for hedonism and convey none of those threatening Islamic values."⁵³ Uddin, Younis and Sharifah are not implicating Tagouri in this project but are suggesting that using a platform like *Playboy* with a pre-formed cultural identity and aesthetic means that incorporating any Muslim woman into it does not work to disrupt that cultural precedent so much as contribute to the hijab's loss of meaning. Still, their habit of disconnecting the hijab from its wearer removes Tagouri's autonomy and discredits the many ways someone can understand and practice their religion and the hijab. Their insistence that regardless of her intent, she was used by and for *Playboy*, displaces her agency. In contrast, Ismail offers, "criticizing *Playboy* magazine's role in controlling women's lives seems very hypocritical when debating a Muslim woman's right to

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Sharifah, "Noor Tagouri and Playboy - Empowerment, Assimilation or Colonialism?"

share her story with a journalist working with that publication.”⁵⁴ Together, we see a potent example of how Tagouri’s “powerful,” “unapologetic” personal choice can appear self-Orientalizing and tokenizing to others.

Across all these responses, we see Tagouri talked about as both an active and passive subject. She is praised for being bold or condemned for using and jeopardizing Islam; she, or her actions or consent, is disregarded while her hijab is the site of activity—i.e., the hijab is corrupted and drained of meaning through its presence in *Playboy*. Two things are persistent across these editorials and opinion pieces: one is the underlying assumption that she represents more than herself because she is visibly Muslim; the second is the use of “Muslim community,” singular, as that which she allegedly represents and what she and her representation is responsible to. Within the US, there are many communities of Muslims who are divided across race, ethnicity, nationality, and sect, often in the very same city. There is no one collective vision for Muslim representation because there is no one collective experience. Sharifah argues that there’s an “absence of a well-developed Muslim collective vision and agenda for social engagement and politics, which then makes us reactive as opposed to visionary.”⁵⁵ The last part is certainly true, but a Muslim collective vision will never be possible, nor should it be the goal when there is so much diversity within US Muslim life.

Social scientist Hina Tai insists that the actual controversy is Muslim women’s representation and the very fact that there was a controversy at all. Exasperated by the responses to Tagouri, she writes,

Four days later, the Muslim women’s body is still controversial. The double standards still exist. Sex is still taboo. Hijab is fetishized. Gendered violence (symbolic or

⁵⁴ Ismail, “Muslims Should Praise Hijabi Journalist Noor Tagouri, Not Criticize Her.”

⁵⁵ Sharifah, “Noor Tagouri and Playboy - Empowerment, Assimilation or Colonialism?”

otherwise) remains a significant fear. Noor in *Playboy* hasn't changed a thing. We are our own greatest impediments to change—it's unfair to lay all this to rest on Noor's shoulders when she is a product of our community and systemic flaws.⁵⁶

Here, Tai disrupts the formulation of Tagouri as a stand-in for all of these other things; she expressly lays out a number of problems and separates Tagouri from them. Sex taboos, hijab fetishes, and gendered violence exist regardless of Tagouri's presence in *Playboy* and conscripting her as a scapegoat does not change that. Muslim women's representation surely is the controversy and Noor Tagouri in *Playboy* displayed that best.

Conclusion

Other Muslim firsts were not nearly as controversial as Noor Tagouri; not even supermodel Halima Aden's appearance in the 2019 *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit edition—where she was the first hijab-wearing Muslim woman to pose in burkinis—inspired this kind of resounding backlash. It is clear that the unique platform of *Playboy* inspired the vitriol; Sarsour and Al-Khatahtbeh declined specifically because it was *Playboy*. Would they and others have been as concerned about the tokenization of Muslims and the use of their bodies to sell magazines had it been another publication? Based on the fact that these women have appeared in many other publications before and since then, the answer seems to be no. This is not to say that the context of *Playboy* is inconsequential; you cannot divorce a representation from its context. It is to say, however, that all publications and institutions looking to suddenly add and stir Muslim women into the mix should be examined with similar concern. As I have outlined, it was critical for

⁵⁶ Hina Tai, "Noor Tagouri Is Not the Controversy. Muslim Women Representation Is.," *HuffPost*, September 29, 2016, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/noor-tagouri-is-not-the-controversy-muslim-women-representation_b_57ed5139e4b07f20daa104bb.

Playboy to include a fully covered Muslim woman, not only because of the relevance and marketability of visibly Muslim women in this moment, but because she represented the antithesis of what *Playboy* was known for, which could help progress their rebrand. Both Sarsour and Al-Khatahtbeh were called in by the controversy to give statements about why they did not do the feature, and showed solidarity to Tagouri who made a different choice. Subsequently, all of the women even marginally involved were made to publicize their personal decisions because the result put a visibly Muslim woman into the limelight.

With Muslim firsts like Tagouri, there is a unique, incredibly elevated public platforming of Muslim women. Such publicity invites more and more gazes that impose expectations onto the Muslim first, who is seen as a representative of Islam by Muslims and non-Muslims alike. The overdetermination of the veil combined with this public exposure and commentary generates representational responsibility, but these discourses do not stop (nor do they start) with Muslim firsts. The same discourses that put Muslim firsts under fire in the public sphere localize and impact everyday Muslim women who become subject to that same scrutiny in their everyday lives on social media and in their communities. Representational responsibility actually becomes one way of managing Muslim women's lives as it generates a sort of circuitous feedback loop between the public and private/personal. Women may internalize these public discourses and manage their public performance—acting bolder so people know she's not oppressed, acting nicer so people know she's not angry, dressing up so people know she's human like them, too—and feel the need to explain themselves because they do not have the luxury of anonymity.

Visibly Muslim women's status as de facto representatives for Muslims and Islam ensures that they are always treated as representatives for much more than themselves, and this is what makes Muslim firsts a gendered formation. Subsequently, recent Muslim religious

representation is very gendered in Western media; Muslim men who have been incorporated into mainstream media in the US since the 2010s have predominantly done so as normative Muslims—what Evelyn Alsultany defines as those Muslims who are culturally Muslim, not religiously so.⁵⁷ The gendered ways that Muslim representation happens also inspires the extremely gendered ways that those representations are received by Muslim communities. For example, in Hulu's *Ramy*—where the Muslim man does own up to his religious identity—the literal depiction of sex and partying in the show does not produce the same repudiation of Ramy as Muslim or claims that he is jeopardizing Islam itself with the representation. Rather, the politics of the veil often marks the parameters of this public debate around Muslims and Islam in Western representation. What the veil means for and about the Muslim community, and what it means for and about the West, is still highly contested and this controversy affirms that.

⁵⁷ Evelyn Alsultany, *Broken: The Failed Promise of Muslim Inclusion* (New York: New York University Press, 2022).

CHAPTER 2

The New Patriotic Muslim: On Racial Icons and the Parameters of Muslim Inclusion

In his essay on Joseph Mankiewicz's *Julius Caesar* (1953), Roland Barthes talks about bangs. Curly bangs, straight bangs, tufted bangs, combed bangs, pomaded bangs—the audience is meant to understand the Romans through this sign. Through bangs, the movie's stylists attempt to transform American faces to Roman ones. It's comedic almost, that every forehead is laced with bangs to signal to the audience the time and place the movie seeks to capture. The excess of that sign, Barthes says, discredits itself by letting its purpose show.¹ The excessive pairing of Muslim women with American flags in the mid-2010s functions in this same way. The purpose of this pairing is to use the flag to signify these Muslim women's commitment to the United States of America—even as the United States is not committed to them. It is this latter discrepancy that is buried in the excess deployment of these images, but it is this discrepancy that reveals the dark comedy of embracing a flag that has been used to aggress and dominate Muslims globally.

In the span of a few years, Muslim women increasingly showed up next to or wearing American flags and American patriotic paraphernalia in *Playboy* (as shown in the previous chapter), on Fox News (figure 3), on *RuPaul's Drag Race* (fig 4), in public demonstrations (fig. 5), and in public art (fig. 6), amid others. The American flag hijab specifically marks Muslim

¹ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Richard Howard and Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 2013), 20.

women as part of the nation through literally enveloping them in its most iconic emblem, in effect absorbing Muslim women into nationalist imagery. This suggests first that the Other—specifically, the one wrapped in the flag, standing next to or with the flag—who has otherwise been deemed un-American or anti-American *is* American, is loyal to the nation and imagines belonging to it. Second, the deployment of this pairing in visual culture helps perpetuate the myths of US benevolence and multiculturalism in a political moment when white supremacist violence and power challenged their validity. The American flag is popularly associated with patriotism; when enveloping a Muslim woman and integrating her image, the flag modifies her with new meaning: she is patriotic, she is good, she is not a threat.



Figure 3: Saba Ahmed, founder and president of the Republican Muslim Coalition (right) interviewed on The Kelly File on Fox News (businessinsider.com)



Figure 4: Drag queen Jackie Cox, aka the Persian Princess, on season 12, episode 9 of RuPaul's Drag Race (ew.com)



Figure 5: Two women in American flag hijabs by Spencer Platt/Getty Images (teenvogue.com)



Figure 6: “I stand with American Muslims and Ilhan Omar. #istandwithilhan Projected in Alameda” tweeted by @AEMarling

I begin this chapter with a reference to *Mythologies* because I find Barthes’ explanation of myths today productive for understanding the instrumentalization of patriotic Muslim icons, which this chapter is focused on. In the first part of the chapter, I will focus on the image *We The People Are Greater Than Fear* (fig. 7) by Shepard Fairey—a red, white, and blue graphic rendering of a Muslim woman wearing an American flag hijab—that became iconic during the 2017 Presidential Inauguration and the Women’s March on Washington the very next day. It was one of three images Fairey completed as part of the “We The People” art campaign founded by the Amplifier Foundation. I reference this image as an icon following media scholar Nicole Fleetwood’s definition:

At moments, the icon connotes its commonsense usage: a notable public person who represents a set of attributes, traits, or talents valued by a given society. In popular culture, the icon often refers to a celebrity with stay power. In the arenas of politics and civil society, the icon tends to refer to a charismatic leader, a dedicated advocate, or a fearless trailblazer. In visual theory, the icon is an image, like a photographic representation, imbued with significant social and symbolic meaning, so much so that it needs little explication for the cultural reader to decode it.²

In this sense, I understand *We The People Are Greater Than Fear* to be an icon as relates to visual theory, as a representation imbued with meaning and one meant to galvanize public action. Fairey's series aimed to create an ethos celebrating diversity and inclusion at these large national events. He focused his triptych on images of "the most attacked and excluded communities" and included a Muslim because "[t]he things Donald Trump has said about monitoring and banning Muslims are in my opinion, fear mongering and totally un-American."³ In contrast, his series emphasized America as a place that does honor diversity and inclusion. People could co-sign this message and emphasize their patriotism by holding up images of vulnerable subjects who, when depicted in red, white, and blue and paired with the words "we the people," are affirmed and embraced as American—alive in her colors and protected by her constitution and flag. Fairey said he found the image of the American flag hijab powerful because it served as a reminder "that freedom of religion is a founding principle of the United States and that there is a history of welcoming people to the United States who have faced religious persecution in their homelands."⁴ It seemed that as US conservatives increasingly defined America and American

² Nicole R. Fleetwood, *On Racial Icons: Blackness and the Public Imagination* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 7-8.

³ Molly McCluskey, "Inaugural Protest Poster Stirs Debate among Muslim American Women," Middle East Eye, accessed July 5, 2022, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/inaugural-protest-poster-stirs-debate-among-muslim-american-women>.

⁴ McCluskey, "Inaugural Protest Poster Stirs Debate among Muslim American Women."

patriotism through a white male body politic, liberals reacted by emphasizing America as a welcoming place and refuge for people of all backgrounds. Centering marginalized communities—their images and their labor—in these movements were seen as central to affirming that.



Figure 7: *We The People Are Greater Than Fear* by Shephard Fairey (amplifier.org)

The patriotic Muslim has been discussed as a media trope and as a subject whose recognition, citizenship, and safety rests on a patriotic performance.⁵ In the second part of this chapter, I consider how this trope has evolved alongside these particular resistance movements and been a condition for Muslim women's inclusion into leadership roles. The Women's March on Washington had multiple women of color co-chairs who helped to organize the march and build the movement. Palestinian American Muslim activist Linda Sarsour was one of them. I attend to Sarsour, who is treated as an icon by some for being a dedicated advocate, and consider how the patriotic Muslim and patriotism more broadly has been redefined alongside this moment. Part of what intrigues me about images like *We The People Are Greater Than Fear* and the inclusion of Sarsour into leadership of a popular feminist movement is how such inclusion of Muslims into national movements works to create a new common sense regarding who and what the United States and its people are, and who and what Muslims are. In this case, through pairing or even enveloping the Muslim woman in nation with the American flag and bringing her to the foreground of movement work in the largest single-day demonstration in American history.

The Making of An Icon

The mass circulation of *We The People Are Greater Than Fear* propelled a Muslim woman wearing an American flag as a hijab into notoriety. Of all the images in the "We The People" art campaign (hereafter, WTP), hers was publicized as the "face of resistance."⁶ How did images of

⁵ See Evelyn Alsultany, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); Arun Kundnani, *The Muslims Are Coming! Islamophobia, Extremism, and the Domestic War on Terror* (London ; New York: Verso, 2014); Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004); Mitra Rastegar, "Managing 'American Islam': Secularism, Patriotism and the Gender Litmus Test," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 10, no. 4 (December 2008): 455–74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616740802393874>; and Kumarini Silva, *Brown Threat: Identification in the Security State* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

⁶ Edward Helmore, "Munira Ahmed: The Woman Who Became the Face of the Trump Resistance," *The Guardian*, January 23, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/23/womens-march-poster-munira-ahmed-shepard-fairey-interview>;

Muslim women like this become symbolic signposts for shifts in US politics/US multiculturalism? Fleetwood names that racial icons are a negotiation of the historical present as it reveals relationships between nation, representation and race.⁷ She argues that the racial icon acquires much of its significance from how race modifies and makes iconic images in public culture.⁸ Even as Muslims are not a race, they have been persistently racialized in the United States since European settlers first brought enslaved African Muslims to the continent. Scholars have figured the commingling of race and religion, or the racialization of religion, to be an important analytic to understanding the relationship of the United States to Islam and Muslims historically and contemporarily.⁹ Stuart Hall argues that race is a “sliding signifier” in persistent classificatory systems organized around the fact of difference.¹⁰ By this, Hall means that race is a discourse, a system of meanings with real effects that is constantly changing, being constructed and reconstructed across time and space. In this way, and despite any changes in the racialization of Islam, race has been a constant figure in the experience of Muslims in the United States.

In “Myth Today,” Barthes writes about the July 1955 cover of *Paris Match* that depicted a young Black soldier saluting, dressed in French uniform. We do not know anything more about the saluting soldier beyond this image; he is chosen to symbolize something. Barthes hypothesizes that he signifies “that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under the flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors

Michelle Garcia, “Meet the Muslim Woman Who’s Become the Face of Anti-Trump Resistance,” Vox, February 10, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/identities/2017/2/10/14508820/muslim-poster-protest-munira-ahmed-ridwan-adhami-shepard-fairey>.

⁷ Fleetwood, *On Racial Icons*.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁹ See Sylvia Chan-Malik, *Being Muslim: A Cultural History of Women of Color in American Islam* (New York: New York University Press, 2018); Edward E. Curtis, *Muslims in America: A Short History*, Religion in American Life (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, *A History of Islam in America: From the New World to the New World Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Sherman A. Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking Toward the Third Resurrection* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Manning Marable and Hisham Aidi, eds., *Black Routes to Islam* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Junaid Rana, “The Story of Islamophobia,” *Souls* 9, no. 2 (June 6, 2007): 148–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10999940701382607>; Omid Safi and Juliane Hammer, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to American Islam* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

¹⁰ Stuart Hall, *The Fateful Triangle: Race, Ethnicity, Nation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017).

of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors.”¹¹ As such, this saluting soldier becomes an accomplice of the concept of French imperialism. Similarly, I argue Fairey’s icon is an accomplice to revamped myths of US benevolence and multiculturalism. Cultural geographers Banu Gökariksel and Sara Smith name Donald Trump’s political strategy as centering white masculinity as victor (President) and victim (voters in the deindustrialized, rural, small-town Midwest and South).¹² Trump’s “Make America Great Again” sought to call back to an American past where white men dominated. Consequently, the liberal resistance to this body politic also sought to redefine what and who is American, but often did so through resorting to existing nationalist symbols and pasts, revamping myths regarding US benevolence and multiculturalism through visualizing difference in national colors.

In liberal multiculturalism, the state manufactures itself as tolerant, or projects a tolerance of difference and diversity, by instituting state-recognized, nominal anti-racism in policy and media. Feminist scholar Sara Ahmed argues that multiculturalism is a fantasy wherein the state likes to imagine itself as diverse, as bringing everyone together, as respecting difference and as committed to equality.¹³ It is the ego ideal for the West. This tolerance is regarded as an achievement of the modern West; the West’s tolerance is positioned as unequivocal especially when painted in contrast to Muslims who are cast as intolerant. In the War on Terror, Muslims are understood to be so intolerant—to women and LGBTQ+ people in particular—that they want to subject the US to its intolerance. This belief that intolerance is a categorically Muslim trait manifests in such a way that when American legislation that impedes the rights of women (i.e.,

¹¹ Barthes, *Mythologies*, 225.

¹² Banu Gökariksel and Sara Smith, “Intersectional Feminism beyond U.S. Flag Hijab and Pussy Hats in Trump’s America,” *Gender, Place & Culture* 24, no. 5 (May 4, 2017): 628–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2017.1343284>.

¹³ Sara Ahmed, “Liberal Multiculturalism Is the Hegemony – Its [Sic] an Empirical Fact – A Response to Slavoj Žižek,” *Darkmatter: In the Ruins of Imperial Culture*, February 19, 2008.

abortion) and LGBTQ+ people are put forward, Americans on social media, for example, will refer to it as “shariah law,” despite the origin for such policies being the American Christian Right. In this fantasy of liberal multiculturalism, racism is officially prohibited—hate should not be explicit. Still, the state only adopts the discourse of multiculturalism, which accounts for a variety of voices and experiences, but neglects to actually address or remedy persistent systemic inequality.

Fairey attempts to construct nationalist imagery that supports this myth of US multiculturalism. Art historian Jamie L. Ratliff notes that this attempt seeks to invoke a sense of inclusion and belonging in the US body politic through offering more diverse images of the US and more inclusive visualizations of America.¹⁴ However, he argues Fairey’s work is specifically engaged with the art historical legacy of national allegory and gendered representations that equate womanhood and nationhood. He did this through glamorizing the woman he depicted and inscribing the phrase “We The People” on each image, which “rehearses the idea that the female body is available for universal occupation and consumption, a vehicle onto which ideas and concepts are projected.”¹⁵ Even as many news outlets took advantage of the moment and wrote about the woman who became Fairey’s “face of resistance,” the mass circulation of this image without context or identifying information for the original portrait turned the subject into an anonymized allegory. So, who is this face of resistance?

On the fifth anniversary of September 11, 2001, Muslim photographer Ridwan Adhami and his model Munira Ahmed (a fellow photographer) took a number of portraits in front of the World Trade Center site. Adhami stated that this photoshoot was a response to the anti-Muslim

¹⁴ Jamie L. Ratliff, “Are We The People? Jessica Sabogal and the National Visibility of Queer Latinx Desire,” *Public Art Dialogue* 11, no. 2 (July 3, 2021): 180–207, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21502552.2021.1992093>.

¹⁵ Ratliff, “Are We The People?,” 200.

rhetoric deployed at the time which claimed Muslims are not American enough.¹⁶ In one tightly cropped portrait, Ahmed is wearing an American flag as a headscarf and looks directly into the camera. This photo titled *I am America* would grace the cover of the now out-of-print *Illume* magazine, which produced content for Muslims living in America. Through shooting on-site in New York City and combining two recognizable symbols—the American flag and hijab, or rather, using the American flag *as* a headscarf—Adhami aimed to articulate: “I was a New Yorker, the subject Munira was a New Yorker, we are both Muslim, the city was ours, the nation was ours, the religion was ours. There was no separating all those facts as many tried and still try to do.”¹⁷ In the same way that hijab mandates a status of publicly visible religious alignment, the incorporation of American patriotic symbols aims to signal alliance or allegiance to the nation-state as well.

Ahmed does not actually veil in her everyday life; veiling in this photo in order to convey Adhami’s message inspires reflection on Muslim visibility and legibility. The preeminent archetype of Muslim visibility—the veil—obfuscates and manipulates who is understood to be Muslim and who is not. Ahmed is just as Muslim without wearing it, but the veil’s dominance in the visual field makes it a compelling, easy shorthand for identification. This image would simply not have the same impact or been received the same were it not for the headscarf and the double effect of that hijab being an American flag. The pervasiveness of using this visual cue/the veil as a substitute for Muslim identity subsequently erases Muslim diversity, including diversity in veiling which renders some forms of veiling as less Muslim or less legible as Muslim than others. Further, the veil is integral to the deployment of this Muslim woman as a racial icon since

¹⁶ “Ridwan Adhami on Instagram: ‘Ridwan Adhami • @ridzdesign X Shepard Fairey • @obeygiant - “We The People” I Created the Photograph on the Left Almost TEN YEARS Ago For...,’” accessed July 5, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BPNljsbhHDP/?taken-by=ridzdesign>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

the hijab is a racializing object. The US politics of the veil configures the veil as a Middle Eastern object and Islam as a Middle Eastern religion; the conflation of Islam with the Middle East racializes the religion and its emblems.

It feels obvious why the American flag was utilized in *I am America*; centering the flag in that way really hones in on Adhami's message that Muslims *are* American enough. In *Brown Threat: Identification in the Security State*, cultural studies scholar Kumarini Silva emphasized how the American flag became a symbol of security and fast patriotism for those communities of color that were threatened by patriotic violence (i.e., post-9/11, the white perpetrator of violence against the brown terrorist is a patriot, not a terrorist themselves). Silva wrote that by adopting the flag in this way, it would secure "the right kind of mark (patriotism) to compensate for the wrong kind of marking (brown)."¹⁸ However, the use of the flag as hijab, even or especially to convey this message, when repeated over and over across US visual culture, is much more flagrant in its impact. Gökariksel and Smith offer,

The flag hijab image welcomes Muslim women 'into the fold,' by transforming a piece of material with deep religious significance into a fundamentally *national* narrative, which presumes that these things can easily come together, that difference is resolvable, that assimilation under a multi-cultural framework is a goal. [...] [A]s our gaze shifts, the flag recalls violence, not in the past, but ongoing, and we see erasure of the religious significance of the headscarf and an insistence on enveloping difference *within* the nation rather than the much more difficult task of challenging exclusionary and violent politics of nation-states and the legacy of European colonialism since the sixteenth century.¹⁹

¹⁸ Kumarini Silva, *Brown Threat: Identification in the Security State* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 56.

¹⁹ Gökariksel and Smith, "Intersectional Feminism beyond U.S. Flag Hijab," 634.

When Muslim women wrapped in the flag are embraced for inclusion, what happens to those who don't embrace it? Here, new parameters of Muslim inclusion are mapped; such conditional inclusion, where Muslim women are incorporated and included only through aligning their difference with/in the nation, leaves all Muslim women in precarious positions. Her hijab is what is both highlighted and neutralized through its resignification with the flag. The hijab's religious significance may be transformed here, but it has not disappeared and can easily be called back to should its Muslim wearer transgress appropriate performances of patriotism.

In Adhami's *I am America*, a building owned by Donald Trump, 40 Wall Street, is out of focus in the background. Years later, Trump would move from the background to the foreground of US Muslim experience as he espoused anti-Muslim rhetoric and inspired vitriolic anti-Muslim hate on the campaign trail. In 2017, when he was inaugurated President of the United States, this portrait of Ahmed would take on new life after contemporary artist Shepard Fairey adapted it for the Amplifier Foundation's WTP art campaign. In addition to the propagandistic stylization he is known for, Fairey sharpens and idealizes Ahmed's features by adding trademarks of femininity like red lipstick and thickened eyelashes. In this way, Ratliff argues he perpetuates a male, desiring gaze that renders her as an idealized youth in the national family, ready to reproduce national citizens in such a traditional allegorical model.²⁰ I think such a gaze does more than that given this subject; the white male gaze has historically desired to access and appropriate Muslim women under its authority. Fairey's additional feminization of the Muslim woman works to make her more desirable, more appealing. Muslim women and the hijab become palatable for incorporation through becoming more desirable.

²⁰ Ratliff, "Are We The People?," 198.

Each print from the WTP campaign paired an image with a statement reflective of the campaign's values like "we the people are resilient," "women are perfect," or "we the people protect each other." Under Munira Ahmed's portrait were the words, "we the people are greater than fear." The association between Muslims and fear has been paramount to the maintenance of the US's great power status. Fear of becoming like Muslim women, who have been imagined as the quintessential subjects of patriarchal oppression, has been used to galvanize destructive foreign policy and dampen domestic feminist movements in the United States. White Western feminism has built itself up, in part, from imagining itself in contrast to Muslims and Islam.

In defining racial icons, Fleetwood argues that,

These images often carry a sort of public burden, in their attempts to transform the despised into the idolized. In their formal and symbolic characteristics of ideation, they work against the long and voluminous history of degrading racial caricatures. [...] As a counterbalance to intentionally demeaning characterization, racial icons can serve to uplift, literally and symbolically, 'the black race' and the nation.²¹

In the instance of *We The People Are Greater Than Fear*, Muslim women are meant to be uplifted into the nation-state and to uplift the nation as a place where Muslim women are indeed included, revealing its benevolent and multicultural character in spite of the widespread, pro-Trump populist rising that suggested otherwise to the world and to the nation. I do contend that Muslim women, as opposed to Muslim men, become subjects of liberal inclusion at a national level because they have been primarily imagined as victims. The masculinist logic of the security state frames the US as a protector of women and children, domestically and abroad. Any acts of force from the state against those who threaten said women and children are validated as

²¹ Fleetwood, *On Racial Icons*, 4.

benevolent under the guise of this protection. Ethnic studies scholar Evelyn Alsultany explains that representations of Muslim women after 9/11 relied on an excess of pity, sympathy or outrage for the Muslim woman while representations of Muslim men relied on regulating or withholding those same affects.²² Such pity, sympathy, and outrage circulates again in the mid-2010s as spiking hate crimes against Muslims in 2016 surpassed post-9/11 numbers,²³ showing Muslim women were vulnerable here. Amaney Jamal aptly writes,

The Muslim woman is depicted and imagined as a defenseless, singular archetype with hijab. She now requires more protection, more support, and more help. She is cloaked in the US flag, signaling mandatory conformity to an “American ideal” that is unarticulated, and simultaneously casting a myth of “American” benevolence and protections for her rights, even as hate crimes against Muslims—in the name of America—continue to grow. She remains a victim of “Americanness gone wrong” and is dependent on an “American ideal” for her survival.²⁴

The Muslim woman is a figure who reveals the hypocrisy of US myths like benevolence and multiculturalism because she is targeted for her difference. Incorporating Muslim women now offers liberal Americans an alibi; rather than confront the US as a nation built on and advancing systemic inequality, they can understand its purported values as hijacked.

I am America was repackaged and repurposed into *We The People Are Greater Than Fear* for the Presidential Inauguration and Women’s March—back to back national events.

While artists Ernesto Yerena and Jessica Sabogal also produced prints for this campaign, Fairey

²² Evelyn Alsultany, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 72.

²³ Katayoun Kishi, “Assaults against Muslims in U.S. Surpass 2001 Level,” *Pew Research Center* (blog), November 15, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/11/15/assaults-against-muslims-in-u-s-surpass-2001-level/>.

²⁴ Amaney A. Jamal, “Trump(Ing) on Muslim Women,” *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies* 13, no. 3 (November 1, 2017): 474, <https://doi.org/10.1215/15525864-4179144>.

was the most publicly well-known artist which often led him to be centered in press articles that would misrepresent the work of Yerena and Sabogal as “Faurey and friends” or “Faurey and others.”²⁵ Even as Faurey emphasized that this campaign was “about diversity and inclusion, about people seeing the common bonds we have, and our connections as human beings,” the allied nature of the campaign was undercut by his foregrounding.²⁶ The three artists cumulatively created posters featuring illustrated portraits of the people most affected by the vitriolic hate Trump inspired/agitated; a Native American elder, a young Black boy, a Latina, a lesbian couple, a young Black girl and a Muslim woman were represented through the campaign series. Illustrating across difference—different races, genders, sexualities, and ages—these subjects were tied together by what they have in common: their American identities. The major aim of Amplifier was narrative change; the WTP campaign worked to recast the narrative around who and what is American, emphasizing unity as foundational to the American way. Named after the first few words in the preamble of the US Constitution, the campaign aimed to assert that America is for “‘everybody’; all of us.”²⁷

The Amplifier Foundation is a non-profit design lab based out of Seattle, Washington that creates media campaigns to support grassroots movements. It was founded by white American photojournalist Aaron Huey who is known for his work with *National Geographic*. Self-described as a nonpartisan campaign, WTP aimed to create “a new symbol of hope — one that reminds us that OUR America is one of equal humanity, and does not demean or discriminate.”²⁸

²⁵ Ratliff, “Are We The People?,” 205n29.

²⁶ Elizabeth Flock, “Why Shepard Faurey’s Inauguration Protest Posters Won’t Have Trump on Them,” *PBS NewsHour*, January 12, 2017, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/shepard-faurey-launches-people-poster-campaign-trumps-inauguration>; and Ratliff, “Are We The People?,” 192.

²⁷ Steph Solis, “Shepard Faurey’s Inauguration Poster: The Meaning behind the ‘We the People’ Art,” *USA Today*, January 16, 2017, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/onpolitics/2017/01/16/we-the-people-activists-make-art-inauguration/96627614/>.

²⁸ “WE THE PEOPLE!,” *OBEY CLOTHING US* (blog), January 18, 2017, <https://obeyclothing.com/blogs/zine/we-the-people>.

During Barack Obama's first presidential campaign, Fairey created the iconic *Hope* poster featuring an illustrated portrait of Obama with the word "HOPE" stacked below his visage. Fairey shared that the WTP posters were driven by the same impulse: "to provide encouragement to those who feel powerless and deflated."²⁹ Fleetwood argues racial icons in the context of social and political movements make us want to *do* something.³⁰ Using the image of a Muslim woman was not a means of actually welcoming or galvanizing Muslims writ large into these national movements. Amplifier was a partner of the Women's March on Washington, and these images were created and instrumentalized in order to produce and circulate a racial narrative of this country that could make white liberals *feel good* after they were made to feel so bad. Liberals were horrified by the explicit hate unearthed by Trump with many declaring some iteration of, "This isn't America!" in disbelief.

Fairey said that WTP aimed to "take back a lot of this patriotic language in a way that we see is positive and progressive, and not let it be hijacked by people who want to say that the American flag or American concepts only represent one narrow way of thinking."³¹ In many ways, however, Fairey has narrowly conceptualized and represented difference through the limited palette of Americana. In *Hope*, Obama's much-debated brown skin is erased and he is rendered in the colors of the American flag, making him the ultimate patriot.³² His race—the very thing that made him so inspirational (and so controversial)—is neutralized. In *We The People Are Greater Than Fear*, her religion is neutralized. It is not merely a hijab, but an American flag embraced and wrapped around her. In Fairey's take-back of patriotism, he is remythologizing the US, emptying the historical antecedents that showcase how the US has been

²⁹ Jessica Gelt, "Shepard Fairey Explains His 'We the People' Inauguration Protest Posters," *Los Angeles Times*, January 20, 2017, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-et-cm-shepard-fairey-inauguration-20170119-story.html>.

³⁰ Fleetwood, *On Racial Icons*, 4.

³¹ Flock, "Why Shepard Fairey's Inauguration Protest Posters Won't Have Trump on Them."

³² Fleetwood, *On Racial Icons*, 50.

marked by a history of excluding racial and ethnic Others and revamping the melting pot metaphor through visualized difference.

According to the campaign's manager Ali Geiser, these images were not meant to protest the inauguration or Trump so much as promote a message of unity and common humanity. On their website, the foundation writes, "We do this work with the goal of reclaiming an American identity rooted in equality, dignity, diversity, truth, and beauty."³³ Amplifier created a Kickstarter campaign with the aim of raising \$60,000 in order to publish the campaign images as full-page advertisements in the *Washington Post*. There were strict limitations around signs and banners at the inauguration, "but no administration can tell you you can't buy a newspaper and hold it up above your head!" Fairey wrote on his website.³⁴ And people did. Within eight days, Amplifier was able to raise \$1.3 million, allowing them to take out full-page ads in the *Washington Post* as well as the *New York Times* and *USA Today*, and distribute over 30,000 placards with the images throughout the DC area.³⁵ The insistence that the campaign was nonpartisan and merely demonstrating the unassailable values the United States was formed on heavily romanticizes the formation and foundation of the US nation state. Similarly, the focus on reclamation assumes that American identity was ever a generalizable, inclusive term or experience, or that it was ever rooted in these things in the first place.

The mass embrace of *We The People Are Greater Than Fear* shows that *images* of Muslim women can be easily appropriated in the name of resistance. Munira Ahmed was invisibilized and flattened into an allegory through Fairey's red, white, and blue rendering and messaging, and the American flag hijab did the important work of absorbing the Muslim

³³ "About," Amplifier, accessed July 5, 2022, <https://amplifier.org/about/>.

³⁴ "WE THE PEOPLE!," *OBEY CLOTHING US* (blog), January 18, 2017, <https://obeyclothing.com/blogs/zine/we-the-people>.

³⁵ "We The People," Amplifier, July 13, 2020, <https://amplifier.org/campaigns/we-the-people/>.

woman's image into the nation. Iconic images of Muslim women are embraced, but what of real Muslim women? In the next section, I look at Linda Sarsour who was the second visibly Muslim woman iconically attached to the Women's March on Washington as one of its co-chairs.

Unapologetically Muslim American³⁶

The 2017 Women's March on Washington (hereafter, WMW) was created after retired attorney Teresa Shook created a Facebook page suggesting people march in Washington, DC on inauguration weekend. Overnight, 10,000 people agreed. At the same time, elsewhere on Facebook, fashion designer and founder of Manufacture New York, Bob Bland, posted something similar. After hearing about each other, they consolidated their efforts through social media and began inviting others in. Just like Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, the Women's March on Washington began as online discourse that evolved into established organizations with much of the organizing occurring on social media. Vanessa Wruble, a white Jewish woman who co-founded the media platform OkayAfrica and an early organizer and co-founder of WMW, wrote to Shook and Bland communicating they should make sure the march is led or centered around women of color, "or it will be a bunch of white women marching on Washington... that's not okay right now, especially after 53 percent of white women who voted, voted for Donald Trump."³⁷ Consequently, African American activist Tamika Mallory, Chicana activist Carmen Perez and Palestinian American activist Linda Sarsour were appointed as co-chairs alongside Bob Bland.

³⁶ This is taken from the quote "I am not ashamed or afraid to be who I am—unapologetically Muslim American, unapologetically Palestinian American, and unapologetically from Brooklyn, New York." in Linda Sarsour, *We Are Not Here to Be Bystanders: A Memoir of Love and Resistance* (New York: 37 INK, Simon & Schuster, 2020), 14.

³⁷ Julia Felsenthal, "These Are the Women Organizing the Women's March on Washington," *Vogue*, March 25, 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170325212731/http://www.vogue.com/article/meet-the-women-of-the-womens-march-on-washington>.

Sarsour is the former executive director for the Arab American Association of New York. She came into the national spotlight after being appointed as one of the WMW co-chairs; she and the other co-chairs were featured in *TIME* magazine's "100 Most Influential People" in 2017 with New York senator Kirsten Gillibrand describing them as "the suffragists of our time."³⁸ I understand Sarsour to be a racial icon, "a charismatic leader, a dedicated advocate, or a fearless trailblazer,"³⁹ who works to reconcile the idea that being Muslim and being American are incompatible. She declares herself "unapologetically Muslim American" and ascribes important meaning to her hijab in asserting this to people. In this section, I review the ideological framing of the WMW and Sarsour's role in it, evaluating how this popular feminist movement included a Muslim woman leader. I also outline my definition for the new patriotic Muslim, using Sarsour as an example.

Unifying Americans

Like the *We The People* campaign, the 2017 WMW also resisted labeling their movement as a protest. Many scholars writing on the WMW take for granted that the event is a protest but do not highlight that the official language employed by the organizers did not reflect this at the time—it was a *march*, a Women's March for human rights. Co-chair Tamika Mallory said, "This effort is not anti-Trump. This is pro-women."⁴⁰ Co-chair Linda Sarsour named the WMW as a protest in her 2020 memoir *We Are Not Here to Be Bystanders* but the official language à la 2016-2017 removed it from being explicitly political or *against* anyone or anything. In fact, the WMW intent to be as inclusive as possible and include as many women as possible led to some

³⁸ Kirsten Gillibrand, "Women's March Leaders by Kirsten Gillibrand: TIME 100," *TIME*, accessed January 22, 2023, <https://time.com/collection/2017-time-100/4742711/tamika-mallory-bob-bland-carmen-perez-linda-sarsour/>.

³⁹ Fleetwood, *On Racial Icons*, 7-8.

⁴⁰ Alejandra Maria Salazar, "Organizers Hope Women's March On Washington Inspires, Evolves," *NPR*, December 21, 2016, <https://www.npr.org/2016/12/21/506299560/womens-march-on-washington-aims-to-be-more-than-protest-but-will-it>.

surprising partnerships. For example, it initially partnered with New Wave Feminists, a pro-life group based in Texas, simultaneous to their partnerships with Planned Parenthood and NARAL Pro-Choice America. The partnership with New Wave Feminists ended swiftly after it was publicized, with WMW apologizing for “this error,” affirming that “The Women’s March’s platform is pro-choice and that has been our stance from day one.”⁴¹ Still, the temporary inclusion of a pro-life group shows how inclusion was operating in the movement, which seemed to lack a cohesive political agenda and opted instead to bring in as many people as possible.

This is another example of what Evelyn Alsultany calls “flexible diversity.” While she wrote about this all-inclusive approach to diversity in the context of university diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) plans, her definition applies to how the WMW initially approached inclusion. Alsultany defines flexible diversity as seeking to “include all students equally, without attention to the power dynamics that sustain inequality; it happens when university administrations redraw the lines of inclusion seemingly to include (and appease) everyone, but in setting aside power dynamics, render the project of DEI meaningless.”⁴² It seems that the WMW worked to create a movement that was all-inclusive, even to the point that it temporarily aligned politically competing organizations together in one movement. Such a flexible movement enabled diverse swaths of people to project their own hopes and desires for the nation onto the WMW, to the point that people articulated the events of that day through competing meanings (e.g., protest vs. meeting vs. march).

Communications scholars Jennifer Vardeman and Amanda Sebesta argue that inclusion and intersectionality became key themes in WMW organizing and messaging because they had

⁴¹ Emma Green, “Pro-Lifers Are Going to the Women’s March on Washington,” *The Atlantic*, January 19, 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170119082804/https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/01/pro-lifers-womens-march/513104/>.

⁴² Evelyn Alsultany, *Broken: The Failed Promise of Muslim Inclusion* (New York: New York University Press, 2022), 192.

quickly encountered criticisms online that the originators were not being intersectional.⁴³ Intersectionality originally refers to the analytic framework coined by critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw that works to disrupt epistemologies that render race and gender as mutually exclusive or separable categories of analysis or experience.⁴⁴ Its ubiquitous deployment in academia, organizing spaces, and popular feminism has inspired a host of debates around its meaning. Concerns over the WMW not being intersectional dealt primarily with the assumption that white women would approach gendered experiences without attending to how race or sexuality differentially impact people's experience of gender. Both the "We The People" campaign and WMW were initiatives started by white people, who, realizing the optics, incorporated people of color into leadership positions. If these initiatives were to live up to their promise of inclusion, they had to incorporate those whose differences (race, sexuality, religion) were both legible and diverse (i.e., *everyone* is included, and you can *see* that). On the original WMW website FAQ, one of the listed questions is, "Is the Women's March on Washington inclusive for women of color?" The answer:

Yes! The WMW is an evolving effort originally founded by white women. Recognizing the need to be truly inclusive, the National Co-Chairs and Organizers were established to reflect a balanced representation. The team of organizers and volunteers are committed to ensuring that the march reflects women and femme expressive people of all backgrounds.⁴⁵

⁴³ Jennifer Vardeman and Amanda Sebesta, "The Problem of Intersectionality as an Approach to Digital Activism: The Women's March on Washington's Attempt to Unite All Women," *Journal of Public Relations Research* 32, no. 1–2 (March 3, 2020): 7–29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1062726X.2020.1716769>.

⁴⁴ For more on Crenshaw's development of intersectionality, see Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics [1989]," in *Feminist Legal Theory*, ed. Katharine T. Bartlett and Rosanne Kennedy (London ; New York: Routledge, 2018), 57–80, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429500480-5>; and Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (July 1991): 1241, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>.

⁴⁵ "FAQ — Women's March on Washington," Women's March on Washington, January 19, 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170119003205/https://www.womensmarch.com/faq/>.

Such posts emphasize the integration of public accountability into the movement itself.

Language employed on the WMW website emphasized the march as “the first step towards unifying our communities, grounded in new relationships, to create change from the grassroots level up.”⁴⁶ Because the rhetoric deployed in the election cycle “insulted, demonized, and threatened many of us,” the WMW aimed to “join in diversity to show our presence in numbers too great to ignore.”⁴⁷ The key phrase that was repeated on the website and to news outlets was “women’s rights are human rights.” Most of the language online was concerned with creating unity; “Unity Principles” were developed and served as a kind of manifesto for the movement with each section addressing a particular issue. These issues were introduced through the lens of belief or support for a cause, with the phrase “we believe” repeated across. For instance, for the reproductive rights unity principle: “We believe in Reproductive Freedom. We do not accept any federal, state or local rollbacks, cuts or restrictions on our ability to access quality reproductive healthcare services, birth control, HIV/AIDS care and prevention, or medically accurate sexuality education. This means open access to safe, legal, affordable abortion and birth control for all people, regardless of income, location or education.” Or, for civil rights: “We believe Civil Rights are our birthright, including voting rights, freedom to worship without fear of intimidation or harassment, freedom of speech, and protections for all citizens regardless of race, gender, age or disability. We believe it is time for an all-inclusive Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.”⁴⁸ Such Unity Principles aimed to bring people together in solidarity, recognizing threats to people’s livelihood and safety that existed in addition to gender.

⁴⁶ “Mission & Vision — Women’s March on Washington,” Women’s March on Washington, January 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170123082501/https://www.womensmarch.com/mission/>.

⁴⁷ “Mission & Vision — Women’s March on Washington.”

⁴⁸ “Unity Principles — Women’s March on Washington,” Women’s March on Washington, January 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170123080934/https://www.womensmarch.com/principles/>.

In her memoir, Sarsour often contrasted the affects and approach of white women and women of color WMW organizers. Regarding the Unity Principles, she writes that while “white women at our table simply wanted to vent their outrage that a misogynistic, sexist, patriarchal racist had been elected president,” women of color had been dealing with such conditions for decades and knew anger wasn’t enough: “we need to be proactive about *demanding* change.”⁴⁹ Consequently, she and Perez convened a diverse group of women to come up with principles that would speak to and honor as many communities as possible. What I find interesting about these principles is that they do not function as a list of demands so much as a list of hopes. The repetition of “we believe” does the work of establishing the WMW’s platform, rooted in a desire to be inclusive, and also does the work of emphasizing a collective ‘we’ of the marchers who would join to co-sign these unifying principles with their bodies in Washington, DC. Such a presentation is not without merit since creating collective power and consciousness raising is a critical first step toward change. In addition to enabling transparency and accountability between WMW leadership to the general public, social media was used as a tool to do advocacy. Twitter in particular was used to teach the public about multiple marginalizations, emphasizing intersectional approaches to understanding privilege and oppression, through “ally resources sessions” or “ally education” that covered white privilege, cis privilege, unequal pay, double marginalization, etc.⁵⁰

Still, these Unity Principles did not function to demand change so much as establish a vision for how things ought to be, appealing to the government to enact such change. Rather than demanding an all-inclusive Equal Rights Amendment, they framed it within the safety of “we

⁴⁹ Linda Sarsour, *We Are Not Here to Be Bystanders: A Memoir of Love and Resistance* (New York: 37 INK, Simon & Schuster, 2020), 199 (emphasis added).

⁵⁰ Vardeman and Sebesta, “The Problem of Intersectionality as an Approach to Digital Activism,” 21.

believe it is time for” such an amendment; this lessens its political edge and leaves it vague enough to not direct action. In contrast, Black Lives Matter lists seven demands online which include action items like calling members of congress, supporting various bills and acts that could be voted into law, and more. The nation and national myths were invoked throughout the Principles, as with “Rooted in the promise of America’s call for huddled masses yearning to breathe free,” or “mothers, sisters, daughters, and contributing members of this great nation...”⁵¹ The WMW aimed to bring together a mass of people tied together by the Unity Principles to appeal to the government to change; the WMW is not by any means invested in divesting from nationalism but are reaffirming their belief in the US through appealing to its foundational myths. This approach—gathering en masse, advocating for changes by showing people in power how many people want this change—was repeated as one way of asserting power in Sarsour’s memoir. The other was through increased representation in electoral politics. Both of these center kinds of civic participation that privilege the state as appropriate actors or change agents. Her commitment to electoral politics and history organizing other Muslims in that way makes her an example of what I call the new patriotic Muslim.

The New Patriotic Muslim

In Mahmood Mamdani’s good Muslim/bad Muslim formulation, he names the patriotic Muslim as a good Muslim anxious to clear their name and conscience by aligning with the state, supporting the proper “us” in the war against “them.” After September 11, US media began including more and more representations of this kind of patriotic Muslims into the mix, often to counterbalance the predominant Muslim terrorist archetype, which in turn idealized the patriotic

⁵¹ “Unity Principles — Women’s March on Washington.”

Muslim as the good Muslim. Sociologist Mitra Rastegar investigated how the state further constitutes religious identities tied to patriotic citizenship by fostering an American Islam that serves US interests.⁵² In her article, “Managing ‘American Islam’: Secularism, Patriotism and the Gender Litmus Test,” she gives examples of how the State Department has drawn on independent, accomplished Muslim American women to spread messaging about the US as the best place to practice Islam worldwide. In particular, the patriotic Muslims she discusses includes Harvard graduate of Islamic studies and international security Fatina Abdrabboh (a hijabi), editor-in-chief of *Azizah* magazine Tayibbah Taylor (a hijabi), and Georgetown grad student in Arabic linguistics Kareema Daoud (a non-hijabi) who worked on public diplomacy in the Middle East for the State Department. She writes,

Indeed, these State Department spokespeople downplay the degree of state and public scrutiny, surveillance and violence that Muslims in the US have experienced. They insist that any problems that exist in the US are a result of ‘ignorance’ which as Dauod (2006) says cannot be described as ‘Islamophobia’ but is merely ‘a lack of education.’ Taylor, similarly insists that the greatest challenge Muslim women in the US face is the misconceptions that people hold, which she sees her magazine as challenging, while also noting that the magazine does not deal with foreign policy or civil liberties issues. By focusing solely on educating others about Islam these women ignore the power relations that not only place the onus for education on Muslims but also paint current conflicts in what they see as purely ideological, and not material or historical, terms.⁵³

⁵² Mitra Rastegar, “Managing ‘American Islam’: Secularism, Patriotism and the Gender Litmus Test,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 10, no. 4 (December 2008): 455–74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616740802393874>.

⁵³ Rastegar, “Managing ‘American Islam’,” 465.

These patriotic Muslims mobilized in the early War on Terror are critiqued for casting systemic problems in individual terms, ignoring power relations, and aligning with state interests that put the onus of corrective representation on Muslims themselves. Such stances function to absolve the state. Taking into account the historical and cultural developments leading up to the WMW, I identify a recent iteration of patriotic Muslim—the new patriotic Muslim. This new patriotic Muslim shares some characteristics with the patriotic Muslim of the early 2000s but is also necessarily distinct in other ways.

The primary distinction between the original and new patriotic Muslim is that the new patriotic Muslim does not explicitly ignore or minimize the wrongs experienced by US Muslims—at least, on the surface. In fact, they are often vocal regarding Islamophobia and the material and historical terms of current conflicts, using terminology that alludes to an understanding of systemic inequality and marginalization. Many are activists or elected officials—like Linda Sarsour or Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib—who are working directly with disenfranchised communities who they would isolate by ignoring these realities. However, despite participation in calling out the ills in American society, what makes them patriotic is their fundamental optimism and belief in the United States because of its foundational principles or myths. That, despite US Muslims experiencing harm from the state, the promises of religious freedom, inalienable individual rights, and official antiracist embrace of multiculturalism makes the state worth investing in so that it may live up to its ideals and potential. Subsequently, the new patriotic Muslim is massively invested in the state and its recognition; legibility, power, and justice are imagined as working through the state, specifically through electoral politics. The new patriotic Muslim will thus mobilize other Muslims to generate people power for the state—

usually for liberals and the democratic party who more willingly embraces Muslims—to allegedly influence it to be an arbiter of good and reduce harm.

For example, Sarsour’s work as an outspoken advocate after September 11 would not make her the kind of patriotic Muslim that Mamdani referenced. However, she embodies the new patriotic Muslim in many ways. In her memoir, she reveals the impact of accompanying Muslim men in New York City to the FBI after 9/11, when they were called in for questioning or registry. Sarsour shares, ““I was standing at the immigration window inside 26 Federal Plaza one afternoon, translating for a Sudanese man when it occurred to me that some good might yet come of the Muslim registry.” She elaborates that,

By selectively targeting Arabs, Africans, and South Asians who were followers of Islam, the registry had ensured that Muslims of diverse ethnicities, cultures, and national origins would be forced to recognize our common cause. The experience of being officially vilified brought home to us that we needed representation at the highest levels of government. And so we began to organize, and to develop our communities politically. We realized that if Muslim Americans had been present at the table when the special registry was being discussed, the national security conversation would have been much more nuanced, and the indiscriminate fear and distortion of Islam might never have become so deeply rooted in America’s heart.⁵⁴

From this quote, we see a number of things happening. First, she frames the massive targeting of Muslims as an opportunity to mobilize and politicize Muslims across race and ethnicity. Second, she imagines the state, the very entity responsible for such widespread targeting, as retroactively being a balm—e.g., if we’d only had Muslim representation in government. Third, she

⁵⁴ Sarsour, *We Are Not Here to Be Bystanders*, 75-76.

rhetorically frames the systemic anti-Muslim racism “deeply rooted in America’s heart” as merely fear and distortion, in turn mimicking the State Department spokesperson Rastegar critiques. This third part is critical to the validation of the second; one can only imagine the state as a balm if one believes that the state itself is not the problem, but the people in it are. It is incredulous that such massive targeting would be perceived so opportunistically, be perhaps even more so to imagine that the state, the very entity responsible for such widespread targeting and harm, as the remedy.

The new patriotic Muslim believes the US is built on fundamentally good principles that just require better management and accountability. Throughout her memoir, Sarsour makes rhetorical appeals that reaffirm this belief; she treats her memoir as “a social justice manifesto” and appeals to the readers by emphasizing that the United States is primed to function for the people, if only the people—“us,” “we,” “our country,” “my sisters and brothers”—step forward. Sarsour frames service to the country as everyone’s duty and any positive changes as contingent on that service. For instance, she calls this book about her life “a rallying cry for every one of us to step forward and serve our country, embracing its rich diversity with open arms, insisting that our leaders respect the rights of all its citizens while behaving morally in the world.”⁵⁵ As an unapologetic Muslim American, her memoir is meant to showcase the diversity of American life and of Muslim life. Sarsour importantly emphasizes herself unique in both senses—she isn’t what people expect from a Muslim woman and she isn’t what people expect for an American. Emphasis on her inhabiting both identities—crucially, equally—becomes the example through which people should see and understand diversity as part of the US—a project she wants people

⁵⁵ Ibid., 13.

to rally around. However, this stance takes for granted that rights already exist that leaders simply need to respect. In actuality, rights are rarely guaranteed unconditionally.

Finally, the new patriotic Muslim is deeply invested in representational politics, with a desire to represent and be represented. Representation—both in government and visual culture generally—is seen as a prerequisite for freedom because the assumption is that it helps people know others and be known by others. In other words, visibility is a crucial project by which these patriots believe Americans can come to know and understand Muslims, and thus, embrace them as part of the nation. Hijab, as a key marker of Muslim visibility, is privileged in this project. Those visibly Muslim patriots who wear the hijab often ascribe representational responsibility onto its wearer—if not to others, then they internalize it themselves. They implicitly or explicitly advocate that the headscarf, if donned with correct intention and action, may function as a tool that welcomes people into a new understanding of Muslims and Islam. In her memoir, Sarsour talks extensively about her hijab and how crucial its visibility has been to showing Americans who Muslims really are. She shared that people like WMW co-chair Carmen Perez have told her that her hijab is her cape and superpower. This statement is regarded positively in the memoir because it affirms what Sarsour believes, but this metaphor is patronizing. The good works of a Muslim woman is made more exceptional only if she is visibly Muslim and thus, visibly challenging stereotypes. She regularly references the potency of her hijab in organizing spaces, advocating that “a Palestinian woman in hijab was something I needed my people to *see* because... my community had never felt invited into the American political process.”⁵⁶ Its visibility was critical; without it, the inclusion of Muslims in the political process could not have been as evident.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 187 (emphasis added).

Sarsour also shares a story about giving out pizzas with a Black organizer to people in Midland Beach affected by Hurricane Sandy. One white woman, overwhelmed by their kindness, apologized because she had marched against a mosque proposed to be built near her. She had been told the mosque would bring Muslims/terrorists who hated them to the neighborhood. Realizing Sarsour's kindness, she said, "I should have known better."⁵⁷ Reflecting on this moment, Sarsour wrote, "That night, I reflected that if I had not been wearing a hijab, the woman in Midland Beach would not have known that it was a Muslim who had shown up at her door... I dared to hope that the next time she met a woman in a hijab, maybe at the mall or in the supermarket, she would remember us standing on her porch and her biases might thaw a little."⁵⁸ Sarsour multiplies the responsibility for thawing such biases onto other visibly Muslim women in addition to herself. I feel concern over the ways that visibility is mobilized as a moral project while also understanding that the visual field is a racial formation, schematized by race,⁵⁹ and that those impacted by that racism are compelled to contradict its logics.

Altogether, these contours of the new patriotic Muslim reveal a person committed to using the master's tools to dismantle the master's house. They critique the US and challenge its current status quo and also align themselves with it at the end of the day with the hopes of changing it from the inside.

Conclusion

The two most visible Muslim women at the Women's March on Washington were Shepard Fairey's rendering of Munira Ahmed in an American flag hijab in *We The People Are Greater*

⁵⁷ Ibid., 122.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 123.

⁵⁹ Judith Butler, "Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia," in *Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Uprising*, ed. Robert Gooding-Williams (New York: Routledge, 1993), 15–22.

Than Fear and co-chair of the WMW, Linda Sarsour. Through this national movement, the biggest single-day protest in American history, two Muslim women were critically represented as patriotic Americans. This women-led organizing included a Muslim inasmuch as she amplified religious diversity. Ideologically, the WMW maintained itself as championing all rights, and emphasized that one of the most foundational principles of the US constitution is religious freedom; visually, having a visibly Muslim co-chair co-signed the WMW commitment. They included Sarsour because she is a long-time advocate for Arabs and Muslims; she is someone vulnerable to losing such religious freedoms herself (e.g., through the Muslim Ban); and she is someone who, despite this, still fundamentally believes in the US project and its potential, and fights to be included in its power.

This allegiance to the state is one of the critical parameters for Muslim inclusion. (In the next chapter, I will emphasize alignment with neoliberal multiculturalism as another.) Fairey included a Muslim woman to remind people “that freedom of religion is a founding principle of the United States,”⁶⁰ but it was not enough to include any Muslim woman—she was wrapped in an American flag, worn as a hijab, and depicted in red, white, and blue to triple emphasize her public, visual allegiance to the nation. Sarsour shared how she felt when she saw the Shepard Fairey poster: “My skin tingled at the sight of her, because in my country, on this day, a Muslim woman in a hijab had become a potent symbol of American freedom.”⁶¹ The use of “my country,” “Muslim woman in a hijab,” and “American freedom,” together are all used here as a challenge to the reader who is urged to see these things as co-existing or needing to co-exist naturally. At the beginning of this chapter, I said what I find interesting about these two racial icons was how they help create a new common sense about who and what the United States and

⁶⁰ McCluskey, “Inaugural Protest Poster Stirs Debate among Muslim American Women.”

⁶¹ Sarsour, *We Are Not Here to Be Bystanders*, 206.

its people are, and who and what Muslims are. The *We The People* campaign and WMW worked hard to revamp myths—not representations of reality—of the US as benevolent and multicultural, as a place where even Muslims can be included. Barthes helps us understand that mythologies disappear history and transform contingent factors into natural essences; over inauguration day weekend in 2017, Muslim women were appropriated and deployed as racial icons whose specific articulations of patriotism set new parameters for Muslim inclusion.

CHAPTER 3

Going Pro: The Commodification of the Hijab in Fashion and Retail

In 2017, Nike released the Pro Hijab for Muslim women. The pull-on head covering made from sweat-wicking material, designed to be breathable and stay in place as athletes move, yielded two awards as an “invention.” *TIME Magazine* ranked the Pro Hijab as one of the best inventions of 2017 and London’s Design Museum gave it one of its six Beazley Design Awards, beating out the pink “pussyhat” in the fashion category. Amanda Leveté, one of the Beazley judges, commented: “The first time I saw this project it stopped me in my tracks. It is a piece of design that tackles an important issue in a simple and elegant way. Perfectly delivered with inclusion at its core.”¹ Leveté’s emphatic praise echoed many reporters’ enthusiasm for this product, which they framed as celebrating diversity in the world of sport. Other reporters described the Pro Hijab as an especially bold move for Nike when Muslims were such a polarizing topic politically. What was buried in the celebration of inventions and firsts, however, was the fact that the Nike Pro Hijab was not the first athletic or sportswear hijab created for Muslims and not the first known to Nike.

Dutch designer Cindy van den Bremen approached Nike and other big sports brands with her sports hijab prototype in the late 1990s. She first decided to design athletic headscarves for Muslim women after hearing that a girl was kicked out of gym class for wearing a hijab, which

¹ “Nike Pro Hijab Among 2017 Design of the Year Winners,” 2Modern, accessed February 18, 2022, <https://www.2modern.com/blogs/design-news/nike-pro-hijab-among-2017-design-of-the-year-winners>.

the teacher deemed unsafe for sports. When the girl's parents could not reach a resolution with the school, the case was debated in a Dutch court that determined wearing a turtleneck and swim cap was acceptable in the hijab's stead because they would be functionally the same. Amused by this solution, van den Bremen said, "At the time, I thought it's not about the covering itself, it's about the way the girls are covered. I'm a designer, and I can bridge this gap."² Nike passed on her design prototype, telling van den Bremen to do it herself, which she assumed was for reasons relating to the "sensitivity of the topic."³ She would go on to found the smaller company Capsters in 2001 and win awards for her designs as early as 2006. Her prototypes were featured in the Museum of Modern Art's *Born out of Necessity* exhibition and became part of their permanent collection.⁴ Muslim-founded companies like Veil Garments, Sukoon Active, Haute Hijab, ASIYA Modest Activewear, Nashata, and others would also design and sell sports hijabs and modest activewear in the 2000s and 2010s. Various sports hijabs were not only already invented but, in some cases, institutionally recognized. The fact that the Pro Hijab was one of the only to be so widely sold and circulated showcases the power and influence international brands like Nike have. Almost 20 years after van den Bremen's pitch, Nike's Pro Hijab was praised for its "ingeniously simple design, trading in a traditional hijab's more voluminous shape for an elegant pull-on piece."⁵

Nike's release of the Pro Hijab is one example of how Muslim women were incorporated into mainstream global markets as consumers in the 2010s. There was both an increasing number of visibly Muslim women featured in advertising to sell products, and more commodities

² Natalie Weiner, "Nike's Pro Hijab Is Huge for Muslim Women, but Not for the Reasons You Think," Bleacher Report, accessed October 24, 2022, <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/2697709-nikes-pro-hijab-is-huge-for-muslim-women-but-not-for-the-reasons-you-think>; Prachi Singh, "A Social Designer Can Build Bridges through Design," FashionUnited, February 13, 2017, <https://fashionunited.com/executive/management/a-social-designer-can-build-bridges-through-design/2017021314667>.

³ Weiner, "Nike's Pro Hijab Is Huge for Muslim Women."

⁴ "Cindy van Den Bremen," The Museum of Modern Art, accessed October 24, 2022, <https://www.moma.org/artists/27732>.

⁵ "Nike Pro Hijab Among 2017 Design of the Year Winners."

marketed to Muslim women by major designers, brands, and retailers. To list only a few: H&M hired the first hijab-wearing model Mariah Idrissi for an ad campaign in 2015; Dolce & Gabbana released its first collection of coordinating designer headscarves and abayas in 2016; CoverGirl introduced their first hijabi brand ambassador Nura Afia in 2016; the British retailers Marks & Spencer released a full-body swimsuit line in 2016; IMG signed the first hijabi supermodel Halima Aden in 2017; and L'Oréal hired Amena Khan to star in a major hair-care campaign in 2018 even though her practice of wearing a hijab guaranteed consumers would never see her hair. The burgeoning presence of hijabis in visual culture and the mainstreaming of Muslim products was celebrated in the West by Muslims and non-Muslims alike. On the surface, these representations seemingly normalized Muslim women as fashionable consumers and suggested that Muslims were finally accepted. There is, however, a disconnect between this aspiration for belonging and its material reality—a consequence of what Jodi Melamed calls neoliberal multiculturalism, which manages the racial contradictions of neoliberalism (itself a form of racial capitalism) through official antiracism that centers race reform in “abstract equality, market individualism, and inclusive civic nationalism.”⁶ The incorporation of diversity and official antiracism into neoliberal markets hinders people from thinking about or acting against the biopolitics of global capitalism, which has generated profound inequality.⁷

For instance, the 2010s was also marked by an increase in legislation seeking to ban Muslim women from wearing face veils, hijabs, burqas, and burkinis. Full face veils have been banned to various degrees in countries like France in 2011, Bulgaria in 2016, Austria in 2017, the Netherlands in 2019, Switzerland and Quebec in 2021, and Belgium in 2022. The list continues to grow. Muslim women who fail to adhere to these laws and unveil are fined by

⁶ Jodi Melamed, “The Spirit of Neoliberalism,” *Social Text* 24, no. 4 (2006): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-2006-009>.

⁷ Melamed, “The Spirit of Neoliberalism.”

police.⁸ In the United States, there are currently no laws prohibiting Muslim women from veiling⁹ but a Georgia state representative put forward a House bill in 2016 that Muslim advocates said implicitly targeted Muslim women who wear face veils.¹⁰ That bill was abandoned due to pushback, and while veiling has not been explicitly targeted in US legislation, numerous states have successfully banned Sharia law or the imposition of foreign laws into US courts. The Southern Poverty Law Center reported that between 2010-2017, 201 anti-Sharia law bills were introduced in 43 states and 14 of those were enacted.¹¹ Hysteria about Muslims in the US produces different outcomes than in Europe, primarily due to the US Constitution's first amendment protection of religious freedom, but it is fueled by the same anti-Muslim racism that positions Muslims as enemies of the state who are precluded from national belonging. Together, these reveal the paradox whereby, 1) Muslims are recognized as consumers and thus increasingly included in commercial visual culture (i.e., advertisements, runways, sponsored social media posts), and 2) Muslims are recognized as threats to national security and national cultures and thus increasingly excluded from public view, rights, and citizenship. How can we understand this paradox?

First, I understand neoliberalism and neoliberal multiculturalism as critical formations that explain how Muslim women and the hijab become included and commodified at a global market level, even as they are excluded and devalued at state or national levels. I understand neoliberalism through Wendy Brown's argument that it is "best understood not simply as

⁸ We know from various historical examples that veil bans are more successful in pushing Muslim women out of the public sphere than empowering them to move through it uncovered.

⁹ Aliah Abdo, "The Legal Status of Hijab in the United States: A Look at the Sociopolitical Influences on the Legal Right to Wear the Muslim Headscarf," *Hastings Race and Poverty Law Journal* 5, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 441–508.

¹⁰ Lindsey Bever, "After Outcry, Georgia Lawmaker Abandons Bill That Would Have Banned Muslims from Wearing Veils," *Washington Post*, accessed October 20, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/11/18/after-outcry-georgia-lawmaker-abandons-bill-that-would-have-banned-muslims-from-wearing-veils/>.

¹¹ Swathi Shanmugasundaram, "Anti-Sharia Law Bills in the United States," Southern Poverty Law Center, February 5, 2018, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/02/05/anti-sharia-law-bills-united-states>.

economic policy, but as a governing rationality that disseminates market values and metrics to every sphere of life and construes the human itself exclusively as *homo oeconomicus*.”¹² Within this system, governments function to increase the efficiency and capacity of capital maximization and also reconfigure all of human life through market logics; humans are rendered as human capital or market actors tasked to survive the competitive world without any guarantee of protections or security from the state. Jodi Melamed delineates that the rise of neoliberal sovereignty and diminishing power of the nation-state, “signifies that neoliberal calculations have come to govern bio-political life, to rationalize, engineer, and organize forms of humanity.”¹³ Such neoliberal sovereignty has produced what Aihwa Ong names as differentiated citizenship: an experience of citizenship that ensures governments protect those valuable to capital (regardless of formal citizenship) and devalue or leave vulnerable those who are not valuable to circuits of capital (regardless of formal citizenship).¹⁴ Melamed offers the incredibly relevant example that “upper-class women in Arab and Muslim countries who have welcomed and consumed luxury goods identified with modernity have been coded as global multicultural citizens, whereas women who do not share these resources or dispositions have been coded as insufficiently modern for global citizenship.”¹⁵ I think, too, about how Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states manage to remain allied to the US due to capital while the rest of the Middle East is seen as necessitating US intervention. Muslims who, in essence, can and do buy into neoliberal ethos by orienting themselves in relation to capital, individualism, and nationalism or patriotism, are the newly privileged multicultural global citizens who benefit through neoliberal

¹² Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 176; 39.

¹³ Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 39.

¹⁴ Melamed, *Represent and Destroy*, 39-40.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 43-44.

sovereignty's differentiated citizenship. It makes it unsurprising that Muslim firsts, who are newly incorporated, fit this bill.

Second, I offer that we can understand it through a case study of the Nike Pro Hijab. Not only are Muslim women understood as multicultural global citizens worthy of marketing to, but in the world of sport, Nike positions itself as offering a (neoliberal) solution to a newly identified problem of Muslim women's exclusion from professional sports. The disciplining of Muslim women's public dress extends beyond the borders of the nation-state, with sport governing bodies like FIFA (the International Federation of Association Football) maintaining bans on religious headwear until recently (for FIFA, until 2014).¹⁶ In 2011, Iran's women's soccer team was disqualified from the pre-Olympic trial match against Jordan because their uniforms with the hijab did not meet FIFA regulations (figure 8). Just one year prior, the Iranian women's team was told by FIFA to make modifications to its uniform before it could play in the 2010 Youth Olympic Games in Singapore. These same modifications were no longer acceptable the next year. Similarly, Egyptian Olympian Doaa Elghobashy was only allowed to play beach volleyball with her full body covered and a hijab after a last-minute concession from FIVB (the International Federation of Volleyball) in 2016. Instances like that of the Iranian team and the last-minute concession exposes how inconsistent and subjective ruling has been when it comes to athletes who wear religious headwear. These bans cite headwear like the hijab, yarmulke, or turban as making athletes especially susceptible to injury and requiring modification—but on some days modification was fine and on others, it was banned. The social movements that encouraged the overturning of religious headwear bans become opportunities for companies like

¹⁶ These religious headwear bans also affected Sikh men in turbans and Jewish men in yarmulkes.

Nike to profit. A problem is presented (exclusion for inappropriate uniform) and the market positions itself as offering a solution (inclusion through appropriate, branded uniform).



Figure 8: The Iranian women's soccer team reacts after being disqualified from a key match. Photo by Ali Jarekji / Reuters-Landov via *Newsweek* (newsweek.com)

In her formative work on Muslim fashion, cultural studies professor Reina Lewis named a robust Muslim consumer culture ripe for the picking but still waiting to be taken in by mainstream fashion brands.¹⁷ Since her monograph *Muslim Fashion* was published in 2015, we have seen a dramatic shift that showcases that global brands do have an understanding of the tastes and needs of Muslim communities, seeing them as valuable consumers; Muslims are no longer a market waiting to be taken in, but have been taken in. Nike's Pro Hijab is evidence of this shift as a brand that has included Muslim women in advertisements to sell products and has produced and marketed a product specifically to them. In this study, I de-center the US context because the Pro Hijab was produced for and distributed through global circuits of capital. We

¹⁷ Reina Lewis, *Muslim Fashion: Contemporary Style Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

know that the company was inspired to make this product because of track and field athlete Sarah Attar's win for Saudi Arabia in the 2012 Olympics.¹⁸ We also know that the Nike designers consulted female Muslim athletes in the Middle East—runner and triathlete Manal Rostom, figure skater Zahra Lari, and Olympic weightlifter Amna Al Haddad—and had them test the prototypes. This, combined with Nike's *Believe In More* ad campaign released in the Middle East days prior to the Pro Hijab's launch, suggests that the American multinational corporation was targeting and extending its market to Muslim women in the Middle East.

Even if Western media notably framed the product and Nike's decision to cater to the expansive Muslim market through language of inclusion, or referencing it as bold decision given the political climate of hostility toward Muslims in the US, attempting to read the Pro Hijab in a US national context and through these terms would be disingenuous and incomplete. I evaluate the Nike Pro Hijab as a case study in understanding this kind of global market inclusion working despite other forms of national exclusion. In this chapter, I trace the development of the hijab as a commodity and then evaluate how Muslim women were taken up by Nike to sell and buy their products—first through entering them into representation *as* athletes in their *Believe In More* campaign, and then through normalization of Muslim women as consumer citizens in ads for the Pro Hijab. In doing so, I argue that Muslim women and the hijab become commodified through neoliberal multiculturalism and that while neoliberalism is projected as a generative space for Muslim inclusion, it works through exploiting the differentiated citizenship of Muslims globally.

¹⁸ Danielle Wightman-Stone, "Nike's Pro Hijab among Design of the Year Winners," FashionUnited, January 29, 2018, <https://fashionunited.uk/news/fashion/nike-s-pro-hijab-among-design-of-the-year-winners/2018012927882>.

The Muslim Market and the Commodification of the Hijab

In recent years, scholars have given increasing attention to the veil or hijab as a commodity, especially as it relates to developments in neoliberalism, Muslim markets, and the Islamic economy. Hijab becomes a commodity in the Marxist sense when it enters capitalist markets as something that can be exchanged with other commodities and bought with money; it is a simple and ordinary thing that is transformed through its abstraction in fields of capitalist exchange. Women's studies scholar Inderpal Grewal offers that neoliberalism as a mode of regulation "produced forms of subjectivity by differentiating between populations and the needs and welfare of what were seen to be very different and contrasting populations."¹⁹ The increasing segmentation of consumer markets has produced "lifestyles" or lifestyle markets which reflect those differently located, gendered, and racialized populations. The Muslim market, for example, which is in itself reductive, is one lifestyle market which attends to Muslims as consumers with particular needs that the market can accommodate.

Hijab first became commodified following the Islamic revival that reverberated across the "Muslim world" in the 1970s and diverted into Western markets gradually. The Islamic revival which emerged in response to perceived failings of secular states and Westernized leadership, was notably anti-consumerist and devised religious garb as a uniform. Hijab was discussed and formulated in ascetic and equalizing terms, emphasizing the simple and demure. However, this shifted after the liberalization of the Turkish economy in the 1980s which coincided with a broader reorganization of Turkish society, including "the rise of a new Islamic bourgeoisie, an aspiring middle class with tastes, styles and modes of social interaction notably

¹⁹ Inderpal Grewal, *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 17.

distinct from the secular, Western-oriented lifestyles of the republican elite.”²⁰ The “tesettür” (modest) industry arose to accommodate these shifts and aimed to produce fashionable and recognizable Islamic dress, moving hijab from an ascetic item to fashion commodity.²¹

Reina Lewis argued that Turkey’s tesettür industry was an important antecedent to the modest fashion industries now developing globally.²² Part of its influence is due to tesettür companies manufacturing 40% for export (twice the national average for any industry), accommodating nearby nations like Iran and Syria, and countries with large concentrations of Turkish-origin immigrants like Germany.²³ State-imposed veiling in Iran—what Mino Moallem has called the corporeal inscription of citizenship²⁴—began in 1979 and was transformed through the integration of tesettür. Mustafa Karaduman, CEO of the leading tesettür retailer Tekbir Giyim (“Allah is Great” apparel), responded to an invitation from the governor of Tehran who wanted him to “present fashionable clothing so these women will choose to cover their heads.”²⁵ This came after he found that, “Iranian women are saying they don’t want to cover their heads because there is nothing fashionable.”²⁶ Tekbir would subsequently win awards at Iranian fashion shows in 2007 and 2008,²⁷ proving tesettür to be a lucrative industry with transnational implications. The integration of fashion into this corporeal inscription of citizenship was both a

²⁰ Banu Gökarişel and Anna Secor, “Transnational Networks of Veiling-Fashion between Turkey and Western Europe,” in *Islamic Fashion and Anti-Fashion: New Perspectives from Europe and North America*, ed. Emma Tarlo and Annelies Moors (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 157–67.

²¹ Annelies Moors and Emma Tarlo, ed., *Islamic Fashion and Anti-Fashion: New Perspectives from Europe and North America* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 1–30.

²² Lewis, *Muslim Fashion*, 4.

²³ Gökarişel and Secor, “Transnational Networks of Veiling-Fashion between Turkey and Western Europe.”

²⁴ Mino Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy in Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 69.

²⁵ Lewis, *Muslim Fashion*, 82.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

response of the state to the demands of women, and importantly some women's "form of everyday resistance through consumption."²⁸

In exploring emerging consumer movements in neoliberalism, Roopali Mukherjee and Sarah Banet-Weiser named commodity activism as those "corporate appropriations, elaborate exercises in hypocrisy and artifice intended to fool the consumer, sophisticated strategies aimed at securing ever-larger profits."²⁹ However, they further offer that "commodity activism may illuminate the nettled promise of innovative creative forms, cultural interventions that bear critically, if in surprising ways, on modes of dominance and resistance within changing social and political landscapes."³⁰ In the instance of Iranian women post-1979, the hijab could be made meaningful and transformed into a fashion commodity in order to express individuality and resist dominant state forms while also complying with them. In Indonesia, "Busana Muslim," or Muslim dress—which was spare in style but high in cost because it was imported—first came into public purview during the reformist period of Suharto's regime and skyrocketed after he resigned in 1998. Religious ethicist Elizabeth Bucar offers, "As young, college-educated women increasingly adopted pious fashion, it became a sign of a cosmopolitan woman. In addition, since a headscarf and modest outfit were not historically part of Islamic practice in this country, women were free to wear these items to express a thoroughly modern identity that is entirely compatible with national development and progress."³¹ The headscarf/hijab was imported into the area as a rapidly changing commodity and became a signifier of new identity formations which were connected to shifts in national cultures and globalized corporate capital.

²⁸ Annelies Moors and Emma Tarlo, "Introduction," in *Islamic Fashion and Anti-Fashion: New Perspectives from Europe and North America*, ed. Emma Tarlo and Annelies Moors (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 1–30.

²⁹ Roopali Mukherjee and Sarah Banet-Weiser, eds., *Commodity Activism: Cultural Resistance in Neoliberal Times* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 2.

³⁰ Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser, *Commodity Activism*, 3.

³¹ Elizabeth M. Bucar, *Pious Fashion: How Muslim Women Dress* (Cambridge ; London: Harvard University Press, 2017), 173.

Even though religion and the market have been historically configured in opposition to each other, with religion often treated as an “authentic” space free from commercial influences, neoliberal appropriations of all forms of life into the market means that religion increasingly converges with the market in novel ways. For example, in addition to the evolution of Busana Muslim in Indonesia, there was a whole host of new ways to be pious which revolved around consumption—television specials for Ramadan, Qur’an recitation clubs, athaan (call to prayer) ringtones, and more³² were means through which consumers could acquire, support, or reflect religiosity with their spending dollars. Fashionably dressed Muslim women who are the most visible participants of Islamic consumer culture in Indonesia may be “accused of merely performing a consumer role of piety, of buying an identity rather than being sincerely devout” by other Muslims.³³ Like the incorporation of fashionable dress coinciding with the rise of Turkey’s Islamic bourgeoisie, this is another example of the veil’s dynamism and of how newly authorized meanings of Islamic piety circulate in the public sphere alongside changes in neoliberal governance.

This history is distinct from that of Black Muslims in the United States, who have used clothing to construct a Black Muslim identity that challenged both American beauty standards and beliefs that Islam was an Arab or Middle Eastern religion.³⁴ Black Muslim organizations like the Nation of Islam (NOI) and their members have organized fashion shows and operated Muslim clothing stores since the 1960s.³⁵ In the NOI, women wore the uniform of the Muslim Girls Training and General Civilization Class (MGT-GCC), which included a khimar (head

³² Carla Jones, “Images of Desire: Creating Virtue and Value in an Indonesian Islamic Lifestyle Magazine,” *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies* 6, no. 3 (Fall 2010): 95.

³³ Jones, “Images of Desire,” 99.

³⁴ Kayla Renée Wheeler, “The Black Muslim Female Fashion Trailblazers Who Came before Model Halima Aden,” *The Conversation*, May 10, 2019, <http://theconversation.com/the-black-muslim-female-fashion-trailblazers-who-came-before-model-halima-aden-116499>.

³⁵ Wheeler, “The Black Muslim Female Fashion Trailblazers Who Came before Model Halima Aden.”

scarf), high-neck tunic, and loose-fitting pants or skirts. Forms of dress that originate from the “Islamic East” are privileged and recognized as emblematic of Muslim piety and as Muslim fashion over other Muslim styling. Anthropologist Su’ad Abdul Khabeer argues that subsequently, the racial hierarchy whereby Blackness is considered ‘less-than’ because it is not rooted in the ‘Islamic East,’ is reproduced in stylistic norms, which generate authority over Islam and in Muslim communities.³⁶

Even as the hijab has functioned as a commodity in the so-called Muslim world and Muslim communities for some time, it is peculiar that it made its way into hegemonic, Western lifestyle markets. It is particularly confounding given the hijab’s Western historical formation as outside civilization and thus, outside market interest. The Muslim veil has consistently been poised in Western culture as the quintessential sign of women’s unfreedom and oppression. In her article, “The Right to Fashion in the Age of Terrorism,” Minh-Ha T. Pham argues the burqa was positioned in direct opposition to fashion in the aftermath of September 11, 2001.³⁷ Building on older colonial and Cold War ‘clash of civilization’ tropes, the burqa was now also understood by the West as *antifashion*. Pham argues this “fashion-burqa dichotomy” enabled the development of fashion-as-a-right discourse to develop, whereby fashion became the outward expression of freedom-loving, civilized people who were exercising their freedoms of self-expression and self-determination through shopping.³⁸ Burqa-wearing women were, in contrast, evidence of what it looks like when you are not afforded freedoms, choice or fashion. Short-term economic recovery campaigns like former New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani’s ‘Fashion for America: Shop to Show Your Support’ propped fashion consumerism as key to caring for the

³⁶ Su’ad Abdul Khabeer, “Muslim Dandies,” *Anthropology News* 58, no. 5 (September 8, 2017): e47–54.

³⁷ Minh-Ha T. Pham, “The Right to Fashion in the Age of Terrorism,” *Signs* 36, no. 2 (Winter 2011): 385–410.

³⁸ Pham, “The Right to Fashion in the Age of Terrorism.”

nation and for the self. Exercises in consumerism like these were framed as dutiful responses, acts of resistance even, against the terrorists who wanted to extinguish American liberties; Muslim women, long designated as uncivilized, were now also rendered outside of fashion in order to do so.

Despite the ways that the West has imagined Muslim dress and veiling as non-fashion, cultural geographers Banu Gökariksel and Anna Secor argue that we cannot think of Islamic dress outside of the global circuits of fashion that claim Western Europe as their central node.³⁹ This is because multifaceted transnational linkages between Turkey and Europe is exactly what develops *tesettür* and adjacent industries. For example, the design team for Tekbir “goes to Paris up to six times a year, observing new trends in colour, cut, fabric and details such as the size and placement of buttons.”⁴⁰ The anti-Muslim concern about the veil in North America and Europe enlists discourses like the fashion-burqa dichotomy which renders Muslim dress illegible as fashion. Marking Muslim dress beyond recognition as fashion discursively supports the continued exclusion and marginalization of Muslims from citizenship. This logic for exclusion is employed, despite the fact that the alienation of Muslim women’s public dress from modernity by Western nation states like France is not supported or reflected in the *actual* developments of Islamic fashion that Gökariksel and Secor describe above.

What I have outlined is a brief overview of the development of the ripe Muslim consumer culture named by Lewis and how fashion has become meaningfully attached to Muslim dress. In contending with the new rise of modest fashion in Western markets, many fashion editors and writers credited its popularity to the growing recognition of Muslims as having major spending power, especially those in the Gulf states of the Middle East—specifically the United Arab

³⁹ Gökariksel and Secor, “Transnational Networks of Veiling-Fashion between Turkey and Western Europe.”

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. Market research started taking note of this in the early 2010s. Euromonitor International, for example, reported in 2012 that there was an emergent global “Ramadan consumer” whose spending was likened to Christmas shoppers. Consequently, to serve and capitalize off of this market segment, the luxury fashion online retailer Net-a-Porter introduced their first Ramadan Edit in 2015, and MAC Cosmetics released a makeup tutorial on how to achieve a “glamorous Suhoor look” during Ramadan 2018.

Muslims in North America were quick to react to MAC’s tutorial on social media, with many commenting on how out-of-touch the company was—Why would Muslim women need to look glamorous for a meal at three o’clock in the morning before a day of fasting? However, these North American Muslims failed to realize that they were not actually the primary market for this advertising campaign. While suhoor may be an experience isolated to family homes and mosques in secular-Christian North America, Ramadan in Muslim-majority countries and Gulf states is expressly different, with social life itself transforming according to the month’s nighttime meals, prayers and festivities. This MAC ad in particular makes it apparent that even as Muslims are configured as having lots of spending power globally, the nexus of that power is located in the Middle East; Arab women are the biggest buyers of haute couture and the actual targets of MAC’s “glamorous Suhoor look.” The Nike Pro Hijab was also developed for this market of women in the Middle East. Regardless of the political tension between Muslims and the state in North America, Europe, India, or Israel, Nike had money to make by catering to Middle Eastern Muslim women.

Because Muslims are a market segment that is not limited to any one gender, race, ethnicity, or nationality, market research has configured them as global consumers. As such, Thomson Reuters and DinarStandard published multiple iterations of a *State of the Global*

Islamic Economy Report. In the 2020/2021 report, they defined the “Islamic economy” as, “Sectors comprising core products/services that are structurally affected by Islamic ethics and law. Islamic law, underlying the notion of ‘halal’ or permissible, directly impacts the core products and services offered in a number of economic sectors, including food, finance, clothing, tourism, media and recreation, pharmaceuticals, and cosmetics.”⁴¹ Modest fashion is one of the biggest sectors in the Islamic economy’s area of “Islamic law and spirituality related lifestyle needs,” with Muslim consumers spending more on clothing and footwear annually than all fashion spending in Japan and Italy combined in 2013,⁴² and spending around \$270 billion on modest clothing in 2017 alone.⁴³ This formation of a global Islamic economy accounts for Muslim spending habits at global and national levels, and generates an understanding of Muslims as both consumers and citizens—or consumer citizens—in distinct ways.

Anthropologist Aihwa Ong identifies neoliberalism as enabling processes that mutate citizenship. Welfare and distributive justice’s attachments to new political spaces like the United Nations, NGOs, cyber-space, refugee camps, etc., mean “rights and protections long associated with citizenship are becoming disarticulated from the state, they are re-articulated with elements such as market-based interests, transnational agencies, mobile elites, and marginalized populations.”⁴⁴ Consumer citizenship is a space in which Muslim needs are rearticulated and are seemingly addressed. I will, however, discuss in the conclusion that there are indeed exceptions to this—e.g., France—which affirms what Ong argues, that global capitalism does not end

⁴¹ “Global Islamic Economy: Muslims to Spend 2.9% Less on Apparel and Footwear in 2020 - Study,” Salaam Gateway, November 16, 2020, <https://www.salaamgateway.com/story/muslim-expenditure-on-apparel-and-footwear-to-drop-29-to-268-bl-in-2020-study>.

⁴² Molly Petrilla, “The Next Big Untapped Fashion Market: Muslim Women,” *Fortune*, July 15, 2015, <https://fortune.com/2015/07/15/muslim-women-fashion/>.

⁴³ Alexis See Tho, “Sizing up the \$2 Trillion Halal Market,” *FM Magazine*, August 1, 2019, <https://www.fm-magazine.com/issues/2019/aug/halal-goods-supply-chain.html>.

⁴⁴ Aihwa Ong, “Mutations in Citizenship,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, no. 2–3 (May 2006): 499–505, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276406064831>.

political sovereignty; political sovereignty is not fully canceled out by capitalist might but interacts with it in peculiar ways.⁴⁵

Just as Evelyn Alsultany emphasizes crises as moments for redirection and new forms of inclusion, anthropologist Arjun Appadurai argues that crisis is a point through which commodities can be diverted from their original paths. He argues that “[t]he diversion of commodities from specified paths is always a sign of creativity or crisis, whether aesthetic or economic” and that diversion is “frequently a function of irregular desires and novel demands.”⁴⁶ Demands of diasporic communities in Western nations invited Tekbir into Germany, for example. Demands of Muslim women athletes to be included in professional sport and be able to cover in ways permissible to them and sport governing bodies invited opportunity for Nike. Appadurai frames demand as emerging as a function of social practices and classifications as opposed to emanating from human need; demand is a mechanical response to social manipulation.⁴⁷ As such, Nike helped manufacture demand for the Pro Hijab in the Middle East through the *Believe in More* advertisements released before the product launched.

Believe in More: Nike Women’s Advertising and the Construction of Athletic Selves

Just a couple of days before the Nike Pro Hijab was introduced to the public, Nike released a video advertisement in the Middle East titled, “What will they say about you?” This was one of three videos launched in their *Believe In More* campaign, with the other two airing in Russia and Turkey. In the short 70-second ad, Nike shows Muslim and Middle Eastern women—with and

⁴⁵ Aihwa Ong, “Powers of Sovereignty: State, People, Wealth, Life,” *Focaal* 64 (December 1, 2012): 24–35, <https://doi.org/10.3167/fcl.2012.640103>.

⁴⁶ Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: commodities and the politics of value” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511819582>, 26, 29.

⁴⁷ Appadurai, “Introduction.”

without headscarves—participating in sport. It begins with a woman in a black hijab peering around a doorway, looking left and then right before tucking the loose end of her scarf beneath her chin and starting her jog. This scene of a Muslim woman tentatively going on a run in unidentified Middle Eastern streets where she meets the gaze of an older woman in traditional jilbab is complemented in the next scene when a teenager shown skateboarding in a hijab and abaya meets the gaze of an unsmiling man with a furrowed brow. Together, these established the precedent for the short video which shows these women being active and athletic *despite* whatever expectations or judgements they encounter, generating an ethos of empowerment. This is also true for the campaign images (figures 9-10) which center women in motion and in color. Many of the others in the frame—other people who also serve as the Other—are out of focus, in traditional and muted clothing, and have their gaze turned toward the women. Importantly, these others are always framed to the right of the women whose movement is directed left, as in—she’s moving forward and leaving them behind. It is noteworthy for the English reader that this forward motion, this time flow, goes from right to left, just like the Arabic language.

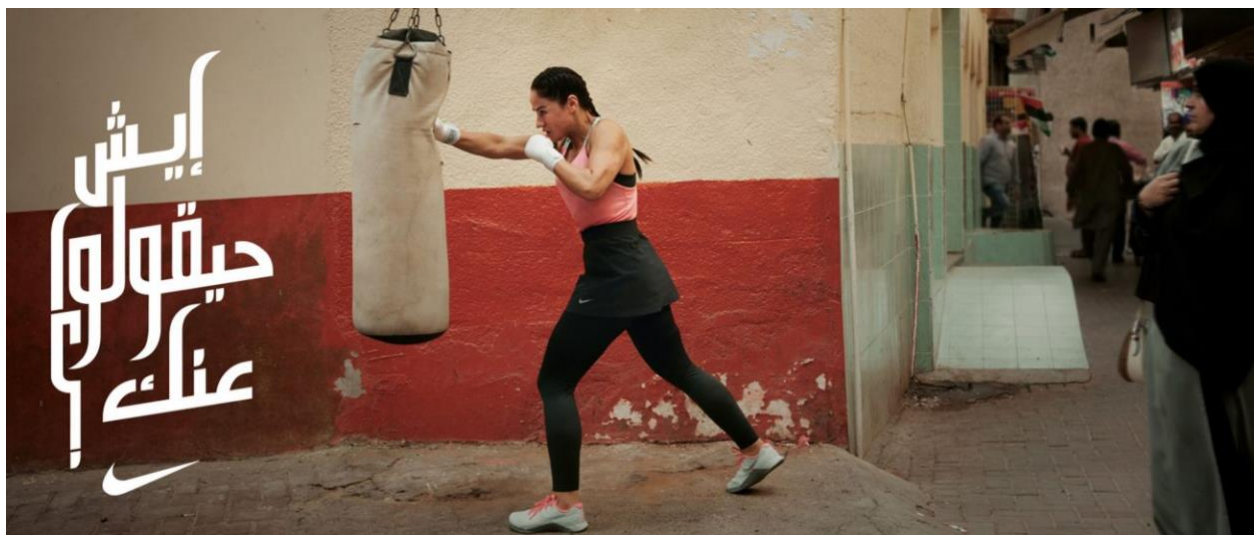


Figure 9: Campaign image for “What will they say about you?,” part of the *Believe In More* campaign, via Wieden+Kennedy Amsterdam (wkams.com)



Figure 10: Campaign image for “What will they say about you?,” part of the *Believe In More* campaign, via Wieden+Kennedy Amsterdam (wkams.com)

In the video advertisement, a woman’s voice guides the viewer in Arabic through clips of Middle Eastern and Muslim women skateboarding, boxing, horseback riding, ice skating, fencing, playing soccer, doing parkour and training at home. The commercial’s English subtitles read:

What will they say about you? That you shouldn’t be out here? That it’s unladylike? That you’re not built for this? Or maybe... they’ll say you’re strong. That you can’t be stopped. That you’ll always find a way. That you make it look easy. That you make it look... good. Or maybe... they’ll say you’re... the next... big... thing.⁴⁸

The voiceover ends and “BELIEVE IN MORE” appears across a black screen in English, followed by a white Nike swoosh logo at the close of the ad.

These Nike ads construct Muslim and Middle Eastern women as active and athletic, mediating a form of communal life that accounts for gender, ethnicity, religion, and athleticism. I do not seek to anthropomorphize Nike as a single entity nor problematically assume a

⁴⁸ NikeWomen, *Nike: What Will They Say about You?*, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F-UO9vMS7AI>.

multinational corporation's intentions. However, considering Nike's brand identity and legacy of advertising, we can read their representations in this field of visibility⁴⁹—one I am identifying as the field of marketing and advertising in fashion and retail. It can also, in itself, reference the field of visibility curated by Nike, amid its longer history of women's advertising and its authority in creating the female athletic subject. Nike has a history of defining itself as an alternative to the status quo throughout different periods. We can see parallels between how Nike advertised first to women and how this has been applied to their Middle Eastern market.

Nike began catering to a growing women's sport and fitness market at the end of the 1980s and has utilized sophisticated strategies to intertwine the Nike brand with women's empowerment since the early 90s. The passage of Title IX in 1972 resulted in an influx of women and girls into sports; neoliberal emphasis on the body and individual health concurring with the rise of health clubs and women's aerobics in the 1980s (think Jane Fonda!) helped develop the women's sport and fitness market. The company Reebok first capitalized on this demographic by marketing lifestyle products like the Freestyle aerobic shoe in 1982 which was advertised as "pure pleasure," both comfortable and aesthetically appealing. Nike continued to market high-tech athletic shoes because, as sociologists Cheryl L. Cole and Amy Hribar write, "Although Nike had been advised of the potential of the women's market as early as 1979, Nike's executives had dismissed the market because they felt it would compromise Nike's authentic and serious sports image."⁵⁰ In 1986, Reebok's market share went up and Nike's went down; Reebok's earnings proved that the women's market could not be ignored. Nike's initial dismissal of the women's market is later mimicked in their dismissal of Cindy van den Bremen's

⁴⁹ Mino Moallem defines fields of visibility as specific representational frames in which "the subject must comply with identifiable subject positions." (*Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister*, 32).

⁵⁰ Cheryl L. Cole and Amy Hribar, "Celebrity Feminism: Nike Style Post-Fordism, Transcendence, and Consumer Power," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 12, no. 4 (December 1995): 359, <https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.12.4.347>.

sports hijab prototype (and what could have been a concomitant Muslim women's market). It is only after a market is proven to be extremely profitable that Nike re-strategizes, and this re-strategizing importantly also includes Nike branding itself as vanguards of inclusivity and recognition. As detailed in the last section, reports on the Muslim market proved its profitability years before the initial release of the Pro Hijab.

Nike's very first ad targeting the women's fitness market in 1987 failed spectacularly.

Cole and Hribar write,

The ad preserved Nike's established focus on sport and performance: It featured triathlete Joanne Ernst moving through a gruelling [sic] workout and a voiceover continuously repeating the "just do it" directive. The ad ended with what Nike intended to be a humorous tag line: "And it wouldn't hurt if you stopped eating like a pig."⁵¹

What feels obvious and unsurprising about this tagline is that it failed to encourage women to buy Nike products. This failure inspired Nike to hire women to develop a strategy that would actually encourage women to identify with the brand and want to buy its products. Janet Champ and Charlotte Moore ran the consequential *Empathy or Dialogue* campaign which centered issues of women's self-esteem and aimed to encourage women to celebrate their authentic self; buying Nike products would mean "locating, expressing, and caring for the self."⁵² They targeted the ordinary, everyday woman who made up the larger portion of the market in addition to the professional athlete of Nike's original 'authentic and serious sports image.' Champ and Moore were from the Wieden and Kennedy ad agency, the very same agency that developed the *Believe In More* campaign over two decades later.

⁵¹ Cole and Hribar, "Celebrity Feminism," 360.

⁵² Ibid.

When it comes to Nike women's advertising, the brand has been "characterized as oppositional, as breaking away from previous antiwomen practices and for doing so in a woman's voice."⁵³ The *Believe In More* campaign centers the question, often used as a corrective phrase to check Muslim and Middle Eastern women's behavior, "What will they say about you?" as a means of identifying modes of moving through the world that have been limiting. In light of this, Nike offers visions of a community capable of moving beyond these limits. In representing Muslim and Middle Eastern women as active and athletic, as transgressing expectations and restrictive norms, Nike mediates a form of communal life that accounts for gender, ethnicity, religion, and physical activity. And it does so with a woman's voice narrativizing the "more" we should believe in together—and the more that Nike products can provide, if you believe.

Communications scholar Jean M. Grow argues that the first decade of Nike women's ads "systematically constructed women's athletic experiences within a series of mediated communities."⁵⁴ Her semiotic analysis shows that these original advertisements used signs from women's everyday lives—those things, experiences, stereotypes, or attitudes associated with womanhood and cultural practices of femininity—to signify a universal or communal female experience. Incorporating fitness and sports signs into this gendered experience enabled Nike to successfully construct athletic women as a new, authentic, shared community form. For example, in their *List* campaign, Nike's ad lists out a series of items—your padded bra, your control top support pantyhose, your black anything, etc.—that represent all the things women are expected to do, "should" do.⁵⁵ Opposite that page, one phrase captures the audience: "Self-support from Nike. *Just do it.*" This messaging works to empower women against these expectations and

⁵³ Ibid., 359.

⁵⁴ Jean M. Grow, "Stories of Community: The First Ten Years of Nike Women's Advertising," *The American Journal of Semiotics* 22, no. 1–4 (2006): 169.

⁵⁵ Grow, "Stories of Community," 175.

celebrate their authentic self that is unrestricted. In this first decade, Nike's constructed womanhood was often conspicuously unmarked by race. As more lifestyle markets were recognized, Nike shifted to incorporate new signs of more particular, differentiated community forms.

I argue that through this campaign, Nike constructed Middle Eastern and Muslim women *as* athletes, which also constructed them as consumers and progenerated demand for the Pro Hijab in the Middle East. Again, these advertisements were done for the Middle Eastern market. As I discuss below, I argue they did not need to do this preparatory work for the US market because they were able to use a Muslim first—US Olympian, Ibtihaj Muhammad—for the same effect. The Western press praising Nike's Pro Hijab as an “invention” once it launched also generated demand. In this *Believe In More* ad, signs like the hijab, traditional garb, and the built environment signify a kind of Muslim/Middle Eastern everyday life or culture that all these women share. Nike's iconic swoosh logo appears on all the women's shoes, leggings, shirts, bras—but not on the hijabs. The possibility for Muslim women to complete their uniform with an athletic hijab boasting that same Nike swoosh was fully realized just a few days later when the Pro Hijab was introduced. Individual professional Muslim women athletes existed prior to Nike's advertising; however, the ad framed active and athletic Muslim women as being a *community* and did so on a global scale through its branding. The ad's incorporation of professional athletes training alongside celebrities like pop singer Balqees Fathi consolidate and affirm active and athletic Muslim women as being in community, regardless of formal status in sport. By extension, the everyday woman can be tied to celebrity through branding and align themselves with a particular product or a company's vision.

By rearticulating women's issues through advertising, Nike epitomizes what Banet-Weiser and Mukherjee call commodity activism. In the case of these women's ads, we can reference more specifically Nike's commodity feminism. Nike's advertising generates affective attachments because it centers gendered experiences that challenge women's self-esteem and circulates imagery and narratives that resist or empower them. Cole and Hribar argue that in the face of a dissolving welfare state, lifestyle marketing functioned to manage and redirect these anxieties and to stabilize identity in a historical moment marked by instability and insecurity.⁵⁶ They write,

Despite a narration of power, struggle, and individualism that relies on the politics of lifestyle advanced by the new right during the 1980s, Nike poses as a counteridentity, as a refusal of and opposition to hegemonic forces: Nike presents itself as pro-women, progressive, and socially responsible. Nike signifies resistance and struggle, and while the style addresses the collective memory of the thirty-something generation, the issues of justice and equality continue to define "our" time. The issue of justice is acknowledged in ways that authorize Nike while discouraging readers from questioning. In the narrative produced by Nike, Nike is portrayed not only as an advocate of women's rights but as a corporation in long solidarity with women. In so doing, Nike rewrites feminist history, identity, community, and solidarity by promoting a popular knowledge of empowerment embedded in bodily maintenance and the consumption of Nike products. Nike stabilizes its popular pro-women position by defining itself as an alternative to the new traditionalism on offer in contemporary popular culture. It is a tale

⁵⁶ Cole and Hribar, "Celebrity Feminism," 354.

of consumer power and transcendence through the physical in a moment in which other political options are absent.⁵⁷

This is compelling because it seems little has changed since the 1980s and 1990s. Nike still poses itself as a solution or relief from hegemonic forces that aim to keep women down—in these ads, the “they” in “What will they say about you?” who pass judgment on women—and promotes empowerment through bodily maintenance and the consumption of Nike products. Nike deploys its cultural authority (developed through this ad legacy) to publicize and authorize meanings about who or what counts as a female athlete.⁵⁸ Nike’s maxim of “if you have a body, you are an athlete,” does not by itself interpellate all bodies as athletic or render every body as Nike’s target audience. Advertising and marketing in consumer culture help produce the desires and conditions in which buying a product becomes meaningful.⁵⁹ The *Believe In More* ads set up a problem and center ways of moving through the world for which the Pro Hijab can be a solution and aid, something that enables women to be true to themselves and their passions with ease. The brand is powerful because it is global; Nike’s “just do it” tagline and signature swoosh logo are globally recognized and its brand comes with a long history of authority when it comes to sport, such that athleticism is affirmed through the visuals and sponsorship of Nike. Through its rearticulation of Muslim women’s issues and their directive to purchase Nike to initiate their own empowerment, these ads establish the Muslim woman *as* athlete and facilitates demand for the Pro Hijab.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 362.

⁵⁸ Michelle T. Helstein, “That’s Who I Want to Be: The Politics and Production of Desire within Nike Advertising to Women,” *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 27, no. 3 (August 2003): 276–92, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0193732503255479>.

⁵⁹ Grewal, *Transnational America*, 86.

Marketing the Pro Hijab in the US

In *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms*, Inderpal Grewal wrote about how the Mattel Corporation brought Barbie into India.⁶⁰ In it, she argues that “consumer culture and its corporate products, such as media and global branded goods, relied on producing new transnational consumer subjects based on historicized differences of race, gender, sexuality, and nationalism.”⁶¹ In the case of Barbie, she argues that a differentiated children’s market had not yet taken shape and the child as consumer did not exist in the same way that it did in North America, Japan, or Europe. Consequently, Barbie did not sell well during its first years in India. In the previous section, I showed how Nike hailed Middle Eastern women as athletes and as consumers through their *Believe In More* ad, which produced the desires and conditions in which buying Nike products became meaningful. Nike utilized the same tactics to shape the Middle Eastern women’s market as it did when first shaping the women’s market in the US in the 1980s and 1990s, relying on commodity activism and appeals to differentiated, gendered community experiences.

In the US, the Nike Pro Hijab was advertised through a series of black and white photographs of female Muslim athletes wearing the Pro Hijab. Those athletes included Emirati figure skater Zahra Lari, German boxer Zeina Nassar, Emirati weightlifter Amna Al Haddad, and African American fencer Ibtihaj Muhammad (figure 11). Muhammad is a Muslim first as the first hijab-wearing US Olympian, and her likeness was also used to create the Mattel Corporation’s first Muslim Barbie doll. Her Nike photos and her statements about the Pro Hijab were taken up and mobilized most by US media. In this context, the Pro Hijab was framed as

⁶⁰ Inderpal Grewal, “Traveling Barbie: Indian Transnationalities and the Global Consumer,” in *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 80-120.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 83.

“designed to solve for the performance constraints of a traditional hijab in sport,” and “intended to help advance the inclusive conversation around hijabs and Muslim women in sports.”⁶² I argue that Nike’s promotion of the product in the US relied on Muslim firsts and mobilized the language of inclusion—nearly always alongside the naming of the charged political landscape such inclusion is happening in—to emphasize Nike as groundbreaking and justice-oriented.



Figure 11: Ibtihaj Muhammad in the Nike Pro Hijab, via Nike News (news.nike.com)

In their news release, “The Nike Pro Hijab Goes Global,” Nike, Inc. centers the experience and stories of Ibtihaj Muahmmad. It begins by presenting how the “traditional” hijab she wore caused discomfort and interfered with her fencing. For years, she wore a children’s

⁶² “The Nike Pro Hijab Goes Global — NIKE, Inc.,” Nike, December 1, 2017, <https://about.nike.com/en/newsroom/releases/nike-pro-hijab>.

headscarf made of folded-over georgette fabric, pinned under her chin, with the excess tucked into her sports bra to stay in place. She shared that she had been carded for false starting many times due to not being able to hear the referee through the doubled fabric, and that the material would get heavy and stiff as she sweat. The release mentions other athletes who “illuminated the many availability and performance problems associated with wearing a traditional hijab for sport.”⁶³ Their continual distinction between the “traditional” hijab, which inconveniences athletes, and the sport hijab they designed, emphasizes the Pro Hijab as a unique, groundbreaking novelty. It is no wonder that so many Western reporters assumed that the Pro Hijab was the first sports hijab ever.

After describing how the Pro Hijab was made through consulting and testing with many female Muslim athletes, they share Muhammad’s response to first using the product in August 2017: “‘It really sunk in how much my previous hijab was hindering my performance when I tried the Nike Pro Hijab,’ says Muhammad. ‘Suddenly, I could hear, I wasn’t as hot and it felt like my body was able to cool itself down better and faster.’”⁶⁴ The contrast Muhammad casts between her old hijab and the Pro Hijab emphasizes that Nike has offered a critical intervention and solution to a problem. That even for an Olympian like Muhammad who has achieved so much, she may be able to achieve even more now that the “traditional” hijab is not interfering. In the last two paragraphs, Nike incorporates runner Manal Rostom and figure skater Lari’s statements about the Pro Hijab being much more than a performance garment. Rostom claims that it already “inspires me to reach greater heights and to run farther distances,” and Lari sees it as a symbol of empowerment that reminds Muslim women that they can achieve anything:

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

“What Nike has done for Muslim athletes is a dream that we never thought would happen.”⁶⁵ As I have outlined, sports hijab had already been ‘invented’, but Nike’s production of a sports hijab solved the problem of access and availability; Nike was not the first but they were the biggest company and most recognizable brand to create such a product. Muhammad is referenced as saying “I only had a few that I used for training and hadn’t been able to find that particular style anymore,” which implies use of other non-traditional hijabs that worked better for sport before, but she did not explicitly name the existence of other sports hijabs.

The Pro Hijab made a splash not only as a retail object, but as a fashion one. It made its first appearance at a Dubai fashion runway in Mashaal Alrajhi’s Spring 2018 show; it also had a fashion cover moment in *Allure*’s July Cover with Halima Aden, another Muslim first. *Vogue Arabia* reported that the entire crowd pulled out their iPhones to capture the “momentous moment” when the Pro Hijab appeared at the Saudi designer’s runway.⁶⁶ Many Muslim women have noted that the Pro Hijab is not a particularly stylish object, nor universally flattering, but it was still taken into fashion spaces immediately after it was released as a statement piece. Its popularity in fashion spaces reflects the cumulative effect of novelty, inclusion, and brand power.

Conclusion

In January 2022, *Vogue France* published a photo on Instagram of model Julia Fox wearing a small scarf, folded into a triangle and tied below her chin, with the caption “yes to the headscarf.” Even though *Vogue France* would come to edit the caption, erasing these words

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Khaoula Ghanem, “The Nike Pro Hijab Makes Its International Runway Debut at Fashion Forward,” *Vogue Arabia*, October 29, 2017, <https://en.vogue.me/fashion/nike-pro-hijab-fashion-forward/>.

without acknowledgment, it would remain as a sticky psychic residue for Muslim women who called attention to this as part of a growing paradox whereby Muslims are excluded from rights by the state, but increasingly granted recognition through neoliberal fashion and retail markets. Similarly, Cardi B appeared in France at Paris Fashion Week in 2019 wearing an ensemble designed by Richard Quinn that covered every inch of her body and face in bright patterned fabric, generating a similar discourse around the permissibility of these coverings in the name of fashion for others, but never for Muslim women. Yemeni-Lebanese stylist Mona Haidar said in a Twitter thread referencing the “Islamification of High Fashion,” that,

Ironically, our religious practices become commodified and praised across society and only accepted through their distancing of Islam. / The cognitive dissonance lies therein, it’s “yes to the headscarf,” while the hijab or niqab is deemed as the “oppressive” cultural contestant. The French hijab bans that started in 2004 and its recent developments, show this criminalisation. / As the realm of Muslimesque Fashion expands and continues to thrive across fashion houses, this leaves us wondering, what was ever so threatening about a Muslim woman having authority over her body?⁶⁷

France has a particularly vexed relationship with Muslims and the veil. Colonial encounters like those in Algeria (France’s failed settler state) haunt the modern nation’s corpus because the veil was successfully instrumentalized for revolutionary action by the National Liberation Front (FLN). The persistent production of Muslims as threats by the state is recently challenged through the incorporation of Muslim women into fashion and retail. This is read as its own threat. Laurence Rossignol, France’s minister for families, children, and women’s rights, argued

⁶⁷ mona 🌙 [@monaandthemoon], “The Islamification of High Fashion Words by Me Edited by @heyhibaq <https://t.co/EfzEjced06>,” Tweet, *Twitter*, February 4, 2022, <https://twitter.com/monaandthemoon/status/1489679638632845313>.

in a radio interview in 2016 that social control over women's bodies was at stake because of modest fashion: "When brands invest in this Islamic garment market, they are shirking their responsibilities and are promoting women's bodies being locked up."⁶⁸ Cofounder of Yves Saint Laurent Pierre Bergé echoed this when he "publicly accused designers who create pious fashion of encouraging the enslavement of women."⁶⁹ Such anti-Muslim discourse reproduces old and tired Orientalist tropes, and also affirms, as Ong argues, that global capitalism does not end political sovereignty; political sovereignty is not canceled out by capitalist might but interacts with it in peculiar ways.⁷⁰ France is still holding onto the tenets of French republicanism—defined by universalism which "insists that sameness is the basis for equality" and *laïcité*, secularism defined "through the state's protection of individuals *from* the claims of religion"⁷¹—at the expense of Muslims.

France is not yielding to the normalization of Muslim women happening through circuits of global capitalism, to the point that even the Nike Pro Hijab was pulled from French Decathlon stores after Olympian and Nike athlete Ibtihaj Muhammad criticized French attitudes on hijab.⁷² Before traveling to tour the country, she tweeted,

It's hard to believe in 2019, people are still trying to tell women what they can can't [sic] wear. Please know the bigotry and Islamophobia we face in this world will never break us. PERIOD. See you this weekend Paris! I'll be in my @Nike pro hijab every damn day.⁷³

⁶⁸ Bucar, *Pious Fashion*, 196.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ong, "Powers of Sovereignty."

⁷¹ Joan Wallach Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 12, 15 (emphasis added).

⁷² "Nike Star Muhammad Attacks French Attitude to Sports Hijab," France 24, March 12, 2019,

<https://www.france24.com/en/20190312-nike-star-muhammad-attacks-french-attitude-sports-hijab>.

⁷³ Ibtihaj Muhammad [@IbtihajMuhammad], "It's Hard to Believe in 2019, People Are Still Trying to Tell Women What They Can Can't Wear. Please Know the Bigotry and Islamophobia We Face in This World Will Never Break Us. PERIOD. See You This Weekend Paris! I'll Be in My @Nike pro Hijab Every Damn Day 🙏🏽" <https://t.co/OZhzVNbp11>, Tweet, *Twitter*, March 3, 2019, <https://twitter.com/IbtihajMuhammad/status/1102292639427178496>.

It is interesting to think about how a US Muslim, treated as a multicultural global citizen and granted relative privilege through her relationship to Nike and the state—not only as an Olympian but a sports ambassador for the US Department of State’s Empower Women and Girls through Sport Initiative—jeopardized access to the Pro Hijab for those French Muslim women who are not privileged in the same way. Instances like this with the Nike Pro Hijab are good examples of how certain Muslims are taken up and privileged in the racialized order of neoliberalism’s differentiated citizenship. The bigotry and Islamophobia “we” face does not impact all Muslims in the same way.

The pulling of the Nike Pro Hijab from French stores after Muhammad made political statements is only one of many examples of how any assertion of an informed Muslim perspective exceeds the bounds of acceptable Muslim inclusion. Model Amena Khan stepped down from her L’Oréal Paris campaign after her 2014 tweets denouncing Israel surfaced online and caused a stir.⁷⁴ In a statement posted on her Instagram, Khan expressed sincere apology over her statements which she said detracted from “the positive and inclusive statement that [the L’Oréal Paris campaign] set out to deliver.”⁷⁵ The L’Oréal Paris U.K. spokesperson also released a statement in which they agreed with her decision to step down. Even by way of feeling, recognizing the artifice of neoliberal multiculturalism causes Muslim firsts to step out of representation. Supermodel Halima Aden quit the fashion industry in November 2020, expressing that the fashion industry was exploitative and made her feel like she had to compromise her religious practice. She shared,

⁷⁴ Isis Briones, “Amena Khan’s Decision to Step Down From Her L’Oréal Campaign Is Causing Controversy,” *Teen Vogue*, January 22, 2018, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/amena-khan-steps-down-loreal-paris-campaign-controversial-tweets>.

⁷⁵ Briones, “Amena Khan’s Decision to Step Down From Her L’Oréal Campaign Is Causing Controversy.”

The last two years, I trusted the team on set to do my hijab and that's when I ran into problems... like jeans being placed on my head in place of a regular scarf. The way they styled it, I was so far removed from my own image. My hijab kept shrinking and got smaller and smaller with each shoot.⁷⁶

In this way, Aden recognized the dissonance between her inclusion as a Muslim woman and the emptying out of Islam from her representation. She was affirmed and embraced as diversity, but only on the aesthetic level. Needing or wanting her hijab to look a certain way interrupted the particular representations of difference that were desired by people styling her for neoliberal markets. Jodi Melamed offers that liberal multiculturalism contains and manages social movements' deployment of culture "by turning it into aesthetics, identity, recognition, and representation."⁷⁷ The hijab has been commodified such that it has been adopted as a shorthand visual signifier of difference and emptied of any religious or personal meaning.

Nike claims it took on the Pro Hijab to solve a problem and advance inclusion in sport. The "elaborate exercises in hypocrisy and artifice" Banet-Weiser and Mukherjee name as central to commodity activism is emphasized best by the contradiction between the illusion generated by neoliberal multiculturalism and corporations' labor practices. Multiculturalism is deployed for neoliberalism to make inclusion into the market appear just but obscures the racial antagonisms and inequalities the market depends on.⁷⁸ Nike is lauded for creating narratives of empowerment and it also has an abysmal track record of using third world sweatshop labor. At the same time that Nike is praised for including Muslim women, they were accused by the Australian Strategic

⁷⁶ Priya Elan, "'Fashion Can Be Very Exploitative' – Halima Aden on Why She Quit Modelling," *The Guardian*, July 21, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2021/jul/22/fashion-can-be-very-exploitative-halima-aden-on-why-she-quit-modelling>.

⁷⁷ Melamed, *Represent and Destroy*, xx.

⁷⁸ Melamed, "The Spirit of Neoliberalism," 1.

Police Institute of using forced labor by young Uyghur women in Chinese factories.⁷⁹ The ongoing genocide of Uyghur Muslims in China makes this particularly appalling. Whole swaths of people are alienated from the realities of this labor, or that alienation makes recognition of those conditions inconsequential. People buy into Nike's messages and buy and wear their products to reflect something about their own political alignment—that they affirm the message that Nike is putting out about who should be supported through inclusion. Neoliberalism is a formation in which the state and market interact with our aspiration for rights, recognition, inclusion, and ultimately, the power of neoliberal multiculturalism rests in its ability to make justice-oriented rhetoric and imagery more potent and important than justice itself.

⁷⁹ Amelia Pang, "The China Challenge: The Stain of Forced Labor on Nike Shoes," Discourse, January 5, 2022, <https://www.discoursemagazine.com/economics/2022/01/05/the-china-challenge-the-stain-of-forced-labor-on-nike-shoes/>.

CHAPTER 4

“For Muslim girls like us:” Fandom and Muslim Representation in the Norwegian Teen Drama *Skam*

In April 2017, writer and director Julie Andem announced that season four of the popular Norwegian teen drama, *Skam* (“Shame”), would be the final one of the series and fans were heartbroken.¹ *Skam* had become a shocking international success in the mere two years since the show’s debut in 2015. It ranked as Norway’s most-watched web series in the country’s history² and its reach transcended national borders thanks to fans who translated and subtitled the Norwegian media content (also known as fansubbers). The series followed a group of high school students at the real Hartvig Nissen School in Oslo, Norway where each season captured a different character’s home and school life through their perspective. The fourth and final season turned the spotlight onto Sana Bakkoush, a hijab-wearing Muslim girl whose insight, quick wit, and loyalty made her recurring character a fan-favorite. The novelty of this character was marked by two important factors: Sana was the first visibly Muslim woman character in Western media to play a starring role in her own season, and she was played by Norway’s first hijab-wearing actress, Iman Meskini. *Skam* is marked by a number of Muslim firsts in these ways. Sana’s character resonated with many Muslim women viewers who felt like they were seeing someone

¹ “@julieandem • Instagram Photos and Videos,” accessed August 26, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BSILwkQlwQY/>.

² Boyd van Hoeij, “The Norwegian Teen-Drama Series Loved Around the World,” *The Atlantic*, June 29, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/06/the-norwegian-teen-drama-series-loved-around-the-world/532008/>.

who looked like them onscreen for the first time, and whose story and personality felt so remarkably like their own. Writing about Sana’s significance for BuzzFeed, Mariam Ansar shared, “My housemates and I cheered at her entrance, at her visibly Muslim, take-me-or-leave-me, casual, complex glory. It’s unquestionable, watching her walk down the street with her girl gang... she is what we didn’t know we were waiting for. She is what we didn’t know we could have.”³ Sana was “for Muslim girls like us.”⁴

How can we understand the significance of Sana Bakkoush and *Skam* for Muslim women viewership? Ansar’s celebration of Sana as something she did not know was possible is a reminder of the absence of substantive, relatable, visibly Muslim women in Western media portrayals. It also reflects the affective attachments viewers make when they feel represented. Many Muslim *Skam* fans felt a sense of ownership over the character because of their shared identities, and this was evidenced through their interactions with Sana’s story and with other non-Muslim fans on Tumblr. In this chapter, I show how their fannish engagements elucidate why this show’s Muslim character is so meaningful and how that meaning consequently burdened Sana’s season with an expectation to counteract a longer history of damaging media representations of Muslims.

In his groundbreaking texts on pre-internet fans and fandom, Henry Jenkins identified fandom as a “highly dynamic and innovative space” inspired by fascination and adoration, and sometimes antipathy.⁵ He names it as, “first and foremost, an institution of theory and criticism, a semistructured space where competing interpretations and evaluations of common texts are

³ Mariam Ansar, “How Watching ‘Skam’ Made Me Feel Seen,” BuzzFeed, accessed December 30, 2019, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/mariamansar/how-watching-skam-made-me-feel-seen>.

⁴ Ansar, “How Watching ‘Skam’ Made Me Feel Seen.”

⁵ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2013), xx; Camille Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992).

proposed, debated, and negotiated and where readers speculate about the nature of the mass media and their own relationship to it.”⁶ This reading of fandom negates fans as mere consumers and emphasizes their ability to produce alternative readings which interpret and appropriate symbols in different terms and for various purposes. In this chapter, I reveal how fan labor propelled *Skam* into the international arena and how it influenced the show’s production and reception, arguing that these fans’ work amplified the impact of the series. Further, I examine the affective dimensions of Muslim fandom whose engagements across the social media site Tumblr worked as cultural criticism, revealing how their appropriation of Sana’s character produced readings distinct from the show’s scripts and other fans’ readings. I argue that their disavowal of certain character traits and storylines as correct or inauthentic and unrealistic (re)assert parameters of what it means to be a Muslim woman.

Making the *Skam* Universe

Julie Andem was hired by Norway’s public broadcaster, NRK, to create a show targeting 16-year-old girls in order to attract a younger audience to the channel. She and her team conducted months of research into the lives and youth culture of Norway’s teenagers in order to develop a show that felt uniquely Norwegian and that would quickly grab their attention. They found that these teens were feeling pressure to perform in school, at home, and with friends; Andem created *Skam* in an effort to take away that pressure. By focusing on the intimate, real life problems these teens were facing, and those experiences that often induce great feelings of shame, Andem was able to make her target audience (and many others) feel seen in a way that was both regionally specific and generally universal. It is not surprising that *Skam*’s attempt to address and build

⁶ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 86.

stories around the feeling of shame ended up pulling in a wider audience. Researcher and author Brené Brown wrote that mounting empirical evidence on shame's importance has led people to describe the feeling as "'the master emotion of everyday life' (Scheff, 2003) and 'the preeminent cause of emotional distress in our time (Karen, as cited in Trout, 2000).'"⁷ Her extensive research on shame shows people conceptualize the feeling in these terms:

'An intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging.' Participants described shame using terms including *devastating, noxious, consuming, excruciating, filleted, small, separate from others, rejected, diminished, and the worst feeling ever*. In defining shame, participants contrasted shame with *guilt*, which they defined or described as a feeling that results from *behaving* in a flawed or bad way rather than a flawed or bad *self*.⁸

Across its four seasons, *Skam* covered teen experiences with poor self-esteem, toxic relationships, eating disorders and mental illness, sexuality, cyber bullying, and religion. Friendships and romantic relationships functioned to both complicate and alleviate the shame and pressure Andem's characters were feeling throughout their seasons, with characters hiding parts of themselves they felt ashamed of before finally opening up and finding relief in being heard, seen, and accepted. *Skam* continually emphasized that people need people,⁹ and that even though it sometimes feels like it, no one is ever alone.¹⁰

The tagline "alt er love" ("everything is love"), came to define the show worldwide after season three propelled *Skam*'s reach beyond Norway's borders. The love story of Isak Valtersen

⁷ Brené Brown, "Shame Resilience Theory: A Grounded Theory Study on Women and Shame," *Families in Society* 87, no. 1 (March 2006): 43–52.

⁸ Brown, "Shame Resilience Theory," 45.

⁹ "Skam, Season 2, Episode 10, English Subtitles - Video Dailymotion," Dailymotion, accessed September 7, 2019, <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x6gjh2l>.

¹⁰ "Skam, Season 4, Episode 10, English Subtitles - Video Dailymotion," Dailymotion, accessed September 4, 2019, <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x6kp1nu>.

and Even Bech Næsheim captured audiences who watched Isak come to terms with his sexuality after finding himself falling for an older boy, Even, whom audiences later discover has bipolar disorder. Their queer love story resonated with many as the season swiftly made rounds across LGBTQ+ networks online¹¹; the couple were even voted “TV Couple of the Year” by readers of the American website, *E! Online* in March 2017.¹² *Skam* was only able to reach those readers of *E! Online* and achieve its cult-like status outside of Norway by virtue of its distribution model and the voluntary work of multilingual fans.

Andem’s research found that teens were more likely to watch videos online than tune into traditional television programming. The series released small video clips on NRK’s P3 website throughout the week in real time. If a scene took place on a Tuesday at 11:35 am, the clip would be uploaded on that day and time with four to six clips later combined and aired on linear TV that Friday. Alongside these clips, the P3 website posted characters’ text messages, group chats, and Facebook events, and also gave characters live Instagram accounts that fans could follow. These supplements were not critical to understanding the seasons’ main storylines but gave them more depth and allowed fans to glimpse these characters’ digital worlds and immerse themselves in their lives as they would a real friend (or, “Friend”). Approaches like these, which integrated social media and crafted storylines in real time, make *Skam* an exemplar of transmedia storytelling. Cultural anthropologist Mizuko Ito argues that transnational cultural flow is being dictated by a growing force of technological privilege and online leadership.¹³ The burgeoning popularity of Korean dramas and K-Pop transnationally is coupled with South Korea’s status as

¹¹ Anna Leszkiewicz, “Skam: How a Cult Teen Drama Has Fans Invading Sets, Stalking Characters’ Instagrams and Learning Norwegian,” *New Statesman America*, April 4, 2017, <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/tv-radio/2017/04/skam-how-cult-teen-drama-has-fans-invading-sets-stalking-characters>.

¹² “This Is «Skam»,” NRK, April 7, 2017, <https://www.nrk.no/presse/programtaler/everything-you-need-to-know-about-skam-1.13465189>.

¹³ Mizuko Ito, Daisuke Okabe, and Izumi Tsuji, *Fandom Unbound: Otaku Culture in a Connected World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/umichigan/detail.action?docID=3420822>.

one of the most wired countries in the world, exemplifying how popular culture is intimately intertwined with online and mobile networks—especially those working peer-to-peer.¹⁴ NRK’s strategic use of the internet and social media was critical to setting *Skam* apart from other web series and traditional television around the globe; the innovation of its distribution model showed a mastered understanding of how teens engage with the internet and this mastery primed it for its transnational reach. Ultimately, it was multilingual fans who enabled it to cross borders. It is these very fandoms that make texts remarkable.

No official site or entity tied to NRK offered translations of the Norwegian scripts; fansubbers were the ones who took up the task of translating and disseminating subtitled video clips, text posts, and captions for international viewership, uploading them to public-facing platforms like Google Drive, YouTube, Dailymotion, Tumblr, and more. Watching *Skam* outside of Norway was an experience reliant on crowdsourced fan labor. In her analysis of fansubbing in participatory media fandom, Hye-Kyung Lee argues that fan-translation and distribution contributes to the bottom-up spread of culture across geographic and linguistic borders.¹⁵ Traditional culture industries have regulations around mass distribution which involve copyright as a key means to maintaining their control. The NRK P3 website initially streamed *Skam* for free all over the world, but the Norwegian site’s content was eventually geoblocked due to music license contracts. Even though authorized streaming is territorially and technologically bounded for reasons like these, the mediation and borderless mobility of fansubs whose reach and speed exceeds that of traditional culture industries cannot be subdued.¹⁶ This independent enterprise

¹⁴ Ito, Okabe, Tsuji, *Fandom Unbound*.

¹⁵ Hye-Kyung Lee, “Participatory Media Fandom: A Case Study of Anime Fansubbing,” *Media, Culture & Society* 33, no. 8 (November 2011): 1131–47, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443711418271>.

¹⁶ Lee, “Participatory Media Fandom,” 1144.

not only enables access to a foreign cultural product and the collective knowledge that contextualizes it, but also adds new layers to the original products.¹⁷

Beyond simple translating, fansubbers must also offer the adequate knowledge needed to access the *meaning* in the scripts. The incorporation of asterisks with more information or brackets alongside narrative subtitles enabled English-speaking viewers to have a fuller and more complete understanding of the text. Fansubbers' critical additions set the scene and the tone, inviting non-Norwegian viewers into a culture familiar but distinct from their own. For example, these critical additions allowed fans to learn that characters were laughing in delight because something they had said rhymed in Norwegian, or that a word hurled at the Muslim character was a slur used specifically against Middle Eastern and North African people. Fans who subtitled *Skam* rendered the Norwegian show accessible to those unfamiliar with the language and customs not only on the level of language, but culture and taste. While this may connote a shift of power to the hands of the fans, new media companies are capitalizing on their participation.¹⁸ Technology and social media scholar danah boyd offers that while some cultural critics reject participatory culture as capitalistic because of how fans influence profit, they fail to see the cultural logics that underpin fans' participation in the first place—whether those be for personal, educational, political, or social reasons.¹⁹ Fansubbed content was free and open to the public, initiating the development of localized fandoms. It was love for the series that instigated fansubbers' labor and while they did not stand to profit, the development of avid fan consumers elsewhere inspired multiple countries to buy the show's rights from NRK. Multiple adaptations

¹⁷ Ibid., 1136-1137.

¹⁸ Henry Jenkins, Mizuko Itō, and danah boyd, *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era: A Conversation on Youth, Learning, Commerce, and Politics* (Cambridge ; Malden: Polity Press, 2015), 9.

¹⁹ Jenkins, Itō, and boyd, *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era*, 9.

and remakes were produced in Italy, France, Germany, Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands, and the United States with more potentially to come.²⁰

When there are multiple (re)productions of an original text like *Skam*, fandoms often identify these stories as existing in the same ‘universe.’²¹ The seven reproductions of Norway’s *Skam* make up the ‘*Skam* universe’ because each adaptation uses Andem’s stories and characters as the template for their own. Some remakes took more liberties to cater to their nation’s teen culture than others, but the core remained the same even amid those changes. Every season of *Skam* was similarly formulated; the plots involved some major upheaval in a romantic relationship—both those budding relationships (seasons 2-4) or those already established (season 1)—that cause the season’s main character to feel shame or exacerbate shame they already felt. The central themes that informed that feeling of shame, however, varied across seasons. On the official NRK website, it describes each season’s central theme, noting that Sana’s spotlights “cross-cultural identity and inner struggle.”²² Many fan engagements with Sana’s character and season were from those who could relate to her struggles, and their care for her story are the focus of this chapter.

Andem and NRK worked with focus groups while building the series’ core characters. One group included ten or so girls with Muslim backgrounds who were asked to discuss their experiences in Norway. What they said revealed disdain for the longstanding tropes and narratives used to characterize Muslims in Western media programming and their desire to move past them. One girl, Sofia Nesrine Srour, communicated to the group that she did not want Sana’s season to be “yet another contribution to the exhausting debate on Islam,” but rather

²⁰ “International Versions,” Skam Wiki, accessed August 26, 2019, https://skam.fandom.com/wiki/International_Versions.

²¹ For example, a commonly known or referenced media ‘universe’ is the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), which references the characters and storylines weaved together across all Marvel movies and distinguishes them from those in the Marvel comics.

²² “This Is «Skam»,” NRK, April 7, 2017, <https://www.nrk.no/presse/programtaler/everything-you-need-to-know-about-skam-1.13465189>.

wanted to see Sana depicted as a full person.²³ There is rarely representation of Muslims in Western media that engages their many facets of identity and experience. Srour was seeking a representation where Sana’s Muslim identity was implied but not the main focus or plot. *Skam*’s producer, Mari Magnus, shared that Sana’s character was created after a seventeen-year-old girl shared her frustration that everyone around her assumed Muslim girls were suppressed. She conveyed that she wanted to see a Muslim girl who was independent and who balanced her religious and non-religious life; Magnus said, “basically Sana is created to cover this girls’ needs.”²⁴

Muslim Media Representation and *Skam*

While there has been a steady increase in Muslim representation in Western entertainment media—in both reality television and fictional series²⁵—popular television in the United States specifically has predominantly centered the images and narratives of Muslim men. Moreover, the fictive media created by Muslims that become popular and have widespread success in the US are those autobiographical in nature; comedy series like *Master of None* and *Ramy*, and Hollywood movies like *The Big Sick*, are all written by Muslim men and center their lived experiences in the United States. Muslim men like Aziz Ansari,²⁶ Kumail Nanjiani, and Ramy Youssef successfully created stories that received numerous accolades, but that very content often lacks equal representation of Muslim, Arab, and South Asian women, if they were shown at all. The absence of Muslim women has been a pervasive trope in Western media, such that

²³ Trey Taylor, “Two Young Muslims Discuss How *Skam* Portrays Islam,” *Dazed*, May 16, 2017, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/35931/1/two-young-muslims-discuss-how-skam-portrays-islam>.

²⁴ thickskinandelastichheart, “Control Your Hoes ~,” Tumblr, September 14, 2017, <https://thickskinandelastichheart.tumblr.com/post/165331613414/some-characters-are-actually-based-on-the>.

²⁵ See Evelyn Alsultany, *Broken: The Failed Promise of Muslim Inclusion* (New York: New York University Press, 2022).

²⁶ While Aziz Ansari does not identify as Muslim, his show directly relates to his experience growing up as a South Asian American Muslim in the United States and being raised in a Muslim family.

anthropologist Nadine Naber argues that their “absence from male spaces creates the idea of Arab-Middle Eastern-Muslim women’s secondary social status compared to white American women who transgress male spaces.”²⁷ Muslim male writers frequently reproduce a comparable logic by centering white women in their protagonist’s stories. Their constant presence, often as the romantic or sexual partner, reinforces the idea that white women are the telos of desirability and femininity. Muslim, Arab and South Asian women are painted as alternatives, the least desirable choice, and/or as they whom the Muslim male protagonist must tread around carefully.

This is not to say that all Muslims receive these stories or characters in this way. In fact, many Muslim men and women felt these representations were refreshing and relevant to their own experiences.²⁸ Others, however, felt that the gendered dynamics reproducing Muslim women’s absence or one-dimensionality not only replicated Orientalist tropes but anointed them with supposed authenticity and rehashed the trope of brown men’s preference for white women.²⁹ In other words, even Muslim men find their women unenviable. The parade of South

²⁷ Nadine Naber, “Ambiguous Insiders: An Investigation of Arab American Invisibility,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 23, no. 1 (January 2000): 45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/014198700329123>.

²⁸ See Angana Narula, “Norway’s SKAM Is Making History: It’s Telling the Stories We Never Hear,” *gal-dem*, October 18, 2017, <https://gal-dem.com/norways-skam-is-making-history/>; Amil Niazi, “‘Master of None’s’ Religion Episode Is the Most Honest Portrayal of Modern Islam on TV,” *Vice*, May 18, 2017, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/d7ae9a/master-of-ones-religion-episode-is-the-most-honest-portrayal-of-modern-islam-on-tv>; Negin Farsad, “Master of None’s nuanced portrayal of Muslim life is a refreshing change,” *The Guardian*, May 16, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2017/may/16/master-of-none-muslim-life-aziz-ansari-netflix>; Gazelle Emami, “There’s Never Been a Show Like *Ramy*,” *Vulture*, April 19, 2019, <https://www.vulture.com/2019/04/ramy-hulu-series-ramy-youssef-on-set.html>; Samir Abady, “Hulu’s terrific new series *Ramy* is the show I wish I’d had growing up as a Muslim American,” *Fast Company*, April 18, 2019, <https://www.fastcompany.com/90334791/hulus-terrific-new-series-ramy-is-the-show-i-wish-id-had-growing-up-as-a-muslim-american>; Julia Ismail, “How ‘*Ramy*’ captures the internal struggle of the millennial Muslim,” *Kulture Hub*, May 2, 2019, <https://kulturehub.com/ramy-struggle-millennial-muslim/>; Wahajat Ali, “I Wish I’d Had ‘*Ramy*’ When I Was a Kid,” *The New York Times*, June 9, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/09/opinion/ramy-Youssef-muslim-representation.html>.

²⁹ Zeinab Khalil, “11 Reasons Why ‘*Ramy*’ Doesn’t Deserve a Second Season,” *Wear Your Voice*, August 12, 2019, <https://wearyourvoicemag.com/entertainment-culture/hulu-ramy-muslim-tropes>. See also, Sana Ali, “*Master of None* has a Muslim women problem,” *Varsity*, November 17, 2017, <https://www.varsity.co.uk/features/14073>; Suad Patton-Bey, “Opinion: ‘*Ramy*’ highlights the double standards of Muslim men,” *The Daily Mississippian*, April 25, 2019, <https://thedmonline.com/opinion-ramy-highlights-the-standards-of-muslim-men/>; Hadley Freeman, “The Big Sick is funny, sweet, original – so why did it leave me furious?” *The Guardian*, July 15, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/global/2017/jul/15/the-big-sick-funny-sweet-original-leave-me-furious>; Aisha Mirza, “The Big Sick’s disgusting treatment of women of color illuminates the violence of ‘colorblind’ love,” *RaceBaitr*, November 28, 2017, <https://racebaitr.com/2017/11/28/big-sicks-disgusting-treatment-women-color-illuminates-violence-colorblind-love/>; Imran Siddiquee, “Why Are Brown Men So Infatuated With White Women Onscreen?” *BuzzFeed News*, June 24, 2017, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/imransiddiquee/why-are-brown-men-so-infatuated-with-white-women-onscreen>; and

Asian women introduced to Kumail Nanjiani for the purpose of marriage in *The Big Sick* are used as the foil that make the love-interest, Emily, even more enticing. These South Asian women were caricatured as marriage-obsessed with thick, put-on accents, denying them the nuance granted to Emily.³⁰ These depictions invest in and reaffirm the notion that white women are different in profound and important ways from Muslim women. Often then, when Muslim women are represented in mainstream Western media, it is not by the grace of Muslim writers or showrunners in the US.³¹

When female Muslim characters are added to popular Western shows, they are often made to wear a scarf to signal Muslimness, and they are often only written in for one episode or as recurring characters whose plot at some point revolves around their religion and more specifically, their headscarf. Maybe her hijab gets ripped off in a moment of anti-Muslim violence; maybe she takes her scarf off to make a tourniquet for a medical emergency like in *Grey's Anatomy*; maybe it falls off in the midst of action like in *911: Lone Star*; maybe she takes her scarf off for her male love interest like in *Elite*, *The Romanoffs*, and *Waterloo Road*; and maybe it is not a major plot point at all, but she takes it off as a gesture toward a sort of realism. In the Canadian show *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, the central female character Rayyan is depicted as coming home and taking her scarf off. This is true to the life of Muslim women who would not wear the scarf at home around family, but this action written into a show or movie, also always necessitates having an actress who does not wear hijab in her day-to-day life.

Aditi Natasha Kini, "I'm Tired of Watching Brown Men Fall in Love With White Women Onscreen," *Jezebel*, July 6, 2017, <https://jezebel.com/i-m-tired-of-watching-brown-men-fall-in-love-with-white-1796522590>.

³⁰ Amil Niazi, "'The Big Sick' Is Great, and It's Also Stereotypical Toward Brown Women," *Vice*, July 7, 2017, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/zmvp3/i-really-liked-the-big-sick-but-please-let-brown-women-live>.

³¹ There have been shows created and written by Muslim women based *outside* the US which air on mainstream channels. These include the Canadian show *Little Mosque on the Prairie* by Zarqa Nawaz and the British show *We Are Lady Parts* by Nida Manzoor. For more on the CBC's *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, see Kyle Conway, *Little Mosque on the Prairie and the Paradoxes of Cultural Translation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017).

Because Iman Meskini wears a headscarf in her everyday life, *Skam* would depict Sana at home with a towel over her hair as though she had just gotten out of the shower.

The German *Skam* adaptation, *Druck* (“Pressure”), and Spain’s adaptation, *Skam España*, were the only other reproductions that cast a hijab-wearing, Muslim actress to play the Sana character.³² *Druck* cast Tua El-Fawwal to play Amira Mahmood whose season aired in 2019 and *Skam España* cast Hajar Brown as Amira Naybet whose season aired in 2020. In this chapter, I privilege an analysis of the original Norwegian *Skam* and use fans’ responses to and comparative readings of *Druck* to understand the confluence of fan labor and criticism in influencing subsequent *Skam* adaptations. El-Fawwal, like Iman Meskini, was the first hijab-wearing actress in her country, and *Druck*, like *Skam*, centered Amira’s life and perspective in the fourth (but not final) season. Having a practicing Muslim woman who wears hijab play that character means there are already boundaries around what the television character can and cannot do based on what the actress’s boundaries are. This simple provision ensures that certain tropes cannot be reproduced—most notably the one where a Muslim woman takes off her headscarf and disidentifies from Islamic or cultural norms to motion toward a newfound independence, liberation, or happiness. *Skam* and *Druck*’s unorthodox decisions to have Iman Meskini play Sana and Tua El-Fawwal play Amira, empowered practicing, visibly Muslim actresses to play practicing, visibly Muslim characters—a new figuration whose accommodation reimagines the limits and possibilities of storytelling, going beyond what has been available.

On the German podcast, *Gedankensalat* (“Ideasalat”), Tua El-Fawwal was interviewed by two Muslim women about her experience being the first hijab-wearing actress in Germany

³² Some other adaptations, as with *Skam Austin*, cast Muslim women actresses but those who do not wear a headscarf in their day-to-day life like the character they played in the show. Casting a Muslim to play a Muslim in and of itself is new and important, but this chapter focuses on those actresses who are unable or unwilling to unveil on screen by virtue of their own veiling practice—a veritable novelty in Western media representations.

and the roadblocks she faced by refusing to take off her headscarf. El-Fawwal shared that Pola Beck, the director of *Druck*, had written to various Islamic Associations across Germany seeking a hijab-wearing Muslim actress who could make the character authentic. Their dedication to the character and the actress was made more apparent when the production team downloaded the MuslimPro app to stay on top of prayer times in consideration for El-Fawwal's schedule. After her initial success as Amira—a role that would win her a German Acting Award in 2020—she sought representation and interviewed with a casting agent who was enthusiastic about welcoming her to the agency. However, his enthusiasm was cut short after he sought to confirm that she would take off her headscarf for other roles. When she answered that she would not, he said that drama and the headscarf “just do not fit together,” and that “he’s been in this industry for over 20 years—he has never seen it happen and it will never happen.”³³ Subsequently, he told her if she hoped to be successful in a headscarf, she should go back to Egypt because “wearing a headscarf to become an actress is just as futile as a long-distance runner with an operated leg.”³⁴ This hateful statement is a double offense against visibly Muslim women and disabled people. Such a story emphasizes *Skam* and *Druck* as exceptional productions for their casting decisions. However, as cultural studies scholars Ella Shohat and Robert Stam write, “‘realistic’ casting is hardly sufficient if narrative structure and cinematic strategies remain Eurocentric.”³⁵ Muslim fans would also note this in their reflections on the season—that even if the actresses’ own Islamic practice shapes the role and guides the possibilities available for storytelling, it does not negate the fact that she is still not the one writing and directing it.

³³ Ervanur Yilmaz and Delal Noori, “018-Hollywood Hijabi: Authentisches Kopftuch Im TV,” *Gedankensalat*, August 2019. Podcast, website, 49:00. <https://open.spotify.com/episode/5dWKACacBBB8peYPx14CJc>. This podcast was translated for me by Duygu Ergun.

³⁴ Yilmaz and Noori, “018-Hollywood Hijabi.”

³⁵ Shohat and Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, 190.

Skam and *Druck*'s fourth seasons examine these Muslim girls' experience of being the cultural and religious other and do so through examining their intimate relationships with friends, family, and budding romantic interests, and their experiences with anti-Muslim racism. In what follows, I investigate a specific interpretive community whose fannish investments are with Sana and Amira's stories because they see them as meaningfully "authentic" and "realistic." Shohat and Stam argue that, "Debates about ethnic representation often break down on precisely this question of 'realism,' at times leading to an impasse in which diverse spectators or critics passionately defend their version of the 'real.'"³⁶ Such "contingent, qualified, perspectival truths in which communities are invested,"³⁷ reveal themselves in fans' interactions with the series and its other fans, resulting in particular definitions of what it means to be and act as a Muslim woman. Some female Muslim viewers found certain aesthetics and gestures were made meaningful through their familiarity with them, marking Sana and Amira as 'real.' In witnessing Sana spread herself between two cultures, Ansar again shared on BuzzFeed,

The loneliness of that position, occasionally flickering into view on her face, silenced me and my housemates. In those moments, the girl on the screen shared our familiar exile, searching for a place to belong... She feels, I realised while hearing her voice her insecurities and wondering if she'll ever be 'Muslim enough', 'Norwegian enough', 'pretty enough', 'cool enough', like me. And then my housemate said the same thing. And my sister had been saying it for a while. So had so many voices on the internet.³⁸

The affects and meanings poached from *Skam* and Sana's season were taken up again in fan's encounters with the German remake; Amira's season paralleled Sana's in many ways but

³⁶ Ibid., 178.

³⁷ Ibid., 179.

³⁸ Ansar, "How Watching 'Skam' Made Me Feel Seen."

there were points of departure from the original narrative that some fans saw as ‘corrective’ to Sana’s season’s ‘mistakes’ detailed below. Fans’ responses to these texts were often comparative readings between the two series and also against other representations of Muslims in Western media. Their love for these characters was often implied in commentary that was otherwise outwardly critical. Such vigilance regarding authenticity, mistakes, and the like reveal a structure of feeling wherein fans identify *Skam* and *Druck* as both disruptive to tropes of gendered Muslim representation and beholden to them. I invoke cultural theorist Raymond Williams’s term here to gesture towards how fans are reading this representation amid increased Muslim visibility in Western media. In his seminal essay, Williams writes that “the emergence of a new structure of feeling is best related to the rise of a class (England, 1700-1760); at other times to contradiction, fracture, or mutation within a class (England, 1780-1830 or 1890-1930), when a formation appears to break away from its class norms, though it retains its substantial affiliation, and the tension is at once lived and articulated in radically new semantic figures.”³⁹ I argue the formulation of ‘the first’ Muslim woman so frequently named in Western media headlines since the mid-2010s—what I call Muslim firsts—is a new semantic figure who consistently reaffirms beliefs about who Muslim women are, what Muslim women do versus what they have traditionally done, and what limitations or allowances have enabled them to do so now. ‘The first’ is a numerical marker but it can also be assigned symbolic significance, and regularly is. Often, ‘the first’ has come to represent a ‘new’ Muslim woman who is empowered, feminist, capable, independent and individual—she is held in constant comparison to assumptions of the Muslim woman as someone who is understood as inherently oppressed by virtue of Islam or so-called Islamic patriarchy. Sana’s character is dissimilar from female Muslim characters that have

³⁹ Raymond Williams, “Structures of Feeling,” in *Structures of Feeling: Affectivity and the Study of Culture*, ed. Devika Sharma and Frederik Tygstrup (Boston: De Gruyter, Inc., 2015), 25.

been produced in and by Western media. However, even as this addition interrupts particular tropes, it does not automatically negate others.

In the following section, I outline the storylines that inspired the varied and often incongruent fan responses to Sana's (and Amira's) season that I further analyze. When I reference "fans" in the following sections, I am referencing a subset of the *Skam* universe's fandom found on Tumblr, and more specifically, those whose posts engage with Sana's character and season. Tumblr is highly accommodating to fan practices given its replicability, scalability, and searchability which allow fans to find and build community online through systems of return, recirculation, and transformative reworking vis-à-vis reblogging and liking, commenting, and tagging.⁴⁰ Tagging in particular has a way of hailing and limiting audiences; tagging can be used to both invite people into fandom or become exclusive to fandom (i.e. fans using tags that only other fans would know to search for). The fans whose textual engagements are surveyed in this chapter were found most often through their public tagging practice; many of these Tumblr users have blogs specifically dedicated to the series and its characters, and/or are those who regularly reblog *Skam* content, make their own text posts or submit comments on someone else's blog. Finding fans in this way minimizes my scope of engagement because not every Tumblr user has a tagging practice, and some may engage in tagging in alternative or unsearchable ways. Further, Tumblr affords users anonymity and identifying users' race, gender, ethnicity, religion, age, or nationality becomes impossible unless they divulge that information themselves. Because of this, I cannot offer a localized argument because I cannot easily identify a localized fandom bound by nation or religion. I most often rely on user self-identification to know if a fan is

⁴⁰ Bryce Renniger. "'Where I Can Be Myself... Where I Can Speak My Mind': Networked Counterpublics in a Polymedia Environment." *New Media & Society* 17, no. 9 (2014): 1513-29; and Louisa Ellen Stein, "Tumblr Fan Aesthetics," in *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*, ed. Suzanne Scott and Melissa A. Click (New York ; London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 86-97.

Muslim and prioritize their readings across the series to elicit insight into how these fans make texts meaningful.

Fannish Engagements with Season 4 of *Skam*

Sana Bakkoush is introduced to *Skam* audiences in episode three of the first season as someone interested in joining a russ bus. The russ, formally “russefeiring,” is a high school tradition in Norway that happens every spring when graduating students celebrate the end of classes. It often centers around themed party vans or buses that tour the country for a month. The celebration and rite of passage is notable for its debauchery, filled with drinking, partying, and pranks that students start planning early. The central girl group of the series—Vilde, Eva, Noora, Chris, and Sana—come together because they aim to plan for russ even though they are only in their first year. Introduced by Chris, Sana enters the scene wearing all black with her hijab pulled tightly around her face, her eyes darkened by black kohl and her lips stained with dark red lipstick. Sana’s sartorial choices throughout the series lend to the storylines themselves because the more closed off and less known she is, the darker her physical appearance is. In that first scene, her dark embodiment immediately situates her as an outsider—the religious Other. Her goth-like appearance completely contrasts Vilde’s blonde hair and subtle makeup, and her pale pink and beige outfit. She looks Sana up and down, startled and uncomfortable by her entrance. Looking back and forth between Chris and Sana, Vilde asks,

Uh, yeah... How do you know each other?

SANA: We met at a Ramadan program in the mosque

(Vilde pauses, eyes widening)

CHRIS: (bursts out in laughter) She’s joking. We have German together.

Vilde confirms again Sana’s interest in joining the bus before asking if Muslims are even allowed to do russ. Without missing a beat Sana responds sarcastically, “No, it’s punished by stoning.” The very casual but pointed sarcasm conjures a latent stereotype about Muslim conservatism and violence to the fore while emphasizing it as ridiculous and overdone. Later in that episode, at their first bus meeting, Sana summarizes her character’s plight and the awareness she holds about her world: “Hello?! I’m a Muslim girl in this white, faithless country. I’m the biggest loser of them all” (fig. 12). This moment is important for understanding Sana’s character generally but is especially important for understanding season four, its theme and the way that Sana understands herself and her place in Norway. In her season, viewers can peer beyond her ultra-confident, tough exterior and listen past her disaffected tone to see a girl who is vulnerable and insecure in her own way. “Sana is one of the most mysterious characters in the show,” Sofia Nesrine Srour said when interviewed on how *Skam* portrays Islam:

We all want to know what lies behind the strong appearance, what makes her so mature, how is she such a great leader, always backing up her girls and counselling them, fixing problems and taking care of her friends? I hope we get to see what lies beneath the surface, and we’re slowly getting to know her now... Sana is also more insecure than we thought... she’s clearly trying hard for people to take her seriously, because people have prejudice against her.⁴¹

⁴¹ Taylor, “Two Young Muslims Discuss How *Skam* Portrays Islam.”



Figure 12: Still from *Skam*, Season 01, Episode 03 via SKAM English on dailymotion.com

Sana's season peels back her layers and reveals how she never feels Muslim enough, or Norwegian enough, or Moroccan enough, or pretty enough.⁴² These things that make her feel inferior and shameful are most pronounced when Sana is placed in comparison with the girls around her. These emotions become particularly salient as she grapples with her feelings for a boy.

I. Yousana

It quickly becomes clear that Yousef Acar—introduced to viewers as Sana's brother's best friend—would be Sana's love interest as the camera captured visual excess of Yousef and Sana exchanging long glances and shy gazes in their first frames together. The fandom endearingly

⁴² "Skam, Season 4, Episode 8, English Subtitles - Video Dailymotion," Dailymotion, accessed September 3, 2019, <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x6kc6ho>.

shipped the two as “Yousana” as they witnessed the budding Muslim romance. (“Shipping” is a fan practice where fans will create a couple name for two characters they want to see in a relationship. This name is often created by merging their first or last names together. In this case, Yousef and Sana became “Yousana.”) Unlike the previous seasons, sex acts and physical intimacy were conspicuously absent from Yousana’s relationship. This type of Muslim romance defined by normative Islamic boundaries, which discourages physical intimacy and sex outside of marriage, is uncommon in Western media portrayals. Often, in contrast, Muslim women in headscarves are represented as asexual or assumed prudish, or sexualized and made into objects of fetish and subjects to conquer. Holding hands, kissing, or other familiar acts used to indicate mutual attraction or love were absent between Yousef and Sana. Still, sex, intimacy and desirability were topics that frequently saturated the dialogue and subtext. In season four’s very first clip, Sana enters a room where her four friends are sitting to find Vilde talking enthusiastically about the sex she and her boyfriend Magnus have. As Vilde drizzles ranch onto her pizza in a way that resembles the ejaculation of cum while simultaneously talking about cum, Sana snaps,

Don’t you have any boundaries for what it’s okay to share?

VILDE: What do you mean?

SANA: Do you have to share every detail of your sex life with Magnus?

VILDE: I understand that it’s difficult for you to listen to because you can’t have sex—

SANA: I can have sex, Vilde. I just choose not to.

VILDE: Yeah, I’m just saying that it’s okay if you get sexually frustrated.

SANA: I'm not sexually frustrated! It's not as if I go around thinking about boys and sex all the time and feel like I'm missing out. I just think that sex should be something nice between you and Magnus, and not the whole world.⁴³

The conversation is dropped there as Noora changes the topic to remedy the tension that quiets the room. Ironically, it is Noora in the next episode who turns to Sana at the end of a long rant about her boyfriend-maybe-ex-boyfriend and says, "You're lucky; You don't have to think about all this stuff—heartbreak and stuff." While Vilde had asserted an assumption about Sana's sexual repression, Noora assumed that because Sana had never openly shared that she had a crush, or romantic or sexual feelings, that she was content in singledom—a projection of what Alia Imtoul and Shakira Hussein call "the myth of the happy celibate."⁴⁴ Imtoul and Hussein identify those cultural discourses within minority Muslim communities wherein "virginity and female celibacy frequently conflate the virtue of refusing sexual encounters outside of marriage with happiness and satisfaction."⁴⁵ They argue that these discourses ultimately downplay if not negate Muslim women's sexual desires, trapping some women into performing said myth to avoid stigma, shame, and potential ostracism from their communities or families.

Vilde and Noora each assumed a particular sexual truth for their Muslim friend on the basis of her religious identity alone; they could not recognize the existence of Sana's tense relationship with "heartbreak and stuff" because it did not look like their own experience of it. Her friends do not see her checking her makeup in the mirror after hearing Yousef's voice in the other room or see her thirsting for him (just like they were), sizing him up and down while he pumped iron at the gym to the tune of Nelly's "Hot in Herre." The absence of her verbal

⁴³ "SKAM: 4.01 - Am I Late?," SKAM English, April 10, 2017, <https://skamenglish.tumblr.com/post/159412366361/skam-401-am-i-late>.

⁴⁴ Alia Imtoul and Shakira Hussein, "Challenging the Myth of the Happy Celibate: Muslim Women Negotiating Contemporary Relationships," *Contemporary Islam* 3, no. 1 (2009): 25–39.

⁴⁵ Imtoul and Hussein, "Challenging the Myth of the Happy Celibate," 25.

affirmation that she is a sexual being with desires like them, and because she moved through the same social spaces with them in markedly different ways (i.e. she would go to the same parties without drinking or hooking up), her relationship with “this stuff” was illegible to them. And it made her story illegible to some non-Muslim fans who did not understand why she and Yousef would not kiss or date in ways that felt familiar to them. Tumblr users shadwhunter and tragicallyphosphorescent both expressed frustration with the ways that non-Muslim *Skam* fans were reacting to this Muslim romance. tragicallyphosphorescent wrote:

On one hand you get the ridiculous people apparently thinking that muslims can't even have crushes and apparently all have arranged marriages and on the other hand you get people who try convince others that there exists a possibility that Sana could kiss or date or hook up or whatever. Please stop. That's not gonna happen. The writers are really respectful about Sana's character and religion and wouldn't make her go against the things she has made very clear.⁴⁶

Along the same lines, shadwhunter wrote,

Yo so wtf is up with y'all forcing the idea of Sana and Yousef dating? As many of us muslims on here have mentioned: dating is not allowed in Islam. But you guys keep on insisting that it will happen. Why can't you guys accept that not everything has to be in a western way? ... Is it so impossible for you to understand that love and relationships don't happen the same way all across the world.⁴⁷

tragicallyphosphorescent and shadwhunter are both responding to non-Muslim viewers' reactions to Yousana and their expressions of frustration extend into the realm of cultural critique

⁴⁶ tragicallyphosphorescent, “So Much of Me Is Made of What I Learned from You,” Tumblr, April 25, 2017, <https://tragicallyphosphorescent.tumblr.com/post/159973419358/they-way-some-non-muslim-skam-fans-are-handling>.

⁴⁷ shadwhunter, Tumblr, April 23, 2017, <https://mooselimcanuck.tumblr.com/post/159905006623/shadwhunter-yo-so-wtf-is-up-with-yall-forcing>.

as they attend to the power differential between Western narrative dominance and its representations of non-Western cultures. As American studies scholar Allison McCracken wrote, fans of color on Tumblr frequently critique when white fans' affective investments are at odd with their antiracist politics, and "their expressions of frustration point to the larger political stakes of such divisions and frequently solicit feelings of solidarity with other fans of color, who respond with their own examples."⁴⁸ The implicit references to non-Muslim *Skam* fans' unwillingness or inability to openly receive this distinct Muslim love story do the work of revealing how overt the Eurocentric gaze is. Through engagement across the fandom, fans worked to decenter the eurocentrism driving the narrative, visual and erotic impact of the season by calling attention to alternate epistemologies and ontologies.

However, in doing this, both Tumblr users were also enforcing parameters around what it means to be a practicing Muslim and dictating what is or is not permitted in Islam. shadwhunter gives absolutes and invokes the many other Muslims in fandom who emphasized that dating is *not* allowed in Islam. Their statement creates a binary that assumes certain behaviors and practices as endemic to one culture or hemisphere—as with dating being the “western way” for relationships. But Muslims in the real world and on television *do* date. And such Muslims are not only those in the West. tragicallyphosphorescent grounds their critique in the character's expression of religion, not necessarily the religion itself (though they do allude to it), thus considering how the character was already written as practicing in a certain way and expecting consistency. For Sana to kiss, date, or hook up with Yousef would break character from the otherwise firmly grounded, practicing Muslim written in the last three seasons. I argue that fans

⁴⁸ Allison McCracken, “Tumblr Youth Subcultures and Media Engagement,” *Cinema Journal* 57, no. 1 (Fall 2017): 161.

like these work to reinforce parameters of Muslim normativity or gatekeep representations of Islam in Western media in order to mediate continual misrepresentation.

At one point in season two, Noora asks Sana if she ever feels tempted to drink or hook up with boys. Sana admits that of course she does, but that her faith is stronger than her desire. Season four puts this to the test as viewers watch her negotiate the tensions she feels between her romantic desire for Yousef and her desire to uphold the Islamic norms she believes in and values. Viewers never witnessed how Sana questioned Islam and herself until her own life was put under the spotlight. The newly apparent negotiations Sana experienced were on the one hand, seen as realistic by Muslim fans, and on the other, as openings for non-Muslims to project their desired outcomes onto.

Scripting theory suggests that sexuality is learned from culturally available sexual scripts that define what counts as sex, how to recognize sexual situations, and what to do in such encounters.⁴⁹ Yousana was both unfamiliar and overly familiar to Western audiences who are used to heterosexual teenage romances with pronounced physical chemistry. Some non-Muslim fans found the relationship boring because cues of mutual attraction like kissing were missing; other non-Muslim fans were frustrated that it was yet another heterosexual couple, especially after the hit-making third season with a gay love story. Muslim fans pointed out that such viewers were not recognizing how novel this representation was. Muslim blogger *thickskinandelastichheart* wrote at the beginning of the season,

@ all the fangirls saying ‘heterosexual bs’ regarding sana and yousef (I’ve seen two so far but I’m sure there’s gonna be plenty more) I think people need to understand, this is

⁴⁹ Janna L. Kim, C. Lynn Sorsoli, Katherine Collins, Bonnie A. Zylbergold, Deborah Schooler, and Deborah L. Tolman. “From Sex to Sexuality: Exposing the Heterosexual Script on Primetime Network Television.” *Journal of Sex Research* 44, no. 2 (April 11, 2007): 145–57. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224490701263660>.

NOT the same as a white couple. This is a young muslim couple people are excited about and shipping and we muslims have NEVER had rep like this before... to slap the term 'heterosexual nonsense' right off the bat at a cute muslim couple is simply..... It's not and will never be the same as white het couples so pls understand.⁵⁰

This fan's reaction to others' dismissal of Yousana evidences how fans interact with cultural texts according to their own contexts and scripts. When those traditional scripts include gendered, raced, and sexed components that do not coincide with what they are familiar with (as with Yousana), they may not find the same relief and feel the storyline is unfulfilled. A heterosexual relationship, which is normative and ubiquitous in media, becomes novel when the subjects in the script who are centered are those otherwise type-cast as deviant. Even as Muslim men have increased romantic and sexual representation on screen, it is rarely with a Muslim woman partner, and it is even more rare for them to be pursued as the first or most desirable option. These other iterations of Muslim romance are also overtly sexual in a way that distinguishes them from Yousana's more innocent "vanilla love."⁵¹ Having two straight Muslims in love (or one Muslim and one raised and racialized as Muslim, detailed below) is peculiar in the Western repertoire of Muslims and/or love and sex. Even as there was potential for this couple to be centered throughout the season, Yousana only appeared together at the bookends of the season. A love triangle was manufactured through the middle, which led audiences to believe that Sana was not desired and iterated a familiar 'Muslim boy interested in a non-Muslim white girl' storyline prevalent in Western sexual scripts.

⁵⁰ thickskinandelasticeart, "@ All the Fangirls Saying 'heterosexual Bs'..." Control Your Hoes ~. Accessed December 18, 2017. <http://thickskinandelasticeart.tumblr.com/post/159460697394/all-the-fangirls-saying-heterosexual-bs>.

⁵¹ "Unromansapphique: Yall Are All like "too Much..." Control Your Hoes ~. Accessed October 23, 2017. <http://thickskinandelasticeart.tumblr.com/post/159995388579/unromansapphique-yall-are-all-like-too-much>.

Explorations of desirability in particular—as in who is beautiful, who is wanted, and who is pursued romantically and platonically—were intimately intertwined with Sana’s experience of being Muslim in Norway and the anti-Muslim racism she faced from her peers. The comparison and contrast between Sana and the blonde-haired, green-eyed, red-lipstick-wearing Noora was constant. Noora’s character is hyper present in Sana’s season because she represents the “cool white, Norwegian girl that Sana sometimes wishes she could be... she always seems to get what Sana thinks she can’t”⁵² and this is emphasized in the love triangle written between her, Sana and Yousef. Noora’s hypervisibility in the season led many to joke that this was her season—again. As the second season’s main character, Noora was pursued and eventually falls for Hartvig Nissen’s most popular bad boy, Willhelm. She follows him to Spain in season three only to officially move back to Oslo in season four. Her friends are unsure what happened, but it seems Noora and Willhelm may not be together anymore and Vilde schemes to set her up with another boy to forget about him. She turns her efforts to the all-Muslim boy group made up of Sana’s brother and his four friends. Despite Sana’s voiced displeasure, Vilde invites them to a party and into their fold in an attempt to have Noora fall for one of these older boys.

Sana is obviously dissatisfied that her worlds are colliding, that her brother and his friends who make up her home life are merging with her Norwegian friends and school life. Where she had maintained a public and private life divide, those lines were now blurring. The use of camera framing in Sana’s season became particularly important for conveying this dimension of her feeling and experience of being an outsider in her own friend group. Scenes frequently showed her in doorways, always on the outside looking in, and often standing at the

⁵² chilldeanne, “Take It Easy,” Tumblr, June 12, 2017, <https://chilldeanne.tumblr.com/post/161758806232/i-understand-why-people-are-upset-that-noora-got>.

edge tentatively before fully crossing into the room. On the train to a party, her brother's friends were laughing and singing alongside her own; she stood apart from them, looking into their circle (fig. 13).



Figure 13: Still from *Skam*, Season 04, Episode 01 via SKAM English on dailymotion.com

The commingling of Sana's private and public life, where the pull between the religious and secular is especially pronounced, is evidenced most when viewers watch her struggle to complete her prayer in public. She sneaks away from the party once they arrive to perform ritual ablution in the bathroom before finding an unoccupied bedroom to complete her prayer in. Within moments, her prayer is interrupted as a couple making out bursts through the door and starts hooking up on the bed next to her. She stops her prayer and sneaks out, remaining invisible to the distracted couple. Just as she walks back into the main party, Sana finds Noora and Yousef talking and smiling on the couch. Sana's eyes grow sad and eyebrows furrow, the camera

focusing on her face before the sound of a balloon popping transitions the frame to black. That protective bubble that had kept Sana's worlds apart finally collided and in the worst way for her; she feared that Vilde's plan worked and that Noora was falling for her crush. Young Thug's "Best Friend" played over the credits—"that's my best friend, that's my best friend"—reminding viewers of the particular closeness that Sana felt to Noora. The latter only joined the bus because Sana did, making her perceived interest in Yousef all the more gut wrenching for Sana.

For the majority of the season, Sana was completely alone in her experience of otherness. The same friends whom she saw and supported through moments of crisis across the other three seasons did not reciprocate the same energy for Sana. Noora was one of the only friends to maintain an awareness of Sana's changing moods, but Sana pushed her away because she believed Noora was dating Yousef. Throughout season four, Sana faced microaggressions from the Pepsi Max squad (the popular girls' bus group named after their bus' sponsorship and proclivity to drink Pepsi Max) who were vying to buy the same party bus and advocated they should get it because they were *normal* Norwegian girls. When Sana had the idea that her friends and the Pepsi Max squad merge to purchase a bus, Sana stipulated that she become the bus boss. Even after they agreed that she would be the bus boss, the Pepsi Max girls were frequently keeping her out of the loop—neglecting to email her about events or add her to the official Facebook page. Sana felt that these things were intentional, but her friends kept assuring her they were probably just mistakes and that she was being overly sensitive. This compounded upon the frequent subtleties of otherness she already felt being with her friends—from having to reject a slice of pepperoni pizza and being asked rude questions about her hijab and what she is 'allowed' to do, to enduring her friend's discomfort whenever the call to prayer went off on her phone.

II. Islam vs. Happiness

At the beginning of the season, as viewers move through Sana's life with her, experiencing things through her perspective, we understand that Yousef is Muslim like her. In a tender scene with her mother, Sana reveals that she has a crush on a Muslim boy who is smart, funny, very good looking and who cooks! Her mother squeezes her shoulder, asking if she can meet this unnamed crush but Sana admits that she does not think they are quite there yet because they had only talked a little and she was not sure if he liked her, too. "Of course, he likes you!" her mother responds, "Who doesn't like you?" This small encouragement opens Sana up with a new lightness. However, Sana finds out by the end of that same episode that Yousef does not believe in Allah, insomuch renouncing Islam. Even so, fans continued to categorize Yousana as a Muslim romance.

Fan reactions to Yousef's character offer insight into how people understand Muslims. If someone is raised as a Muslim but renounces their faith, is that enough to distinguish them as non-Muslim or no longer Muslim? Even if the character maintains that distinction, do viewers accept that assessment? Is he still understood as Muslim even though he is not observant? Ultimately, Yousef was still racialized as Muslim by fans regardless of his declaration of no faith and he still operated as Muslim-*ish* on the show. This was contingent on the understanding that he was raised as Muslim and thus aware of the Islamic practices, expectations, and boundaries implemented by Sana; his proximity to Islam, Muslims, and his Turkish background all racialized him as Muslim despite his own disidentification. The reveal that he is non-believing introduced a story arc where Sana had to grapple with the incongruence of her feelings for Yousef and her dedication to her faith practice. She understands that Islam dictates that Muslim women cannot marry non-Muslim men—so why pursue something that will never happen? In

the same way she had drawn closer to Yousef throughout the first three episodes by adding him on Facebook and having small encounters with him in person and via Facebook messages, she draws herself away from him in the following episodes by unfriending him and working to distract herself from her feelings by quite literally Google searching ways to get over someone you love.

The bind between her feelings for Yousef and desire to follow her religion leads Sana to ask many questions of Islam, such as why marrying outside of the faith is not “allowed.” “Sana asking hard-hitting questions is relevant and relatable af,” blogger hijabi-habibty wrote, “But the way this story line is going; Sana’s questions being left unanswered and showing Sana deviate because of misunderstandings and misinterpretations is rubbing me off the wrong way. It puts Islam in a bad light and shows that there are holes or gaps in it, it shows that religion can be disposable.”⁵³ The concern that religion was portrayed as secondary to romantic desire and more insidiously, that Islam was portrayed as a barrier to Sana’s happiness (and thus the audience’s) was prevalent in some Muslim fans’ grievances with season four’s storyline. I assert that the conflicted hijabi narrative wherein, “westerners can’t imagine writing Muslim girls/characters in general without some clash with their religion,”⁵⁴ has become a trope in itself. And while *Skam* does not follow the protocol wherein a hijabi removes her hijab as a result of that conflict, some Muslim fans felt that it nonetheless purported that your religion or values are less important than love. greenteawithlillies wrote,

One thing that always bothers me in discussions of season 4 is this idea that the Sana character needs to have her beliefs challenged, that it’s a good thing that she’s fallen for a

⁵³ hijabi-habibty, “Love Will Last,” Tumblr. Accessed March 9, 2020. <https://hijabi-habibty.tumblr.com/post/160569436598/honestly-what-muslim-teen-living-in-the-west>.

⁵⁴ thickskinandelasticeart, “Control Your Hoes ~,” Tumblr, August 16, 2019, <https://thickskinandelasticeart.tumblr.com/post/187046486524/why-did-druck-have-to-make-him-not-religious>.

non-muslim... there is always this notion that all religious people must be blindly following what their religion tells them, and oh, if only someone would challenge and make them *think*.⁵⁵

Sana becoming close to, or pulling away from Yousef throughout the season was informed by two things: Sana's belief that Noora and Yousef were hooking up, facilitating a sense of shame around her lack of desirability, and her abrupt moving back and forth between following what she believes Islam "allows" and doing what she wants regardless. Like hijabi-habibty wrote above, the representation of Sana's experience with Islam was largely dictated by what she can and cannot do, with few scenes showing positive aspects of Islamic practices and fewer still addressing why they exist. Fans felt that plot line after plot line introduced new hardships and barriers to Sana's happiness (as they did to all the mains because good drama necessitates it) but underlying all of them was the idea that her difference—her Muslimness, her Islam, her Otherness—was the cause of her strife. Her difference was credited as the problem as opposed to people's reaction to that difference.

Western news media and political discourses often render Muslim bodies and Islam as obstructing peace and as troublesome to the nation. I argue that the translation of Islam as a barrier to happiness into the personal, affective dimension of viewership compound those discourses and render them salient in the viewer's body. Even as the personal is always actually political, what had been situated outside the home in the imagined political realm was now bombarding the personal, emotional space that exists between a viewer and a show—a show intended to remove pressure from teens' everyday life. When the bodies of the Muslim Other were not only centered, but featured in a way that did not downplay their difference, non-Muslim

⁵⁵ greenteawithlilies, "Tea and Lilies," Tumblr, August 29, 2019, <https://greenteawithlilies.tumblr.com/post/187339765080/i-cant-sleep-so-i-guess-i-am-going-to-ramble>.

viewers had to grapple with and confront the Other on an affective, personal level. When Sana was a side character who flattered the white mains with her wisdom, humor, and sarcasm, she was the safe sidekick who was otherwise marked by absence—i.e., she was not a full and complex human whose problems could interrupt the familiar whiteness of *Skam*'s teenagedom.

In truth, actual scenes of Sana and Yousef together—communicating together, flirting together, spending time together—were rather sparse. The very first time that Sana and Yousef would get together knowing their feelings were mutual, was also the last time they would share the screen. Yousana's delicate courtship received praise for its depiction of a slow-burn, intimate relationship based on mutual respect; their relationship developed through a series of glances, text messages, a meaningful conversation, a couple basketball games, and a date at the pier. Their humble relationship was meaningful to viewers like asteriaria who felt Yousana was the most realistic depiction of a teenage relationship they had ever seen on television.⁵⁶ However, the fact that there was only one clip where viewers saw Yousana as an active couple did not sit well with many Muslim fans who believed this absence due to Andem's inability or unwillingness to write a sexless relationship. Muslim fans who expressed their frustration with how Sana's story was told were sometimes met with anonymous hate which evidenced some non-Muslims fans' disinterest or distaste for this Muslim story. This message was anonymously sent to hijabi-habiby:

if you hate this fandom so much, leave. sana is never going to get the attention you want her to get because her entire story line is boring. who the fuck cares about your islam? i sure as hell don't, especially today when we can once again see how much pain and death

⁵⁶ thickskinandelasticeart, "Control Your Hoes ~," Tumblr, May 6, 2017, <https://thickskinandelasticeart.tumblr.com/post/160357610244/asteriaria-not-only-did-skam-surpass-the-iconic>.

your toxic religion brings to people. stop trying to make us aware of your shitty evil culture and religion and go back to the desert.⁵⁷

“Especially today” was in reference to the following scene and the fans’ reaction to it, their vilification of Islam consequently reinforced by what was shown onscreen.

III. Reinforcing Representational Responsibility

The “karaoke apocalypse,” what fans informally called the last clip of episode five, was the season’s climax. In it, Sana is at a karaoke bar with her friends and most of her grade. Evan and Isak are at the mic and the whole room sings John Lennon’s “Imagine” as Yousef and his friends walk in. Sana smiles subtly when she spots Yousef. After the singalong, she mingles with friends and is suddenly confronted by Noora who was upset to find out that Sana knew Wilhelm had dated someone in Spain after she left. In the midst of that encounter, Yousef interrupts them and pulls Sana aside in a panic, telling her that her brother Elias is in trouble outside. Sana hurries out to find her brother fighting Isak with boys on either side trying to pry them off each other. Sana physically injects her body between them to pull them apart; she literally separates these two who represent the violent collision of her worlds. The Muslim boys storm off and Sana is left to check on Isak whose face is bleeding. Her hands become stained from his bloodied nose and she goes inside to wash the blood from them. As she washes her hands, she hears a couple of the Pepsi Max girls outside the stall. One of the girls is talking about the fight and she assumes that Elias punched Isak because he is Muslim and Isak is gay—“There’s bound to be a fight there,” she says.

⁵⁷ Anonymous, “Love Will Last,” Tumblr. Accessed March 9, 2020. <https://hijabi-habibty.tumblr.com/post/161029542768/if-you-hate-this-fandom-so-much-leave-sana-is>.

Without knowing what instigated the fight, viewers are only given this dialogue as explanation for the events that just happened. Such an explanation is saturated with Islamophobic assumptions regarding Muslim male violence and homophobia, which is intimately tied to the pervasive Muslim terrorist trope. A later scene similarly emphasizes Muslim men's stereotypic misogyny. While lounging in the backyard, Elias and all the boys except for Yousef who is absent, were talking about the long fasting days and how hard they are. One of them cracked a joke about how they look forward to getting seventy-two virgins in paradise and they all laughed. This tired joke, one familiar because it is often used to reference Muslim men's sexism and licentiousness, reinforces the boys as backward and inept.

This is so irresponsible of Julie, srsly. I'm not Muslim and I'm ignorant about Islam, and when the boys talked about the 72 virgins, I was like "so is this really true?" and I came to Tumblr and you guys are clarifying this issue. Thanks. The fans are doing a better job than Julie in this season.⁵⁸

As this anonymous commentator shared with thickskinandelasticheart, fans were doing what was essentially viewed as damage control for moments where stereotypes were reinforced instead of challenged or complicated. An explanation of why the fight had broken out was only offered many episodes later when the audience learns that it was not due to homophobia and was actually started by Isak.

Just as he was completely removed from the fight, Yousef is made exceptional among his friend group and his being non-Muslim factors into this. In their moments of violence or misogyny, he is absent; while they fought, he stayed inside and while they joked about virgin brides, he was out with Noora. He is never positioned as being the same as the other Muslim

⁵⁸ Anonymous and thickskinandelasticheart, "Control Your Hoes ~," May 28, 2017, Tumblr, accessed March 4, 2020, <https://thickskinandelasticheart.tumblr.com/post/161169229804/this-is-so-irresponsible-of-julie-srsly-im-not>.

boys in the story and in fact, is constantly written as distinct from, and separate from them in many cases. He is precluded from the stereotypes that mark these Muslim boys because he does not believe in, nor follow, Islam. Even while Muslim fans racialized him as being like them, Andem's storytelling separates him, as though removing his Islam leaves him unmarked.

The Pepsi Max girls move their conversation onto Sana. One tells the other to check the stalls to make sure no one is listening. Sana quickly moves behind the door so she remains unseen when the stall is opened before they continue with their conversation. Her face falls as she hears the girls' vitriolic comments that affirm all the things she had feared. All those comments and lost invitations were intentional; they planned to throw her out of the bus, calling her stupid for thinking she would ever be the boss and subsequently judging her for taking part in russia at all. She shouldn't even be part of russia, they agreed, "Especially when she wears a hijab. She's supposed to be a good representative for Islam" (fig. 14).



Figure 14: Still from *Skam*, Season 01, Episode 05 via SKAM English on dailymotion.com

The critical comment regarding Sana's involvement in a uniquely Norwegian tradition as a Muslim girl shows who the girls believe can and should be involved in those traditions. It also highlights the dissonance between vice-filled rusk tradition and how Muslims are expected to act. And not just Muslims, but Muslim women. Earlier in the season, Elias asked if their mom knew she was part of a rusk bus. She commented that he had done a rusk, too. "But you're a girl," Elias replied, "it's different." Women who wear hijab are imagined as a "representative for Islam," by their own Muslim communities and by non-Muslims like the Pepsi Max girls who look at them as the most visible adherents of the religion. Such visible difference, attached to a historically rooted repertoire of stereotypes, demands the Other to perform their difference in a way that supports facile assumptions about their identity. Sana's person and actions, decisions and mistakes, were not appropriately confined to this mold. This expectation for a performed Muslim womanhood again dictates a singularity to Islam, including Islamic belief, practice, and expression. Cultural logics that prefigure the Other in singular terms have demanded the Other to have a reactive politics instead of a proactive one. Fans who are protective of Muslim representation and non-Muslims who expect proof that not all Muslims are this or that way are stuck inside a loop that does not offer liberation and renders Islam and Muslims as two-dimensional.

After hearing all this, Sana waits a moment before walking back into the main bar to find Yousef and Noora kissing across the room. Like the end of episode one, Sana looks on with some shock, her mouth dropping for a moment as her eyes express a mix of sadness and hurt. This time she is thoroughly shattered and the clip fades to black as "Love Will Tear Us Apart" by Susanna and the Magical Orchestra plays. (Again, *Skam* shows its remarkable ability to pair exactly the right song to a scene.) Everything in the karaoke apocalypse reinforced that her two

worlds could not coexist and rather, resulted in a violent collision and further relegated her sense of belonging to her Norwegian friends. Yousef staying behind with Noora signified to Sana his belonging to the world she is othered in, and in many ways, cast out of.

After this, Sana “goes dark” again. She used this very phrase later when talking to Yousef to describe how she regresses into this isolated, cold, and defensive place after she faces bullying. She goes dark in a literal, physical sense too. Her embodiment more closely matches how we were introduced to her in the first season—eyes rimmed dark with kohl, wearing dark lipstick, and a black hijab tied tightly around her face. She aggressively keeps away from her friends, pushing them away. In an unflattering episode, she becomes an antagonist in her own story when she sets up a fake Instagram page using stolen screenshots where she posts the private messages of the Pepsi Max leader who gossiped about classmates to Isak. Sana’s anonymous cyber bullying caused much controversy, with her own friends’ wondering what kind of horrible monster could do such a thing, in turn garnering more sympathy for the Pepsi Max leader. Isak took the blame since they came from his personal chat and because he was more likely to be forgiven, but he quickly confronted Sana who he knew to be the culprit.

The two of them are filmed sitting on a bench. Sana begins to explain why she did what she did—the racism, the microaggressions, the plot to throw her out of the russ bus. She wanted revenge and for that girl to feel shunned for her backbiting the way she had made Sana feel shunned. “Maybe she just wanted to throw you off the bus because you’re a condescending, bossy bitch,” Isak retorts. “Why are you so cold towards people, Sana?”

SANA: Yeah, well, try growing up in this country as a Muslim girl without turning cold.

ISAK: What about growing up as a gay youth, then?

SANA: It's not the same. No one can look at you and tell you're different. You don't get the same looks I do. Do you know what people think when they see me, when they see my hijab? Which is the first thing they see... They think I have to wear it because I'm forced to, not because I want to. And if I say I want to, then I'm brainwashed, because I can't form my own opinions. We talk about freedom of religion and so many other freedoms here in Norway, but wearing an extra article of clothing is wrong? And people think that we get married out of nowhere, and that there are all these arranged marriages, that I'll be forcibly married to my cousin tomorrow! Do you know what people do when Elias and I walk down the street? People spit after him because they think he's oppressing me! Elias! He doesn't even want me to wear the hijab, because he doesn't want me to get hate. Do you know how fucking tiring it is walking out the door, every day knowing it's another day where you have to prove to a whole country that you're not oppressed?⁵⁹

The pressure to preemptively prove others wrong, knowing Western hegemony always imposes otherness onto Muslims, was beautifully articulated by Sana. She emphasizes the effect of visibility and existing in public with an identity so evident and so burdened with history and expectation. This was swiftly disregarded by Isak who was emphatic that most Norwegians are *not* racist, they just do not know how to act around Muslims “when you're constantly reading articles in *VG* and *Dagbladet* about genital mutilation, ISIS, terror, wars and stuff like that.” He argues that their dumb, racist questions are important and dangerous, and that is why Sana *has* to answer them. Sana is a bit speechless and lets out a small chuckle, “Who the fuck even are you? I swear, you sound like my Imam or something.” This comment reveals again a dual pressure

⁵⁹ Skam English Videos, “Skam, Se 4, Ep 7, English Subtitles,” Dailymotion, June 2, 2017, <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x6nvu76>.

that Sana faces; if Isak is just echoing what her imam says, Sana must be the one in the wrong by not living up to the expected performance of de facto representative for Islam. Power is reproduced in this scene as Isak is rendered as an insightful sage who does not buy into Sana's own monologue; he becomes the teacher who explains that Sana is wrong in how she understands her own experience. He finishes the conversation with, "As soon as you look for hate, you'll find it. And when you find hate, you start hating yourself." While this scene on the bench was lauded by many, especially those who felt like and agreed with Isak, it was appreciated least of all by Muslim fans who were not partial to this sentiment. aconstantache posted,

That conversation was *the worst* and I'm so immensely annoyed by it. I can't believe the show had a white guy tell a visibly Muslim girl that if she looks hard enough for hate, she'll find it. What! The! Fuck! I don't really care that Isak doesn't have a perfect knowledge of how racism works and he's still learning etc etc. That's cool but the line that *the show* is taking is that largely the isolation Sana feels is a self-inflicted thing and white people are just struggling and trying to understand in a world that makes it so hard for them. When Isak was like 'how do I know if I'm allowed to shake her hand?' - like, who cares??? ... The conversation could have explored Islamophobia - the way it acts on an institutional level through the media (which they lingered on for like a second) but instead it was another way to pile on Muslims! Yay!⁶⁰

In this scene, Isak is perceived as a stand-in for 'the show' and for white Norwegian society whose words and perspectives he is made to mimic. Tumblr user grapebooty similarly interrogates this Eurocentric positioning wherein Isak effectively 'mansplains' Sana's own

⁶⁰ monstermonstre and aconstantache, "Love Isn't Something Weak People Do.," Tumblr, June 2, 2017, <https://aconstantache.tumblr.com/post/161366603504>.

oppression to her by critiquing how the show “completely misuses a chance to present beautiful, uniquely Muslim experiences to a non-Muslim audience, orchestrates a disgusting scene where a white boy ‘explains’ racism/islamophobia to a Muslim girl of color after calling her a ‘condescending bossy bitch’ & makes sure said Muslim girl agrees with & validates his stupid ass opinions so her white audience can be guilt-free.”⁶¹ Sana shared her experiences as a Muslim woman—which resonated so deeply for many Muslim women viewers who have felt those things and experienced them, too—just to have her voice invalidated, denying her full consciousness of her experience, especially in relation to others.

In the final scene Sana has with Yousef, they are on a date, sitting on a dock and eating the carrot soup Yousef brought for Sana to break her fast at maghrib. Sana shares how she has not felt like a very good Muslim this Ramadan, how she goes to this dark place in response to bullying, and how she is “trying to practice thinking that people aren’t prejudiced against Islam”—the last part an echo from her conversation with Isak. Yousef softly counters, “I don’t think it helps to pretend that prejudice doesn’t exist. What you have to do instead, is show what Islam is.” Even if Yousef’s rhetoric does not put the impetus on Sana to be tolerant to intolerance, it nonetheless reinforces the duty of the Muslim to “show” and prove to others that Muslims are not the terroristic, licentious, oppressed or fanatic people others believe them to be through good behavior. Such a burden of representational responsibility, emphasized by her own Muslim community and the non-Muslim Norwegians around her, individualizes anti-Muslim racism instead of rightfully identifying it as a systemic issue that cannot be solved merely by answering questions politely.

⁶¹ grapebooty, “L E T H E,” June 6, 2017, Tumblr, accessed March 4, 2020, <https://kaafka.tumblr.com/post/161526530407/grapebooty-julie-andem-the-rest-of-the-skam>.

Danke, *Druck!*

*“Druck said yousana rights when no other skam dared to”*⁶²

Druck (“Pressure”) is one of the seven *Skam* remakes and it received much praise from Muslim fans for its development of the Sana character’s story. Revisiting many of the same blogs that commented on season four of *Skam*, I found fans partaking in considerable comparative analysis between the German adaptation and the original, most of which praised *Druck* for its rewrites. Some joked that *Druck*’s writers must have read the fandom’s *Skam* fanfic and commentary because in so many ways, they maintained most of the canon’s plots but did so in a way that fans found reparative.⁶³ Regardless of whether the writers did, the fact that fans felt they had influence is meaningful. “Danke, *Druck!*” (Thank you, *Druck!*) was a frequent declarative in posts celebrating those changes. In this next section, I will highlight those changes that were praised in order to offer a glimpse into what Muslim women fans perceived as authentic, realistic and meaningful changes in this representation. If what has been offered above clues writers and directors into what not to do or what not to replicate, this brief section may clue them into what *to do*, especially when it comes to worldbuilding and Muslim romance.

Druck’s Sana character, Amira, is an Egyptian Muslim girl whose older and younger brothers call her lychee—a fruit that is hard on the outside and soft on the inside. More than the original Sana, Amira expresses her feelings with less angst and more anger, and she takes that hot temper to boxing class with her. Amira’s season explored her experiences of being Muslim in Germany. Her story was more rounded out and complete than Sana’s because there was a full narrative arc that included resolutions and an ending that was less rushed, even if truncated. She

⁶² overthemoonwithme, “Druck Said Yousana Rights When No Other Skam Dared...,” Tumblr, September 5, 2019, <https://overthemoonwithme.tumblr.com/post/187514651137/druck-said-yousana-rights-when-no-other-skam-dared>.

⁶³ thickskinandelasticeart, “Control Your Hoes ~,” Tumblr, September 5, 2019, <https://thickskinandelasticeart.tumblr.com/post/187515329534/the-religion-is-like-a-home-and-i-lost-both>.

and her family spoke in mixed Arabic and German for much of the dialogue which is realistic for many immigrant and first generation households. Unlike the original *Skam*, Amira had multiple other women of color represented in her life—Muslim and non-Muslim—who were incorporated into the storyline. The former showed diversity in Islamic practice and perspective, and even if they were only brought into the show once or twice, Tumblr user *norwaydumpsterfireremakes* wrote that they

filled out the complex world that Amira has to navigate, and showing a number of viewpoints and exposing truths as they go.... Not only is it realistic (as other Muslim / WoC bloggers have pointed out, lol, Amira would never just hang out with one other WoC) these characters all help us learn more about Amira too... We aren't just getting the one scene that's added almost as an afterthought or a couple of scenes that ultimately are sweet but meaningless to the main's journey or the message. We get a whole world here.⁶⁴

Incorporating Muslim characters into Amira's season improved upon the original in realistic ways. *Druck* attended to how Muslim community dynamics produced immense pressure in Amira's life, specifically in regard to navigating gender norms and her relationship to non-Muslim German culture. On their first date where Amira met Mohammed at a park, they were shyly strolling together when Amira suddenly pulled Mohammed behind a tree. She looks frantically around them to see if the people she is hiding from have passed. "I know them," she said. Mohammed is unconcerned; "who cares if they see us? we have nothing to be ashamed of." Amira looks into his eyes and says that it is different for her, "it might not matter for you, but it does for me." While Muslim men may be given a pass for their public behavior and

⁶⁴ *norwaydumpsterfireremakes*, "¿Este Es El Pome?," Tumblr, August 30, 2019, <https://norwaydumpsterfireremakes.tumblr.com/post/187374394869/the-reason-why-im-not-mad-that-druck-made-a>.

relationships, Muslim women are not given the same, and in fact, largely stigmatized because of it. Another double standard is brought forward an episode later when Amira confronts her brother Essam about fighting a German guy during a party. “Everyone gets into fights,” he says. Amira responds, “But we’re not like everyone! If a German gets into a fight, he has his reasons. But if we get into a fight, then we’re lowlife Arabs or something.” Rather than leaving questionable behaviors to the imagination of predominantly white audiences, *Druck* manages the scenes to show that Islam is not the cause for all behavior, and in fact, Muslims are incredibly aware of the fact that it is perceived as such.

Further, Amira’s German girl group was also more supportive and was shown making an effort to talk to her when they noticed her going through hardships and pulling away from them. These additions made Amira’s world a more generous and less isolating one than Sana’s, and allowed *Druck* to answer the question: How would viewers respond if they understood that the social context and people’s reactions to Amira are the problem instead of Islam? Amira felt safe enough with her friends that she didn’t hurriedly shut off the call to prayer when it sounded from her phone. Unlike Sana’s friends who were shown viscerally uncomfortable by the sound, Amira’s friends were unphased and she often told them she was going to pray. One scene from a prior season became a meme; in it, Amira jumps up and tells her friends, “I’m off to prayer, bitches.” Further, her prayers were not constantly interrupted or rushed; not only were prayers completed and represented accurately in their movements and utterances, but multiple emotions were conveyed in her prayers—hope, joy, and sorrow. thickskinandelastichheart shared, “I can’t believe Druck gave me crying during Salah representation but at what cost?!? No, but honestly,

it felt so real and humbling watching Amira cry like that in prayer because it is such a familiar feeling.”⁶⁵

Amira’s love interest, Mohammed Razzouk, was characterized as a Syrian refugee and he was played by Kurdish actor and refugee, Hassan Kello. Together, Amira Mahmoud and Mohammed Razzouk were shipped by fans as “Mazzouk,” and sometimes “Momira.” As a non-native speaker himself, Hassan Kello’s German was imperfect, and in the WhatsApp chats posted as supplemental material on the *Druck* webpage, Amira would sometimes tease Mohammed about it. There were subtle hints given regarding cultural difference even among Arab-speaking populations when Mohammed told Amira that her Arabic sounded funny. These small things were critical to building Amira’s world and making it one that felt most authentic to Muslim fans who revelled at the show’s incorporation of different dialects, Abel Halim Hafez’s love song “Ahwak,” and Arab dancing like dabke—all without shame.

Druck was notable because of Amira’s character *and* because of Mohammed’s. Someone anonymously wrote to floraflorenzi’s blog:

tbh can we talk about mohammed canonically being a syrian refugee like?? i dont think i've ever seen a refugee character with an actually fully fleshed out personality (instead of just being "the refugee"), and being the main love interest no less? i don't think we talk enough about that, it's rep i've never seen before? like, he's allowed to exist as a love interest and a person first and foremost, instead of just being "the refugee" designed to evoke sympathy or teach the audience a lesson!⁶⁶

⁶⁵ thickskinandelasticeart, “Control Your Hoes ~,” Tumblr, August 14, 2019,

<https://thickskinandelasticeart.tumblr.com/post/186998110464/i-cant-believe-druck-gave-me-crying-during-salah>.

⁶⁶ Anonymous, “#renewannewithane,” Tumblr, September 5, 2019, <https://floraflorenzi.tumblr.com/post/187517618125/tbh-can-we-talk-about-mohammed-canonically-being-a>.

While Yousef's character was marked by his absence—absence of belief, his physical and emotional distance from Sana—Mohammed's was more nuanced. Almost every scene incorporated either a text conversation or physical meeting between Mohammed and Amira. He was not conspicuously absent from their story and his affection for Amira was obvious and felt from the very beginning. It was not a slow burn kind of love like Yousana; Mohammed told Amira he liked her, that he had never experienced a connection like theirs, that she looked pretty. There was no question about their feelings for each other and no love triangle to interrupt their story together. The drama still prevailed without those things. The excitement around his hearty presence and fleshed out personality, and his alarming ability to effectively communicate, left fans hopeful that Mohammed might be Muslim unlike canon Yousef. This ended up not being the case.⁶⁷

Mohammed not being Muslim was revealed as the season's dramatic climax. However, *Druck* was able to circumvent the framing of Islam as the barrier to Amira's happiness because her distancing from Mohammed was not framed as allowables and forbiddens but rather, as driven by how Amira envisioned her life and the kind of partner she wanted and needed. She shared that "religion is a home for me," and when she questioned how Mohammed would fit into her life when he did not share that home she asked, if we had kids what would they do on Eid, or, what about prayers? Mohammed sighed and said, "fine, I'll pray with you." Surprised, Amira quickly responded that he'd be doing it for her and that was not the right reason; he needed to do it because he really believed. blankearks wrote "I'm so glad druck took this route like religion is so complex and it's such a strong part of amira that she would be compromising herself if she

⁶⁷ imane-bakhellal and thickskinandelasticeart humorously posted, "#having an athiest called mohammed is peak white european culture ... "the SLANDER of naming him Mohammed and goin through with that storyline ... if they turn him into Mo I'm calling the police!!!" via "Rumaan," Tumblr, June 15, 2019, <https://rumaan.tumblr.com/post/185606201971/thickskinandelasticeart-imane-bakhellal-all>.

wasn't with someone that doesn't share her values."⁶⁸ Further, thickskinandelasticeart shared that she was

so, SO grateful for this clip. THIS is the conversation that was needed in the og, this is the explanation which makes it so clear as to why they wouldn't work out. They way Amira laid it out all and made him understand, and even refuted him when he said he'd change. Because it's a hollow change, she wants to be with someone who genuinely feels religion is home for them too, not someone who will pray for her sake.⁶⁹

Instead of framing Islam as a burden and obstacle with requirements to be fulfilled, Islam was represented as integral to Amira's core sense of self and happiness.

When One Representation Can't Remedy the Rest

Even as *Druck* was much more positively received and its fan discourse generally more jovial, there were grievances in the way these young Muslim women's stories were told. And those were often attributed to *whom* exactly was writing their stories. The absence of a Muslim writer in these writers' rooms meant that in many ways these stories reproduced "the same broke ideas"⁷⁰ of cultural and religious difference. More than that, Muslim fans expressed grief that the Muslim mains' seasons and stories were truncated. Other characters' stories were brought back in the final episode at the expense of the Muslim ones. Sana's season only featured her perspective in 9/10 episodes and Amira's in 7/9. Because Sana's was the final season of the series, Andem quickly finished off other stories in the final episode before everyone convened at

⁶⁸ blankearks, "Blinded, Blinded by You," Tumblr, August 16, 2019, <https://blankearks.tumblr.com/post/187057128504/that-scene-was-painful-but-i-can-seriously-relate>.

⁶⁹ thickskinandelasticeart, "Religion Is Home for Me," Tumblr, August 19, 2019, <https://thickskinandelasticeart.tumblr.com/post/187122550764/religion-is-home-for-me>.

⁷⁰ rumaan, "Control Your Hoes ~," Tumblr, August 15, 2019, <https://thickskinandelasticeart.tumblr.com/post/187021725189>.

Sana's Eid party. These choices made fans feel that Muslim stories were being "shafted"⁷¹ and ended thoughtlessly without proper resolutions. Blogger hijabi-habibty expressed her grief as rooted in having "waited for so long to be represented... and [waited] for so long for people to hear us, and when we were finally given that opportunity, our character (and ourselves by extension) were overshadowed by other characters and their story lines."⁷²

Conclusion

Tumblr fans who engaged with Sana and Amira's characters and stories did so in a deeply affective and expressive way that elucidated how texts are made meaningful through different ways of knowing and experiencing the world. Not only this, but they showed just how much Muslim fans felt was at stake. Their hypervigilance in reading these season's produced massive amounts of criticism, but under much of that anger or disappointment was love and desire to be seen and understood. hijabi-habibty wrote:

some of those scripts were ignorant and ugly asf and 70% of the characters were flawed beyond redemption and it was messy™ but I loved it ya know... Sana Bakkoush? The world's greatest character in the world? The character I relate with the most whom I loved with my entire heart? I miss her so much... the only reason I was so hard on Skam is because it was so near and dear to my heart. I wanted it to be perfect. Nothing else on tv could ever compare to it ngl.⁷³

⁷¹ Anonymous, "Control Your Hoes ~," Tumblr, September 16, 2019,

<https://thickskinandelasticeheart.tumblr.com/post/187753598584/how-do-i-stop-myself-from-being-disappointed-and>.

⁷² hijabi-habibty, "Love Will Last," Tumblr. Accessed March 9, 2020. <https://hijabi-habibty.tumblr.com/post/160960695613/the-problem-is-that-some-of-you-guys-dont-even>.

⁷³ hijabi-habibty, "Love Will Last," Tumblr. Accessed March 9, 2020. <https://hijabi-habibty.tumblr.com/post/168020708668/i-miss-skam-forreal-like-some-of-those-scripts>.

Fans looked to *Skam* and *Druck* for representation that felt real and authentic in ways others had not and did so with a particular urgency as the geopolitical moment became increasingly hostile toward Muslims.

Sana's season was produced and aired between April and June 2017, and Amira's between June and September 2019—both amid the rise of right-wing leaders coming into power, further agitating anti-Muslim racism in North America and Europe. This political landscape paired with the historical and contemporary repertoire of Muslim media representation created a context in which Muslim fans looked to these seasons hoping to see themselves and/in a story they could relate to—one they wished was not created for and by the white gaze, nor written to fill shallow diversity quotas. “We don't want representation for the sake of representation,” hijabi-habibty wrote, “Because representation for the sake of representation is tokenization.”⁷⁴ Muslims may seek relief from the alienation they feel through authentic representation. In the constant struggle to make sense of the self and the world, and to make a better place for the self in the world,⁷⁵ representation has ascended to a position of exaggerated importance for people's sense of inclusion. Authenticity is a fantasy that drives people's sense of belonging. But authenticity is illusory, the objet petit a of representation wherein the dissonance between the expectation and actual encounter constantly reinforces the text, experience, character, etc. as a re-presentation—a shallow expression attempting to mimic the real, something that is only ever partial. Like a tourist who seeks authenticity in their encounters with other lands, other people, or other foods, the audience can make certain things and practices matter by authorizing what is

⁷⁴ tvseries-addicted and hijabi-habibty, “Love Will Last,” Tumblr. Accessed March 9, 2020. <https://hijabi-habibty.tumblr.com/post/173706630428/cmon-guys-if-you-dont-like-the-actress-who>.

⁷⁵ Lawrence Grossberg, “Is There a Fan in the House?: The Affective Sensibility of Fandom,” in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (London ; New York: Routledge, 1992), 53.

authentic and what is not, and do so through confronting the text with their own personal and cultural knowledge.⁷⁶

Looking to *Skam* and *Druck* as a counterforce from representational and societal alienation, female Muslim fans' responses evidence they were often disappointed by the story in which they failed see themselves and the depths of their experiences onscreen. The quote mentioned before from hijabi-habibty shows the lapsing of fictional character with self ("our character (and ourselves by extension)") which reveals how "Celebrities function as symbolic resources, resulting in spectators negotiating conventions concerning identity."⁷⁷ Knowledge that Muslim actresses were playing these characters already inspired a feeling that Sana and Amira were authentic because fans were seeing a Muslim onscreen, not just someone playing a Muslim character. Muslim fans possessed a sense of mastery over the character and her story, or what "should have been" her story, based on the position they occupied relative to who was on the screen and the events that transpired.⁷⁸ These fans' experiences of reading Sana and Amira's seasons and the certain aesthetics, gestures, and sartorial choices present throughout, was deeply meaningful to how they distinguished these Muslim representations as authentic. With Muslim actresses Tua El-Fawwal and Iman Meskini, they saw Muslim women onscreen, not women dressed to play a Muslim. The latter appears dressed by someone who thinks this is what a Muslim woman looks like, but does not see, know, feel, nor recognize the subtleties of Muslim womens' actual embodiment—from their outfits to the way they move in them. El-Fawwal wore tights under her wide-leg pants, the tiniest detail barely noticeable while she was standing on screen. Something so trivial or even completely unrecognizable to some became noteworthy to

⁷⁶ Shohat and Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, 178.

⁷⁷ Francesca Sobande, "How to Get Away with Authenticity: Viola Davis and the Intersections of Blackness, Naturalness, Femininity and Relatability," *Celebrity Studies* 10, no. 3 (July 3, 2019): 400, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2019.1630154>.

⁷⁸ See Todd McGowan, "Introduction: From the Imaginary Look to the Real Gaze," in *Real Gaze: Film Theory after Lacan* (Ithaca: State University of New York Press, 2007), 2.

other Muslim fans who understood that choice to be intuitive. Wide-leg pants often catch the wind, exposing an ankle or calf, making tights an instinctive move for some to preserve modesty. Similarly, the way that El-Fawwal and Meskini wrap their hijabs looked and thus felt authentic to the familiar eye. Instead of looking like a folded cloth had been placed on an actress's head hesitantly like a hat, and instead of being made to wear two-piece hijabs that are often worn by young girls in real life, theirs were expertly wrapped and pinned with ease and naturalness, appearing in different styles and matching different outfits. thickskinandelasticeart wrote,

There's a reason soooo many of us connected with Sana specifically despite there being other Muslim characters out there, in popular American media as well, but none of them felt as authentic and real as Sana and that has A LOT to do with the fact that Iman Meskini is a hijabi in real life and a practicing Muslimah....these things are interconnected (for example they couldn't ask Iman to take off her hijab and that was refreshing for us too) and there's no two ways about it.⁷⁹

Shared identity grounded this feeling of "refreshing" authenticity even if and when the non-Muslim writers' plotlines felt reductive to the same fans. The world that Andem built, which expanded across the globe into the constellation that is the *Skam* universe, was a fiction that Muslim viewers engaged with in profoundly personal ways as they sought a representation that was deeply and profoundly true to them and one that was reparative to the centuries-old ideological fallacies regarding Muslims in the West. Even as these texts did not provide such closure, as none could nor can nor will, Kathryn Smoot Egan writes, "we can still identify with characters, consider what we would do and whether what they do matters" because the "authentic text is open to refiguration, which, in turn, invites reason, so that we come closer to

⁷⁹ thickskinandelasticeart, "Control Your Hoes ~," Tumblr, October 17, 2017, <https://thickskinandelasticeart.tumblr.com/post/166490998179/i-dont-claim-any-sana-bakkoush-that-will-be#notes>.

understanding our own essential existence and the power we have to act on the world.”⁸⁰ Fans’ cultural criticism, their relentless engagement with the seasons’ characters and stories and other fans (those supportive and antagonistic), did considerable work to reveal the ideological work and meanings produced across the media landscape at large and the stake and impact of *Skam* and *Druck* in particular.

⁸⁰ Kathryn Smoot Egan, “The Ethics of Entertainment Television: Applying Paul Ricoeur’s Spiral of Mimesis for Authenticity as a Moral Standard,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 31, no. 4 (January 2004): 165, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01956051.2004.10662049>.

CONCLUSION

In December 2018, North Sudan began an uprising against the central government where Omar Al-Bashir had been in power for 30 years. Little regard had been given to the Sudan Uprisings in Western media until a photo of Alaa Salah leading anti-government protest chants went viral and garnered global attention. In the photo that would come to define the uprisings (figure 15), the then-22-year-old student stands atop a white car wearing a white Sudanese tobe draped over a dark, long-sleeve t-shirt, her large gold circle earrings reflecting the light. Salah's stance is strong, her finger pointed upward to the sky as she recites a poem: "The bullet doesn't kill. What kills is the silence of people."¹ In videos that capture this iconic moment in Khartoum, you also hear her sing-chanting and the crowd calling back rhythmically in Arabic: "revolution." People on the street circle her. Many of them are women in hijabs and tobés looking up at her, holding their phones high to capture this moment—multiplying the image, multiplying its impact.

¹ *Traiblazers: Sudan's "Woman in White,"* 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xcPx7Ob5RMY>.



Figure 15: Alaa Salah leading protest chants at a sit-in; photo taken by Lana H. Haroun, April 8, 2019 (@lana_hago, twitter.com)

When this image was circulated, Salah became known as a protest icon, Sudan's woman in white, and popularly, Kandaka (Nubian queen). Sudanese American interfaith educator Hind Makki tweeted that, "Sudanese everywhere are referring to female protestors as 'Kandaka,' which is the title given to the Nubian queens of ancient Sudan whose gift to their descendents is a legacy of empowered women who fight hard for their country and their rights."² Empowered women leading and contributing to resistance movements has a long legacy in Sudan, to the point that Salah's outfit even pays homage to earlier eras of resistance; Salah's white tobe and gold moon-shaped earrings are the same things worn by Sudanese women in the 60s, 70s, and 80s who marched against previous military dictatorships.³ Still, the fact that Sudan is an Afro-Arab country that was under Islamist leadership inspired Western reporters and commentators to frame Sudanese women's involvement as surprising. The assumption is that women in Islamist states are oppressed and in need of rescue, incapable of standing for themselves or something more. In actuality, women often made up the majority of the protestors.⁴ Salah's stature in the photo mimicked Lady Liberty, a beloved US icon meant to serve as a beacon of hope, which inspired Western media to also dub Salah "Sudan's Lady Liberty."⁵ Mapping Lady Liberty's symbolism onto Salah becomes another way in which Americans might see the Sudanese struggle as relatable, as worthy of being understood. Salah shared that she was ultimately glad her photo worked as a strategic resource that "let people around the world know about the

² Hind Makki [@HindMakki], "Sudanese Everywhere Are Referring to Female Protestors as 'Kandaka,' Which Is the Title given to the Nubian Queens of Ancient Sudan Whose Gift to Their Descendents Is a Legacy of Empowered Women Who Fight Hard for Their Country and Their Rights. 🇸🇩," Tweet, *Twitter*, April 8, 2019, <https://twitter.com/HindMakki/status/1115342886609063937>.

³ Hind Makki [@HindMakki], "I've Been Seeing This Pic on My #Sudan_Uprising TLs Today and It's Amazing. Let Me Tell You Why. Htps://T.Co/Gt6Otvj0Al," Tweet, *Twitter*, April 8, 2019, <https://twitter.com/HindMakki/status/1115337418301935616>.

⁴ Liv Tønnessen, "Sudanese Women's Revolution for Freedom, Dignity and Justice Continues," CMI - Chr. Michelsen Institute, accessed January 16, 2023, <https://www.cmi.no/publications/7355-sudanese-womens-revolution-for-freedom-dignity-and-justice-continues>.

⁵ Iliana Hagenah, "Alaa Salah, Sudan's Iconic 'Lady Liberty,' Speaks out: 'Life Has a Way of Choosing People for Missions,'" CBS News, October 29, 2019, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/alaa-salah-sudan-iconic-lady-liberty-life-has-a-way-of-choosing-people-for-missions/>.

revolution in Sudan” and “spoke about the strength of women and fought the stereotype of women being weak and not involved in their communities.”⁶ Because of this image, which publicized her activism, Salah was shortlisted for the 2020 Nobel Peace Prize.

Salah’s image works as a paradox: Salah is seen as exceptional—distinct in important ways from who people in the West assume Sudanese/Muslim women to be—and thus, she’s incorporated into Western media; Salah is only incorporated by virtue of being an exception. With this, we can see how the ways that Muslim women are rendered exceptional manifests beyond the concept of ‘firsts’ and has global implications—to the point that people in the West only find out or invest in things like the Sudanese Revolution when it appeals to the disruption or maintenance of certain civilizational tropes.

Like Salah, many visibly Muslim women who were “firsts” or who were rendered exceptional in Western representations debuted outside the US—in UK visual culture in particular—around the same time as those I assess in this project. For example, Mariah Idrissi, the first hijab-wearing Muslim model for H&M, and Amena Khan, the first hijab-wearing model for L’Oréal Paris, are both from the UK. I do not find my framing of Muslim firsts and US exceptionalism to contradict this fact, especially because my claim is not that Muslim firsts are an inherently or importantly US American category but develop out of the greater Western representational legacy of Muslims and Muslim women. I argue Muslim firsts function in this particular way in the US even as they may function in similar and distinct ways elsewhere. As a scholar in American studies, I yield my question as to why these look so similar yet different in other places to another curious scholar.

⁶ Iliana Hagenah, “Alaa Salah, Sudan’s Iconic ‘Lady Liberty,’ Speaks out: ‘Life Has a Way of Choosing People for Missions,’” CBS News, October 29, 2019, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/alaa-salah-sudan-iconic-lady-liberty-life-has-a-way-of-choosing-people-for-missions/>; Zeinab Mohammed Salih, “‘I Was Raised to Love Our Home’: Sudan’s Singing Protester Speaks Out,” *The Guardian*, April 10, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/apr/10/alaa-salah-sudanese-woman-talks-about-protest-photo-that-went-viral>.

“Representation matters” is an expression whose widespread popularity reflects the perennial significance of visual representation. This is especially true for historically marginalized groups who have been rendered in one-dimensional ways, if they have represented at all. My project affirms that expression while problematizing the notion that more representation means more progress. People look to representation as a promise—either of something already achieved or as a promise for something more, whether that be belonging, access to rights, or other forms of progress. Representation in itself does not reflect or lead to more freedom or justice for the marginalized—in this case, for Muslims in the West. Representation does matter, but as anthropologist Su’ad Abdul Khabeer writes, it is also a trap because mainstream recognition is selective and works to preserve someone else’s power, and because it causes us to police ourselves.⁷ In June 2021, hijabi fashion blogger and musician Nemah Hassan, aka Nemahsis, released her debut single *What if I took it off for you?* In this emotional ballad, she sings,

What if I took it off for you? / Would you love me the way they never do? / I thought I should take it off for you / What a fool / ... / Oh, I don’t speak much no I don’t speak at all / Guess I should have spoken ‘cause you still left me after all⁸

The listener easily assumes that Nemahsis is reflecting on a heartbreak with a lover, maybe a toxic relationship, and wondering if removing her hijab would make her more loveable and appealing. In actuality, this song is about how she was “screwed over by a multimillion dollar corporation who refused to pay her for a campaign by explaining, ‘It’s a good look for your community.’”⁹ Despite turning down the corporation, the unnamed brand used her images

⁷ Su’ad Abdul Khabeer, “Representation as a Black Muslim Woman Is Good—And It’s a Trap,” *Vice*, March 27, 2019, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/nexp3d/representation-as-a-black-muslim-woman-is-goodand-its-a-trap>.

⁸ Nemahsis, *What If i Took It off for You?*, 2021, <https://genius.com/Nemahsis-what-if-i-took-it-off-for-you-lyrics>.

⁹ Natalie Harmsen, “Premiere: Nemahsis Drops Her Impassioned First Single, ‘What If i Took It off for You?’,” *Complex Canada*, June 23, 2021, <https://www.complex.com/music/nemahsis-first-single>.

without her permission. Not speaking is often the price of inclusion but Nemahsis found that remaining quiet does not guarantee being beloved by a brand and treated as human; she was still exploited even or especially through her silence. She told *Complex*, “I felt like such an idiot. I was supposed to be strong and independent. I was too proud to admit what had happened. But I will not be anybody’s victim.”¹⁰

The context for *What if I took it off for you?* is intriguing because the toxic relationship is not between two partners or two equals, but between a Muslim woman and a corporation. They used Nemahsis’s images without regard for her consent or compensation because it pushed their bottom line and projected an inclusive image. Instead of actually paying Muslim women for their labor, they profited off her visibility and insisted that amplifying or associating her image with the brand would benefit Muslims broadly. This shows how corporations profit off of the assumption that representation in and of itself is an end. I argue it also exemplifies how not just the hijab, but Muslim women themselves have become commodified. Companies profit off of integrating Muslim women into their brand image; people want to feel like they are giving their money to a company that cares and corporations want to avoid the backlash (limited audience, declining sales) that comes with lack of diversity. As a visibly Muslim woman myself, I have found great relief in the integration of modest fashion into mainstream retail spaces. Having ready access to clothes that are both modest and fashionable makes my life easier in many ways. However, the integration of certain Muslim women into fashion and retail effectively sells a certain type of Muslim woman—one who is acceptable enough to be included. Consequently, there are now more parameters than ever around what a good Muslim woman looks like—i.e., what’s in fashion, what’s en vogue/in *Vogue*, what a stylish (and thus includable) hijabi can look

¹⁰ Harmsen, “Premiere: Nemahsis Drops Her Impassioned First Single.”

like—and that in itself is very limiting because there are more and more parameters around what a hijab-wearing Muslim woman must *look* like to be accepted or included as a non-threat. It now feels imperative that should I want to move through the public and appear non-threatening, I must be fashionable.

This commodification of Muslim women has community-wide and individual repercussions. Being platformed by big brands like *Playboy*, Nike or that unnamed brand Nemahsis sings about, leaves Muslim women vulnerable, even as it makes some also feel empowered and included. In addition to the hashtag #LetNoorShine that I discussed in Chapter 1, #BoycottNike and #IMarchwithLinda were hashtags that trended around the inclusion of Muslim women into Nike and the Women’s March on Washington (WMW). This shows that even as Muslim women are embraced in some spaces by some people, they are also importantly reminded that they do not fully belong. The hashtag #BoycottNike would swarm social media in 2018 during Nike’s “Just Do It” campaign with Colin Kaepernick, but it also trended one year before, after Nike released the Pro Hijab. Tweets advocating for Nike to be boycotted attributed hijab to “the subjugation, domination, and oppression of women”¹¹; through producing and selling the Pro Hijab, these tweets suggested Nike was co-signing and normalizing women’s oppression.¹² The inclusion of Muslim women was seen by some as “accommodating Muslims” for the sake of corporate greed.¹³ People like Cici (@Ptkay) would complement the hashtag with “No sharia law in America!!” which exemplifies the sensationalist response some Americans

¹¹ #Sandy [@GSDDogLover], “#Nike cashing in on the subjugation, domination, and oppression of women. I will never buy another Nike product again.” Tweet, *Twitter*, March 8, 2017.

¹² Connor R. Kenney [@realKenney], “Congratulations, @Nike for normalizing the oppression of women through the Pro Hijab. Disgusting.” Tweet, *Twitter*, March 8, 2017.

¹³ Cici [@Ptkay], “I will NEVER buy anything Nike again! Their greed for \$\$ is so great now accommodating Muslims? No sharia law in America!! #BOYCOTTNIKE,” Tweet, *Twitter*, March 9, 2017.

have to Muslim inclusion, insisting that something as simple as a sports hijab means Muslims are taking over.

Similarly, after Linda Sarsour's speech was live broadcasted at the WMW, conservatives and right-wing Islamophobes began a hate campaign against her. In her memoir she describes how they "claimed that I was a radical Islamic supremacist, that I was anti-Semitic because I advocated for the human rights of Palestinians; that I wanted to institute sharia law in America because I wear a hijab; that I was connected to terrorist groups."¹⁴ The visibility of Muslim women in public and their proliferation in visual culture fuels bigotry that associates Muslim visibility with Muslim dominance (e.g., sharia law). The US constantly (re)configures and (re)constructs the Muslim bogeyman and this inclusion of Muslims—through diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) campaigns, critical race theory curriculum, or diversified representations in media—is increasingly imagined by racist Americans as threatening. #IMarchwithLinda was mobilized to show Sarsour support amid the hate she received. Together, these show the US's ambivalence toward Muslim women, who they are including in more ways and who they are maintaining as the Other.

Throughout my dissertation, I offered numerous examples of how Muslims are newly incorporated into Western media through the new trope of Muslim firsts and examine how such massive platforming of Muslim women produces discourses that impact Muslim communities in gendered ways—i.e., representational responsibility. Many scholars still take for granted that the oppressed Muslim woman trope is preminent. In some ways this is true, but we are increasingly offered additional formulations of the Muslim woman that are worthy of interrogation and critique. In fact, as I have shown, these other formulations work with the oppressed Muslim

¹⁴ Linda Sarsour, *We Are Not Here to Be Bystanders: A Memoir of Love and Resistance* (New York: 37 INK, Simon & Schuster, 2020), 208.

woman trope in critical ways. For instance, I argued in the final chapter that Muslim firsts are a new semantic figure who reaffirms stereotypes about Muslim women through rendering certain Muslim women exceptional. Instead of fundamentally shifting the paradigm or negating the oppressed Muslim woman trope, Muslim firsts work as a foil.

I have analyzed real Muslim women who are represented in Western media, and to a lesser extent, fictitious Muslim women written for television and film. Since I first started writing, there have already been numerous representations of Muslim women and girls that break from the old and new tropes outlined in this dissertation. This diversification is particularly true for fictional media. In the realm of television, the British Channel 4/Peacock show *We Are Lady Parts* stands out. The series—written and directed by Nida Manzoor, a Muslim woman herself—follows the development of a punk rock band that consists entirely of Muslim women who practice various levels of veiling and religiosity, and exhibit diversity in race and sexuality. If *Skam* offered a representation of what it's like to be Muslim in a white secular world, *We Are Lady Parts* builds and invites people into a thoroughly Muslim world that examines what it's like to be a visibly Muslim woman who does not fit into her own normative Muslim community either. It is notable to me that some of the most nuanced and interesting representations of Muslim women like this do not come out of the US or Hollywood and what does, rarely makes it into the mainstream media. In contrast, representations of real Muslim women have remained fairly consistent. Muslim women who are granted visibility and representation for their achievements are often treated as exceptional, and/or are patriotic or neoliberal in their presentation of self and politics.

The way these different kinds of images circulate through the public becomes meaningful for different reasons. These images add to a large repertoire of Western representations of

Muslims, which add to ways the West imagines itself as knowing, understanding, or including Muslims. Their inclusion functions to diversify the institutions they are now given entry into and affirm myths of US exceptionalism and multiculturalism. But we know this adoption of multiculturalism only *projects* a multicultural society without addressing persistent structures of inequality and state violence against Muslim bodies.¹⁵ They also become meaningful as Muslim communities react and respond to these highly publicized images. Commentary and discourses that attach to these highly visible Muslim women impact real Muslim women in their everyday lives and on social media. This is to say, the major platforming of Muslim women and the series of Muslim responses to that have ramifications in the private sphere, not just the public sphere. The gendered nature of Muslim representation—whereby the headscarf ties women to a distinctly religious accountability—leads to gendered consequences for these communities where women are often assigned (and may internalize) the insurmountable burden of representing not just themselves but an entire religion. The insistence by some Muslims that there is one proper way to be Muslim or to represent Islam is itself yielding to the suffocating binaries orchestrated by power. There is no one way of being Muslim and thus, no one way of representing Muslims.

¹⁵ Evelyn Alsultany, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

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