Narrating Normal:
Arabs, Queers, Neoliberal Spectatorship

By

Marc Barry Boucai

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Abstract:

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Queer and Arab—as both social movements and signifiers of cultural difference—have shared surprisingly similar historical trajectories within American culture and politics since the late 1960’s. The historical parallels become especially relevant to this project with the arrival of the 1990’s, when the United States witnessed the roughly simultaneous consolidation of (1) identity politics and (2) a multicultural ideal in which difference is at once defining and irrelevant. Like other racialized/stigmatized social groups, Arab and queer identities post-1990 have been folded into larger debates on the creation of a new multicultural America in which differences of gender, class, and race are supposedly null and void. In this model, Arab and queer subjectivities can pass and/or cover as normal, as good, as worthy of heteronormative and white privilege and full citizenship, if they adhere to the narrative benchmarks (monogamous marriage, procreation, the accumulation of capital) that have become common sense.

Narrating Normal argues that being a spectator/subject in a neoliberal multicultural era is inherently about the recitation of the same scripts with different casts, in which difference is subjugated/erased and sameness amplified and spectacularized, creating what I call the Neoliberal Multicultural Spectator. This subject does not exist. It is, rather, an ideal subject evoked for political speeches, televised news, and media and entertainment. As a performance studies project, this dissertation utilizes concepts of theatricality and the performance of self in everyday life to examine the current spectacle of the real we are all embrocated in. Although we know that we can never really possess all of the positive attributes, moral clarity, and desire for a concrete, stable, normal life that make up the neoliberal multicultural spectator, there is still societal and personal
pressure to embody the values and desires of that unattainable, non-existent spectator. The constant barrage of media today, both in terms of cultural production and the production of the self, makes the lines between one’s own subjectivity and one’s performance of self tenuous at best, causing us to live in what many critics have called a “spectacle of the real,” trying to find some sort of normative narrative fulfillment.

Each chapter of this dissertation examines certain spectacles of citizenship, analyzing specifically the ways in which difference is both underplayed and amplified. This is first apparent in the Arab American National Museum where a variety of camp aesthetics are utilized in order to make clear how normal and acceptable Arab Americans are, and have always been, creating a spectacle out of rituals of normative American citizenship and assimilation. Next, I look at two different spectacular narratives that have become intertwined in the past decade; the inherent Orientalist spectacle of melodramatic narratives about Iraq and Afghanistan in the years of U.S intervention and the tales of immigrant assimilations to the American polity. I execute this work by analyzing the narrative similarities between The Kite Runner and Bilal’s Bread, two novels that became word of mouth sensations from 2003-2005. Next, I examine how even intimate moments found in small-scale theatrical productions (Jeff Key’s The Eyes of Babylon and David Adjmi’s Stunning) can set the stage for their own form of pyrotechnics. In Key’s piece, this spectacle comes in the form of a positivist and life-affirming disembodied kiss between an American solider and an Iraqi queer while Adjmi’s form of spectacle concerns the violent whitewashing of a queer women of color. My analysis of the spectacle of everyday life reaches its apex in Chapter 4, which analyzes the two very different performances of self found on TLC’s All American Muslim and Bravo’s The Shah’s of Sunset; while the former underplays differences and overlays normalcy, the latter underplays normalcy and overlays artifice. The last spectacle of normalcy I examine is the wedding ceremony, looking at how different non-normative sexual subjects (queers, Muslims, and Mormons) have been represented in popular media, giving way to what I coin a contemporary “monogamy panic” that elucidates the limits of both neoliberalism and multiculturalism as political and social projects.

Central to this project is the inherent double-bind that lies at the heart of our contemporary relationship to identity: it is limiting and liberating, essentializing as well as essential to democratic engagement. It renders difference both invisible and highly visible in the performative tactics used by othered/non-hegemonic subjects. This dissertation takes lessons from the affective and historical similarities of Arab and Queer in the hopes of elaborating new aesthetic and social forms of recognition that are both hopeful and pragmatic, optimistic but not limiting, and critical and forgiving of reiterated concepts of “identity.”
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For the memory of Eva Klein Boucai (1941-2013)  
who always said she would have a son who was a doctor.
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Over the course of writing this dissertation, personal and familial emergencies caused me to complete my manuscript in Florida and New York City. If it were not for
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If it takes a village to raise a dissertation, it takes a family to instill the work ethic, drive, determination, and capacity for curiosity necessary to even take on such an undertaking. My parents Joseph and Eva Klein Boucai instilled just such qualities in their children, and even as they found it more and more difficult to understand just what my research was, their pride at my accomplishments never ceased. Special thanks also to Charmain Smith, who in the past two years has not only become a member of our family but a source of encouragement and belly laughs. Perhaps my greatest debt of gratitude goes to my brother Michael Boucai. From helping with my application process though the final stages of this dissertation, Michael always pushed me as a writer and a thinker. Although some might think having two queer theorists in the family might be too many, having Michael as a colleague, friend, brother and co-producer in the show called life is essential to the person, brother, son, teacher and scholar I have become. Michael, I really couldn’t have done any of this without you.
Introduction:
Spectacles of (Ab) Normalcy
Queering the Arab Question in Neoliberal America

America and Islam. Although the two terms seem uneven ground for a comparison, in the years since the end of the cold war, the concepts of “Islam” and “America” have been consistently evoked as symbolizing a clash of civilizations.1 In this model, America is not just a nation but a way of life—democratic, egalitarian, and progressive—while Islam is not just a religion but a backwards mode of existence, misogynist and unenlightened. Keeping his campaign promise that if elected he would give an address to Muslims from a Muslim capital, President Barrack Obama addressed this oft cited comparison between Islam and America in his speech at Al-Ahzar University in Cairo on June 4th, 2009. Entitled “A New Beginning,” Obama’s speech asks for just that, a fresh start “based upon mutual interest and mutual respect; and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive, and need not be in competition.” Rather, the new President insisted that America and Islam “overlap, and share common principles—principles of justice and progress; tolerance and the dignity of all human beings,” even stating that “Islam is a part of America.”2 Despite Obama’s strong thesis, that Islam and America “share common principles,” the bulk of the President’s remarks concerned not “shared values” but the tensions that exist between America and the Islamic world, focusing on hot button issues such as “violent extremetism in all of its forms”; the rights and responsibilities of those nations with nuclear weapons; democracy; religious freedom (tolerance); and women’s rights.3 Obama returned again and again to the axiom that, contrary to Sedgwick, people (at least “Americans” and “Islamists”) aren’t so different.4 He argued that “regardless of race, religion, or station in life, all of us share common aspirations—to live in peace and security; to get an education and to work with dignity; to love our families, our communities, and our God.”5 He told his audience that the “hope of all humanity”6 was riding on these shared common aspirations; if not, dystopia could ensue.

America and homosexuality. Although the relationship between these two terms is not as contentious as that between America and Islam, there remains in American culture a strain of subject who views homosexuality as incompatible with the American way of life, seeing gay rights as harkening an apocalypse, a world without morals and ethics. In September 2010, in a satirical response to the negative outcry surrounding the

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3 Ibid.
5 Obama, “A New Beginning.”
6 Ibid.
planned “Mosque at Ground Zero,” the creators of Saturday Night Live staged a mock commercial depicting an apocalyptic future in which gay weddings—to be exact, “weddings for two women, weddings for two men, weddings for a person and an animal”—are performed within the walls of the contested mosque. The infomercial announcer assures viewers that the mosque’s wedding services are “fabulous, classy, friendly, first-class from top to bottom for tops and bottoms, and with a 20% discount for active military!” In order to exaggerate even further the seemingly nonsensical connection between gay marriage and Arab American rights, the mosque also offers “free naturalization services for Mexican immigrants,” and a “state of the art pregnancy termination lounge.” The announcer tells viewers that though the mosque may be “controversial” it is also “fun, definitely,” and is “nothing to worry about.” Abruptly, the frame freezes and an animated message is stamped over the commercial, accompanied by an ominous voice, stating: “it could happen,” followed quickly by a voiceover from the mockumercial’s sponsor, the Republican National Committee (and 80% of the Democratic National Committee). Though the uneven analogy between the subjugation of homosexual and Muslim subjects is meant to be a source of humor here, the real humor of the commercial comes from its prescient punch line, “it could happen,” making clear that for the right (and 80% of the left) what is most funny is what the fear-mongering media thinks we should be most afraid of. Moreover, the commercial can be said to be aimed at the 20% of the left that are do not share these fears with the right, creating a cosmopolitan audience that is in on the joke.


7 “Gay Weddings at the Mosque at Ground Zero,” Saturday Night Live, season 36, episode 1, first broadcast September 25, 2010 by NBC Studios.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
Arabs. Queers. Spectatorship. Although sketches on Saturday Night Live may take as their ideal viewer a well-educated spectator critical of the state apparatus, the intended audience for Obama’s speech is much broader, encompassing the majority of subjects that the commercial takes to task. It is this majority of the population, comprised of the right and 80% of the left, that Obama is speaking to when he takes about shared values and goals for the future. The SNL sketch highlights how certain subjects might not fit into this vision of the future, exemplifying how Arab and Queer have become important and emblematic signifiers of culture difference and fear before and since the events of September 11th, 2001. Arab and queer identities can now be summoned up interchangeably with the nation’s other “others,” an eclectic mix of races, ethnicities, religions, classes, and genders—“others” that are considered second-class citizens until they prove themselves otherwise. One proves oneself worthy through the adherence to a new set of norms that are supposedly colorblind and indifferent to sexual orientation, religion, or ethnicity.

It is adherence to the logic undergirding these new norms that creates what I refer to in this dissertation as the neoliberal multicultural spectator. This subject does not exist. It is, rather, an ideal subject evoked for political speeches, televised news, and media and entertainment. In this dissertation, I augment the concept of the spectator and the creation of a certain multicultural citizen/subject that has been theorized by many feminist and race scholars.11 I argue that, due to the ways in which the “Arab” and “Queer” questions have become contested sites concerning what constitutes an acceptable citizen, looking at how these terms intersect, constellate, and interact with one another provides a lens for examining larger questions about the normative content of American citizenship in the present. This dissertation takes the current pairing of Arab and Queer as an opportunity to expose the contradictions at the heart of Obama’s rhetoric about our shared goals. It is, after all, the belief in these goals that creates the neoliberal multicultural spectator.

**Queer and Arab: Passing as Normal**

Queer and Arab—as both social movements and signifiers of cultural difference—have shared surprisingly similar historical trajectories within American culture and politics since the late 1960’s. The historical parallels become especially relevant to this project with the arrival of the 1990’s, when the United States witnessed the roughly simultaneous consolidation of (1) identity politics and (2) a multicultural ideal in which difference is at once defining and irrelevant. Like other racialized/stigmatized social groups, Arab and queer identities post-1990 have been folded into larger debates on the creation of a new multicultural America in which differences of gender, class, and race are supposedly null and void.

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11 For more on the genealogies of these concepts, please see the sub-sections of this introduction entitled “Spectacular! Spectacular!” and “Yoking Neoliberalism and Multiculturalism.”
In addition to an affectively similar sense of shared stigmatization, this dissertation argues that the distinctive link between queer and Arab lies in the ways in which a rhetoric of fear concerning conversion and indoctrination is explicit in the history and literature by and about queer and Arab Americans. This fear of conversion is made even clearer by the way extremist notions of both the queer and the Arab are rendered as the ultimate threat to both “traditional family values” and “traditional democratic values.” Nationally and internationally, the Arab has emerged as the American scapegoat, the symbol of everything “un-American and unpatriotic,” even more certainly in the years since the events of September 11th, 2001. The figure of the terrorist, generated in the wake of 9/11 symbolized the ultimate threat to the bio-political entity that is the American nation. This terrorist subject wanted to convert Americans into Muslims, and, hence, needed to be assimilated into and/or cast out from normal American society. This fear of difference was also quite evident in movements founded in the 1970’s to “Save Our Children” from the militant, anti-American homosexuals who would pervert and recruit our nation’s youth. The fear of queer as perpetually perverse and other continues in the rhetoric of normal family values and monogamy used to “whitewash” the gay marriage campaign. Hence, the signifier Queer, like Arab, carries negative, “black,” shameful resonances, many of which imply the fear of “conversion” from good subjects to bad subjects. This insistent utilization of good/bad, black/white dichotomies has resulted in what Mamdani has coined the “good Muslim, bad Muslim paradigm,” in which one can only be either of one these things, nothing in-between. The whitewashing of the gay and lesbian movement—Pinkwashing, as it is often called—is another example of this paradigm at work: good gays are constructed in opposition to more radical, non-conformist, bad queers.

This rhetoric about good Muslims and bad Muslims, good gays and bad queers, makes clear that citizenship is not only about legal certification but has affective contours. Far more than a green card or a legal designation, citizenship has been

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thorized in recent years as being multicultural, transnational, flexible, and dissident. Moreover, recent work on queer and Arab citizenship shows how citizenship is less about a piece of paper than it is about feeling like a member of American society, feeling as if one “belongs.” This sense of belonging is affective, a felt sensation more than something tangible, as elucidated in recent writings by queers of color.

The affective elements of citizenship also have affinity with two centuries of tales, stories, and histories about racial, ethnic, and national passing. Passing—both racially and sexually—is a narrative concept and an epistemology, a way of giving power to hegemonic constructions of whiteness and American-ness. Even if the American civil rights movement gave birth to a multicultural era in which differences of gender, class, and race are supposedly insignificant, a desire to pass as “normal,” as a functional, biopolitically capable subject, remains. Historically, Arabs have been considered what many called “marginally white.” At least until the events of September 11th, which transformed many Arabs from invisible citizens to visible subjects, the majority of Arabs in America, especially the 70% who are of Christian or Jewish descent, have been able to pass un-problematically as white, and to enjoy the benefits attached to that status. Similarly, the proliferation of a gay rights rhetoric that privileges heteronormative constructions of coupledom and procreation has changed the stakes of queer passing; no longer are people forced to pass as “straight,” but now must pass as the right kind of gay subject. For these specifically stigmatized subjects, as for many Americans in general, a desire to cover, to pass as “normal” persists. Do different forms of passing—Arab to

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20 For more on this topic please see the Section of this literature review devoted to Queer of Color Critique on pages 10-12.


white, gay to straight—share an affective resonance? How does the performance of passing along axes of race and ethnicity support or impinge upon the performance of passing along axes of gender and sexuality? To what extent should we understand the demands of assimilation and citizenship as demands to pass? What is the relationship between passing and forms of conversion into both secular and religious modes of being?

In this dissertation I examine Arab and Queer as passing identities, or identities that elucidate the precarious double-bind at the heart of identity politics itself; identity is limiting and liberating, essentializing as well as essential to democratic engagement. It renders difference both invisible and highly visible in the form of political tactics used by those outside of US hegemonic forms of race, class, and heteronormative privilege. Arab and queer subjectivities can pass and/or cover as normal, as good, as worthy of heteronormative and white privilege and full citizenship, if they adhere to the narrative benchmarks (monogamous marriage, procreation, the accumulation of capital) that have become common sense. Because Arab and Queer are both passing identities they are the perfect lenses through which to look at how larger questions of race, sexual difference, religion, class, ethnicity, and citizenship function. In order to make clear the surprising ways queer and Arab come into contact with one another in our contemporary moment, I often examine populations (Iranian-Americans, Afghani Americas, Mormon polygamists) that are neither Arab nor queer.\(^25\) I do so in order to show how Arab and Queer as signifiers in our current moment are no longer about literal Arabs and queers but about those qualities (religious fundamentalism, sexual immorality, non-democratic forms of governance) that have historically stigmatized them as second-class citizens. Living in a supposedly race and religion neutral society, anyone can now pass as normal, and often may be ideologically manipulated and coerced into doing so.

This dissertation claims that the performance of American citizenship, especially for queers and Arabs in the present moment, is based on the ways that these aforementioned demands to pass are institutionalized and incorporated. Like art and the public sphere writ large, my dissertation claims that the creation of new identities is subject to a form of institutionalization.\(^26\) It is through this institutionalizing and disciplining of the subject, I argue, that the subject is incorporated into the imagined national and trans-national spheres. Incorporation, as I use the term, has three valances. It refers to (1) the inclusion of different identity-based political movements into full participation in the nation state; (2) the allowance of once stigmatized subjects into a capitalist, neoliberal mode of being that conflates the free market with the free subject;\(^27\) and (3) assimilation into the American melting pot, in the sense that an incorporated ingredient is indistinguishable from all others, losing its authenticity. How one becomes

\(^25\) Although there is no way to fully engage with the concept given the scope of this dissertation, the contemporary example par excellence of the ontological complexity of passing identities would be “genderqueer subjects” who, unlike their transgendered counterparts, do not wish to pass as male or female. For more on this topic, see Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).


“incorporated” in all three of these ways, I argue, is a result of certain narrative tropes and ideological concepts that seem like common sense. In this model of thought, individual experiences must meet certain generic qualifications to count as full American citizens. Like the generic conventions of popular cinema, television, and literature, identity can only be accepted if rendered legible. This project looks at how this legibility is performed through certain lived practices and narrative constructions, in both the public and private sphere, in popular and “avant-garde” art, and how the constellation of Arab American and queer subjects can tell us something important about the larger structures of acceptability at our current moment.

“Arab-American” and “Queer of Color”: Critical Genealogies

The greatest challenge for both Arab American Studies and GLBTQ Studies as bourgeoning areas of academic inquiry has been their (in)ability to define who/what Arab and Queer represent as umbrella terms. Despite the media’s penchant for conflating the two, Arab and Muslim are in no way interchangeable terms. Arab Americans are from Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Druze, and Kurdish heritage, among others. Historically, what linked these diverse groups as Arab Americans was a shared language, shared geographic factors, and a personal investment in America’s questionable intervention in the region, as epitomized by the Arab American Association of University Graduates constructed in 1967. However, in the years since the Cold War, the American tendency to racially/religiously profile “questionable subjects” has resulted in a decline in the popularity of pan-Arabism as an animating term for political organizing and a rise in popularity of what Nadine Naber calls a “Muslim first, Arab second” mode of identity politics. While trying to be an umbrella term for the myriad of different subjects

30 Founded by Edward Said and other prominent intellectuals and politicians, AAUG became, for twenty plus years, one of the most important organizations making clear the shared desires of a bourgeoning Arab American movement. Foundational and historical research on the history of Arabs in America was undertaken in Winter 2011 at AAUG Archives housed at Eastern Michigan University. Although much of this primary research did not find a place in this dissertation project, it informs this project with a dose of historical accountability not reflected in the text. Association of Arab American University Graduates Archive. Michigan State University, Ypsilanti Michigan. Last Visited February 25, 2011, http://caine.emich.edu/archives/findingaids/html/Association_of_Arab_American_University_Gr aiduates_collection.html.
31 For more on this concept, see Chapter 3 of Nadine Naber, *Gender, Cultural Politics, and Activism* (New York: NYU Press, 2012). For more on questions of race, ethnicity and profiling, see Louise A. Cainkar, *Homeland Insecurity: The Arab American and Muslim American*
descending from South West Asia and North Africa, Arab also lacks specificity in our contemporary political consciousness, which might explain why Muslim and Arab are often used as synonyms in the mainstream press.32

Similarly, Queer Studies as an academic mode of inquiry was first developed in the early 1990’s to think of sexuality in relationship to larger structures of power, while also making clear the magnitude of different subjects that live outside of straight and/or gendered norms.33 Due to its taking heteronormativity (rather than heterosexuality) as its object of derision, Queer Studies has often been seen as being at odds with gay political mainstreaming, reflective of a divide between assimilationist and liberationist modes of organizing present since the founding of the Homophile movement in the 1950’s.34 Moreover, over the past decade many queer theorists have attacked the field for being too whitewashed and monolithic, resulting in the emergence of queer of color critique as a mode of analysis, a genealogy of which I highlight later in this introduction. Like the moniker Arab, Queer has seemed to cause as much conflict and fissuring as it has coalition building.

Substantial inquiry into Arab American experience in the academy may be traced to the late 1960s when, concurrently with the growth of the AAUG and other Arab American political groups, a cohort of academics from the social sciences began to document the Arab American experience.35 Although questions of race were discussed in this work, the 1990’s saw the entrenchment in the United States of a multicultural politics of recognition.36 In this work, a new generation of scholars in history and cultural studies began to look at whiteness through the same social constructionist lens that had already been applied to racial and ethnic minorities.37 This academic trend informed a new body

33 In recent years, the term SWANA (South West Asian/North African) has been taken up by many Arab and Muslim Americans as an alternative to these other labels. For more on the use of SWANA by activists and youths please any of the sources cited above.
34 For more see Michael Warner, ed., Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
35 For more on this topic see John D’Emilio, Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). For a contemporary fictional representation of the rift at the heart of the Mattachine Society, see Jon Marans, The Temperamentals (New York: Dramatists Play Service Inc., 2010).
38 For more on the history of whiteness and American culture see Richard Dyer, White: Essays on Race and Culture (New York: Routledge, 1997); Michael Rogin, Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998);
of work that profitably focused on Arab Americans’ marginal racial position as neither black nor white, but it tended to take for granted its summoning of a discrete and stable Arab American subject position, uncomplicated by contingencies of religion, class, gender, sexuality, and geographic location.\(^{38}\) At around the same time, a significant identifiable Arab American form of artistic expression began to emerge. Though undoubtedly influenced by the identitarian tenor of the times, its creators were provoked by xenophobic anxieties exposed during the Persian Gulf War of 1991-1992 and exacerbated in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. Major contributions to this literature were compiled in five major literary anthologies.\(^{39}\) For the first time, Arabs in America self-consciously represented themselves as hybrid, complex subjects, often in direct challenge to centuries of Orientalized stereotypes.\(^{40}\) However, much of this work has been in the social sciences and has not examined the aesthetic and ideological qualities of cultural production by and about Arab Americans. This dissertation utilizes close analysis to examine this new body of culture critically, investigating the ways in which the Arab American subject is consistently engaged in larger debates concerning race, class, and sexuality. In so doing, it will build upon the work of cultural analysis done by Ella Shohat, Lisa Suheir Majaj, Nadine Naber and Evelyn Alsultany by explicitly augmenting this work with questions and modes of analysis gleaned from Queer of Color critique.\(^{41}\)

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\(^{41}\) See Rabab Abdulhadi, Evelyn Alsultany, Nadine Naber, and *Arab and Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence, and Belonging* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2010); Evelyn Alsultany and Ella Shohat, eds., *Between the Middle East and the Americas: The Cultural
Roderick Ferguson has defined Queer of Color analysis as “a heterogeneous enterprise made up of women of color feminisms, materialist analysis, post-structuralism theory, and Queer critique.” From the body of literature on women of color feminisms I draw upon concepts of breaking down monolithic notions of the subject and transnational coalition-building and consciousness-raising between different ethnic/racial/cultural groups. From post-structuralist theory, I adopt an investment in non-epistemic forms of knowledge production, as they have manifested themselves in the recent slate of writings on the affective turn within Queer studies. From materialist analysis and Queer critique, I am indebted to critics who expose how sexuality is embedded in the creation of the capitalist subject and debates about America’s future. Using this nexus of theoretical concepts, a cohort of recent authors have developed Queer of Color critique to interrogate the ways in which sexuality and American conceptions of neoliberalism and the subject affect the creation of Latino, Filipino, Chinese, Native American, and African American identities, among others.

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42 Roderick Ferguson, Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 149.


If the research questions, subject, and scope of this project are eerily reminiscent of Jasbir Puar’s *Terrorist Assemblages*, they are meant to be. At the heart of Puar’s 2007 text is an argument about contemporary queer subjecthood and bio-politics:

The emergence and sanctioning of queer subjecthood is a historical shift condoned only through a parallel process of demarcation from populations targeted for segregation, disposal, or death, a re-intensification of racialization through queerness. The cultivation of these homosexual subjects, folded into life, enabled through market virility and regenerative reproductivity is racially demarcated and paralleled by a rise in the targeting of queerly raced bodies for dying. In the “turn to life,” how queerness folds into racialization is a crucial factor in whether or how that turn to life is experienced if experienced at all.⁴⁹

Part of how queerness folds into racialization is by acting as “an alibi for complicity with all sorts of other identity norms, such as nation, race, class and gender unwittingly lured onto the ascent towards whiteness.”⁵⁰ Puar argues, following Rey Chow, that the “ascendancy of whiteness in bio-power incorporates the multiplication of appropriate multicultural ethnic bodies complicit with this ascendancy.”⁵¹ Puar’s most explicit targets of analysis are queer subjects who in the past 25 years have seen their communal subject position change from victims of bio-power to, for a small percentage of GLBTQ subjects, exceptional and acceptable subjects, perhaps unaware of the ways in which “the narrative of progress for gay rights is built on the back of racialized others, for whom such progress was achieved, but is now backsliding or has yet to arrive.”⁵²

For Puar, the rise of these subjects has resulted in homonationalism, which she recently re-defined as “a facet of modernity and a historical shift marked by the entrance of (some) homosexual bodies as worthy of protection by nation-states,” and “a constitutive and fundamental reorientation of the relationship between the state, capitalism and sexuality.”⁵³ Moreover, Puar sees the concept of homonationalism as fundamentally a deep critique of liberal rights discourses and how those rights discourses produce narratives of progress and modernity that continue to accord some populations access to citizenship—cultural and legal—at the expense of the delimitation and expulsion of other populations.⁵⁴

The subject of this dissertation is explicitly these “narratives of progress,” but contrary to Puar, I believe that it is not just “liberal rights discourse” which disseminates these narratives; it goes much deeper and is ideologically embedded in most of the culture we consume whether we are aware of it or not. What this “narrative of progress” looks like under what Jodi Melamed called a “neoliberal multicultural racial project” is

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⁵⁰ Ibid, 24.
⁵³ Ibid, 337.
⁵⁴ Ibid, 337.
seemingly colorblind and self-sustaining;\textsuperscript{55} although there are indeed necro-political (non)subjects who are delimited and expelled from the social, cultural, and legal frames, these subjects still have the capacity to become acceptable through their subscription to a rhetoric of normalization. It is this capacity to become “normal” that sets the stage for the need to live up to this capacity and creates in subjects a new form of governmentality and self-surveillance. Anyone can be normal—or has the capacity to perform normalcy—if they follow the narrative benchmarks of acceptability that neoliberal multiculturalism has set for them. Whereas Puar’s work looks at a wide range of sources aimed at a wide number of different audiences, this project takes at its primary focus the diffuse realm of the “mainstream” spectator, the subject who is indoctrinated to believe in the concepts of bio-politics that Puar elucidates.

My main object of analysis is not the often accounted for subaltern looking for a “politics of the open end,”\textsuperscript{56} but rather the normal, middle class, mainstream spectator. Although no such spectator truly exists, this idealized mainstream American consumer with a certain set of morals and values is constantly evoked (especially by America’s right) as the subject for whom news, museums, television programming, and novels should be created for and/or must target. This might explain why shows like NBC’s \textit{The New Normal} were considered too unorthodox for middle American audiences. On the other hand, the mainstreaming of gay and lesbians and Muslims and Arabs in the media over the past dozen years has created an American left that is just as complicit in the creation of this mainstream spectator as the right. Moreover, neoliberal multiculturalism seemingly merges disparate ideologies under the guise of what Jodi Dean calls a form of communicative capitalism in which “right and left share the same rhetoric of democracy, a rhetoric merging ethics and economics, discussion and competition so that each is a version of the other.” It is in this model without distinctions that “conviction is indistinguishable from knowledge and certainty triumphs over truth.”\textsuperscript{57} The desire for the certainty of a better, more peaceful, good life creates a subject that often unknowingly justifies a rhetoric of bio-politics as common sense.

Hence, in order to really get to the root of bio-politics, we need to disregard it for a moment and look at the logics that undergird it, creating subjects who seemingly embody its current values. We need to look not only at objects of cultural production that have become popular in both educated circles and the academy (Azar Nafisi’s \textit{Reading Lolita in Tehran} and radical, queer Arab texts (Rabih Alameddine’s \textit{I, The Divine}, David Adjmi’s \textit{Stunning}) but also at more populist texts (Khaled Hosseini’s \textit{The Kite Runner}, \textit{Shahs of Sunset}) that are often overlooked by the academy and examine how they work together to try to herald into being a certain kind of spectator and consumer.

It is this consistently cited but invisible subject that I define as the neoliberal multicultural spectator. Through the evocation of this spectator, the logics of biopolitics, of freedom with violence, and of homonationalism as a tenet of modernity gain their power and their status as commonsense notions. In order to examine how contemporary

\textsuperscript{57} Jodi Dean, \textit{Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 18.
debates about Arabs and queers in the 21st century are central to the creation of such a spectator, one must first unpack the definitions and narratives of neoliberalism, multiculturalism, and spectatorship as processes and lived practices. The following pages of this introduction elaborate each of these terms. First, I provide a theoretical and historical genealogy of neoliberal multiculturalism as a concept, followed by an in-depth analysis of the contemporary relationship between spectatorship and the performance of everyday life. In these pages, I argue that the neoliberal multicultural spectator is informed by a desire to live up to specific narrative achievements. Next, I examine the three main narratives of normal examined throughout the dissertation’s body: the narrative of the American dream; the story of secular progress; and, lastly, what I call the romance of recognition, in which stigmatized/under-represented subjects are recognized as equal and full citizens. Taken together, these narrative desires form the neoliberal multicultural spectator; each chapter of this project will examine the different contours of this subject.

Yoking Neoliberalism and Multiculturalism

Neoliberalism first became prevalent in the 1970’s as an economic philosophy. As opposed to a Keynesian philosophy that believes capital should be regulated by state, national, and international policies and periodically redistributed to meet the need of citizens, neoliberal thinking advocates for the privatization and deregulation of state programs. Recognizing these differences, anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli sees neoliberalism not as “an event, but [as] a set of uneven social struggles within the liberal Diaspora.” Over the past thirty years, three of the most consistent sites for these uneven social struggles have been the public university, America’s fast-dwindling infrastructure for social welfare, and the realm of high-risk business and investments. At the university level, many departments in the Humanities and Social Sciences are now at risk of becoming extinct since they cannot prove their worth in economic terms, unlike their colleagues in the sciences who prove their value to the market in terms of private funding, grants, and patents. Similarly, programs that wish to redistribute money across lines of class and race, such as universal health care, food stamps, and housing subsidy campaigns are seen as helping those who refuse to help themselves. Private business, however, is seen as the answer to all problems, a panacea so important that national governments and international organizations should see it fit to bail these organizations out at times of economic crisis. These three sites make clear how in the forty years since the term was coined, following David Harvey, neoliberalism is defined by the ways in which “the free subject is interchangeable with the free market.”

Because of the ways in which it collapses the economy with subjectivity, the

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definition of “neoliberalism” has lost a lot of specificity in recent years, standing in for everything and nothing simultaneously. According to John Clarke,

Adding the adjective ‘neo-liberal’ to a site, process, or practice might conceal two different political relations. The first, most obvious, one is that this site, practice, or process is the effect or consequence of neo-liberalism: it would not exist without neo-liberalism. The second meaning identifies the neoliberal articulation of a pre-existing site, process, or practice. Whether we treat neoliberalism from the standpoint of capitalist regimes of accumulation, or as a version of liberal governmentality, most of its political work involves practices of de- and re-articulation: reorganizing principles, policies, practices, and discourses into new configurations, assemblages, or constellations.  

Following Clarke, when I talk about the neoliberal contours of Arab and Queer subjectivities, I am referring to both the new neoliberal articulations of these trans-historic concepts while also arguing that the particular contemporary constellation of Arab and Queer as signifiers of social difference is also neoliberal in the sense that it would not exist without neoliberalism.

For many, the economic crisis of 2008 signaled the possible end of neoliberalism as a global ideological project. Speaking in June 2009, John Comaroff argued that even if this is the case, “it is highly likely to leave the capillaries of the beast…largely intact.” Moreover, he contends that the meltdown and its aftermath “may see the planet less, not more, open to alternatives to the neoliberal tendency.”  

For Povinelli, the problem with alternatives to the neoliberal tendency is that they prove to be ineffective: “If a social welfare program, for instance, can be shown to lengthen life and increase health, but at the same time cannot be shown to produce a market value, this lengthened life and increased health is not a value to be capacitated.” Following this logic, Povinelli argues that “we get nowhere within neo-liberalism arguing whether this or that person did or didn’t care about whether this or that social welfare program was or was not a failure. Instead we need to start asking what are the measures of failure, the arts of failure, such that people believe and experience cultural recognition and social welfare as failures.”

It is in relation to notions of “failure,” “cultural recognition,” and “social welfare,” that neoliberalism is invoked with the suffix multiculturalism. Starting in the early 1990’s in the academy with Charles Taylor’s essay on “Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition,” multiculturalism quickly became de rigueur in hiring practices as well as education curricula, framed as positivist and heterogeneous. Following Jodi Melamed, this was originally a liberal form of multiculturalism, one that stressed “representation and cultural recognition, screen[ed] off differential power, dematerialized concepts of race, and marginalized antiracisms that addressed material disparities in racial outcomes.”

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Melamed argues that liberal multiculturalism provided “weak terms of social solidarity,” emitting a “we are the world” ethos and a logic that “justified applying the ethnic model of immigrant social mobility [on] to people of color (dissimulating race as the same thing as ethnicity in the post civil-rights era) and disguised U.S. expansionism as merely a universal nation fulfilling its destiny.” 65 For Melamed, the turning of liberal multiculturalism into neoliberal multiculturalism means that the spirit of neoliberalism is now portrayed as an ethic of multiculturalism, blinding us to the reality that “neoliberalism remains a form of racial capitalism.” 66

The affixing of neoliberal to multiculturalism in the past decade has made both terms similarly diffuse and indefinable. For Melamed, neoliberal multiculturalism is both racist and anti-racist:

Neoliberal policy has engendered new racial subjects while creating and distinguishing between newly privileged and stigmatized collectivities, yet multiculturalism has coded the wealth, mobility, and political power of neoliberalism’s beneficiaries as the just desserts of multicultural global citizens while representing those neoliberalism has dispossessed as handicapped by their own monoculturalism or other historicocultural deficiencies. 67

In this model, racial difference both does and does not exist, race becoming a symbol of economic incapacity, social incompatibility, and a subject’s choice to remain “monocultural,” inadaptable to other cultures and the market.

Due to this seeming erasure of racial, religious, and sexual difference as impediments to social and economic progress, neoliberal multiculturalism is often defined as a new form of governmentality, of self-surveillance and sovereignty. 68 But unlike neoliberalism in theory, neoliberalism in practice is a lived set of self-disciplining and world-making strategies. According to Aihwa Ong, one can only “study neoliberalism not as a ‘culture’ or a ‘structure’ but as mobile calculative techniques of governing that can be decontextualized from their original sources and recontextualized in constellations of mutually constitutive and contingent relations.” 69 Separating this process of self-disciplining from “the varieties and specificities of capitalism and state,” Povinelli develops a new term, “late liberalism,” to define “the shape that liberal governmentality has taken as it responds to a series of legitimacy crises in the wake of anti-colonial, new social movements and new Islamic movements,” as well as a “belated response to the challenge of social difference and the alternative social worlds and projects potentially sheltered there.” 70 For Puar, “what is queer about the terrorist” and “what is terrorist about the queer” is both this increased sense of self-governing and the ways in which new world making projects, social movements, and connectivities are being formed because of and despite this increased state of surveillance. 71

65 Melamed, Represent and Destroy, 34.
66 Ibid, 35.
67 Melamed, Represent and Destroy, 45.
69 Ong, Neoliberalism as Exception, 13.
70 Povinelli, Economies of Abandonment, 24.
71 Puar, Terrorist Assemblages, xxiii.
If neoliberal multiculturalism is diffuse and indefinable, what are the ways in which we can pin it down and examine the logics, ethics, and contours of it? Firstly, one must, following Ong, pick a socio-historical moment and recontextualize it vis a vis “constellations of mutually constitutive relations.”\(^{72}\) The current constellation of Arab and Queer, as passing identities, as symbols of cultural stigma and derision (in their “badder” iterations) as well as symbols of a new inclusive race/religion/sexual orientation blind world provides for me the starting point of this kind of analysis. Secondly, one must find a common thread not only between representations of Arabs and queers but across other sexually, ethnically, and religiously different populations that are wrestling with similar issues about cultural recognition and representation.

**Spectacular! Spectacular!; or, the Confluence of Performance and Spectatorship**

Much recent scholarship on cultural production argues that subjects are both formed and informed by a number of generic genres of citizen formation, such as museum installations, live performance, and serial and reality television. It is the ways in which these genres both inform us about the world from a very particular point of view and form our contemporary ethical and moral matrix that makes them simultaneously inconsequential and subliminally powerful. Recent work in performance studies by Deborah Paradez, David Román, and Tavia Nyong’o make clear how citizenship and racial/ethnic/sexual identities are created and performed in response to dominant culture.\(^{73}\) These authors argue that the performance of passing as American and being an American citizen occurs in a multitude of different spaces, from the stage to the building of public monuments and institutions. My work follows just such a polyvalent approach to performance, intermingling the aesthetic with the everyday, the popular with the experimental, and the cultural with the political, while also augmenting this scholarship by focusing on contemporary notions of spectatorship, spectacle, and the real.

The generic affective power of these tales stems from what Debord would call a power of the spectacle.\(^{74}\) For Debord, contemporary spectacle existed on two planes; one diffuse, permeating the everyday as in the USA, and one concentrated, usually existing in places of perpetual violence.\(^{75}\) I am interested in the more diffuse ways in which spectatorship functions, how the “capillaries of the [neoliberal] beast” are still left intact; these capillaries, I argue, exist in our consumption, identification, and dis-identification with mass culture. Moreover, spectatorship as lived activity, in which one is both the subject and object of consumption—exemplified by the popularity of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram—has made the ways in which we both interact with and are made by cultural texts simultaneously more concentrated and more diffuse. If, following Judith Butler, identity is constitutive of social practice, then the fact that what we do/what we

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\(^{72}\) Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception*, 13.


consume outwardly can change us interiorly makes this flurry of self-promotion even more perplexing, obfuscating the lines between the self and the performance of self to the point of misrecognition.\textsuperscript{76}

Like many of the other keys terms of this project (neoliberalism, multiculturalism, Arab, Queer, spectatorship), performance is also most often defined by its diffuse nature and its indefinability. Indeed, performance is used so loosely these days that nearly everything can be read as some kind of performing. Performance is constantly disappearing and only exists within context taking into account political, historical, and cultural contingencies.\textsuperscript{77} It may refer to the performance of self in everyday life, the ways in which one adjusts oneself to fit a social frame.\textsuperscript{78} It can be found under the guise of the performative utterance, such as “I do” and I “legally pronounce you” in marriage ceremonies and in the courtroom respectively.\textsuperscript{79} It is also deeply related to neoliberal concepts of “performance standards” and other tests that measure the relative success or failure of both economic undertakings and social welfare projects.\textsuperscript{80}

I see the spectator as a co-creator in the performance of everyday life rather than a passive conduit for the dissemination of an immutable ideological project.\textsuperscript{81} Although I do not doubt the agency of subjects, I am also interested in the ways in which subjects submit to the logics of a neoliberal multicultural project inadvertently. Every time a monogamously partnered person tells a queer single that they wish they could just find their “person,” every time someone empathizes with starving children in Africa or sexually abused gay youth in Iraq and wants them to have the opportunities they have had, every time a Western feminist wishes that their Islamic counterparts could remove their veils and be free like they are free, this ideology of neoliberal multiculturalism gets reified. Although seemingly empathetic, these types of responses have embedded within them a salvationist rhetoric in which the mainstream way of life comes to stand in as the only acceptable way of being. Performance as mode of critique allows us to look underneath these common sense ideas, put them in their socio-historical context, and examine the dramatic, narrative, and aesthetic motors that make them seem commonsensical in the first place.

Perhaps one of the most canonical and germinal texts about the links between performance and spectatorship is Jill Dolan’s \textit{The Feminist Spectator as Critic}.\textsuperscript{82}

\textsuperscript{76} See Judith Butler, \textit{Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity} (New York: Routledge, 2006).
\textsuperscript{81} See Dennis Kennedy, \textit{The Spectator and the Spectacle: Audiences in Modernity and Postmodernity} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
Building off the work of feminist film criticism of the 1970’s and 1980’s (Laura Mulvey, Mary Ann Doane), and foreshadowing the work of the 1990’s (Judith Mayne, B. Ruby Rich, Kaja Silverman), Dolan argues that all cultural production is inherently ideological. She utilizes her text to “deconstruct the privileged position of the ideal, white, middle class, heterosexual spectator.” In order to deconstruct this position, Dolan turns to experimental performance. Both practitioners and critics of avant-garde art and performance often argue that post dramatic, non-narrative works of cultural production are intended to subversively deconstruct normative ideology and modes of thinking most often found in narrative work. In order to do this kind of work in the realm of scholarship, Dolan called for a materialist feminist approach that stresses “the ideological nature of representation” and unmasks “the naturalized ideology of the dominant culture most theatre and performance represents.” What makes Dolan’s work so germinial is that while she lauds most post-dramatic performance makers for rightfully considering identity as “unstable and refracted” and the psyche “not quite the coherent, unified site of individualism,” she argues that these pieces of art have “left intact the gender dichotomies of the cultural status quo.” It the job of the feminist critic as spectator to expose, de-center, and denaturalize what seems to be ideological common sense to most people.

In the twenty-five years since Dolan’s work was first published, what it means to de-center the status quo (i.e. the normal) has shifted due to the ways in which liberal multiculturalism and neoliberal multiculturalism as racial projects have functioned. Although the narratives of normativity have not changed much, which subjects are granted access to these narratives have; women, people of color, and queers are now granted the ability to be normal, or if not normal, at least normal enough and acceptable. In order to grasp non-ideal spectatorship, performance studies scholarship in the 1990’s was deeply influenced by what Esteban Muñoz labeled a theory of dis-identification. Subtitled “Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics,” Muñoz’s book postulated that avant-garde work by GLBTQ non-white subjects attempted to undo dominant ideology while also making clear a new theory of spectatorship, not dissimilar from Dolan’s materialist feminist intervention. Here, certain subjects can consume dominant mainstream culture without being ideologically inculcated by spectacle. In fact, most “spectatorship theory” in the last decades has been primarily devoted to in-depth

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85 Dolan, The Feminist Spectator as Critic, 18.

86 Ibid, 41.

87 Ibid, 42.

88 Ibid, 43.

89 See Jose Esteban Muñoz, Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2000).
interviews of individual spectators in order to clarify the nuances and specificities attached to spectatorship as a practice of both identification and dis-identification.

Both Dolan’s “feminist critic” and Munoz’s Queer of Color dis-identifier, however, seem to be immune to the more coercive aspects of spectatorship; always at a distance, these figures see dominant culture as inherently foreign. Indeed, if to follow Puar, homonalism is a new facet of modernity, then these spectators are no longer on the outside of a mainstream world, they are inside of the same power structure as we all are. In a 21st century context, the feminist critic of the 1980’s and the queer disidentifier of the 1990’s have been replaced by the critically-minded neoliberal multicultural spectator. This spectator has the capacity to critique narratives of normalcy but also has the capacity to be normal. However, this reconceptualization of normalcy as fulfilling certain narrative benchmarks does not undo the problems of power and hegemony historically associated with the ideal white, straight, male, middle-class spectator, it simply displaces it onto once racialized/queered bodies with the same old standards of acceptable citizenship. What makes this particular moment homonal and neoliberal is the ways in which spectatorship is no longer solely about how one engages with a textual object, but about how the narratives of normal sedimented within these objects become ideological motors through and by which we function in the world.

In other words, this dissertation argues that being a spectator/subject in a neoliberal multicultural era is inherently about the recitation of the same scripts with different casts, in which difference is subjugated/erased and sameness amplified and spectacularized. Although there are still “feminist critics,” queer of color dis-identifiers, and many kinds of poachers90 whose job it is to undermine the dominant ideology espoused in popular cultural production, the spectacularization of the subject makes such processes of undermining more difficult. As a performance studies project, this dissertation utilizes concepts of theatricality and the performance of self in everyday life to examine the current spectacle of the real we are all embroiled in. Although we know that we can never really possess all of the positive attributes, moral clarity, and desire for a concrete, stable, normal life that make up the neoliberal multicultural spectator, there is still societal and personal pressure to embody the values and desires of that unattainable, non-existent spectator. The constant barrage of media today, both in terms of cultural production and the production of the self, makes the lines between one’s own subjectivity and one’s performance of self tenuous at best, causing us to live in what many critics have called a “spectacle of the real,” trying to find some sort of normative narrative fulfillment.91

Each chapter of this dissertation examines certain spectacles of citizenship, analyzing specifically the ways in which difference is both underplayed and amplified. This is first apparent in the Arab American National Museum where a variety of camp aesthetics are utilized in order to make clear how normal and acceptable Arab Americans are, and have always been, creating a spectacle out of the rituals of normative American

citizenship and assimilation. Next, I look at two different spectacular narratives that have become intertwined in the past decade; the inherent Orientalist spectacle of melodramatic narratives about Iraq and Afghanistan in the years of U.S. intervention and the tales of immigrant assimilations to the American polity. I execute this work by analyzing the narrative similarities between The Kite Runner and Bilal’s Bread, two novels that became word of mouth sensations from 2003-2005. Next, I examine how even intimate moments found in small-scale theatrical productions (Jeff Key’s The Eyes of Babylon and David Adjmi’s Stunning) can set the stage for their own form of pyrotechnics. In Key’s piece, this spectacle comes in the form of a positivist and life-affirming disembodied kiss between an American soldier and an Iraqi queer while Adjmi’s form of spectacle concerns the violent whitewashing of a queer women of color. My analysis of the spectacle of everyday life reaches its apex in Chapter 4, which analyzes the two very different performances of self found on TLC’s All American Muslim and Bravo’s The Shah’s of Sunset; while the former underplays differences and overplays normalcy, the latter underplays normalcy and overplays artifice. The last spectacle of normalcy I examine is the wedding ceremony, looking at how different non-normative sexual subjects (queers, Muslims, and Mormons) have been represented in popular media, giving way to what I coin a contemporary “monogamy panic” that elucidates the limits of both neoliberalism and multiculturalism as political and social projects.

In many ways, the spectacles of citizenship examined in this dissertation are not so dissimilar from DeCerteau’s postulation concerning the “institution of the real:”

An anonymous code, information innervates and saturates the body politic. From morning to night, narrations constantly haunt streets and buildings...they ‘cover the event’ this is to say they make our legends out of it. Captured by the radio (the voice is the law) as soon as he awakes, the listener walks all day long through the forest of narratives from journalism, advertising, television...Even more than the God told about by theologicians of earlier days, these stories have a providential and predestining function; they organize in advance our work, our celebrations, and even our dreams. Social life multiplies the gestures and modes of behavior (im) printed by narrative models; it ceaselessly reproduces and accumulates ‘copies of stories.’ Our society has become A RECITED SOCIETY IN THREE SENSES: it is defined by stories (recits, the fables constituted by our advertising and informational media), by citations of stories and by the interminable recitation of stories.92

Not dissimilar from Butler’s theories concerning gender performance and citationality theorized ten years later, de Certeau sees citation as the ultimate weapon for making people believe and that “because it plays on what the other is assumed to believe, it is the means by which the real is instituted.”93 In other words, the real is constituted by our desires to achieve an unattainable performance and to fulfill in narrative terms certain life expectations. The constant citation and re-iteration of these stories of normal has made them both more quotidian and more spectacular. This citation of normalcy is similar to neoliberal multiculturalism in which difference (sexual, religious, ethnic, racial) is both non-existent and over-exaggerated. In other words, neoliberal multiculturalism is no

92 de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life, 186.
93 Ibid, 188.
longer just a political-economic project, it is a narrative, a narrative of inclusion, acceptance, and normalcy. Although neoliberalism and neoliberal multiculturalism exist with their own rules in different national settings, the American example is quite pervasive because of its narrative similarities to the story of the American Dream disseminated across the world throughout the 20th century. This narrative is but one of three stories of progress that fuels the American iteration of the neoliberal multicultural spectator in our current moment.

Tracing the Narrative of Neoliberal Multiculturalism

It would be all too easy to ridicule the [American] Dream, and to dismiss it as the motivating false consciousness of national/capitalist culture. But the fantasy of the American dream is an important one to learn from. A popular form of political optimism, it fuses private fortune with that of the nation: it promises that if you invest your energies in work and family making, the nation will secure the broader social and economic conditions in which your labor can gain value and your life can be lived with dignity. It is a story that addresses the fear of being stuck or reduced to a type, a redemptive story pinning its hopes on class mobility. Yet this promise is voiced in the language of un-conflicted personhood; to be American in this view would be to inhabit a secure space liberated from identities and structures that seem to constrain what a person can do in history.94

Just as the subject of this dissertation is indebted to the work of Jasbir Puar, its mode of cultural analysis is deeply influenced by the work of Lauren Berlant. Berlant takes the narrative of the American Dream seriously, making clear how this dream is intrinsically tied to notions of mobility that constantly avow and disavow concepts of racial/ethnic/religious/sexual/class difference. Following Berlant, I contend that ideal American neoliberal multicultural spectators are supposed to believe in narratives of the self-made man, especially those of the diasporic variety. Part of the historical and contemporary force of the narrative of making it in America is predicated upon the notion that anyone can come to American shores and make something of themselves. Even if one does not become wealthy, they have the ability to provide the possibility of a better life for their children and loved ones. If, following Moretti’s work on the novel in/as ideology, we can read the Aristotelian motor of 19/20th century dramatic plot as restaging dominant ideologies vis a vis capitalism, the contemporary iteration of this story restages this drama as one of becoming modern.95 In this tale, subjects not only become modern, but become “free” in a democratic sense. This democratizing potential of neoliberalism restages Orientalist, civilizationist rhetoric as mere fact. Following Melani McAllister, I am interested in “the ways in which the production of a discourse about the Middle East comes to be understood as authoritative, as common sense.”96 It is this version of a universal common sense that Lisa Duggan describes “as a kind of non-politics—a way of being reasonable, and of promoting universal desirable forms of economic expansion and

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96 McAlister, Epic Encounters, 8.
democratic government around the globe” because, after all, “who could be against greater wealth and more democracy”\footnote{Lisa Duggan, \emph{The Twilight of Equality?}, 10.}

There are many hidden costs behind a neoliberal “common sense” notion of capitalism and representative government.\footnote{A note on common sense: Throughout this introduction, I have discussed the idea of common-sense notions that pervade various elements of popular culture. The ways in which I use this term is similar to that of Berlant, McAlister, and Puar, who see these concepts of common sense as politically regressive and further U.S. interests. For more on how a study of common sense as a primary object of inquiry functions within this project, see Footnote 112.} The neoliberal mindset will also condone a fair share of violence and bloodshed in the name of democracy, installing projects on the ground to disseminate American values without thinking of the numbers of people who go uncounted, the necro-political non-subjects which are thought of only as causalities of war. Beautifully theorized by Berlant, this desire to continually push our goals of freedom and free trade results in varying degrees of national amnesia. According to Berlant, this national amnesia manifests itself inside of cultural texts which fulfill spectators’ generic expectations, allowing us to empathize with our society’s others and even enfold them into our national consciousness without ever questioning “our values” or changing “our way of life.”\footnote{For more on the topic of national amnesia, see Berlant, \emph{The Queen of America Goes to Washington City}.} When this national amnesia is manifest in a mainstream story or narrative, it quite often emerges as a form of storybook simplicity, with good guys and bad ones, melodramatic contrivances and a conventionally happy ending.

In terms of their representations of Arab and Queer subjectivities, narratives of the American Dream and the good life manage to look at these “bad Muslims” and “bad gays” as both intrinsically related to one another and part of a larger pathology of barbarism and terror. This separating and quarantining of good subjects from bad, from those considered worthy of geo-political folding into the American way of life and those who must be destroyed at all costs, is what allows those on the left and right to find a sense of common ground. It also simplifies complex subjectivities, concluding with redemption and the promise of happiness for good subjects, and negative repercussions and an unhappy future for bad ones. Hence, neoliberal multiculturalism is not defined by political party but by adherence to a new set of rules that articulate what it takes to be an acceptable citizen in America.

Unsurprisingly, this narrative of neoliberal multiculturalism has a lot of similarities with what Pelligrini and Jakobsen call the narrative of secular progress:

According to conventional wisdom telling the story, secularism does not just promise the progress brought about by emancipation. It also promises peace, or at least a more peaceful resolution to conflicts. Because secularism is based on a rationality shared by all human beings, it provides a universal discourse whereas religions are held to be the expressions of particular cultures. Conflicts that arise between particular cultures seem irresolvable, except through violence, because there are no shared terms on which to base a resolution. By contrast, the universality of rationality implies that conflicts can be resolved as Jurgen Habermas posits “by force of a better argument.” Such reasoned debate paves the way for modern democratic government, allowing political debate to take the
place of religious authority in the formulation of state policy. If secularism represents rationality, universality, modernity, freedom, democracy, and peace, then religion (unless thoroughly privatized) can only present a danger to those who cherish these values. So the story goes, but how adequate is it in either historical or ethico-political terms? These logics of secular progress are most often juxtaposed with narratives of religious extremism, but are said to be at odds with any form of extremism which is weary of the supposed universal rationality of secularism and the narratives of modernity, freedom, and democracy that it evokes. Although rationally one knows that not all Muslims are uncivilized and in need of saving, and not all queers want a heteronormative version of equality, the ways in which this story gets told so well compel us to believe in it, no matter how simplified it may be.

What is it about this story of becoming a full American that makes it so difficult to undermine, to examine critically? Again, the answer brings us back to Berlant who sees genre as “something like a conventionalized symbolic, an institution whose modern translation through the commodity form affixes it with both generic-ness and a uniqueness derived from the particularity of its distinguishing details.” Berlant argues genres are so satisfying because they meet a spectator’s generic expectations in unexpected ways and “reflect the nameable aspiration for discursive order through which particular life narratives and modes of being become normalized as the real, the taken for granted.” In other words, genre gives us a way of looking for order in the world, and the hopes of a happy ending.

Although Berlant is interested in the specifics of each of these genres (melodrama, comedy, etc), of utmost important is the denouement of these texts. Each promises a concrete ending, in which the protagonists are at least happier than they were at the tale’s beginning. This happy ending is supposed to symbolize the “good life.” Berlant sees spectator-citizens as reflexive, aware, and ambivalent to this dream of the good life, resulting in what she coins as a form of cruel optimism. It is this sense of ambivalence with a text, this sense of both identification and dis-identification with it that makes clear that there can never be an ideal neoliberal multicultural spectator, no matter how hard various texts and narratives try to create one. Moreover, this ambivalence also shows how, following Sara Ahmed, the promise of happiness and/or the good life is really about “the hope or promise of becoming acceptable, where in being acceptable you must become acceptable to a world that has already decided what is acceptable.”

A third narratological strand of neoliberal multiculturalism concerns what I refer to as the “romance of recognition.” Like the progress narratives of Americanization and secularism, the story of being recognized as an equal and full citizen is often looked at as triumphant, with visibility and a marginal degree of public acceptability becoming synonymous with equality. However, the story of stigmatized subjects such as Arabs and Queers being recognized has required the subjugation of some of the more “non-

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102 Ibid, 257.
normative” elements of their collective identities in order to both frame them as acceptable and exceptional citizens and also to counter decades of negative representations. However, this performance of cultural recognition means that queer, religious, and activist contours become excised from this narrative. At the end of the narrative is a vision of the world where people of different races/ethnicities and sexualities are recognized as equal, even if being a true equals means being an open target for derision. For example, *The Shahs of Sunset*, one of the main objects studied in Chapter 4 of this dissertation, may be enfranchised enough for their Persian ethnicity to be superfluous, but, like the protagonists of other racial/ethnic lifestyle shows (*The Real Housewives of Atlanta and Miami*), they are still too self-involved to be objects of empathy. The dissertation argues that the romance of recognition in American media is really one about over-visibility, about the creation of a type of subject who represents an apocalyptic future where one is recognized as a full citizen but not as source of identification and empathy.

**Constellation as Methodology**

Despite this dissertation’s emphasis on spectatorship as a theoretical conceit, let it be clear that this is not a real study of spectatorship. It is not conventionally ethnographic, in the sense that I did not interview people about their personal experiences of taking a tour of the Arab American National Museum, or reading *The Kite Runner*, or binge-watching a marathon of the *Shahs of Sunset*. Although the following chapters are neither conventionally ethnographic nor archival, I have tried my best to be ethnographically and historically accountable, using interviews and archives as a way of making sure that the arguments I was making were not coming out of left-field. For example, I spent three months doing archival research at the Arab American National Museum, and conducting secondary research in Dearborn, MI, however much of the original writing on these historical and ethnographic sources proved worthwhile but outside the scope of the eventual final thesis of this project. In terms of the chapters on novels, television, and live performance, anything truly ethnographic is speculative, based on casual conversations and intensive reading (and re-reading) of Amazon.com reviews, fan blogs, and YouTube recap videos. Although the work of media studies scholars and anthropologists such as Lila Abu-Lughod, Katherine Sender, and Angela McRobbie has deeply impacted the way I do research and write, the object of this study is not to hypothesize a reader/viewer’s reaction to a cultural text, perform qualitative and quantitative research, and see if my hypothesis was “right,” if people thought what I expected them to think.105 Rather, I take the ethnographically accountable approach of making sweeping, exaggerated, subjective generalizations about cultural texts (“*The Kite Runner* makes you cry, maybe even twice!” or “*The Shahs of Sunset* and other lifestyle programming is enjoyable because of the schadenfraude it engenders in viewers, the delight they feel in being nothing like the people they see on television.”) I make these kinds of problematic generalizations because I am not interested in whether or not *The Kite Runner* makes you

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cry; I am more invested in why it makes you cry, how it capitalizes on its generic
convention to make you cry, and what the text’s success or failure to make you cry can
tell us about the ideological, neoliberal multicultural, commonsense notions that
undergird these narratives of assimilation, acceptance, capitulation, and progress. 106

Archival research and interviews remain my secondary and tertiary
methodologies; my primary methodology is the close readings of aesthetic objects, and
deploys phenomenology, critical theory, and post-structural approaches to race, gender,
ethnicity, and nationality. As in many other ways, this project’s method and archive is an
assemblage of objects from popular and more alternative culture, from reality television
to documentary films, from guided tours in ethnic history museums to readings of
discrete moments of intercultural recognition in live performance, a veritable hodge-
podge of “hot topics” ripped from newspapers and tabloid columns with debates in
critical race and queer theory. Following Foucault, Said, and others, my dissertation will
treat race and sexuality as a set of interrelated discourses, looking specifically at how
they are performed in opposition to and in generative tension with one another. 107 As in
many other facets of this project, my archive and method are indebted to Puar who argues
that “assembling these varied and often disjunctive primary sources is crucial to
countering the platitudinous and journalistic rhetoric that plagues those public discourses
most readily available for consumption.” 108 Moreover, Puar asserts that such a disjunctive
archive helps to build “an alternative historical record, archive, and documentation of our
contemporary moments.” 109 Although I agree with this building of a new historical record,
whereas Puar is interested in the more political, alternative, and activist project of
“denaturalizing expectations,” I am specifically interested in examining more popular
pieces of cultural representation to try to analyze what makes these spectatorial
expectations seem natural in the first place. 110 Although this dissertation does examine
some aesthetically challenging works of art (Rabih Alameddine’s I, The Divine, David
Adjmi’s Stunning) I am more interested in analyzing work that is often taken for granted
as in-artistic, trite, and aesthetically empty. As a work of cultural studies, my project’s
methodology sometimes resembles that of Lauren Berlant who attempts to “take the

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106 My work follows in a long line of cultural studies work that takes the production of common
sense as its primary object of analysis. In addition to the aforementioned theorists (Puar, Povinelli,
McAlister, Duggan) whose work embodies this type of methodology, I am also indebted to the
work of Jacques Ranciere, Michael Taussig, and Roland Barthes for making this kind of analysis
Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2004); Michael Taussig, Mimesis and Alterity: A
Particular History of the Senses (New York: Routledge, 1992); and Barthes, Mythologies.
107 Please see Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (New York:
Vintage Books, 1995); Michel Foucault, History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction (New
York: Vintage Books, 1990); Michele Foucault, “Society Must Be Defended”: Lectures at the
College de France, 1975-1976 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Edward Said,
and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World. (New York: Pantheon Books,
108 Puar, Terrorist Assemblages, xv.
109 Ibid, xv.
110 Ibid, xv.
temperature of hegemony” by performing “a counter politics of the silly object.” These “silly objects” can tell us a lot about the ways in which we live now and require as dense theoretical unpacking as more obviously scholarly objects.

My use of the phrase “constellation as methodology” as this section’s subject heading is indebted to Deleuze and Guattari’s theoretical work concerning the assemblage as a weapon for social change, as a vessel for the uncontainable and constantly and persistently mobile, what the authors refer to as the “rhizomatic.” In theoretical opposition to the assemblage is a sense of rootedness, what Deleuze and Guattari call the arborescent. As such, the pair’s monumental work A Thousand Plateaus ends with a call for readers to “make rhizomes, not roots,” and to “never plant!” What rooted thinking does, according to Brian Massumi, is cause us to think within already constitutive models, resulting in the use of intersectional models of identity formation. Following Massumi, Puar argues that “intersectionality demands the knowing, naming, and thus stabilizing of identity across space and time, relying on logics of equivalence and analogy between various axes of identity and generating narratives of progress that deny the fictive and performative aspects of identification.” Puar wishes to displace intersectional modes of thinking with the assemblage, which she sees as a crucial conceptual tool that “allows us to comprehend power beyond disciplinary regulatory models,” focusing not on “naming, visuality, epistemology, representation, and meaning” but rather on “feeling, tactility, ontology, affect, and information.”

My animating use of “constellation” is nearly interchangeable with that of Puar’s elucidation of an assemblage but with one crucial difference: whereas as an assemblage is difficult to pin down and always moving, “constellation” implies a moment in time when certain fixed markers (in this case, identities) seem to come in close contact with one another consistently over a given period of time. Each chapter of this dissertation looks at a current cultural phenomenon that has assembled Arab and Queer (as well as other non-normative identities) in unexpected ways. The proliferation of ethnic/racial history museums in America. The popularity of rape-to-redemption novels concerning the Middle East. The production of American plays that deal with the cross-cultural encounter. The reality television boom and its subsequent instantiation as a staple part of cultural production. And lastly, the persistent representation of “alternative weddings” on North American television. Although each of these trends has assembled Arab and Queer in different ways, I am more interested in examining what has allowed these cultural forms to constellate, solidify, and gel into new genres. My interest in the silly object, therefore, is about utilizing these cultural forms to examine the new types of generic expectations of acceptable citizenship that have become ideological imperatives for many subjects.

111 Berlant, The Queen of America Goes to Washington City, 12.
113 Puar, Terrorist Assemblages, 212.
Surfing Narratives of Neoliberal Inclusion: A Chapter Breakdown

Since the aforementioned neoliberal multicultural spectator is diffuse and non-existent, the only way to see this concept at work is by closely analyzing the narratives of Americanization, secularism, and recognition as they manifest themselves in a varying series of cultural objects. Although each of the body chapters of this dissertation analyzes a different genre of cultural production (and often pays close theoretical attention to specificities within that genre), my larger argument is not to demonstrate how the tenets of the neoliberal multicultural spectator manifest themselves in different genres; rather I look at these varied sites as each emphasizing different contours of this spectator. Moreover, the first four chapters of this book provide their own form of teleology both in terms of chronology (starting with the opening of the Arab American Museum in 2005 and ending with episodes of The Shahs of Sunset from 2013) and in terms of the “failed romance of recognition” that I trace. This particular story begins with Arabs and Queers as “marginally acceptable” citizens who must overemphasize their normalcy and ends with the creation of acceptable and rights-bearing citizens with morals and ethics created out of the free market instead of out of empathy.

The first chapter, “Telling Everyone’s Story: A Queer Tour of Dearborn’s Arab American National Museum” examines the ways in which a narrative of assimilation and acceptance has become de rigueur for ethnic/racial history museums. Here, readers take a performative tour of the Museum’s three permanent exhibitions which chart the Arab American story and learn that the Museum wishes to make clear that this story is really the same as the American story writ large. In order to prove that Arab Americans are ideal neoliberal multicultural subjects, the Museum display erases, covers, and crops out the more queer aspects of its collective history and exaggerates the more socially acceptable aspects of Arab citizenship in America. I read these elisions and sequestering of certain stories as queer and examine the queer display techniques (such as kitsch and camp) that are present in order to make hyper-aware to the mainstream just how normal Arabs in America are. Also present is a queer absence and presence of race as a concept in the Museum, with Arab Americans being conflated with African Americans and white Americans interchangeably, or, more accurately, when it makes them more empathic or understandable to a mainstream viewer. Framing this argument is a larger debate about ethnic and racial history museums in America, in which museums feel the need to both make themselves legible as community centers that represent a myriad of different subjectivities in their daily activities and visiting exhibits, and also present one unifying positivist story about coming to America, living in America, and making an impact. What are the dangers of investing too heavily in this positivist narrative and what exit strategies and opportunities for disidentifying with this tale of progress and acceptance exist?

The second chapter, “Rape, Redemption and the Narratology of Neoliberal Multiculturalism,” plunges further into plots of progress and Americanization and their alignment with America’s geopolitical interest; it looks at the similarities in structure between Khaled Hosseini’s The Kite Runner and gay American convert to Islam Suleiman X’s GLAAD-award nominated Bilal’s Bread. At the center of each story is a young child of color (the symbol of a new future), the survivor of sexual abuse from a “barbaric” homeland. I argue that these stories of “rape-to-redemption” manage to put a
human face on contemporary conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq respectively while also reifying ideologies about American democracy and sexual acceptability. Moreover, these stories and their emphasis on the poor child of color in need of saving (both by themselves and by their readers) follow neoliberal multicultural logics and heteronormative notions of time and narrative. In order to examine the ways in which this narrative of rape-to-redemption need not be so ideologically loaded (however inadvertently), I provide a counter example: Rabih Alameddine’s 2001 “Novel in First Chapters,” I, The Divine, which covers similar narrative territory (rape, immigration to America set amongst the twenty years of the Lebanese Civil War) but de-chronologizes the pathologies involving the survivors of childhood rape in queer, unorthodox ways.

The third chapter moves away from this story of Americanization, instead focusing on two distinct moments of intercultural recognition from recent theatrical productions. Here, I argue that live performance remains one of the most useful forms of cultural production for examining the affective contours of a politics of recognition. In both examples, characters from different worldviews, races, religions, and ideologies stand face to face with one another in emotionally charged and politically fraught circumstances. The moment of impossible recognition in Jeff Key’s auto-biographical The Eyes of Babylon is staged as a sexy, coded kiss on the streets of Bahdra in 2004 between an American marine and a young man the soldier describes as “an Iraqi version of me.” Their eyes meet but their mouths touch only by proxy—a shared tube of lip balm. The exchange evinces hope for and despair over the feasibility of full recognition between American and Arab queers. David Adjmi’s Stunning, by contrast, forgoes even a compromised picture of cross-cultural recognition is which a women of color is violently choked in a bucket of white paint. After examining these two moments of recognition, I argue that perhaps an emphasis on “recognition” as an animating term is part of what makes affectively recognizing the other as equal so difficult. Instead, I advocate for a politics of equal respect, in which difference is not just an empty signifier or an obstacle to overcome.

Chapter 4 returns us to Dearborn, MI, and the middle-class cast members of TLC’s All American Muslim, a program considered both too boring and too fundamentalist for mainstream audiences. In order to argue for the ways in which the American “romance of recognition” and the telos it engenders creates a cultural of color-blind, commodity-obsessed stupidity, I examine the scandal around and eventual cancellation of All American Muslim in relation to the success of Bravo’s Shahs of Sunset, a reality show about wealthy Persians in Hollywood. Here, I reformulate the narratives of progress, secularism, and Americanization in light of the contrivances found in reality television as a genre. In this genre can be found a narrative about the return to the Freudian notion of the pleasure principal for certain subjects, turning equality and enfranchisement into narcissism and immoral behavior. It is here, in the garish melting faces of the self-obsessed, colorblind stars of reality television that we see that the endpoint of neoliberal multicultural narratives of inclusion might not be the good life after all.

Chapter 5 marks a turn in emphasis from narratives of neoliberal inclusion, shifting focus to one event of performative, legal, and narrative significance: the wedding

ceremony and the right to marry. “Two Weddings and A Tribunal: Queer, Muslim, and Mormon at the Crossroads of Acceptability” examines two recent televised examples of alternative marriage ceremonies (CBC’s Little Mosque on the Prairie and NBC’s The New Normal) and one battle to legalize fundamentalist Mormon polygamy (HBO’s Big Love). Stitching these disparate examples together is an argument about “polygamy panic” in contemporary culture, in which the new logics and ethics of contemporary culture might be blind to questions of race, religious, and sexual difference but they are quite unaccepting of lifestyle forms outside of the norm of dyadic coupledom. This new form of citizenship for queers and Muslims comes at the expense of non-monogomous subjects. Also present in this analysis is attention to the differences between affective and legal forms of citizenship. Utilizing literature based on Austen’s concept of “I do” as the emblematic performative speech act, I examine the ways in which the desire for cultural recognition (marriage ceremonies, familial acceptance) and the need for legal recognition are sometimes at odds with one another. The conclusion of this dissertation examines a number of other sites of Arab/Queer constellation and advocates for the creation of dissenting, heretical critical neoliberal multicultural spectators.

Coda: Towards a Politics of Heresy

To end where we began, I return to the rhetoric of Obama, specifically his commencement speech at Morehouse College, an all-male, historically black college in Atlanta, Georgia, in May 2013. In addition to framing his speech by invoking the spirit of the famous and groundbreaking Morehouse men who predated the current graduates, men like Martin Luther King Jr., Fredrick Douglas, and W.E.B Dubois, Obama also made some more questionable assumptions about his audience, implying that most of the men, like himself, were raised in single-mother homes, stigmatized from the mainstream, forced to work twice as hard as their white counterparts. These types of generalizations about African American men led many minority reporters and critics to call the President’s tone “scolding”, calling the speech yet another lecture “to black audiences about taking responsibility for their lives and communities.” In addition to his lecturing tone, Obama also managed to elide African American struggles with a contemporary laundry list of America’s most stigmatized. Obama contested that the affective similarities between Black, Latino, GLBTQ, Muslim, and feminist social movements gave the Morehouse men “special insight,” a special capacity for “empathy,” and an understanding of what it takes to “cross barriers.” Although this cross-community sense of shared stigmatization was meant to propell the Morehouse men to political and social

action, it also turned the graduates of the most prestigious black college in the United States into nothing but the professionally subaltern, the spokespeople and advocates for America’s socially and economically dis-enfranchised.

That Obama commits such identity collapsing in his speechifying is not surprising. What might be surprising, however, is the way in which the two Obama texts and the SNL sketch described at the beginning of this chapter make clear different possibilities of national politics. Although one might assume that Obama’s speech is meant to be more radical, envisioning a colorblind world, its vision makes those who were once/still are stigmatized become begrudging advocates and supporters of those currently stigmatized. On the other hand, the vision of a world where gays are married and women can have abortion procedures in the walls of a mosque, though created to evoke laughter, actually ideates a more radical, activist version of the world. In *A Call for Heresy*, Anouar Majid provocatively argues that notions of cultural dissent are intrinsic to both American and Islamic culture. I would personally add that this concept of heresy is also intrinsic to queer organizing. Rather than looking at dissent as barbaric and anarchic, Majid sees “heretical thought, or freethinking, as the only lifesaving measure left to avoid an apocalyptic future.”

Hence, rather than the SNL sketch representing the apocalypse, I argue that it is the lack of heretical thinking in Obama’s speeches that might actually evoke, and create, a scary future. This might just be what it means to live in an era when neoliberal multiculturalism is the dominant racial project. And this is exactly why we must examine objects aesthetic and aesthetically lacking, mainstream and avant-garde in order to examine how the good life Obama envisions in his speeches might not be as positivist as first imagined.

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Chapter 1:
Telling Everyone’s Story:
A Queer Tour of Dearborn’s Arab American National Museum

As you know, America is a nation of immigrants. That is what makes this country unique, innovative, and in constant renewal. Like other immigrants, Arab immigrants came searching for better lives for themselves and their children. They were attracted by the promise of better educational and employment opportunities. You are going to find that the Arab American story is really the same as the Irish or Greek or Italian American stories. The Arab American story is, in fact, the American story.

Arab American National Museum Director Anan Ameri

“I believe that we must embrace a fresh understanding of the American experience. We must reject models of the American experience that express—directly or indirectly—a concept of either/or. We must not tolerate thinking in which folk are either African-American or American. Lurking behind such concepts are constructs such as separatist/integrationist, we/they, and ours/their. Instead, we must honor the comprehensive character of the American experience. We must assert its inclusiveness and embrace the reality that folks can be simultaneously African American and American. We belong inseparably to our selves and to the whole. We are our own community while also being part of the larger community.”

Edmund Barry Gaither, “Hey That’s Mine!: Thoughts on Pluralism and American Museums”

“[There] is something very queer at the heart of the naturalization process, a performance whose very theatricality exposes the constructed nature of citizenship itself.”

Siobahn Somerville, “The Queer History of Naturalization”

Dearborn Yesterday and Today

During the early days of the twentieth century, one of the most iconic performances of what Israel Zangwell coined “the melting pot” took place every six

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months at Henry Ford’s English School in Dearborn, Michigan. Here, immigrants were subject to intensive schooling in English language and American customs:

The first thing learned in the Ford school was how to say, “I am a good American.” Later the students acted out a pantomime, which admirably symbolized the spirit of the enterprise. In this performance, a great melting pot (labeled as such) occupied the middle of the stage. A long column of immigrant descendants descended into the pot from backstage clad in outlandish garb and flaunting signs proclaiming their fatherlands. Simultaneously, from either side of the pot another stream of men emerged, each properly dressed in identical suits of clothes and each carrying a little American flag.

One hundred years later, a trip down Michigan Avenue, Dearborn’s main thoroughfare, makes clear yet another very different performance, one that nevertheless gestures to certain questions and tensions regarding “American-ness.” Dearborn today does not feel like the melting pot of yesteryear but rather like an ethnic enclave. A plethora of store signs in Arabic now stand amid Michigan Avenue’s Pizza Huts and KFC’s. Dearborn, once a heterogeneous city of many immigrants, is now home to America’s largest self-identifying Arab-American community.

The Arab American National Museum, situated downtown across from City Hall, epitomizes this new aspect of Dearborn’s cultural character. Built in 2005 after a ten-year fundraising initiative, the museum was meant to act as a home for the cultural wing of ACCESS (Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services), which has been a mainstay of Dearborn’s cultural landscape since 1973. From all sides of Michigan Avenue, one can now see a white marble building replete with tile and design forms from the Arab world, topped with a glistening dome and minaret. Within the walls of the museum are three permanent exhibitions that help to reconstruct the Arab American story, which museum Director Anan Ameri consistently reminds visitors is “really an American story.”

Taking spectators on a tour of 100 years of immigrant history, this story begins with “Coming to America,” is followed by “Living in America,” and reaches its conclusion in “Making an Impact,” an exhibit of famous Arab Americans and the contributions they have made to US society. For the three million Arabs in America, the mere existence of the museum itself acts as a symbol of their impact in America and affirms their transformation from Arabs into Americans.

As made clear by both Henry Ford’s language school performance and the glistening new museum in the city’s center, a glimpse of Dearborn then and now helps demonstrate just how conceptions of race and ethnicity have shifted during the Great American century. No longer a melting pot in which differences are shed, the Arab American National Museum represents the salad bowl of cultural difference that is

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5 This scene was depicted to humorous effect in Jeffrey Eugenides’ Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Middlesex*, in which the main protagonist’s grandfather is a participant in the ritual, where “Inside the cauldron men are packed together throwing off immigrant costumes, putting on suits,” with “limbs tangling up and feet stepping on feet.” See Jeffrey Eugenides, *Middlesex* (New York: Picador, 2007), 104.
6 Ameri, “Track 8: Introduction to the Second Floor.”
America at our current moment. In this model of multiculturalism, ingredients are not blended together, losing their “natural essence,” but rather are tossed together lightly, allowing differences to shine through. In contemporary conceptions of neoliberal multicultural America, racial, cultural, and sexual differences are not expunged but rather made gratuitously visible. This visibility, however, comes at a cost. Those rendered visible are those that are the most in line with the morals and ethics of the contemporary moment; anything not in line with these interests is excised or glossed over so that the basic essence of “The American Story” remains intact. In other words, whether we are utilizing a salad bowl or a melting pot metaphor, something is always lost in the process of “becoming American.” Indeed, we lose the elements of our cultural and social lives that do not play well to the mainstream.

This chapter argues that there is something palpably queer about ethnic/minority museums in America in general, and in the Arab American National Museum in particular. Following queer studies’ commitment to performing a subject-less critique of larger institutional structures that take normalization as their primary object of inquiry, I insist that looking at the queer contours of the AANM (and the execution of ethnic/racial history museums in general) allows us to see how narratives of normalcy are cemented in our collective consciousness. I use “queer” to signify not a sexual identity or category but to stand in for a certain kind of lack. This lack, as postulated by Judith Butler, is what is lost when one is rendered legible as a certain kind of subject, the psychic remainder of difference that is often tossed aside in order for subjects to meet popular expectations about what it means to be a citizen in America. In addition to mapping out the narrative nuances of the “Arab American Story” writ large, I am interested in the stories and concepts the museum makes allusions to but quickly suppresses. What secondary stories and modes of being about religion, sexuality, race, and cultural practice are shown but rendered too simply? What queer alternatives to normative forms of kinship, culture, and American neoliberal secularism are suggested amongst the bric-a-brac that constitutes the supposedly unifying Arab American experience the museum wishes to make clear? In other words, what exactly is queer about the Arab American Museum and about ethnoracial history museums in general?

**Exposing the Queer in Minority Museums**

As Judith Butler argues, “queer” as a concept must remain amorphous and based on historical contingency in order to “let it take on meanings that cannot now be anticipated by a younger generation whose political vocabulary may well carry a different

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7 This Salad Bowl metaphor is a remnant of two racial projects from the 1970’s through the 1990’s: racial liberalism and liberal multiculturalism. This metaphor can also be seen in the institutionalization in the academy of courses on world literature and ethnic/minority literature, turning these courses into spaces where each culture is studied separately and judged to be equal in their morals, ethics and abilities to be good American citizens. For more on this, see the Introduction of this document and Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press 2012).


set of investments.” Reflecting this shift of investments, a new generation of scholars in 2005 took Warner and Butler’s prescient call for keeping queer an open term to task, asking “What is queer about queer theory now?” What this new generation of scholars postulated was that queer, in recognition of its commitment to performing “a subject-less critique,” must be used as a way of making clear the normative concepts, ideologies, and narratives inherent within such non-queer subjects as citizenship, terrorism, mourning, among others. Most relevant to this analysis is what Gopinath, Eng, Manalansan, and other queer critics of color have named “queering Diaspora,” which, borrowing Dipesh Chakrabarty’s term, wishes to provincialize queer studies, making clear how problems like “citizenship, sovereignty, migration, asylum welfare, the public sphere and civil society [relate] to questions of sexuality and sexual development at the heart of the public sphere.”

Following this mode of critique, my analysis of the Arab American National Museum utilizes queer in three very specific ways: 1) as a way of reading around the normative, phallic narratives of citizenship on display; 2) as the remainder of difference that is created when Arab stories are conflated with the stories of all other ethnic minorities, both white and racialized; and 3) for the ways in which elements historically associated with such queer practices as camp and kitsch become prevalent in museum display. In each of these three workings of queer, I am referring specifically to the identities, stories, narratives, and modes of being that do not fit within the generic parameters of the “performance of citizenship” on display in the museum. What all three of these different usages of queer share is an alertness to what Munoz’ calls an “eye for the disidentificatory.” This chapter argues that the minority museum simultaneously feeds into the narrative of the American Dream and exposes its fallacy. The Arab American National Museum is a site of identifications and disidenifications, where subjects are reconfigured in ways both conscious and unconscious to the Museum’s creators. These seemingly unconscious queer contours of difference can be found throughout the museum, be they through the concurrent conflation and disavowal of racial/ethnic difference, the camp-ing of everyday customs, or the existence of temporary exhibitions that look at the more scandalous aspects of Arab American culture, such as sexual orientation, Arab/black Muslim coalition building, and pro-Palestinian organizing. Rather than highlighting these more possibly controversial aspects of Arab American

13 See Jose Esteban Muñoz, Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).
culture, the museum’s main exhibitions make a spectacle out of normalcy, over-

exaggerating the most quotidian and acceptable aspects of citizenship.

In order to make clear the queer contours of ethnic museum display, we begin

with an examination of shared qualities of ethnic history museums in general, with

special focus placed on the history of the Arab American National Museum in Dearborn.

What is it about these institutions and the community groups attached to them that

allowed them to turn from small non-profit groups with leftist agendas in the 1970’s to

multi-million dollar organizations in the beginning of the 21st century? What aspects of

their cultural identity had to be changed or covered in order to display one dominant story

about Arab American enfranchisement and cultural inclusion? I read this desire to

explicate the positive aspects of cultural identity as an example of what Shane Phelan

calls “phallic citizenship,” imitating modes of citizenship based on notions of hegemony

and power.14

After this contextualization, readers begin a tour of the museum’s three permanent

galleries, beginning with the “Coming to America” exhibit. Here, visitors see Arabs

portrayed as black slaves, Anglo immigrants, and white assimilated Americans, without

ever discussing the racial/ethnic links between Arabs and observers of Islam. The

conflations of racial and ethnic difference at certain times and its disappearance at others

show the queerer aspects of living in a post-racial moment where race seemingly

disappears but racialization is constant and constantly shifting. Perhaps as a tactic for

covering up the significance of race within its walls, the museum also indulges in the

world of camp, as exemplified by the center piece of its “Living in America” exhibition,

a tour of a “typical Yemeni American house” that turns out to be anything but typical.

Lastly, readers tour the Arab American “hall of fame,” depicting only the most positive

aspects of Arab citizenry, often cropping out biographical material about its stars (i.e.

their religion, their sexuality, their political affiliations) that would make them seem

anything but exceptionally normal. My conclusions and counterargument reflect on the

more radical work being done in the museum’s temporary exhibitions and everyday

operations. How can a museum be both progressive in what it represents in special

exhibition yet conservative in what is highlighted in its permanent collection? What do

these exceptions tell us about race, culture, and the production of knowledge at our

contemporary moment?

A Brief Note on Methodology

How can a critic make clear that each visit to the museum, like each iteration of a

live performance, is completely unique while also making objectively clear the rhetorical,
tactical, and narrative strategies utilized in museum display? Following Barbra
Kirshenblatt Gimblett’s tour of various folkloric exhibitions and Wendy Brown’s tour of
the Simon Wiesenthal Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, I structure my tour
following the museum’s curators, unearthing the narrative of normal that develops
throughout the museum’s permanent exhibitions.15 Like the aforementioned authors, I use

14 See Shane Phelan, Sexual Strangers: Gays, Lesbians and Dilemmas of Citizenship
15 See Wendy Brown, Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire
(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 107-148 and Barbara Kirshenblatt Gimblett,
the tour as a way to consolidate a considerable amount of field notes from multiple trips to the museum, and to reconstruct the museum experience through various audio clips, sign placards, interactive exhibitions, and curatorial statements.  

In order to highlight the subjective nature of the museum exhibit, I have chosen to utilize the second person “you” as my primary subject. I hope that “you, the reader” will put yourself in the place of “you, the museum visitor” while readings these sections. Although there is no way this “you” can be completely devoid of a personality (i.e. “you” are obviously me), I have tried to be as objective and non-partisan as possible for the majority of the performative exercise. However, I contend that these slips of subjectivity in my text are part of my larger rhetorical argument. What makes the museum such an important part of society is the way in which each subject who enters the museum can choose his/her own journey and feel as if they are constructing their own experience while being led through a very specific set of exhibits which present one dominant narrative. In other words, each visitor to the museum will make their own choices. They will listen to certain recordings provided by the museum, ignoring others. They will fixate upon certain stories and objects. They will be reminded of certain things and make unexpected connections. They will relate and feel alienated.

I also contend that the use of an empty “you” in the tour follows the rhetoric used in the museum. In her introduction to the permanent exhibitions on the second floor, Museum Director Anan Ameri tells visitors that

As you go through these exhibits, think about your own family, its history, culture, and traditions. When did your first relative arrive in the United States?
How is your family influenced by American culture and its own culture as well?
How is your family similar or different of that of Arab Americans?

In constructing this performative tour, I am following the museum’s staff’s lead to make you “read your own story” both into and as the Arab American story. In reading the Arab American story as the American story, a spectacle is made out of how one identifies and disidentifies with the narrative of normalcy on display within the exhibit’s walls. Whereas Ameri is more interested in the similarities between Arab-Americans and other immigrant groups, I am more interested in the parts of “your story” that are different

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16 During the winter of 2011, I spent two months conducting research at the Arab American National Museum. In addition to meeting with different Arab American organizations in the community to situate my research, I spent a good deal of time in the museum’s own archives and interviewed 75% of the museum’s staff. I spent upwards of 100 hours in the museum exhibition space trying to document the experience for a spectator, even undergoing impromptu training as a tour guide. The forthcoming tour is made up from segments of my fieldnotes and transcriptions, as well as sections from various press materials distributed by the AANM and ACCESS. My two primary sources are the companion book to the museum’s main exhibitions compiled by the curatorial staff, Telling Our Story: The Arab American National Museum (Dearborn: Arab American National Museum, 2007), and a plethora of audio materials made available as part of iTunes University (e.g. Footnote 1).

17 Ameri, “Track 8: Introduction to the Second Floor.”
(concerning religion, activism, sexual orientation, lifestyle choice) and that the museum’s exhibits exclude, alter, or cover up.

**The Ethnic History Museum: Performing Utopias and Realities**

| Entering the Arab American National Museum in Dearborn, Michigan, you are immediately confronted by choices. To the right of you lies a gift shop, filled with various books, videos, and souvenirs of the Arab American experience. To the left are the doors of the museum’s Library and Resource Center, where visitors can pursue independent research and view documentaries and narrative films by/about Arabs in America and abroad. In front of you is the museum’s main information stand. After purchasing your ticket, you see a sign informing you that cell phone use is encouraged to interactively obtain secondary information on exhibits. You pick up your portable device, punch in a phone number followed by the numeral 1 and the # sign, and instantly you are being aurally greeted by the museum’s Executive Director, Anan Ameri. She informs you that there are about 17,000 museums in the United States, but the one that you are standing in is “the only one dedicated to tell the story of Arab Americans,” from 1520 to today. She makes clear that while the museum focuses on the experience of Arab Americans, it also celebrates the “rich history and culture of all other minorities in this country,” and that their “programs and exhibits are designed not only to tell our own story but to impress yours and impress the diversity of this nation.”

While listening to this cell phone introduction, you walk into the museum’s main courtyard. Exhibits line the perimeter of the space, and near the entrance you see a wall of tiles, each with the names of different donors to the museum, the size of each tile reflecting the size of that donor’s contribution. You look at a plethora of architectural innovation around you and, searching for more information, you reach into your pocket and make another call, this time pressing 4 followed by #. Soon Ghada al Zemen, one of the project leaders from Ghazzari and Associates, the firm that envisioned the space, tells you that “Islamic design trends towards the abstract and the geometric, somewhat like the design of the blue and white tiles you see at the base of the museum’s dome above you.” You look up. She continues: “The dome’s decoration is not random. That is the museum’s name rendered in Arab calligraphy by Arab American artist Faya Kawwis…. Other traditional Arab architectural elements here in the courtyard are the lush patterned tile on the walls and the floors, the arches and intricate patterns on the wood display cases, and the central fountain.” As she speaks your eyes dart around the space, attempting to catch glimpses of the all the elements she describes.

Since its popularization as the epitome of public culture across America and Europe in the 19th century, the museum has been disorienting and restoring, confusing

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and enlightening, creating wonder and awe. According to Barbara Kirshenblatt Gimblett:

The museum is at once an architectural form, a concrete environment for reflection, a reservoir of tangibility, a school for the senses, a space of conviviality, an autopoeitic system and a project of the ideal society, notwithstanding the amply documented tensions between the utopian ideal of the museum and its instrumentalizations.

The museum has also been a place for the creation of a certain type of foreword-thinking subject, hopefully embodying the civility and consciousness that constitute the ideal citizen. If the museum in contemporary culture has come to stand in for the values of our society at any given moment, it also becomes the responsibility of the museum to constantly re-invent itself in order to reflect a constantly changing multicultural America. However, no matter how racial/ethnic/cultural/economic demographics change, the museum must still fulfill its role as distracter, delighter, educator, and indoctrinator, as a space of tourism and leisure where national imaginings can be consumed.

As it distracts and delights, the museum takes spectators on a synaesthetic journey in which a particular type of moral, forward thinking subject is formed. As one participates in the museum’s “school for the senses,” the museum may be weaving “a narrative of discipline and culture through exhibition.” These ideological underpinnings of the museum are at the heart of what Tony Bennett, following Foucault’s theory of the Pan-opticon, calls the “exhibitionary complex…a self-monitoring system of looks in which the subject and object positions can be exchanged.” Here, members of society discipline themselves “through interiorizing the ideal and ordered view of itself as seen from the controlling vision of power—a site of sight accessible to all.” Created in part to have a rationalizing effect on lower and middle-class patrons dreaming of upward mobility, the museum does have utopian aspirations but, as many museologists have made clear, these Utopian leanings are intermingled with a project of ideological indoctrination. By “interiorizing the ideal” they see on display, subjects hope to turn certain concepts of Utopia into reality and make a positive impact on society. In this way, the museum aestheticizes and exaggerates the positive contours and underplays the more ethically dubious and/or abnormal aspects of the American Dream; in other words, by interiorizing an ideal, one might start seeing oneself as a citizen who wishes to embody the principles of that ideal.

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The exhibitionary complex, on display in nearly every museum, has taken on new valances since the rise of ethnic (or minority) museums in the U.S. Since the era of Civil Rights, thousands of museums focusing on the objects and stories of African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and others have been developed. Indeed, the Arab American National Museum in Dearborn is only the newest in a long lineage of Smithsonian-funded and/or recognized institutions that epitomize a shift towards documenting the cultural history of Americans who have often been excluded by nationalist rhetoric and “official” versions of American history. Although many of these museums started as grassroots community organizations stemming from a given ethnic/racial community, the rise in national funding for special interest (i.e. racial and religious) groups developed by Ronald Reagan during the 1980’s saw the creation of many large, formidable institutions, such as the Wing Luke Asian Museum in Seattle, the Charles Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit, and The National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C. Unlike other museums, which tend to focus on either the aesthetic or the ethnographic/historical aspects of culture, the “minority” museum fuses these genres, creating wonder and awe out of a mélange of personal stories, recreated moments from history, art objects, and ethnographic details about the immigrant/minority experience. This mixing of fact with spectacle is what constitutes the “exhibitionary complex” at the minority museum during our current neoliberal multicultural racial project.

Another key element of minority museums involves the connection between the institution and the community that it purportedly represents. With objects and stories collected from people inside of that minority community, the permanent exhibitions at ethnic museums need define community as a static concept (stable, positive, and resulting in acceptance, progress, and financial success) while also showing how heterogeneous and indefinable a label like “Asian American” or “African American” can be. Although many curators and museum employees are aware of the impossible task of defining what it means to be an ethnic minority in America, the need to positively define broad labels such as “Arab American,” “African American,” and so on is exceedingly prevalent, particularly because many of these groups “have been largely ignored or devalued in the telling of our national story.”

Ivan Karp, accordingly, likens identity politics to museum politics, making clear how “museums and communities simultaneously cooperate and do battle” with one another. This battling between lived experience and the performance of national belonging displayed in the minority museum exists specifically because these institutions—especially those with operating budgets in the ten millions—must be bastions of both diversity and homogeneity. Indeed, for a community to be rendered legible to any kind of mainstream audience, a certain kind of tailoring of the

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24 The Smithsonian has funding bodies designed to help develop new museums and serves as a training center for teaching curators how to construct a cultural history museum. See the three Smithsonian edited essay collections: Karp et al, eds., Museums and Communities; Ivan Karp, Corrine A. Kratz, Lynn Szwaja and Tomas Ybarra-Frausto, Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); and Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display, edited by Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington D.C: Smithsonian Books, 1992).


ethnic/minority narrative is always necessary, often involving the creation of an ideal citizen-subject that, though multicultural in makeup, is steadfastly American in values.

This ideal citizen-subject is both particular and generic, culturally distinct yet universally culturally acceptable. Accordingly, AANM’s Director Anan Ameri can claim that the Arab American story is nearly indistinguishable from the Italian, Irish, or Greek American stories. Although the museum prides itself as telling the poly-vocal stories of Arab Americans from all backgrounds, religions, and walks of life, the need to tell one Arab American story, and one American story, ultimately siphons out difference. In this way, the museum both destabilizes and reifies monolithic notions of the signifier “American.” Hence, although the AANM prides itself on the vast archive of Arab American experience from which it draws, it also repeatedly states that the Arab American story is the American story. In nearly every press release, mission, curatorial statement, and article written by the museum’s staff, one can find this rhetoric of conflating the Arab American story with the American story, and, by extension, a narrative of progress.

The need to both create and destabilize monolithic symbols that represent America is symptomatic of a much larger cultural trend, one that has long been the subject of much crisis within American Studies as a new academic field. Interrogating canonical texts in American Studies, such as Henry Nash Smith’s Virgin Land (1950), R.W.B Lewis’ The American Adam (1955), and John William Ward’s Andrew Jackson: Symbol for An Age (1962), scholar Bruce Kuklick argued in the 1970’s that the discipline’s founding fathers had created a static, monolithic vision of America as a country and culture summed up by its greatest (white) men. By focusing on the symbol, Kuklick suggests that “we invest the image with much more than a denotational quality; we enable it to connote moral, and intellectual qualities of wider range.” The symbol, thus, not only symbolizes but signifies, reading “American” as having one basic and true signification: progressive, tolerant, democratic, and deserving. An era of postmodern theory has demonstrated, and deconstructed, the reductive nature of monolithic symbolism, yet the urge to quantify America as a static, monolithic entity persists. Although Edmund Barry Gaither argues that “folks can be simultaneously American and African American,” the ability for ethnic/racial history museums to display this simultaneity is more difficult to execute. Indeed, the Arab American National Museum attempts to reach this level of simultaneity, but in the process excises the more controversial, “unnatural,” and, hence, “un-American” aspects of Arab/Muslim identity to prove to the mainstream that Arabs are worthy of inclusion as naturalized, full citizens.

29 Gaither, “Hey That’s Mine,” 60.
As quoted in the frontpiece of this chapter, Siobhan Somerville asserts that even the use of the word “natural” in relationship to naturalization makes clear a civilizationist imperative in which becoming American is conflated with becoming natural. Through examining the performative speech acts connected to the swearing-in ceremony of new American citizens, Somerville demonstrates that there “is something very queer at the heart of the naturalization process, a performance whose very theatricality exposes the constructed nature of citizenship itself.” However, as made clear by Butler, cognizance of the construction of a given performance (be it race, sexuality, or ethnic/cultural identity) does not inherently make it possible to undo the cultural power attached to the performance of that concept. Hence, even though we know that citizenship is constructed and not, in fact, natural, we cannot help but reconstruct what Shane Phelan calls a form of “phallic citizenship,” in which we “resist pluralization in favor of a bland plurality that reinforces boundaries and limits.” Phelan argues that “bypassing the phallic citizen is essential for the citizenship of lesbians and gays, as well as the citizenship of people of color and all women.”

As a symbol of economic and cultural prosperity, the Arab American National Museum can easily be read as embodying many contours of this phallic citizenship. Despite stigmatization, Arabs in America (unlike many of their minoritarian counterparts) are from higher educational and income brackets than the national average. The AANM’s edifice and mission statement reflect this, highlighting the important impact Arabs in America have made in the course of the past 100 years. Similarly, the museum constructs an Arab American story that reflects dominant democratic and cultural values. Although the museum curators wish to make clear that “Arab Americans are from all religions, class backgrounds, and ways of life,” a core story about immigrant progress and eventual mainstreaming is explicit. Hence, just as certain members of GLBTQ organizations wish to make clear that gay and lesbian subjects are “Virtually Normal,” a large percentage of those involved in Arab American organizing feel a proclivity to highlighting the normal, phallic aspects of their status as American citizens.

By placing the personal objects, stories, and cultural traditions of many different types of citizens on display as national history, the minority museum takes theories of multiculturalism and plurality and turns them into practice, helping to render a new version of the ideal America. This new ideal is not monolithic, but a collage of different

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31 See Butler, Psychic Life of Power and Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 2006).
32 Phalen, Sexual Strangers, 156.
33 For more on census data on Arabs in America, see the DAAS Report on Arabs in Detroit from 2003 discussed in Citizenship in Crisis (Washington D.C: Russell Sage Foundation, 2009) and Nabeel Abraham and Andrew Shryock, Arab Detroit: From Margin to Mainstream (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000), which examines earlier surveys on Arab Americans in the region.
fabrics woven together, an America that does not need a single image to unite its citizens. In other words, the symbol of America, no matter how multi-layered, signifies not a single subject but rather a clear-cut narrative. The minority story begins with unrest and displacement, is followed by years of hardship trying to “make it” in America, and ends with each minority group attaining a degree of normalcy, acceptance, and legibility within mainstream culture. This narrative thread can be spotted in most minority museums, specifically those representing a national, rather than local, population of an ethnic/racial group. Some pertinent examples include the Wright Museum’s permanent exhibition entitled “And Still We Rise,” which follows an in-depth journey of slavery in America with exhibits that show more than one hundred years of African American uplift in culture and politics, and the Wing Luke Museum’s main exhibition on the Asian American experience, comprised of five chronological chapters: 1) Home, 2) Getting There, 3) Making a Living, 4) Social Justice, and 5) Community. Like its sister institutions, the Arab American National Museum’s narrative thrust is embodied by the labels “Coming to America,” “Living in America,” and “Making an Impact,” making clear the cultural and economic presence Arab Americans have and have had on the national landscape.


Although many of these minority museums construct their exhibits by paying specific attention to aspects of art, culture, and tradition, these objects and stories are housed within architectural structures that reveal just how much economic weight lies in the coffers of many Americans who were once considered abject. The ethnic museum, as an edifice of stone and concrete, represents the literal institutionalization of minority communities as they reach economic prosperity. To quote Miranda Joseph, “in order to be recognized as a potential recipient of (subject to) the goodies that come from a pluralist state one must first constitute oneself as a legitimate community.” In doing so, however, “one inscribes oneself into the machinery that turns the raw material of community into subjects of the nation state and of capital.”

I read the minority museum as the symbol of a community’s economic importance and vitality, one that allows them to be considered legitimate by earning them their share of the benefits that come from a pluralist state. Moreover, the AANM, like its sister institutions, is pressured by public funding to have programs and exhibits that are “designed not only to tell our own stories but to impress yours and impress the diversity of this nation” [sic]. This conflation of all minorities and their success as members of the American polity demonstrates how neoliberal multiculturalism is, at the current moment, about fulfilling certain narrative requirements that are in line with capitalism.

Perhaps the most fascinating element of these new ethnic museums remains the ways in which these cultural organizations, in alliance with community groups, were able to raise millions of dollars for the creation of flagship institutions. How was this money raised? The case study of the Arab American community for the most part mirrors that of their Asian, African, Latino, and Native American counterparts. For example ACCESS (Arab Community Center for Social and Economic Services) started as a volunteer organization run out of a donated storefront but within 20 years had six different campuses throughout Dearborn, an operating budget of $15 million dollars a year, and a payroll of two hundred employees. ACCESS and other organizations like it were also able to capitalize on what would become in the 1980’s a trend toward the creation of government-subsidized organizations aimed at specific racial/ethnic/religious communities. It was during this time period that minority/ethnic museums and allied organizations began to proliferate in the nonprofit landscape.

Noticing both the need for more political organizing as well as the large amount of funding available to groups fighting for equal protection, a large number of new Arab organizations began to populate the local and national political scenes. In 1979, a group of Chaldean Americans created the Arab American Chaldean Council with one volunteer in a small office; within 15 years, they had 12 help centers, 40,000 clients, and an

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39 See Anan Ameri, “Track 8: Introduction to the Second Floor.”
operating budget in the millions. In 1980, Senator James Abrouzek established the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, which would soon become the largest Arab American civil rights organization in the country, garnering national attention for its legal battles against Disney and MGM for defamation. Five years later, James Zogby started the Arab American Institute (AAI), whose mission focused on getting Arab Americans in local, state, and national politics. These organizations helped to show how Arab Americans in the realm of the political, the social, and the economic could be mainstreamed into dominant American society.

Although the proliferation of Arab American nonprofit organizations in the 1980’s and 1990’s could be interpreted as solely a positive occurrence, the rapid rise to prominence of a certain kind of acceptable minority citizen in the 1980’s is also deeply imbricated with notions of neoliberal capital. In order to bear the fruits of state funding, ACCESS, ACC, AAI, and ADC must often deviate from some of the more radical elements of their identities and political agendas. Andrew Shryock, an ethnographer of Detroit’s Arab American community for decades, asserts that these groups whose leadership included “individuals who began their careers as socialists and communists in the 1970’s” underwent “a dramatic shift toward the political center as a result of their successful immersion in ethnic constituency politics.” Shryock makes clear how many organizations make choices based not their community but on the “programming agendas and fiscal regulations of their American partners and funding sources.” For Shryock, the process of mainstreaming that takes place in the ethnic minority activist space shows

how mainstreaming can be achieved by way of (not in spite of) special identity labels. It also shows how labeling, when carried out by state agencies, can bring even the most stigmatized and politically suspect communities into existing structures of power and representation.

This move from a post-Civil Rights era socialist, anti-establishment form of activism to a neoliberal multicultural form of economically interconnected racial/ethnic constituencies shows how forms of difference—queerness, if you will—are stripped out of the ethnic narrative, even if inadvertently. Community vs. capitalism, individuality vs. collective identity, Utopian hopes for a different world vs. the needs of becoming “American” in all its harsh reality; these battles are constantly being re-enacted in the space of the contemporary minority museum in the United States.

In the case of Arabs in America, the need to prove themselves as patriotic Americans has only intensified in the years since the Civil Rights era. As Nadine Naber

40 See the Arab American and Chaldean Council’s website for information on their history and their current social projects at http://www.myacc.org.
41 See the ADC’s website for more information on their history and social projects at http://www.adc.org.
42 See the AAI’s website for more information on their history and social projects at http://www.aaiusa.org.
43 For more on the history of these organizations and their financial success during the period of Detroit’s financial ruin, see Abraham and Shryock, Arab Detroit.
eloquently argues, the perception of Arabs in America changed from that of “model minority” to “problem minority,” not just because of 9/11, but as an extension, if not an intensification, of a post-Cold War U.S. expansion. In the era after the Berlin Wall, Arabs, Muslims, and people of Middle Eastern and North African descent became racialized.  

In other words, what Mamdani called the “good Muslim, bad Muslim” paradigm summoned up the concept of race where none seemed to exist, good Muslims raced white, bad Muslims raced black. Wishing to convince the American mainstream that they were indeed a model and not a problem minority, more conservative Arab American community groups utilized their stigma to over-perform their normalcy, representing themselves as “good Arabs,” even if this meant the excision of certain “bad” elements from their communities’ collective story.

Using a theory of racial formation first postulated by Jodi Melamed, I read the ethnic/minority museum as having proven itself useful to a new form of anti-racist hegemony, both in its liberal multicultural (1990’s) and neoliberal multicultural (2000’s) phases. In its first incarnation, ethnic museums stressed “representation and cultural recognition [which] screened off differential power, dematerialized concepts of race, and marginalized antiracisms that addressed material disparities in racial outcomes.”  

In the last ten years, race as a signifier has seemingly disappeared but racialization has not; neoliberal multiculturalism as “an official antiracism” for our times utilizes the concept of differentiated citizenship, “in which governments subject their populations to different treatment according to their worth within neoliberal circuits of value.” Although Melamed’s primary object of analysis is literary studies discourse, I believe her theory of racial formation applies quite seamlessly to the ethnic/racial museum space. The Arab American National Museum is an example both of using culture to suture racial/ethnic difference in a liberal multicultural sense (in its humanistic structuring of the Arab American story as the American story) and as a testament to the ways in which Arabs in America—mostly upper-class, well-educated and patriotic—can prove their worth in neoliberal circuits of value.

The Queer Absence and Presence of Race

Walking toward the entrance of the “Coming to America” exhibit, you hear a stream of cacophonous voices of various immigrants telling stories. You enter the exhibit and are greeted by a display giving off the aura of the African bush. In the background is drawn a barren landscape, while in the foreground are large plastic rocks and a marble bust of an ethnicized figure with pronounced lips and brows. He has a single feather rising from his head. Reading the placard in front of you, you learn that this figure is a representation of Zammouri, or Estebanico, the first Arab (in his case Moroccan) to be taken into slavery and brought to the new world. Although little is known about him, it is known that Zammouri walked across the Americas, outliving his master and eventually earning his freedom. Intrigued, you reach for your phone, enter the appropriate numbers, and hear the voice of Carla Thomas McGuiness, the co-coordinator of educational programs and

45 See Naber, Arab America.
46 See Jodi Melamed, Represent and Destroy, 46.
47 Ibid, 47.
services at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History. After giving you more details about Zammouri, Thomas explains the connection between Arabic culture and the slave trade of the 16th-19th centuries. She tells you that “Many Arabs from North Africa were among the 12-15 million enslaved people who came over during the next four hundred years. Today, there are likely many Americans who had enslaved Arabs as ancestors…. While it is difficult to estimate the number of enslaved people from the Arab world, there are records dating back to the year 1717 that refer to the arrival of enslaved Arabic-speaking Muslims who would not eat pork.” Next, she tells you of other Arabic, or at least Muslim, slaves from American history such as Ben Ali and Omar Ibn Said, who was freed by an early governor of Virginia for his pious ways and his knowledge of the Koran. You note that no mention of this slave’s race is given.

As Katherine Bond Stockton and Robyn Weigman assert, the history of racial stigmatization and subjection in this country has always been tangled up with notions of sexual subversion and deviance. In her germinal work from 1996, American Anatomies, Weigman takes refuge in the how of racial and sexual formation by looking at the historical construction of black masculinity, often read as aggressively heterosexual and savage. Weigman argues that “the relationship between race and gender is not transhistorically the same—is not a natural reading of bodies in their obvious and unchanging visual differentiations” and that this relationship “demonstrates that differences are contingent and contextual productions.” Bond Stockton, following the work of Erving Goffman, focuses on the sense of shared stigmatization found “where black meets queer.” Bond Stockton relies on Weigman’s logic in that, in both works, the performance of one’s sexual identity is always linked to one’s level of ability to pass as white, and if not white, at least normal. The shame of being unable to pass, however, does not explain why for many subjects there is something “attractive about bottom states” and “the logic by which beauty finds itself wed to shame.” Bottom states, according to Bond Stockton, are about a shared sense of abjection. For every immigrant group in America, full citizenship over this abjection came through the adherence to a certain performance of gendered normalcy. For Jews, this required men to shed their effeminate characteristics and women to perform themselves as less dominant, whereas for African Americans, men needed to have their virility softened. In the case of Arab Americans, both men and women have historically been drawn as sexually lecherous and chaste, helpless and cuckolded, depending on what image better suits American interests at any given moment in history.

Given the ways in which religious and racial difference have been historically intertwined, it should not be surprising that the first instance of Arabs/Muslims “coming to America” should be as slaves. Zammouri, the moor, becomes the embodiment of racial and social difference, a slave queered by race and religion who becomes a model for his

race by outliving his masters. The other “black Muslims” discussed on the audio tour are also paragons of virtue who earned their freedom for their erudition and moral strength. As Harvey Young argues, these “success” stories follow the *Code of Ethics for Museums* developed by American Association of Museums, stipulating that programs must “be accessible and encourage the widest participation possible” and “respect pluralist values, traditions and concerns.”

Examining the removal of the rather offending and horrifying wax figure representations of lynchings on display at America’s Black Holocaust Museum, Young reads this example as emblematic of the ways in which “historical responsibility [is] incompatible with museum ethics.” It is for this reason, perhaps, that even though Arabs are elided with African American slaves, little of the negative history of this atrocity is on display for museum-goers, such as the events of 1909, when a Syrian Jewish merchant in Central Florida was lynched and murdered due to his being racialized as a sexual threat by the white members of his community. Similarly, the shared history of Arab Muslims and African American members of the Nation of Islam is completely overlooked at the AANM, perhaps because of the way in which racial coalition is evoked only when it is in line with a museum’s code of ethics.

From slaves to America’s 1%. From the bottom to the top. What is attractive about bottom states then, both sexually and socially, is that when they are brought into a structural relationship with the narrative of capitalist enfranchisement, they become something a subject can outgrow. In this way, even great atrocities in American history, such as the slave trade, the brutal treatment of Native Americans, and the internment of Japanese Americans during the Second World War, can be included in the narrative with brutal detail, since the members of these groups have “risen up” and become members of America’s middle and upper middle classes. This rising from the bottom is nowhere more clear than in the case of GLBT organizing, in which a new figure emerges: the homonational. According to Jasbir Puar, the homonational is no longer a homosexual subject, but rather a subject who is homosexual. Regardless of the fact that most citizens can never shed their stigmatized origins fully, the idea of homonationalism suggests that one can have their difference be an addendum rather than a defining feature of their identity.

Why, then, are such important political aspects of being Arab in America (such as an investment in pro-Palestinian causes and an interest in due process and more accurate representation post-9/11) reduced to the status of anecdote, if mentioned at all? I attribute this to the museum’s need, as a neoliberal, secular institution, to keep itself in line with dominant American interests at this particular neoliberal multicultural moment. In this regard, the Arab/Muslim in America, like the queer, must almost become hyper-patriotic in order to dismiss suspicion from rearing its ugly head. Utilizing this mode of logic, it makes sense that an Arab museum might hide the aspects of their community that are not in line with state interests. This may be why anti-Israeli sentiment, many horror stories

54 For more on this incident, see Chapter 4 of Sarah Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White: Race and Ethnicity in the Early Syrian Diaspora* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).
about police brutality concerning innocent Arabs after 9/11, as well as affiliations with the Nation of Islam and other more “dubious” groups are kept to a minimum throughout the permanent exhibitions. I read this process of covering, following Yoshino, as one that covers what is essentially queer about us.\textsuperscript{56} Hence, vis-à-vis normalcy, an affiliation with anti-Zionist causes is a queer trait that must be covered up in order for Arab American subjects to pass as adequately patriotic. The attempt to cover up many of the queer (as is non-dominant) aspects of Arab American subjectivity, also results in the creation of a number of queer (as in peculiar) rhetorical contrivances, such as the melding of the Arab American story with the American story writ large and the constantly changing conflations and disassociations made between Arabs and other racial/ethnic groups in America.

The “Coming to America” exhibition at the AANM manages to tell the stories of many Arab Americans and articulate the ways in ways in which they changed, covered, or passed as “normal citizens.” It attempts to do so in as objective a manner as possible. Let us return to our tour and the tale of Majid Aljaber/Mitch Freeman.

\begin{quote}
You turn around and look out a fake window onto a painted image of an outdoor scene with an airplane waiting at the gate in front of you. Next to this picture window is a door and sign for Gate 07. To the right is an airport video screen showing departure and arrival times. You read that this section is about “Hardship in Iraq” after the Gulf War and during the regime of Sadaam Hussein. You read that tens of thousands of Iraqis immigrated to the U.S. in the early 1990’s. You read about Layla Aljaber, an Iraqi woman who fled the country with her family, and her son Majid, a medical doctor who completed his training in Baghdad and arrived in the U.S. in 1994. You read one seemingly objective statement about Majid twice to let it sink in: “At first, he had difficulty finding work as a doctor. Upon the advice of friends, Majid changed his name to Mitch Freeman and soon after found a job as a family doctor in Arizona.”\textsuperscript{57}
\end{quote}

The story of Layla and her son becomes the stand-in tale for Iraqi immigration in the years after the Gulf War. Described in a matter-of-fact and objective tone, Majid’s transformation into Mitch Freeman seems quotidian and uneventful. However, Majid’s need to cover his Iraqi heritage in order to find work as a doctor is telling of the ways in which becoming American requires the shedding/sequestering of the more controversial parts of one’s identity. The museum placard does not go into any more details about Mitch’s new life, leaving one wondering the extent to which Majid is content with the loss of his Arabic name and cultural marker. Was the erasure of his racialized moniker enough for him to attain his status as an American doctor and a Freeman?

The complicated relationship between Arab identity and histories of racial and ethnic covering continues as visitors pass through the only portion of the museum that deals directly with the tragic events of September 11\textsuperscript{th}. Rather than focusing on the ways in which Arabs and Muslims were involuntarily detained for their inability to pass as normal, Western, and/or non-threatening, the museum exhibit instead highlights the Arab


men and women who voluntarily turned themselves in for questioning, confident in their status as patriotic Americans.

You see a small-framed letter, asking Arab and Muslim Americans to voluntarily undergo intensive questioning regarding their connection to terrorist organizations. As you read, Noel Saleh, emeritus board member of ACCESS, tells you that “After the tragic events of 9/11, the government of the U.S. was in trauma as was the Arab American community—both the immigrant and the non-immigrant community—because there was a concern as to how they were going to be treated. One of the responses of the U.S. government was to develop a list of 5000 individual Arab and Muslim men between the ages of 18 and 33 to ask them questions regarding their knowledge about the terrorist attack on the United States. Here in Michigan, the Arab and Muslim community met with the FBI and the U.S. Attorney’s office and said ‘while we may question the need for this interviewing processes, we know it has to be done, but it should be done in a respectful manner.’ The letter you see was developed in a collaborative effort between the U.S. Attorney’s office and the Arab American community. Interestingly, Michigan had 700 names from the list of 5000 and we were the most successful from the mass of American Department Justice’s own report in having the highest level of cooperation. Equally interesting to the Arab American community was that of the 5000 individuals, not one was found to have any information or relation to the tragic events of 9/11 or any other terrorist attack. But…we hope we set an example for other parts of the country of how the community and the government need to work together.”

The tone of Saleh’s narration is reserved and measured, never suggesting that underneath this prime example of “the community and the government working together” might lurk feelings of fear and shame. Although all 700 of Dearborn’s voluntarily questioned Arab Americans were found unsuspicious and were quickly released, the display gives no sense as to the tens of thousands of Arab Americans who were detained against their will for weeks and months. The faces and voices of these innocent Americans remain covered in the museum’s narrative, perhaps because they are a little “less good” than their patriotic counterparts, those willing to be considered suspicious simply because of their religion, ethnic background, or skin color.

The tensions between being American and being Arab continue as the visitor is seamlessly transported from one exhibit to another. As “Coming to America” concludes, visitors find themselves “Living in America” as guests on the front porch of an Arab American family’s home. In the corner of the porch are a rocking chair, a backgammon board, and transistor radio, labeled “press me.” Although visitors can choose between four different stories about “Living in America,” the story told by an unnamed older male who reminisces about the ways in which his family was stigmatized for their cultural customs is the only one that most directly addresses discourses of race and tolerance.

“When I was a young boy back in the 40’s, we lived on a street on the eastside of Detroit called Lakewood. We often referred to it as Damascus Row because many of our cousins, perhaps as many as 20 families, lived on Lakewood. And on a Sunday afternoon, perhaps after mass, everybody would sorta gather on our front porch and it was very much a get together of the family, the kids would play, mothers would go and prepare wonderful foods like hummus and tabouleh and izza and we would eat on our front porch. Well, Mr. Kessler sponsored our father, he was a neighbor from across the street, into the Knights of Columbus, and they came back from the meeting and they were feeling good and Mrs. Kessler was sort of yelling at her husband. She said, ‘What is wrong with you, you lummox? Why do you let those foreigners across the street make a fool of you?’ And I was playing with Bobby, her son, a little older than me and I asked ‘What does your Mother mean, foreigners?’ She continued to criticize the fact that we ate on our front porch. And we indeed did. It was a lot of fun. We ate on our front porch and we played baseball in the driveways and on the street. It was a good time and she was finding fault with it. And then she said another thing, that we cooked outside like nomads. And we indeed did that, we shishkababed outside— ‘You can’t cook that inside the house, you got to cook it outside’—and this was the 40’s and people didn’t do that in the 40’s. People cooked inside except for the Arabs and Greeks, perhaps and the African Americans. Well, she found fault with all the things I liked and I didn’t understand it because I was a young boy. But now, at age 85, I live in a mixed neighborhood, plenty of African Americans. Come a Saturday night the African Americans return from church and they are playing the piano and gospel music and the kids are rollerblading up and down the driveway. And now I have to watch myself to make sure that I am not Mrs. Kessler. Tolerance is a really important thing in life. It brings forth friendship and understanding.”

In this anonymous oral history, the queer customs of foreigners are discussed in relation to notions of cultural understanding, tolerance, and friendship. According to Mrs. Kessler, the antagonist of the tale, “eating outside” is an uncivilized, barbaric act associated with nomads. This is especially true due to Mr. Kessler’s sponsorship of his Arab neighbor in the Knights of Columbus, a symbol both of the Kessler’s seeming tolerance of foreigners and of the narrator’s father’s ascendency to the American middle class. Although to Arabs and Greeks “cooking outside” makes sense, in America this public act of difference becomes something that needs to be covered and sequestered.

Mrs. Kessler’s issues about eating outside are not dissimilar from those discussed in Berlant and Warner’s germinal work on “Sex in Public.” The authors argue that anything that could be considered ethnically questionable or culturally taboo is relegated to the private sphere. Like gay sex (especially the more risqué elements of it: polyamory, leather, sado-masochism, etc.), Arabs’ eating outside should be kept indoors and out of site. This separation of public and private sphere, however, is not so clear cut for stigmatized individuals, many of whom, in an effort to hyper-perform their normalcy,

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make public their private space to show the world they are just like everyone else. This making of the private public is made literal in the AANM’s “Living in America” exhibition, as visitors act like nosy neighbors and voyeurs, walking through a typical Yemeni American house to discover that their Arab counterparts are really just the same as themselves.

The story about Mrs. Kessler and eating outside also shows how both racial signification and tolerance are mutable, constantly evolving concepts. The narrator’s confusion about Mrs. Kessler constantly finding fault with his “ethnic” behavior is emblematic of his family’s racialized status in her eyes, something he subliminally recognizes by likening his Syrian family to Greeks and other racially queered subjects. Although visitors are given little to no information as to the narrator’s life choices between childhood and the age of 85, one can infer that he learned to cover up his more public displays of difference (such as eating outside) in order to become a “normal American.” One can surmise this by the ways in which African Americans function in his tale; at first they are mentioned in the same breath (as another tribe of publically different subjects) but by the time the narrator reaches 85, they are now the new abject, making a public nuisance of themselves, something the narrator must tolerate. He must tolerate them since he is afraid of becoming a Mrs. Kessler, an intolerant person, unaccepting of public displays of difference. Although the oral history ends on a note of understanding and tolerance, loaded within the tale are more complicated questions about covering one’s difference, passing as normal/white, and learning to tolerate if not like/respect what is queer about the other.

The lines between public and private, between what is covered and what is displayed, continue to blur as visitors enter a model bedroom of a male Arab American teenager. On the walls are posters of various bands, a blue Michigan football pennant, and a cardboard cutout of an Arab American teenage member of Fordson High School’s football team, which is almost completely comprised of children of Arab descent.

You look behind you and discover that a purple hued MacIntosh desktop is screening a documentary of Arab American teenagers talking about their dual identities as Arab Americans. One girl shows you the interior of her closet, from her more traditional outfits to her small pair of booty shorts, which, she tells you, really upset her father. Another girl recalls realizing that the smells and foods in her house were always different than those of her peers. She tells you that she doesn’t think of herself as anything but American, “perhaps with a little extra spice.” More and more stories appear before you. An Arab teenager talks about his love of both Arabic music and contemporary hip-hop, another talks about how it is hard at school to explain to his classmates that he is not strange, just different.

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61 Please see Chapter 4: “Muslim Heritage, American Dream: Reality, Television and The Narcissitic Reconfiguration of Normal” for more.
62 For more on the link between football, Arab-American identity, and patriotism see Fordson: Faith, Fasting, Football, directed by Rashid Ghazi (Dearborn: North Shore Films LLC, 2011) DVD.
63 See “The Teen’s Room,” Telling Our Story, 92-95.
These personal stories from teenagers do an exquisite job of demonstrating the work of balancing dual identities. Following Nadine Naber, these young people could be attempting to manifest a form of cultural authenticity that labels them authentically both Arab and American, as exemplified by the girl who shows the camera her provocative clothing, something that makes her seem more like an “American whore” more than an “Arab virgin.” This need for men to play football and for women to be sexualized seems to reify the concept that one can’t really be a good Arab girl/boy and a good American girl/boy without sacrificing something. Moreover, these young people feel the imperative to prove to both themselves and others that are not “strange,” (i.e. queer) just different; that they are just like everyone else, only with “a little extra spice.”

As a visitor examines the teen’s bedroom more closely, they might realize that although there is no form of racial covering/passing occurring, all of the teenagers interviewed seem to subscribe to normative gender roles, the girls feminine and dressed provocatively, the boys masculine and on the football team. That holds true, until one digs a bit deeper into the museum display.

In a set of drawers in the corner of the bedroom, you discover an unfolded t-shirt on display that has a large handprint outlined in red at its center. Above this handprint, in large red font, is the slogan “Prevention is your best protection.” Below, smaller print explains that the t-shirt was given away at a number of different community events about HIV awareness, prevention, and testing in Dearborn. The shirt has no date on it so you are not sure when these events took place. You notice that each of the five fingers highlights a different way of preventing HIV/AIDS: The first finger says to only use clean needles and bottles; the next advises children to “have sex with only one partner in a monogamous relationship”; on the hand’s middle finger are the words “say no to sex and drugs”; and, finally, “have sexual contact only with those of the opposite sex and use condoms.”

A souvenir t-shirt from an ACCESS-sponsored program about AIDS prevention (circa 1995) becomes the only instance of explicitly queer material in all of the Arab American National Museum. Moreover, homosexual sex is not even mentioned, summoned only in connotation as the opposite of having sexual contact with those of the opposite sex, something to be avoided. Although this direct correlation between homosexual sex and the contraction of the HIV virus was prevalent throughout AIDS prevention discourse especially in the 1990’s, its placement as a part of “Arab American history” is nevertheless telling of the tensions between Arab/Muslim identity and gender/sexual non-conformity. The t-shirt’s taboo mentioning of gay sex might help to explain why it has been sequestered to a discrete corner of the exhibit, hidden in a drawer, covered from the eye of casual passersby. However, just as questions of racial, ethnic, gendered, and sexual difference are covered and/or cropped from the frame of the exhibition display, certain elements of the Arab American experience are over-emphasized to help prove to mainstream museum-goers just how normal Arabs in America supposedly are.

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Camp/Kitsch Contours of the Minority Museum

After a moment, your eyes dart to the far right, to the kitchen you had spotted earlier. You walk over to it, fixated on a large pink box that sits on a kitchen counter. It is a 2-pound box of baklava and other Middle Eastern pastries, made by Shatilla, a Dearborn-based company founded in 1989, now the largest purveyor of Arab sweets in the United States. Next to the sweets is a cookbook containing recipes from across the Arab world as well as a small placard describing the importance of food to each and every sub-section of Arab culture. Looking up from the kitchen island, you notice that almost all of the cabinets are labeled with signs instructing you: “open me.” Your gaze moves towards the top left cabinet as you walk over and pull it open. In a glass display case on the upper half of the shelf lies an open bag of Za’atar with a descriptive placard. You stare through the case and the plastic bag to see the contours of sesame seeds and thyme. Below are a package of dried figs and a tub of tahini, a mix made of ground sesame. You register a sense of oddness at seeing such everyday food items behind glass, moved from being everyday to being extraordinary. In the drawers by the sink, you find a falafel press, a zucchini corer, and cookie molds for holidays celebrated by Assyrians and Chaldeans. The fridge behind you, too, gleams with an “open me” sticker. You open it. In the left-hand corner of the fridge sits a liter of half and half with a placard dedicated to Melody Farms, a $130 million dollar creamery owned by Arab Americans. Behind lay three bottles of Cortas pomegranate molasses. In front, an open bowl of hummus with a card describing the recently popularized dish. You peer down into the bowl and see off-white plastic molded to look like hummus. Also on this shelf are three stacked cartons of Tazam brand Lebne and two containers of Famous Brand Chili, both third-generation Arab American businesses. In the far left corner is a row of five bottles of rose water. You lower your gaze to examine the open bowls of food (this time foul muddamas, a mash made up of fava beans), a package of pita bread, two cans of tahini, and an open falafel sandwich with full garnish facing out as it sits perfectly perched in a red ceramic soup bowl, another explanatory sign in front of it. Jutting out of the pita’s shell are foam pieces of lettuce and one small slice of a plastic tomato. The small brown balls of faux fried chickpea gleam with a certain inedible polish, as if they were to momentarily become animate and began speaking to you as in a cartoon.
This fridge and its (dis)contents are emblematic of the last major ideologically and aesthetically queer contour of the ethnic museum. I assert that 1) camp/kitsch reading practices are an integral element of the minority museum experience and that 2) these elements of camp can be read as being in line with both a historic gay sensibility and a latent subversive queer potential. For the purposes of this material analysis, I make the assertion that camp and queer are intrinsically related on a number of levels. Camp, like queer, is defined by its resistance to definition. Like queer, camp is ephemeral, something one knows when one sees. Beyond camp’s long historical genealogy as a specifically gay practice, camp is also queer due to the fact that both terms are constructed in relationship to normalcy and require subjects to be aware “of the role one is playing.”

To quote fully one of Sontag’s brilliant notes on the subject,

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Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp, but a "lamp"; not a woman, but a "woman." To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater.  

What constitutes the “farthest extension” of the “life as theater” comparison is something aesthetic, self-aware, exaggerated, and excessive. Moreover, camp is about the exaggeration of one thing, and only one thing, to the point where it can no longer be more exaggerated. Because of its proclivity to excess (e.g. a dress with 3000 feathers), camp is the buffoonery of the quotidian. Unlike Queer, which, as a discourse is interested in performing identities that break outside of established representational models, camp takes the narrative of normalcy and (often beautifully) lampoons it. This lampooning exposes the absurd logics at the heart of generic modes of subject formation, resulting in what Fabio Cleto calls a plethora of “representational excess, heterogeneity, and gratuitousness of reference.”  

It is because of, or, perhaps, in spite of this gratuitousness that pleasure found within camp is a result of its own exclusivity. Camp can be read as an in-joke made for specific audiences, but it is also famously bad or aesthetically lacking. For this reason, camp is often defined as “drawing the contours of an aesthetics of failure.”  

Although a camp sensibility takes pleasure in aesthetic failings, this pleasure is never mean-spirited or malicious; it is “a kind of love” that “relishes rather than judges.” Pure camp is unintentional and sincere, and does not “become camp” until a viewer with a camp sensibility makes contact with the subject/object. Intentional camp is impure, and self-aware of the ways in which exaggeration and over-identification can trigger a camp response. However, both forms of camp rely on identifying with an inability to live up to certain normal expectations of a given performance. Tenderness, thus, is an empathetic response to the aesthetics of failure on display. As José Esteban Muñoz asserts, it is often through embracing failure that a certain version of queer Utopia can be created.  

Many of the words used to describe camp are utilized in definitions of its sister term, kitsch, with one main distinction: camp is to the live or performed subject as kitsch is to the performative object. Hence, in the realm of the museum space where there are no live performers (and but a few mannequins, for that matter), the object (especially when placed in relationship to sound recording, written descriptions, and other museum aids) takes on a special meaning. In this mode of exhibition, the object not only performs itself but also becomes a stand-in or signifier of both a certain subject position and a certain way of life. Whereas in intentional camp, a performer is aware of the construction of

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72 For more on this please see Barbara Kirshenblatt Gimblett’s work on “Objects of Ethnography” in *Destination Culture*.  
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their performance, often winking at the performance’s own construction, in kitsch, an object takes on so many qualities of personification that it too can wink at its own artificiality. The kitschy nature of the ethnic museum artifact reaches new heights when objects are moved from the exhibition space to the gift shop, where kitschy objects are highlighted and commodified. It is through the creation of heritage-as-commodity that certain modes of normalcy and comfort are created, modes that become exemplary traits of an imagined ideal neoliberal multicultural spectator. Epitomizing this idea are kitsch artifacts concerning the Oklahoma City bombings and 9/11. Marita Sturken argues that these kitsch items (such as gold coins made with metal from Ground Zero) help to engender comfort in American consumers, a comfort that makes them less scared of “being attacked.”73 Hence, kitsch objects, like camp performances, can be used to make dissident commentaries on normalcy, while also maintaining certain performances that are in line with dominant national interests.

The camp/kitsch possibilities of the ethnic museum may be both intentional and unintentional. What constitutes unintentional camp, I contend, are the moments in the museum display when the affective fervor of belonging and being “a full American” are adhered to blindly. Intentional camp in the minority museum derives from the obvious exaggeration of one or more characteristics in order to display adherence to a dominant narrative of normalcy. The most extreme example of intentional camp in the house display can be found when one opens the refrigerator door. What makes this image so camp is the sheer exaggerated nature of it—there is not one bottle of pomegranate molasses but half a dozen. The sandwich is not wrapped in foil but is open. The inedible polish of these falafel balls gives the sandwich human dimensions, the gherkin and other accompanying vegetables acting as mouth and eyes, telling you “eat me,” accept me. Though it is obvious that this sandwich is artificial, it has taken on life-like characteristics, aware of its status as kitsch object in the museum display. In other words, the falafel is winking both at and with you.

In short, by pedantically highlighting the products that render legible and knowable the Arab American experience, the museum display camps itself. What makes this type of display intentional camp is that even the museum’s curators are aware of how unrealistic their “realistic” display of everyday Arab American life really is. When I interviewed and talked with museum employees, many would roll their eyes when I mentioned my obsession with the inside of the aforementioned Frigidaire, aware of just how absurd the display was, but were also aware of why those types of exaggerations were being made. However, it seems as though making these kinds of exaggeration was/is de rigueur within the world of museum display.74

The use of camp and kitsch tactics continues as spectators move from the “Coming to America” exhibition to the “Making an Impact” display.

73 Marita Sturken, Tourists of History: Memory Kitsch and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 41.
74 A secondary methodology for the chapter, no matter how ethically uncouth, remains gossip. I say this because a lot of my feelings that my arguments were on track came from moments of conversation when the recorder was off, due to the fact that many of my informants were afraid for their jobs if they were to go on the record saying negative things about the museum. I choose to use this gossip as a form of scholarship in the spirit of queer studies.
You walk to the entrance of the “Making and Impact” exhibition, hearing a news program jingle play in the background. Ten television screens greet you with moving images scattered across a billboard of static photographs. You walk to the left and spy a statue dedicated to the memory of Khalil Gibran. You notice that the wall is divided into the different fields in which one can “make an impact.” To the right is a large banner, heralding the stories of Arab Americans devoted to community activism, while behind you is a wall featuring Ralph Nader, Donna Shalala, Rosemary Barquette, and other Arab Americans who have achieved success in the realm of politics. After examining the contributions famous Arab Americans have made to science, activism, and the arts, your attention turns to the far corner of the space, where an antique 1950’s television set sits. Next to the television lies an electronic keypad and an alphabetized list of 28 famous Arab Americans. You immediately recognize the first name: Abdul, Paula. Having forgotten she is of Arab descent, you excitedly enter 01 into the keypad in front of you, cueing a 30-second segment of the singer’s major accomplishments, edited at a rapid pace. You learn about the cultural work of Paul Anka, Michael Nouri, and many others. You spy in a glass case an autographed glossy photo of actress Kathy Najimy. Shot as an advertisement for PETA, Najimy’s shoulders are bare. She is winking at you, sexily, coyly, as you read her personal message for museum visitors. She thanks the museum for their important work and imparts her autograph and a pink imprint of her lips on the page.

In the “Making an Impact” exhibition, great men and women of science, letters, and politics have their life histories and accomplishments edited to mere snapshots, where their identities are reduced to their trade (Singer, Novelist, Activist, etc) and their ambiguous status as Arab, with little mention of their religious background or if they are first, second, or third generation Arab American. Needless to say, the exhibit also steers clear of demonstrating what other affiliations and kinships (sexual, ethnic, religious, class) these celebrities subscribe to. They are simply important model Americans who have made an impact.

Figure 4 Cropping at work: The photo on the right is cropped by the author to reflect the autograph of Najimy at the AAMN. The second, the full advertisement with its queer content. “If you need fur to keep you warm, you got problems,” Scenic Reflections, Accessed October 29, 2013, http://www.scenicreflections.com/download/39635/PETA_%09_Kathy_Najimy_Wallpaper/.
A prime example of a person whose identity becomes flattened when featured in an ethnic museum display is Kathy Najimy, star of stage and screen. Although Najimy is on the Boards of the AANM and PETA (as made explicit by her autographed photo), what the museum willfully obscures is that Najimy is also a lifelong member of the board of GLAAD, having won numerous awards for her commitment to the fight against HIV/AIDS, and for both gay rights and same-sex marriage. Moreover, the museum’s 30-second video biography on Najimy overlooks the fact that the actress has roots performing as part of “The Kathy and Mo Show” with best friend and co-writer Mo Gaffney. Known for her pointedly feminist version of sketch comedy, Najimy made a name for herself performing a monologue in the guise of Sylvie, a 60-year-old Jewish woman who confesses she loves her gay nephew. Sylvie the gay-friendly aunt has become a staple character in Najimy’s repertoire over the years.75 Although Najimy is very proud of her large gay fan base and gay activism, the museum’s narrative chooses to conceal these aspects of her life and work. And although there is no particular need for gay affiliations to be made explicit in the realm an Arab space, its omission is nevertheless telling of the ways in which our complicated multiple subjectivities oft get reduced to fit a given narrative.

This need to reframe, restage, and reduce the scope of multivalent subjects is literalized by the autographed photo of Najimy displayed prominently at the AAMN. In the museum space, Najimy’s autograph for the museum is a pas de deux; she and a young man lie together at opposites ends of a large bed; she giggles in delight and glee at the prospect of heterosexual sex with the model. However, upon further research, one finds that the photo of Najimy was cropped, taken from a larger advertisement campaign for PETA. In this original print advertisement, Najimy is no longer in a pas de deux but a pas de trois. She is at the foot of a gigantic, wooden, king-size bed, connected by a black cloth to two topless male figures leaning against the headboard. These two men form a separate unit, arms around one another. To any eye, the couple look homosexual, as if they jumped out of a gay men’s magazine like the Advocate or Out. At the bottom of the ad is the punch line for the photo: “If You Need Fur to Keep You Warm, You Got Problems.”76 The line, like the photo, is meant to suggest that Najimy and the boys are mid-coitus, stopping and giggling for us. The way the photo is constructed, it almost appears as if Najimy and the boys have been photoshopped together, adding to the underlying camp that lies at the heart of the image. This camp is so ridiculous, it must be intentional. Najimy is giggling at the absurdity of the situation, of being in a bed with two gays boys and faking a threesome. The ad very intentionally blurs the line between progressive animal politics and sexual politics. The camp of the larger advertisement is even more evident when placed side by side with the autographed glossy on display at the museum, making clear how certain aspects of the lives of celebrities can be literally cropped out of the frame to be more amendable to mainstream—read heteronormative—tastes, morals, and ethics.

The limiting of the literal frame of the Najimy PETA advertisement, I argue, is emblematic of the meta-framing of human experience that occurs in the space of the ethnic/minority museum. In order to fit a multifaceted, heterogeneous population into a

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76 For source information on the Najimy photograph, see caption for Figure 4.
larger narrative packaged to be accessible to a mainstream audience, forms of differences must often be cropped from the larger frame. This is not the fault of museum curators, it seems, but rather a fault of the form ethnic museum display must take to satisfy mainstream spectators. Although the ethnic museum must decide what constitutes an adequate amount of information in a limited amount of space, what gets cut out, especially at ethnic/minority museums, are all the elements of subjective experience that do not adhere to the museum’s mission of uplift, economic achievement, and social, cultural, and economic impact. This might explain why, despite the AANM’s investment in highlighting the stories of women and people from all Arab backgrounds (even those with minute diasporic populations in the US), the museum’s permanent exhibitions contain not one explicit image, personal story, or mention of an Arab American who also explicitly identifies as LGBTQ. Although it was suggested that this lack was a result of a dearth of willing informants and interviewees from this population, I argue that the lack of anything explicitly queer in the AANM is due to the museum’s need to adhere to a heteronormative, capitalist narrative, both appealing to and creating a neoliberal multicultural spectator. In other words, the ethnic/minority museum needs to omit representations of literal queerness in order to distract visitors from the queerness inherent in any group trying to wield its difference as its ticket to sameness. The Najimy photo is emblematic of how, despite intentions to crop, re-frame, and cover certain contours of Arab American difference, traces of the queer continue to slip out of the cracks, oozing onto the edges of the cropped photograph, like a viscous substance leaving a stain in the space between plate glass and paper.

These traces of the queer can be found in all aspects of the telling of the Arab American story. Queerness is present in every utterance that Arab Americans are just like every other immigrant group in America. Queerness is present in the conflation of Arab Americans with European immigrants and sometimes with a legacy of slavery. Queerness is present in the stigmatization of the family eating outside, a representation of their uncivilized behavior. Queerness is present in the bottom drawer of a teen’s bedroom, where a shirt promoting AIDS prevention, abstinence, and homophobia can be found. Queerness is present in the ways in which you, the visitor, do and do not identify with the performance of the American dream on display within the museum’s walls.

**How to Make an (Arab) American Quilt:**

What conclusions are to be made concerning the overabundance of queer contours and lack of literal GLBTQ content on display at the Arab American National Museum? Although this is not a comparative study, my research on other ethnic/minority museums in the United States proves that similar tensions between over-performing “normal” and a lacuna of display space devoted to those with gender and sexual non-conformities are present at other museums. This lack of specifically queer content at our nation’s flagship cultural and history museums for African, Asian, Latino, and Native Americans makes clear the ways in which sexuality is still a taboo both within these ethnic/racial communities and across the American mainstream.

The need to be legible to the cultural mainstream is imperative to ethnic/minority museums for two main reasons. First, according to the Code for Museum Ethics, museums in America must attempt to make themselves legible to as large a portion of the
American public as possible. With this mission in mind, it should come as no surprise that queer content, whether it be about actual LGBTQ-identifying subjects, ethically questionable political affiliations (i.e. Nation of Islam, pro-Palestinian organizing, etc.), or brutal events from history (lynching, unlawful detention), might be considered too polarizing for mainstream museum goers. Second, as discussed earlier, this emphasis on even-handed, non-shocking representations of Arab Americans might also have been a result of a need to please corporations and larger funding bodies. It is through these funding bodies that museums like the AANM find the capital (for the creation of the AANM, over $25 million dollars was raised) to fund their own existence. As Chief Financial Officer of ACCESS Maja Freji makes clear:

Philanthropy has made us realize the imperative responsibility we carry in today’s society to tell our own story and to be able to sustain it. Harnessing this archetype of philanthropy has solidified our confidence and belief that we as a people are capable of creating legacies and imprints for our children to follow and future generations to replicate.\(^7\)

What Freiji does not tell us, however, is just what kind of legacies and imprints this philanthropy is actually making possible. In order to be understood to different funding bodies, Arab American organizations often have to follow a definition of Arab that renders differences of religion, nationality, and sect as non-existent. This flattening of difference creates a cultural imprint of Arab that is both everything and nothing, creating a minority story that is “just like every other minority story” in the U.S.

The mainstreaming of Arab American nonprofit organizations, I argue, is intrinsically related to the narrative dimensions of the story of becoming an American. In this narrative, citizens are made American both because of and despite their differences. This story foregrounds economic prosperity and shared national values like “Family, Education, and Freedom” common to almost all minorities in America. In this manner, the ethnic/racial nonprofit organization and the ethnic museum (often an offshoot of an NGO) both collapse all forms of difference into one minority story and make clear just how heterogeneous, poly-vocal, and multifaceted any one identitarian group can be. It demonstrates how community can be anti-capital and reinforce it simultaneously.

Is there a solution to this double-bind that minority museums find themselves in? Is there a way to tell one legible story to a mainstream audience while also communicating the more complex contours and subjectivities that go into the motley patchwork of the Arab (or African, or Latino, etc) American experience? Perhaps the problem and the solution are one and the same. After spending three months at the AAMN completing ethnographic and archival research, I was struck by how aware many of the museum’s staff were to the cropping, coverings, and inconsistencies found within the three main exhibits. In our conversations they both critiqued the exhibits and explained why certain exhibits were the way they were, identified and dis-identified. It is this dis-identificatory eye that assures you that even when the museum seems to embrace images courting the mainstream eye, a more complex identification with what it means to be American is actually at play. It is the museum researchers and curators’ own sense of ethnographic reflexivity that makes this possible. In this chapter, I have argued that the

\(^7\) See Maja Feiji, “The Development of Arab American Philanthropy,” *Telling Our Story*, 16.
museum’s hyper-awareness of the construction of race, ethnicity, and gender in relation to visibility and capitalist measures of success is inherently camp.

The dis-identificatory eye present throughout the AANM’s main exhibitions is also, in many ways, the guiding force of its temporary exhibitions, performance series, and other museum-sponsored events. Temporary shows in the museum often use aesthetic objects to tackle the complex nature of diasporic and gendered subjectivity in the U.S., focusing on such world-renowned artists as Faya Kawiss and Jamal Khoury. The museum’s Global Thursdays Event Series hosts concerts of African American jazz legends and famous oud players; it is accompanied by a film series that screens documentaries on topics ranging from Civil Rights era protesters to the lives of Shi’a grocery store owners in present-day San Francisco. Perhaps the most progressive event is the AANM’s annual Diwan Conference and Festival of the Arts. In the performance portion of the festival, slam poet Suheir Hammad and musical theatre writer Mike Mosallam have performed for a room full of Detroit’s youth. Suheir’s work, about being Born Palestinian, Born Black, explicitly complicates facile conceptions of race, gender, and normalcy.78 Even more queer is the inclusion of Dearborn native Mosallem’s performative lecture on his new work, Muslim! The Musical. Watching Mosallem campily perform his version of his aunts and nosey neighbors, one is aware of how strikingly progressive the Arab American National Museum actually is in most aspects of its everyday operations.79

The work of Mosallem and Hammad illuminate how gendered/queer, ethnic, and racial identity are always complex negotiations. The two are also emblematic of the ways in which museums become battlegrounds where communities try to legitimize themselves but not become inherently capitalist; where concepts of individuality wrestle with the want for some form of collective identity; and where Utopian hopes for a different world attempt to distract visitors from the harsh realities of “becoming American.” During my time conducting primary research at the AANM in the winter of 2011, many of these same battles seemed to be occurring in various curatorial meetings going on at the museum. One example concerned whether or not the museum should undertake an upcoming special exhibition and library collection on the Tacqwacore movement, a Muslim punk-based subculture with adherents in cities across the United States. While some were worried about the associations the Tacqwacore movement had to drug culture, communism, and youth anarchism—and whether or not a museum space should valorize such behavior—others were worried about the fact that a larger percentage of youth involved in the Tacqwacore movement were not Arab, but often African Americans, Pakistanis, and Iranian Americans, none of whose stories are on display in the museum. After some vigorous debate, the decision to have the exhibition was unanimous. Lastly, all members of the museum’s staff were aware of my project and its political mission to use queerness to critique some of the narrative assumptions inherent in the museum, and all were supportive in both theory and practice, well aware of the ways in which the

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79 See Mike Mosallam, “Muslim the Musical,” in From Beirut Hills to Muslim: The Musical! What’s So Funny About Arab Americans (DIWAN: A Forum for the Arts, 2009) Arab American National Museum-English, distributed through iTunes University, released March 27th, 2009. Coincidentally, Mosallam is the executive producer of All American Muslim which is one of the primary objects of analysis for Chapter 4 of this dissertation project.
museum, as the recipient of funding from a national neoliberal multicultural funding body, must come across as innocuous to a mainstream audience.

The museum’s own auto-ethnographic awareness is what allows the programs, temporary exhibits, and conferences held there to truly wrestle with the complex nature of subjectivity in America in the 21st century, and to avoid falling into a rhetoric that reifies a monolithic notion of being American. However, the permanent exhibitions of the museum do not seem to be able to avoid this monolithization. I wish to make clear one more time that I look at the problems found in the museum’s exhibits “Coming to America,” “Living in America,” and “Making an impact” as a result of adherence to a certain narrative of normalcy found in nearly all ethnic/minority museums. This narrative of normalcy reduces the complexities of the human experience into its most basic components. This narrative of normalcy likens “Making an Impact” to financial success, biological reproduction, and having full access to the “goodies” of being “a fully fledged American.” It is this narrative of normalcy that attempts to cover up the queer(er) contours of the human experience while the museum itself embraces queerness in its other, more temporary projects.

I hope this chapter has made clear what an accountable job the curators and advisors at the Arab American Museum are doing, and that I am not critiquing them but rather the need to make clear one monolithic story of overcoming adversity and racial/religious interlorance to become an acceptable citizen. The trope found in many ethnic history museums’ permanent exhibitions is to tell a one-dimensional story of progress, assimilation, and the understanding of cultural difference as a harmless conceit. Although the Arab American National Museum post-9/11 worked hard to make an acceptable image in a time of high Arab-America racial profiling, in the realm of television and movies, the same narrative concerning Middle Eastern subjects was broached in more black/white terms. When this narrative is put in storybook terms, the Taliban becomes the ultimate enemy, and small brown children, unable to defend themselves become the vehicle for spectatorial empathy. Here is where this narrative of normal moves from being positive, mainstream and innocuous to exposing underlying tendencies to forcibly convert subjects to an American inflicted regime of democracy, freedom, and free market capitalism.

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80 See Joseph, Against the Romance of Community, 27.
Chapter 2: 
Rape, Redemption and the Narratology of Neoliberal Multiculturalism


The 2011 graphic adaptation of Khaled Hosseini’s runaway bestseller *The Kite Runner* ends on a thoroughly uplifting note. The scene is the Berkeley Marina during a kite-flying tournament. The story’s protagonist, Amir, is perturbed because he cannot get his nephew Sorhab, a refugee from Afghanistan who was sexually abused by the Taliban, to emotionally open up to him. Amir buys Sorhab a kite and cajoles the reluctant child into maneuvering it with him, cutting a kite from the sky. The image depicts an excited Amir as he runs after the kite, turns and screams back to Sorhab, “*For you a thousand times over.*” Inset in a smaller frame is the cartoon face of a young brown boy. The frame is a close up view of the boy’s smiling visage, dimples in his cheeks. He is happy, stable, recovering from the trauma of childhood rape, on his way to being redeemed.¹

In this chapter, I argue that “rape to redemption” narratives about children in our current moment function as a way of subliminally re-instantiating neoliberal multicultural ideology. Texts such as *The Kite Runner* and the 2005 GLAAD award nominated young adult novel *Bilal’s Bread* by Suleiman X use the story of one boy to stand in for the nation. Rape, specifically the rape of a young boy, becomes the narrative obsession of each story. Moreover, it is the protagonist’s coming to grips with this act of sexual abuse that provides each book with its narrative momentum.² By story’s end, each of the books’

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² See Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2003) and Suleiman X,
heroes—one a witness to, the other a victim of—childhood sexual abuse, is able to resolve his own personal inner conflicts concerning the moment of rape and confront and overcome the rapist figure. In each book, the narrative trajectory from rape to redemption allows readers to go on an emotional journey where one is made to feel “disgusting, upset, and ultimately healed.” Moreover, as a seeming result of these shared narrative elements, both of these novels became word-of-mouth sensations, putting a human face on wars and conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq in the years following questionable American intervention in the region.

At the heart of my analysis is a persistent and disorienting anxiety about the role of the child, specifically the queer and/or Muslim/Arab child in our contemporary moment. How is this child both an empty signifier and remnant of Orientalist literature and the new symbol of an all-inclusive liberal society? How does this figure manage to be pure and prurient, capable of being both abject other and brother? How do the act of rape and the narrative of redemption that often stems from it help to solidify these young children as “good subjects” and “docile patriots” who can be folded into the American nation? And why does the mere notion of this child engender in readers a civilizationist mentality in which the redemption of each child causes tears of joy? What is it about this child, whether fictional or actual, that he/she becomes such a source of empathy and a symbol of abjection in need of saving/redemption by middle class Americans?

Examining the rape to redemption narrative as a generic form, I focus on four key chronological elements: 1) the scene of rape; 2) the emotional and psychological affects of the rape, and the passage of time; 3) the moment of dramatic climax in which the hero faces his abuser head on; and 4) the subsequent moment of personal redemption, usually the story’s concluding note. What is it about the narrative arc of rape to redemption that makes it so compelling? And how do these narrative contrivances help to re-instantiate neoliberal multicultural spectatorship?

By exposing the narrative similarities in these two tales, I hope to make apparent how these texts literally re-perform a narrative which reifies old conceptions of imperialism, colonialism, homophobia, and capitalist hegemony but re-packages it as “showing the human face” of Iraq and Afghanistan for Western readers and viewers. Moreover, I contend that these novels combine two forms of spectacle—an age-old form of Orientalist excess and the spectacular performance of American citizenship—into a hyper-spectacle that blinds readers to the more ideologically loaded aspects of the narratives constructed. In order to further prove my larger point that coming-of-age texts about the Middle East with queer content utilize a chronological mapping of rape to redemption in order to instantiate a certain kind of bland neoliberal multicultural citizenship, I conclude my analysis by looking at a counterexample: Rabih Alameddine’s *I, The Divine: A Novel in First Chapters.* Although Alameddine’s novel does manage to tell a similar story of rape, immigration, culture clash, and queerness, I argue that this text literally and figuratively reorients, reconfigures, and destabilizes the narrative of rape to

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3 Comment by queer young adult author Alex Sanchez on the cover of Suleiman X, *Bilal's Bread* (2005).

redemption by de-chronologizing it, allowing rape to be but one queer piece in the misshapen puzzle which is one’s life story.

**Literary Genres and Neoliberal Multiculturalism**

Texts like *The Kite Runner* and *Bilal’s Bread* are specifically neoliberal in that they utilize the conventions of a given genre (in this case, melodrama) to mask the ideological elements of their narrative, all the while putting a human face on wars and conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq in the years following America’s intervention in the region. It is specifically this human face that manages to disguise some historical alterations in the books’ plots. The *Kite Runner* seems to squarely blame the Soviets for the destruction of prelapsarian Kabul. However, very little historical light is shed on the ways in which the U.S. intentionally funded, encouraged, supported, and propped up Muslim fundamentalist forces in order to keep the Soviets out of Afghanistan. In other words, Americans have national amnesia around ethically questionable involvement in geo-political affairs, so we subliminally create stories of Afghanistan that are clear of our tainted hand in its history.\(^5\) Similarly, *Bilal’s Bread* romanticizes the regime of Saddam Hussein in order to extricate Americans from culpability in Iraq’s present political woes.

Following Jodi Melamed, I think of literary texts and narratives as a “primary technology for assembling and disseminating the normative regimes of successive anti-racisms.”\(^6\) Contrary to Melamed, however, who argues that the work of Azar Nafizi is exemplary of a self-conscious neoliberal multicultural project, *The Kite Runner* and *Bilal’s Bread* are not so calculatingly neoliberal.\(^7\) As a medical physician with no prior literary training, Hosseini developed *The Kite Runner* because he felt a need to tell a story about Afghanistan. When asked about the utility of an explicit scene of child-rape vis-a-vis his narrative, Hosseini claimed that “The scene is pivotal,” and that “without it, the

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\(^7\) Although many books that attempted to depict a particular female subject in need of Western emancipation, none garnered as much attention from academics as Azar Nafizi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (New York: Random House, 2003). See Fatimeh Keshavarz, *Jasmine and Stars: Reading More than Lolita in Tehran* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2008); John Carlos Rowe, “Reading *Lolita in Tehran* in Idaho,” *American Quarterly* Volume 59, No 2 (June 2007) 253-275; and Jodi Melamed, “Reading *Lolita in Tehran*...” in *Strange Affinities*, 76-112. All of these articles elucidate the ways in which Nafizi’s “nonfictional text” reads Western literature as a form of salvation and redemption for non-Western readers. Moreover, most of these articles make clear how both Nafizi herself and the work she constructs are part of a larger official anti-racist project fueled by the state. As such, Nafizi is regarded as the Iranian American face of neoliberal multicultural conservatism. For more on the paradox of this figure, see Angela Dillard, *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner Now? Multicultural Conservatism in America* (New York: NYU Press, 2002).
story falls apart… but I think you have to look at the film in a more panoramic way and not let one scene stand in for the film. What Hosseini seems unable to account for, however, is the ways in which this scene of rape and the narrative of redemption that springs from it, would enrapture millions of spectators. Similarly, Suleiman X notes that the impetus for Bilal’s Bread came from his conversion to Islam and his subsequent discovery that the religion was homphobic, resulting in a text that utilizes both gay rape and the discourse of gay monogamy to make clear the compatibility of certain forms of Islam with certain forms of homosexuality. What makes these tales both so compelling for readers and so difficult to critique are the ways in which this narrative of rape to redemption blinds us to the common-sense, neoliberal assumptions that lie behind our initial, affectively empathetic responses.

The Children Are Whose Future?

It is now a sine qua non—the child must be protected at all costs. As shown by Lee Edelman and Katherine Bond-Stockton amongst many, the symbol of the yearned for, happy future is the child. As such, the child, especially the queer or of color child, has become the imagined symbol of a universal human rights issue. As the right and left become increasingly divided on questions of social welfare, abortion, gay rights, and many other issues, the child in peril because of sexual abuse has become one of the few examples of a possible shared moral ground. Moreover, these stories of sexual abuse engender a very basic binary in which good and bad are as clear as black and white. Unlike in more complicated works, where the line between “good Muslim” and “bad Muslim” is often tenuous at best, stories of sexual abuse are fairy tale-like in their inartistic use of a simplistic moral logic. Perhaps because of this good/bad polarity, these tales are also very accessible for mass consumption, and in the past two decades have overrun the marketplace. Desire for this type of narrative is so specific that in 1999, the long-running Law and Order: Special Victims Unit was created to capitalize on this market, giving viewers a weekly opportunity to indulge in the prurient delights of a

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9 Perhaps little critical attention was paid to either of these novels because of their resonance with contemporary political events. Some, like Harold Bloom in his harried introduction to the book for his Bloom’s Guide series, would argue that this lack of attention is deserved. Bloom calls Hosseini’s narrative “grindingly sincere,” written entirely “in clichés,” as nothing more than a piece of pulp social history for those “who cannot absorb serious scholarship about Afghanistan or even responsible reportage.” Bloom yearns for the day when “we will be out of Afghanistan and no longer return to reading The Kite Runner.” See Harold Bloom, ed. Khaled Hosseini’s The Kite Runner (Bloom’s Guides), (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 3. The only critical mention of Bilal’s Bread is alarmingly positive in its outlook, with the book discussed with other works that contain queer Muslim protagonists. See Ibrahim Abraham, “Sodomoized by religion: Fictional representations of Queer Muslims in the ‘west,’” Topia 19 (2008): 139-152.

child’s physical and emotional pain.\textsuperscript{11} Bond Stockton argues that, “as odd as it may seem, suffering certain kinds of abuse from which they need protection and to which they don’t consent, working-class children or children of color may seem to be more innocent.” Bond Stockton sees this as a form of equal opportunity innocence, which for the underprivileged requires them being brutalized.\textsuperscript{12} A similar tale of redemption allowed Sapphire’s \textit{PUSH} to resonate with audiences outside of its original demographic, spawning an Oscar-winning film adaptation. The road from rape to redemption is, thus, also one from abjection to equal recognition, from being a victim to being special, different but still “normal.”\textsuperscript{13}

This desire for a simultaneous recognition of difference and sameness manifests itself in \textit{The Kite Runner} by replacing racial signification with a renewed emphasis on culture. According to Melamed, “neoliberal multiculturalism also revises racial liberalism’s model of race as culture” replacing it “not with older, biological conceptions of race,” but by displacing “racial reference altogether.”\textsuperscript{14} To take Melamed’s critique further, I argue that culture, especially written culture, also becomes the space where certain racisms get seemingly revised. Amir and Bilal, the novels’ protagonists, become the embodiment of “good immigrants”: educated, articulate, capitalist, secular, and artistic. This newly culturally assimilated subject can also be read as a by-product of the rise of neoliberalism as an economic model. In this model of racial formation, whiteness is less about skin color than it is about the creation of Western autonomous subjectivity, committed to fostering shared values of freedom and democracy.

Rape to redemption narratives, especially those that contain homosexual sex, help to reify the concept that there is a form of homosexual that, like a certain strain of Muslim, is deviant and undemocratic. \textit{The Kite Runner} also manages to look at these “bad Muslims” and “bad gays” as both intrinsically related to one another and part of a larger pathology of barbarism and terror. The separating and quarantining of good subjects from bad, from those considered geo-politically worthy of American whiteness and those who must be destroyed at all costs, is what allows those on both ends of the political spectrum to find a sense of common ground. As such, child rape narratives re-establish a certain kind of humanistic, capitalist, empathetic status quo in which a child needs to be saved and converted to our way of life for his/her own good, which is what makes them so generic and so satisfying.

What is so satisfying might be just how salacious these tales of rape and redemption are. Not only do these tales contain graphic content and language, this content seems to be exaggerated to the point of excess. In both texts, not only is non-consensual gay rape evoked, but so are much more graphic scenes of gang-raping. Unlike the rather self-reflexive type of campy exaggerations found in the Arab American National Museum, these overly graphic examples of sexual abuse are not intentional

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\textsuperscript{12} Kathryn Bond Stockton, \textit{The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the 20th Century} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 33.
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campy or at all humorous. Similarly, the spectacularization of non-consensual gay sex in *Bilal’s Bread* and *The Kite Runner* seems to be embellished to the point that the actual sex on display cannot be called gay. Rather, these sexual acts do not have an orientation but seem to create subjects queered by experience, that are queer whether they grow up to be homo (as Bilal) or heterosexual, as is inferred with the story of Sorhab.

Moreover, texts like *The Kite Runner* and *Bilal’s Bread* help to reify the notion that being a sexual abuser, like being a terrorist, is pathological. The child victim of this abuse must be rescued from becoming an abuser his/herself (as in the sequel to Sapphire’s *PUSH*) or from taking on a gay identity as a result of this abuse, as in *Bilal’s Bread*. In Hosseini’s text, yesterday’s bullies become tomorrow’s Taliban leaders and their young victims symbols of a gross pathology that must be excised at any cost. Following Ann Cvetcovich, I look at sexual traumas such as incest and sexual abuse by corrupt officials as related to the concept of the trauma of “national identity, producing something like the links between public and private.” This analysis adopts a “queer and de-pathologizing approach to trauma and refuses the normal as an ideal or real state, the trauma of immigration need not be healed by a return to the natural nation of origin or assimilation into a new one.” For Cvetcovich, a de-pathologizing approach to trauma is inherently queer. Whereas the many works examined by queer theory scholars such as Cvetkovich, Bond-Stockton, Daerrick Scott, and Fred Moten examine artists who try to de-chronologize and depathologize time, books like *The Kite Runner* and *Bilal’s Bread* pathologize, chronologize, and simplify complex histories of personal and national trauma in ways that attempt to form an empty character who is a symbol of abjection, ripe for reader empathy.

What makes seemingly pedagogical texts like *The Kite Runner* and *Bilal’s Bread* so seductive is that they utilize the diffuse generic form of culture (melodrama) to unpack the concentrated spectacle of the violated and abject, making the reader/ spectator a co-creator/conspirator in the spectacularization of the other. When the generic-ness of the rape to redemption melodrama is paired with the particulars of Afghani and Iraqi history, what results are texts that come across as both pedagogical and entertaining, educational and emotionally satisfying. In other words, these texts create two dangerous causal relationships; that if one is raped as a child, they will forever need to be saved, and that if one is raped in the Middle East, they must be saved by American notions of freedom, democracy, and color-blind enfranchisement.

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17. Ibid, 121.
Blood on White Snow and Tile: The Scene of Rape


In *The Kite Runner’s* first sixty pages, Hosseini paints a nostalgic romanticized version of pre-1978 Afghanistan, in which Kabul is a bustling metropolis where east and west blend seamlessly. During this moment of peace in Afghani history, we are introduced to Amir, our hero, the son of a wealthy businessman and doctor, and his servant and best friend Hassan. Hosseini uses the opening pages of his novel to establish the relationship between Hassan and Amir, and to also make clear his hero’s tragic flaw: cowardice. In an early scene, Hassan and Amir come into contact with Assef, an older boy, portrayed as a rich, popular, one-dimensional bully. The servant Hassan comes to his master’s aid, shooting Assef in the eye with a stone propelled from his slingshot. Assef leaves the scene warning both friends that “This is not over for either of you.”

Amir and Hassan come into contact with Assef again at Kabul’s annual kite flying competition. After Amir wins the contest, Hassan races to claim the last flag that Amir cut, turning and telling him, “for you a thousand times over.” Hours later, Amir begins to search for Hassan and finds him held against his will by Assef and his cronies. Instead of jumping in to aid his friend, Amir’s cowardice takes over and he remains hidden from view. Assef tells Hassan that he will let him pass unharmed if he hands him the blue kite, the symbol of Amir’s victory. Hassan refuses to relinquish the kite, prompting Assef to let him keep it, but warning him that, “I’ll let you keep it so it will always remind you of what I’m about to do.” Watching this, Amir finds himself paralyzed by fear, saying

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20 Ibid, 65.
21 Ibid, 73.
nothing. Amir’s voice-over tells the reader that he almost said something and that “the rest of my life might have turned out differently if I had.”

It is not the rape of Hassan that provides the dramatic momentum for Hosseini’s novel, but rather Amir’s reaction, or lack of reaction, to this event. For this reason, the reader experiences the rape of Hassan through the eyes and memories of Amir. What the protagonist does remember are brief flashes: “the blue kite resting against the wall” and Hassan’s “brown corduroy pants thrown on a heap of eroded bricks.” He sees Assef unzip his jeans, drop his underwear, and position himself behind Hassan, with his two friends holding the boy down. Hassan, however, does not struggle. Watching this display, Amir next senses a cold liquid running over hands and notices that he has bit down so hard on his own knuckles that he has induced bleeding. Nervous, “because I was a coward,” he runs away, waiting for Hassan in the street for ten minutes. When Hassan re-emerges, he is exhausted, limping, holding the blue kite in one hand, wiping snot and tears from his face, his spirits dashed. With no sort of acknowledgement made between the boys they walk off in silence, Amir pretending not to see “the dark stain in the seat of his pants” or “those tiny drops that fell from between his legs and stained the snow black.”

Although these drops of blood will melt with the snow, Hosseini makes clear that the emotional impact of the scene of rape on both of his heroes will cause a narrative rift. Amir ends his friendship with Hassan, eventually accusing him of stealing, causing Hassan and his father to be removed from the family home. For the young protagonist, the rift in his friendship coincides with the political events of Afghanistan in the late 1970’s. Before he is able to redeem himself, Amir and his father are exiled to America (due to the Russian occupation), where they live in destitution, caught between two worlds. The relationship between the scene of rape and Amir’s family’s exile from Kabul is teleological and convenient as a plot device, symbolizing how Amir’s privilege and personal cowardice might have brought two countries to political war.

Whereas The Kite Runner keeps the sexual assault of Hassan a narrative surprise, rape in Bilal’s Bread is a quotidian event. A Best First Gay Male Book nominee by GLAAD, the novel begins, “I need you to help me shave,” Salim said as he stepped into the boy’s bedroom.” Within a few pages, readers are privy to a typical sexual encounter between 16-year-old Iraqi Kurdish refugee Bilal Abu and his brother Salim, 13 years his senior. During the course of the scene, the reader learns that Bilal and his brother have been shaving each other’s genitals since Bilal was eight (in honor of a practice started by the Prophet Mohammad, Bilal and the reader are told). Moreover, one discovers that this sexual abuse, once fun and sexy for Bilal, has been recurring for almost a decade, and is no longer enjoyable. The novel’s tone is both serious and frivolous, peppering the intense interaction with dastardly phrases like “Salim’s hand massaged Bilal’s anus for a long time, then he poked in a finger into Bilal’s rectum” and “his hardness stabbed at Bilal like a scimitar.” After this opening tryst, Bilal returns to the bathroom and, taking his

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22 Ibid, 75.
23 Hosseini, 75.
24 Ibid, 76.
25 X, Bilal’s Bread, 1.
26 Ibid, 4.
27 Ibid, 6.
father’s razor from its special hiding place, makes “several small deep cuts on his right thigh...slowly, cringing from the pain of each one and letting himself take deep breaths afterwards to calm himself.” X leaves the viewer with the image of Bilal splayed on his bathroom floor “watching the blood bubble to the surface of his skin.” X’s use of brutal, succinct, matter-of-fact language manages to be both grotesque and seductive, luring the reader to simultaneously dis-identify and empathize with Bilal as he lies in a pool of his own fluids.

Drops of blood on fresh white snow in the middle of the market in Kabul. Drops of blood against white tile in a bathroom in suburban Kansas City. In both images, the blood of the scene of rape becomes symbolically tied to the blood caused as a reaction to that rape. Amir’s bloody knuckles and Bilal’s cut-up thighs make visible the lasting, multiplying effects of the damage to the body caused by the shaming act of child sexual abuse. This image of complete abjection post-rape helps to dehumanize the subjects at their center, turning these boys into ciphers of helplessness, “othered” victims who need to be saved. The mixing of bloods against a white, pure setting makes the image even more striking. Unlike other works by queer and/or of color artists that utilize disidentificatory strategies to illustrate a certain sort of dark camp or cognizant “extravagance,” I argue that works like The Kite Runner and Bilal’s Bread follow what Fatimeh Keshavarz calls a neo-orientalist agenda. Rather than commenting on the generic scene of rape as a textual conceit in coming-of-age novels, The Kite Runner and Bilal’s Bread reify the notion that small, brown boys need to be saved by Western readers.

Raping Towards Americanization

In The Kite Runner, the scene of rape almost conspicuously coincides with the shift of the novel’s setting to America. With Afghanistan now in a war with Russia, Amir and his father are smuggled out of the country, arriving in America destitute. In the pages that follow his immigration, Amir begins to be constructed as the ideal multicultural subject, balancing his identity as an upper class Afghan with his new status as a lower class immigrant of color. He becomes what Erving Goffman would call the “professionally stigmatized,” a professional writer who becomes the voices of his people, a people who are misunderstood by most members of his adopted country. He is both legible to Americans and Afghans, with a Pashtu wife and respect within the Bay Area’s community of Afghan immigrants.

After constructing Amir as an idyllic multicultural subject, Hosseini reminds us of Amir’s Achilles heel: his cowardice and the shaming secret he has kept hidden from his wife and the world. The Kite Runner makes this clear from its first pages, in which Amir receives a call from Rahim Khan, his father’s best friend, demanding he return to Afghanistan and find “a way to be good again.” This phrase and Amir’s constant mental recitation of it pepper The Kite Runner. What Amir does not realize is that the “way to be good again” will require going on what seems like a suicide mission: to rescue

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28 X, Bilal’s Bread, 10.
29 Ibid, 11.
30 See Keshavarz, Jasmine and Stars.
32 Hosseini, The Kite Runner, 2.
Hassan’s son Sorhab from the predatory arms of the Taliban. At this moment in the novel it becomes apparent that the portion of Hosseini’s story about “becoming American” has ceased and the reader’s attention is shifted back to the narrative of rape and redemption.

However, this road to redemption manages to paint a rather dastardly picture of the homeland Amir must return to. Amir must go into the heart of an ethnic conflict to reclaim his former best friend’s son and his own sense of self. Moreover, before he begins his journey into Afghanistan, he learns another secret that exposes Afghanistan as prescribing to certain notions of backwardness—that Hassan was, in fact, his father’s son and, by extension, his half-brother, making Sorhab his nephew. Amir complacently struggles with this news, telling readers that he “had a good life in California, a good marriage, a promising writing career, in-laws who loved,” him and that he frankly “didn’t need any of this shit.”33 Although his Western self wishes to disregard his traditional past, Amir is driven by his sense of filial piety and personal shame to dismiss his complacency and rescue his nephew in Afghanistan. The act of reclaiming his cultural identity will not only make Amir less of a coward and more of a man, it will also make Amir the right kind of American, the kind who saves innocent brown boys from evil “backward” Muslim men.

Although the narrative world of Bilal’s Bread is almost entirely confined to Kansas City, Iraq, like Afghanistan in The Kite Runner, is imagined as a once lush land now plagued by civil and international war, with no sense of justice or human rights. In Iraq, Bilal’s father was brutally murdered before the novel’s commencement. We meet the rest of the Abu family: Hakim, Bilal’s very Westernized brother with booze, girls, and money on the brain; his radical feminist sister Fatima, a year older than him; and the family’s matriarch, who seems to have abdicated all familial responsibilities in the years since her husband’s death. Time passes and the sexual abuse continues. This “barbaric” and “traditional” form of sexual abuse has travelled over the ocean with the Abu family, keeping them from fully assimilating. Through his friendship and eventual sexual relationship with Mohammad, the 16-year old son of his Imam, Bilal learns what it is to be loved, and that homosexuality and Islam need not be immediately incompatible. Through his sexual experiences with Mohammad, Bilal is also schooled in the “good” forms of homosexual sex, those that are monogamous and emotionally committed, allowing him to see just how “bad” his coitus with his brother had been. This form of incest-as-traditional-practice, then, is consistently connected to the homeland and to Iraqi identity, helping to paint the whole country as backward, practicing a backward form of Islam.

This type of civilizationist rhetoric is literalized by the novel’s only flashback to Iraq. Here, readers are provided with the graphic image of Salim being gang-raped by Iraqi officials. His father watches this display before being shot execution style in front of his eldest son. Salim tells Bilal that through this act his “manhood was taken from him,”34 attempting to justify to his brother why he has sexually abused him for over a decade. Although this story does not help justify his actions in the eyes of his brother (Bilal thinking during this passage, “Wasn’t that what Salim was doing to him?”35), it does help to make Bilal even more wary of his bourgeoning identity as a queer. However, this

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33 Hosseini, The Kite Runner, 183.
34 X, Bilal’s Bread, 172.
forced gang-rape is so spectacular that it no longer becomes about Bilal’s accepting his sexual orientation, it is more about him coming to grips with being the object of sexual abuse and pathology, one that started with the abuse of his own sibling in a backwards country called Iraq.

In both The Kite Runner and Bilal’s Bread, the bucolic image of the homeland is tainted by violence and sexual abuse. This imagined space reifies nearly every Orientalist trope, including a plethora of barbaric homoerotic acts of violence. Given the time of their production, with GLBTQ rights constantly making national headlines alongside news from the budding crises in Iraq and Afghanistan, it should come as no surprise that when these two concepts are found in intersection in the realm of a literary text, the result is often exaggerated, campy, gratuitous and in line with certain forms of U.S. interests. Although readers of The Kite Runner are not privy to such a salacious scene as that of Salim with the Iraqi police, a similar scene is made to be imagined, since Sorhab, Hassan’s child, has become the sexual plaything of the Taliban elite. In both cases, men from Iraq and Afghanistan are constructed as ciphers of evil, laughing as they sexually abuse young boys. The literal embodiment of Puar’s notion of the monster/terrorist/fag, these men symbolize America’s greatest fears circa 2004, also enabling what Joseph Massad has called the rise of the gay international, a hubbub of organizing mobilized around saving supposedly poor, gay, sexually abused youth from the Middle East from these constructed gay-terrorist figures and from governments aggressively policing homosexual conduct. 36 Bilal’s Bread and The Kite Runner both confirm and undermine the fears of Americans while following the narrative structure of a generic transnational coming-of-age melodrama. It is this blending of preachy content with normative form that makes these novels so compelling and so problematic.

The Moment of Confrontation

According to Peter Brooks and Linda Williams, part of the mechanism of melodrama involves a moment of climactic confrontation. 37 In this moment, the protagonists of a melodrama have their morals put to the test. Whether this be the confrontation between adversaries, or a character confronting his or her abuser, confrontation scenes help to solidify the creation of a new and better subject. In The Kite Runner, the moment of confrontation comes with a dramatic narrative twist. Upon his arrival to a newly inhume and impoverished version of Kabul, Amir discovers that not only is his nephew a sexual slave for the Taliban, but that the leader of the Taliban is Assef, the bully who brutally raped Hassan some twenty years earlier. This narrative twist does more than simply give Amir a stronger reason to rescue Sorhab. It makes explicit the trope that yesterday’s bullies are today’s Taliban leaders. This scene of

36 For more on questions of the gay international and homonationalism see Jasbir Puar, Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Tines (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007) and Massad, Desiring Arabs (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), as well the introduction of this dissertation project.

confrontation elucidates how sexual abuse is connected to the conception of a vicious
cycle, one in which uncivilized aspects of the Muslim are written as unchanging. Amir’s
attempt to physically overpower Assef is about righting wrongs and triumphing over the
uncivilized. Although his attempt to be “masculine” fails, Amir relishes the act of being
physically attacked, describing it as “feeling wonderful,” cathartic even.  

Assisted by Sorhab, who, like his father, has a flair with a slingshot, the duo
manage to escape the Taliban and Afghanistan, arriving in Peshawar emotionally and
physically spent. After their first night in Pakistan, Sorhab runs away, later explaining
that he was afraid that Amir might just be another adult who would sexually mis-use him.
Amir makes clear that from now on, no more physical harm will come to him. Sorhab
describes himself as “dirty,” a vessel for sexual abuse, to which Amir responds that it is
men like Assef who are “dirty” and that Sorhab should feel safe.  

Worried about never feeling safe, Sorhab takes matters into his own hands. Hosseini
describes the scene delicately, Amir stepping into the bathroom, discovering the
young boy unconscious. Suddenly, Amir is on his knees, “screaming through my
clenched teeth…screaming until I thought my throat would rip out and my chest would
explode.” The next chapter finds Amir praying by Sorhab’s bedside as he recovers from
his suicide attempt. Whereas this moment in Hosseini’s novel is treated delicately, in the
graphic adaptation of the text, this scene is literalized in all of its brutal explicitness.
Sorhab lies in the tub in a sea of pulsating red, his small body white, covered in shadow.
His hand hangs over its edge as a stream of blood is depicted gushing from his open

38 Hosseini, The Kite Runner, 334.
39 Ibid, 343.
40 Ibid, 348.
wrists onto the floor. As with the scene of rape at the text’s commencement, the visceral elements of Sorhab’s suicide help to once again make him other and abject, in need of saving and redemption.\textsuperscript{41}

In \textit{Bilal’s Bread}, the moment of confrontation occurs moments after the Abu family has returned from Ramadan dinner at their Imam’s house, where Bilal and Mohammad sneak away to make love in the bathroom as Salim witnesses. Salim confronts Bilal about “letting that nigger faggot fuck you in the bathroom.”\textsuperscript{42} In pure rage, Salim physically attacks his brother, kicking and punching at his ribs and stomach. He bitterly rapes his brother, sadistically yelling and laughing. Found unconscious in his bathroom by his brother Hakim, Bilal is sent immediately to the hospital where doctors are required to file a police report upon seeing a child is such a state of abuse. Bilal tells the doctors and the police the truth, also admitting to them that among his scars are those self-imposed as well as those induced by Salim. X makes clear that Salim has been arrested and the vicious cycle of abuse has come to an end. Though wounded, bloody, shamed, and sticky, Bilal is safe.

\textbf{Tears of Redemption}

It is the ways in which redemption functions in these texts as being the key to a happy (or at least happier) vision of the future that make them the “tearjerkers” spectators have named them.\textsuperscript{43} This hopeful future is about the cementation of a certain kind of stability—one in which no matter your race, ethnicity, or sexual preference, you can be assured the right to emotional monogamy, economic prosperity, and the ability to see your grandkids grow up before your eyes. Aware of this need for stability and certainty, Hosseini engages in one of the novel’s only moments of meta-theatrical commentary. Amir recalls how in Afghanistan, listeners of stories only wanted to know about a tale’s end, “whether there was happiness in the end.” Asking himself about his own happy ending, Amir responds that he is uncertain and bitter, telling his reader, “After all life is not a Hindi movie” with a stable, uplifting ending.\textsuperscript{44} Although Amir makes clear his dislike of happy endings, the finale of his own story, if not happy, is at least redemptive and promises future happiness.

\textsuperscript{41} The graphic nature of this image as opposed to its mere description is an intrinsic part of this chapter’s argument and is discussed in a more thorough manner in the sub-section named “The Medium as Message: Graphic Graphic Novels.”
\textsuperscript{42} X, \textit{Bilal’s Bread}, 188.
\textsuperscript{44} Hosseini, \textit{The Kite Runner}, 358.
In *Bilal’s Bread*, this moment of redemption takes place at a poetry reading at the protagonist’s Muslim Day School. After almost ruining his family by outing his brother as an abuser, Bilal takes an even larger risk, deciding to read a poem exposing himself as homosexual to all of his peers. Hesitantly at first, Bilal whispers, “my first suicide was an evening in July,” voicing his various attempts. Bilal tells his listeners “love was not meant to be, it’s not allowed for folks like me,” that he felt as if no one would ever understand or let him be as he wanted to be. The more Bilal recites, the more his confidence is reinforced, allowing him to reach the poem’s coda and his moment of public outing by announcing: “I am queer / And let this be a suicide / A death to lies and my deceit / A death to all my furtive hiding / A death to my dishonesty cuz life was / Meant to be for you and for me.”\(^5\) The audience gives Bilal a standing ovation, and discursive narrative order has been restored. Bilal and his boyfriend Mohammad will begin a new future together in which they can both be gay (the good, monogamous kind) and Muslim. Together, they represent a new type of neoliberal multicultural future, in which tradition and modernity, race and American-ness need not be in constant clash with one another.

This moment of public redemption mirrors what W.C. Harris calls a Utopian impulse in contemporary GLBTQ young adult literature. Like Molly Bolt from Rita Mae Brown’s *Rubyfruit Jungle*, and the heroes of Sanchez’s *Rainbow Boys* series, Bilal must not only be accepted, but must not have “anything less than confetti and sparklers Acceptance.” Bilal uses the cultural form of poetry to recite his normative desires to be accepted. Harris reads the Utopian individualism at the heart of these novels as being

> a substantive insight that can be put to use in transforming or even navigating social reality, or...another trapdoor opening into the *oubliette* of feeling good about oneself for being unique in a culture where individuality has become the sine qua non of existence.\(^6\)

Taking Harris’ conceit one step further, I contend that if Bilal has indeed fallen through the trapdoor opening into an oubliette of feeling good about himself, it is because the generic expectations of the genre demand it. For Bilal, redemption from sexual trauma must be accompanied by an adherence to heteronormative notions of time and family. Moreover, the logic of neoliberal multiculturalism is predicated upon these normative notions of time, space, and growing-up, while also fostering a capitalist driven notion of uniqueness and individuality.

In *The Kite Runner*, the moment of emotional redemption coincides with the consolidation of a new kind of nuclear family. Months after their return to San Francisco, Sorhab is emotionally fragile and shell-shocked and goes into hiding, refusing Amir’s support. Although he has overcome many personal demons, Amir still does not feel redeemed due to his inability to connect to his nephew and adoptive son. Here begins the description of the “small miracle” set at the Berkeley Marina. He happily tells readers “that when spring comes, it melts the snow one flake at a time, and maybe I just witnessed the first flake melting. A grown man running with a swarm of screaming


children. But I didn’t care. I ran with the wind blowing in my face, and a smile as wide as the valley of Peshawar on my lips. I ran."47 It is this moment of redemption that seems to be the place where one would cry out of tears of joy (I know I certainly do). Narrative order has been restored through the restoration of the new nuclear family. Amir has overcome his fear and shame concerning raising an emotionally fractured child. Moreover, American interests have been restored. The sexually abused child from the war-torn Middle East will be successfully folded into the nation, if not now then eventually, when the ice melts and spring arrives.

The affective sensations of empathy created by The Kite Runner and Bilal’s Bread are a direct result of the redemption offered to their main protagonists. By travelling the road from rape to redemption, the characters in these stories are now on track to reach what Lauren Berlant calls “the good life.”48 Following Moretti, Hosseini and X’s narratives conclude with a “particularly marked ending; one that establishes a classification different from the initial one but nonetheless is perfectly clear and stable-definitive.”49 In this stable version of the good life, Amir, his wife, and his nephew live as a seemingly normal nuclear family, free of fears of poverty and sexual abuse while Bilal and his lover Mohammed lead a new life as a queer Muslim couple. It is these new re-writings of the good life that signify the end of politics. In this Utopian realm of the apolitical, we are all different and normal simultaneously, and we can capitalize off our differences. In this version of a forward-looking good life, following Sara Ahmed, Sorhab and Bilal are given “the hope or promise of becoming acceptable, where in being acceptable you must become acceptable to a world that has already decided what is acceptable.”50 In other words, in order for a queer and/or sexually abused child from the Middle East to become acceptable, they must be exceptional, sometimes spectacularly so.

The Medium as Message: Graphic Graphic-Novels

Due in part to its uplifting conclusion, The Kite Runner resonated with audiences and remained on Andrejevic he best-seller list for upwards of two years, spawning a film version with an Oscar caliber pedigree in 2007.51 Soon, the novel became a staple of book clubs and high school classes, with a proliferation of study guides and Cliff’s Notes editions of the text available to students. Perhaps capitalizing upon this newly emerging “Kite Runner industry,” Hosseini approved a graphic novel version of his text in 2011, illustrated by European artists Fabio Celoni and Mirka Andolfo.52 Although I am not

51 See The Kite Runner, directed by Marc Foster (2007; France: Universal Studios Home Video, 2008), DVD. For more on the historical conditions surrounding the film version, please see the coda section of this chapter.
52 Since the book’s rise in popularity, The Kite Runner is now taught and read in a variety of contexts, seeing the proliferation of much secondary literature on the novel such as Cliff’s Notes, ready made essay, book club discussion inserts. However, very little to no serious critical attention has been paid to the text, aside from its inclusion as an example of inclusive cannon
arguing that the medium of the graphic novel is inherently reductionist by nature, I do contend that when texts/narratives originally created in different formats are adapted graphically, the result usually amplifies their more problematic aspects. This is particularly true when the main subjects of the graphic novel are of Arab and/or Middle Eastern descent. Epitomizing this type of comic before The Kite Runner was The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation, released in 2006. Funded by the U.S. government as a medium to transmit information about the terrorist attacks to a larger population, the graphic version of the report not only translated a dry, factual document into an action-packed pictorial spectacle, but also managed to construct an Orientalist vision of the Taliban conspirators responsible for the terrorist attacks of that day. If a picture can indeed say a thousand words, then the images on display in graphic texts like The Kite Runner and The 9/11 Report describe characters, thoughts, and emotions that seem highly edited, truncated, stereotypical, and oversimplified.

Figure 8: Still showing red blood on white sand from the graphic adaptation of The Kite Runner. See Fabio Cieloni and Andolfo The Kite Runner: Graphic Novel, by Khaled Hosseini (New York: Riverhead Books, 2011), 45.

Utilizing color, light, shadow, and texture to literalize good/bad polarities, the Taliban “villains” in both The Kite Runner and The 9/11 Report are depicted as dark, grizzled, unkempt, and uncivilized, not unlike the stereotypical version of the terrorist featured in political cartoons and on animated satires like The Simpsons and South Park.54

building such as in Allen Webb, “Literature from the Modern Middle East: Making a Living Connection, English Journal 98.3 (2009), 81-89.
54 For more, please see Jasbir Puar’s germinal and astute reading of the representations of terrorists on South Park in Puar, Terrorist Assemblages, 67-76.
 Whereas many of these other visual takes on the terrorist seem to at least be aware of the Orientalist archive of images from which they draw, often commenting on the persistence of that image in culture, post-9/11 graphic adaptations seem to take this archived image as fact, as what the Taliban looks like. By contrast, the protagonists in _The Kite Runner_ seem to be shaded lighter, and are framed more in sunlight than in shadow. This literal painting of good subjects as “in the light” and villains as “in the dark” reinforces normative conceptions of geo- and necropolitics as well as foundational tenets of global neoliberalism. It is by witnessing the other literally come into the light of the frame that spectators, like those who read the novel, are brought from feeling disgusted to feeling healed. This is the light of “enlightenment,” brought about by secular, rational, and neoliberal (i.e. capitalist) modes of thinking and being.

If we are to follow Marshall McLuhan’s prescient axiom from the 1960’s that, in contemporary culture, the medium is the message, then just what kind of message is being staged in _The Kite Runner_’s move from page to comic frame? 55 If, as aforementioned, the novel version of Hosseini’s story was both pedagogical and entertaining, then the pedagogy being performed in/by the graphic adaptation is more graphic (in both senses of the term) than its literary predecessor. This graphicness is most evident in the text’s most vulgar scenes of rape and violence. In these images, Celoni and Andolfo revel in gritty details, a generous smattering of blood on white snow, a young boy in a tub of red waters, his wrists gushing. Given the hegemonic nature of the visual in contemporary culture and the comic book’s appeal to a younger demographic, these scenes come as a form of early indoctrination in which American readers learn what/who is good and bad. Graphic novel images also help to instill salvationist values in the young reader; after all, who wouldn’t want to see this young boy saved from rape and depression, smiling in the light of freedom and democracy?

Similarly, the graphic pat language in _Bilal’s Bread_ is considered acceptable for a middle school-aged, young adult readership. However, salacious details of cutting and sexual titillation (“this penis entered him like a scimitar”) make the book seem more pornographic than pedagogical. That these texts are disseminated for a pre-teenage audience tells us how anesthetized to physical violence our society has become. It also points out the ways in which the act of an older man raping a younger boy is considered not a sexual act but rather an act of random violence with traumatic psychological effects. In either case, a causal relationship between this act of violence and becoming an acceptable sexual subject, whether gay or straight, is present. Especially because of their impressionable target audiences, these tales reduce sex to a polarizing logic of bad (nonconsensual, taboo) and good (consensual, monogamous, responsible, and ethically sound). Hence, when it comes to tales of children and rape during times of war, the sex attached to this rape is so spectacular that it becomes legible as neither hetero- nor homosexual sex, just unwanted sex. This emptying out of homosexuality from the scene of gay rape conflates uncivilized masculine power with a moral-less barbarism, disregarding the ways in which the performance of American imperial power utilizes similar logics. When aimed at young audiences, the simplistic contours of this ideology become very apparent, exposing how homonationalism is indeed a new facet of modernity present in both “gay” texts (_Bilal’s Bread_) and straight ones (_The Kite Runner_)

to similar effect, creating stable American subjects who follow heteronormative logics of family, monogamy, and religious expression.

**De-chronologizing Rape to Redemption: Rabih Alameddine’s *I The Divine***

Queer refers to non-normative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time. ‘Queer time’ is a term for those specific modes of temporality that emerge with postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance.\(^{56}\)

Is there a way to place this normative narrative structure in queer time? Is there a way to tell the narrative coming-of-age story without reinforcing dominant logics or interests? In other words, is there a way for a Middle Eastern American coming-of-age novel with GLBTQ content to not reinforce empty concepts of sameness? Can the form be post-modernized, fractured, and re-performed in such a way that, to paraphrase Halberstam, we can look at coming-of-age outside of a normative temporal frame? Is there a way for this type of narrative structure, after Love and Bond-Stockton, to look backwards, or sideways?\(^{57}\)

On the narrative surface, Rabih Alameddine’s 2001 work, *I, The Divine: A Novel in First Chapters* seems to have much in common with *The Kite Runner* and *Bilal’s Bread*. Sarah Nour el Din might be Amir and Bilal’s imagined Lebanese sister. Half-American, half-Lebanese of Druze ancestry, Sarah came to America at the age of 19 and never left. Similar to her male counterparts, she was the victim of a brutal rape at the age of 15. She, too, must balance the memory of trauma from the homeland with her new identity in America. This, however, is where the similarities between Alameddine’s novel and a typical Middle Eastern American coming-of-age novel cease. Following the work of Borges and Calvino, Alameddine’s book is a series of 38 first attempts at an opening chapter for a never written autobiographical novel; *I, The Divine* is a text that finds it practically impossible to tell one distinct story.\(^{58}\) In this way, Sarah’s coming-of-age is de-chronologized, forcing readers to experience different moments of her life with a disregard for how they fit into a normative sense of time. Jumping from Beirut in the 1970’s to New York in the 1980’s to San Francisco in the 1990’s, Alameddine’s text


weaves the Lebanese Civil War, the AIDS crisis, and other world events in such a way that regular logics of history, both personal and political, are ineffective to deciphering it.

By working outside of chronological time, Alameddine is also able to re-construct the scene of child rape and re-pathologize it. Located on pages 193-201 of some three hundred, Alameddine does not give an exact date to the events described in a first chapter entitled “Spilt Wine,” although one can infer that the time is the late 1970’s before Sarah Nour-al-Din has moved to New York. Withstanding the lack of a given time, Alameddine wishes the reader to not have a sense of one. The reader accompanies Sarah as she takes a shared taxi through occupied Beirut, being held at gunpoint and forced out of the cab to an empty alleyway. Like its counterpart scenes in The Kite Runner and Bilal’s Bread, Alameddine’s scene of rape is not short on gratuitous, graphic details. The author spends five pages brutally describing the attack. He shows Sarah fighting with her abuser, biting down on his fist, provoking him to hold her down and scream:

You see these fingers you bit? I am going to shove them in like… The rest of the phrase hung in the air, suspended, because the pain this time was so sudden, she could only hear her own cries. He penetrated her savagely. She thought he was going to pierce her. The sky had disappeared. She closed her eyes out of pain, out of bitterness, out of shame. She felt him going in and out like an animal in a rut. With every movement of his body, he emitted a cry and she groaned in pain.59

Like in the aforementioned texts, the language is terse and omniscient, recalling bits of memory from the scene of trauma; shame is recalled, as is the mixing of bloods from hands and sexual organs. However, rather than reifying this scene of rape as simply an act of arbitrary violence, Alameddine takes the conceit one step further. As she begins to return to her senses in the alleyway, Sarah sees a young boy feet away from her. For a moment she is hopeful that this person, an adolescent boy, will call for help, perhaps even rescue her himself. Rather than the inactivity of witnessing committed by Amir in The Kite Runner, the scene of rape in I, The Divine is turned into a scene of complicity. This young boy does not get help, nor does he walk away but is beckoned to Sarah’s side where the young poor child is egged on by her abusers to take advantage of their situation:

The man stood up, arrogant in spite of the fact that he was naked from the waist down, his penis covered in blood. You want to remain a virgin all your life. Come. Come find out the pleasures of being a man. The adolescent hesitated. Looked at her. From pathetic and poignant, his look transformed to desire… Come on. What are you waiting for? Inspiration? Both men burst out laughing. The boy began slipping out of his pants. You know what to do right?… The boy nodded. He jumped on her, penetrating her brutally and clumsily. She did not have to close her eyes before he emitted the strange cry… She felt him being picked up. Why didn’t you take your time. She is ours. One of the others went inside her.60

Alameddine is demonstrating how brutality is conditioned. It comes out of a mixture of disgust and awe, of power in difficult circumstances, and through being converted or

60 Alameddine, I, The Divine, 197.
coerced into demonstrating dominant behavior. Through the eyes of these three men, Sarah becomes an empty symbol of abjection, as in *The Kite Runner* and *Bilal’s Bread*. However, I contend that Alameddine’s authorial choices—taking the scene out of narrative context, including a third boy who joins in, and switching to a third, omniscient voice from a text that usually uses the first person—make clear that he is commenting on the scene of rape rather than reifying it. Through his use of even more graphic details than either Hosseini or X, Alameddine is having readers immerse themselves in the dirty details of the scene of rape in order to make them question why they find such scenes so compelling, and to illustrate how political violence and sexual violence seem to intermesh during moments of political crisis.

Moreover, unlike in the two neo-Orientalist texts explored earlier, the scene of rape in *I, The Divine* in no ways fuels the book’s plot nor does it lead to a narrative of redemption as the novel’s raison d’être. In order to show how rape disorients, Alameddine utilizes two different tactics. In the chapter preceding “Spilt Wine,” readers are presented with three paragraphs of the following chapter in French. By having his protagonist write in both French and English, Alameddine makes clear just how scrambled the scene of rape becomes outside of context. Moreover, although Sarah is shaken by the event and cries on the shoulder of her best friend Dina, she seems to have recovered from the event until six months later while playing Pictionary. While trying to draw a very difficult word, Sarah and Dina have a moment of “psychic connection,” Sarah realizing her friend is trying to illustrate the word “rape.” After a moment of suppressed laughter, Alameddine leaves his readers with two pivotal questions: 1) Why a game of Pictionary would have the word rape in it,” and more specifically, 2) “How do you draw rape?” These questions both trivialize rape and comment on the trivialization of rape as it is often used in coming-of-age novels.

Furthermore, by placing this rape scene somewhere in the middle of a Borgesian collection of “first attempts,” Alameddine does not allow his readers to indulge in any version of the narrative of rape to redemption. Sarah finds no redemption in life. By her forties, Sarah is a two-time divorcee living off of alimony without any ability to financially support herself. She consistently calls herself a slut and a loose woman who finds it impossible to remain emotionally and physically close to a man. This is epitomized by her 20-year old son Kamal, who she abandoned at the age of two to stay in America. Instead of finding redemption and narrative stability, Sarah is a lonely divorcee in San Francisco with an estranged son halfway across the world in Beirut. In other words, her life never fulfills any of the narrative contracts it was supposed to.

Although Sarah does not identify as a GLBTQ person as Bilal does, in many ways, Alameddine’s novel depicts a more accurate illustration of how queerness operates to construct what Kath Weston calls a “family we choose.” than *Bilal’s Bread* with its’ out protagonist. In the protagonist’s final attempt to write her story, we find her sitting on her couch, procrastinating, eating cartons of Ben and Jerry’s while watching a nature documentary on a pride of lions. In these final moments, she realizes,

[61] Ibid, 201.

I could not begin to fathom what being a lion was if I only looked at each lion individually or even at the relationship between lions. All of them together, not all of them individually summed up but all of them as a dynamic organism, were the species; all were the word lion.  

Providing meta-commentary on her numerous failed attempts to tell her life story Sarah tells readers:

I had tried to write my memoir by telling an imaginary reader to listen to my story. Come learn about me, I said. I have a great story to tell you because I have led an interesting life. Come meet me. But how can I expect readers to know who I am if I do not tell them about my family, my friends, the relationships in my life? Who am I if I am not where I fit in the world, where I fit in the lives of the people dear to me? I have to explain how the individual participated in the larger organism, to show how I fit into the larger whole. So instead of telling the reader, Come meet me, I have to say something else. Come meet my family. Come meet my friends. Come meet my pride.

Rather than reading the family as merely biological and linear, the “pride” that Alameddine describes is diverse not only in their sexualities and ethnic backgrounds, but also in the ways they have chosen to lead their lives. Key members in this queer family include Sarah’s best friend Dina, a disheveled lipstick lesbian in a long-term relationship; her gay brother Ramzi with his perfect American partner Peter; and, finally, David, her most recent lover who, by novel’s end, we realize has been having an affair with Sarah behind the back of his male partner. Hence, Sarah’s queerness is derived from her life choices, the people she surrounds herself with, and her inability to find stability.

This inability to be stabilized realizes itself in both the form and content of I, The Divine. As Steven Salaita asserts, Alameddine’s novel demonstrates how hard it is to “both fit and belong.” The form and narrative style of Alameddine’s work show how a queer life cannot fit the bounds of a normal Aristotelian dramatic structure. Following Halberstam, I argue that the work is a wonderful example of queer time, in which “temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance” are forgone.

Although one could argue that it is because of Sarah’s subject position as an upper middle class Arab American women that she is able to lead such a non-normative life and live out different forms of what Aiwa Ong would call flexible citizenship, Alameddine in no way tries to deny how class and globalization function in his text. One chapter entitled “Starbucks as Metaphor” perfectly exemplifies this. Here, Sarah and her sister meet at the new Starbucks on Hamra street and continually make fun of the Beirut elite who have returned to the city center after the war. While making fun of these people,

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64 Ibid, 308.
65 Steven Salaita, Arab American Literary Fictions, Cultures and Politics (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 81.
66 Halberstam, In a Queer Time and Place, 6.
Alameddine is also implicating Sarah as following such capitalist, normative ideas of consumption.

Though it covers much of the same thematic material as *The Kite Runner* and *Bilal’s Bread, I, The Divine’s* inability to siphon itself into a recognizable genre allows it to destabilize rather than reify normative concepts of success, family, and happiness, as well as audience expectations. With rape but no redemption, and a lack of restorative order, Alameddine’s novel not only queers the transnational coming-of-age of novel, but also makes clear how unqueer texts like *Bilal’s Bread* and *The Kite Runner* truly are. In his newest piece of metafiction, Alameddine’s narrator, a septagenarian female translator of fiction from French into Arabic, self-reflexively talks about the problems of causality in literature:

> If this were a novel, you, my dear, would be able to figure out why my mother screamed. Alain Robbe-Grillet once wrote that the worst thing to happen to the novel was the arrival of psychology. You can assume he meant that now we all expect to understand the motivation behind each character’s actions, as if that’s possible, as if life works that way. I’ve read so many recent novels, particularly those published in the Anglo world, that have been dull and trite because I am always supposed to infer causality. For example, the reason a protagonist can’t experience love is because she was physically abused or had been raped, or that the hero constantly searches for validation because his father paid little attention to him as a child. This, of course, ignores the fact that many others may have experienced the exact thing but do not behave in a comparable manner. The latter is a minor point compared to the real loss of fulfilling the ‘everything-must-be-explained’ desire, the loss of mystery. Causation extraction makes Jack a dull reader.\(^\text{68}\)

It is this sense of causality, of pathology, of logics of bio- and necropolitics that not only make “Jack a dull reader,” they also make him a dull liver of life, invested in normative concepts of the good life. Moreover, in a sublime example of life mirroring art, quite often the neoliberal multicultural logics behind causality can take these simple stories and manifest them into a new reality.

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\(^{68}\) Rabih Alameddine, *An Unnecessary Woman*, (New York: Grove Press, 2014), 108. Used before publication with permission of the author. HOW TO CITE?
Coda: The Kite Runner Film Scandal and the Non-Fictional Face of Redemption


We end, just as we began, on a note of redemption. In early October 2007, days before the big-screen adaptation of The Kite Runner was to have its American premiere at the Mill Valley International Film Festival, executives at Paramount Pictures were confronted with a public relations nightmare of epic proportions. Four of their film’s main stars, local, untrained actors from Kabul, had been receiving threats on their life and safety due to what many reporters called “a rising lawlessness in Kabul” in the years immediately after American occupation. Moreover, there was fear that the graphic rape scene in which Pashtu boys brutally sodomize a Hasara could reignite ethnic tensions in a country still working its way to political stability. Based on these fears, lawyers at Paramount Vantage made the executive decision to postpone the film’s premiere until the child actors had been safely granted asylum and financial security in the United Arab Emirates.

Most media attention focused on 10-year-old Ahmad Khan Mahmoodzada, who played the role of Hassan. Mahmoodzada’s ascension as the face of the controversy was due both to his role as the character who is raped on camera and to an 11th hour confession from his father. The elder Mr. Mahmoodzadah began claiming in August of the same year that his son never received a script nor was aware that the rape was a pivotal plot point until moments before the scene in question was shot. Director Foster and producer E. Bennet Walsh contested these claims steadfastly, but the damage to the public image of Paramount’s The Kite Runner had already taken effect. Within weeks, the story of Mahmoodzadah and his cohorts had gone viral, with various web-pages

created by American-based NGO’s to “Save The Kite Runner Boys” sprouting up in cyberspace, and op-ed articles concerning the conflict in international newspapers like the *The Guardian* painting it as potentially another “Danish cartoon crisis.” By October 8th, the child had been flown to a secret location in the United Arab Emirates. Although the conflict was resolved, the controversy continued to haunt the film throughout its various publicity junkets in November and December. The safe passage of Mahmoodzadah and his peers to a “better” life in the Gulf goes a long way in proving how our interest in presenting a realistic face of Afghanistan can result in inadvertent forms of neo-imperialism, in which Western film crews allow certain facts to be lost in translation, even at the expense of children’s safety.

The controversy concerning Mahmoodzadah and his fellow actors is a case of life literally imitating art. Simply by performing the role of a boy who is the victim of a heinous sexual crime, Mahmoozadah became a living stand-in for his fictional counterpart. Just as the hero of *The Kite Runner* must redeem himself by overcoming the guilt he holds from “inaction,” from allowing a friend to be subject to the most “reprehensible behavior and doing nothing” to stop it, members of American NGO’s became literal heroes and saviors, rescuing the young actors from an unimaginable fate in which their safety and happiness were put in danger. It is important to note that both of these tales, the fictional and the lived, end happily, the imagined with the creation of a new stable family for Sorhab, and the actual with Mahmoozadah and his fellow actors safe to start a new life free from death threats—and awaiting possible long-term visas for immigration to America, courtesy of the film’s producers and legal staff. *The Kite Runner* movie controversy makes clear the ways in which many consumers of the text as movie, graphic novel, or novel possibly utilized the story as a substitute for learning actual facts about the situation in Afghanistan. As such, the hubbub that arose around the children’s safety reflects the ways in which these children, actors in danger for having performed the abject, literally become abject themselves through this performance of abjection.

It is the way in which cultural texts such as *The Kite Runner* and *Bilal’s Bread* can be their own sort of ideological performatives, bringing into being the things they create fictitiously, that make them so easily consumable and so unexpectedly dangerous. Is there a way to dissociate salvationist concepts concerning the of-color child without turning him/her into an empty symbol of an imagined future? Perhaps, but until this begins to happen all one can do is seriously scour the works that perpetuate these concepts and highlight the use of generic melodrama for ends that wish to quarantine, discipline, and reconfigure the subject. Through this process, we can begin to re-educate ourselves on how to consume popular texts critically, and even if we cry at the moments of redemption on display to us, we can begin to have a better understanding of why we cry, and what larger geopolitical consequences our easy susceptibility can facilitate.

Moving from the large scale of epic novels and films, we now move to the smaller scale of live theatrical production, to examine how many of the same principals that

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72 Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*, 68.
define neoliberal multicultural spectatorship can exist in more intimate moments of interpersonal connection.
Chapter 3:  
Theatre of the Impossible? 
Performing “Equal Recognition”

What does it mean to be recognized as a full human subject? Is it simply a matter of legal rights, civic equality, and material well-being? Or is it also about feeling—in particular, feeling the respectful regard of others who, despite or even through difference, perceive and identify with one’s humanity? In short, what are the affective, interpersonal dimensions of “the politics of equal recognition”?1

After examining the large-scale spectacle of ethnic museum displays and the spectacularization of the rape to redemption narratives manifested in contemporary novels, graphic novels, film, and real life, this chapter returns to live performance and a small scale. Although the scale of production might be reduced, the two examples of live performance examined here make clear how intimate moments of live theatre can summon up as much affective power and spectacle as any other cultural form. Moreover, these two examples make clear how the “spectacle of recognition” is most often played in the realm of the inter-personal.

This chapter focuses on moments of “impossible recognition” in two contemporary plays about Arabs and Queers. In both, characters from different worldviews, races, religions, and ideologies stand face to face with one another in emotionally charged and politically fraught circumstances. They look into each other’s eyes and search for connection—with drastically different effects in each play. The moment of impossible recognition in Jeff Key’s autobiographical The Eyes of Babylon is staged as a sexy, coded “kiss” on the streets of Bahdra in 2004 between an American marine and a young man the soldier describes as “an Iraqi version[] of me.”2 Their eyes meet but their mouths touch only by proxy—a shared tube of lip balm. The exchange evinces hope for and despair over the feasibility of full recognition between American and Arab queers. David Adjmi’s Stunning, by contrast, forgoes even a compromised picture of cross-cultural recognition. In Stunning’s climactic scene, a bitter verbal confrontation between Ike, a Syrian-Jewish male, and Blanche, his African-American lesbian maid who is sexually and romantically involved with Ike’s wife, devolves into a physically violent struggle; when Ike spots a container of white paint in the corner of the room, he drags Blanche “by her hair to the paint trough, and shoves her face in it. Hard.”3

Through this brutal gesture and its consequences—Blanche commits suicide and life returns to normal in Ike’s household—Adjmi disavows any possibility of mutual recognition between his differently raced and gendered characters.

Adjmi and Key’s plays are emblematic of new waves of theatrical output. Adjmi may be seen as one among a rising generation of Arab-American playwrights, such as Stephen Karam, Betty Shamieh, and Yussef El-Guindi, who are creating art that

3 David Adjmi, Stunning and Other Plays (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2011), 120.
highlights the complexities of what it means to be recognized as Arab and American.\(^4\) Meanwhile, Key joins a number of writers, not of Arab descent, who are critical of American intervention in the Middle East, such as Rajiv Joseph, JT Rogers, and Christopher Shin.\(^{5}\) Both theatrical movements offer necessary alternatives to the kinds of mainstream representations of the war and Arab-American subjects often found in mainstream media.

Yet tonally and ideologically, Key and Adjmi are worlds apart. With its glimpses of Utopia and a popular anti-war message, *The Eyes of Babylon* was a “feel-good” hit that has seen numerous revivals and was even the subject of a Showtime documentary. As we shall see upon closer inspection, Key’s identification with the Iraqi man smacks of mis-recognition; their connection, such as it is, is premised upon an erotic alliance that implicates, and certainly cannot dismantle, the power structure that accounts for Key’s very presence in Bahdra. *Stunning*, on the other hand, was at best a *succès d’estime*. It signaled the promise of a bright new playwright but alienated the public with its pessimism and displeased many critics with its heavy-handed combination of satire and melodrama. Such aesthetic criticisms of the play are valid, but it is precisely through the compromised and compromising recognition depicted in Key’s play that we can begin to appreciate the wisdom behind Adjmi’s cynicism. Taken together, critical readings of *The Eyes of Babylon* and *Stunning* attest to the contemporary crisis of recognition. If that particular Utopia cannot be found even at the theatre, we may be looking there for the wrong thing.\(^{6}\)

**What’s Recognition Got to Do with It?**

In order to examine these images from recent theatre as failed moments of recognition, I begin with an overview of the term’s usage in contemporary writings about multiculturalism. The starting-point for this survey is Charles Taylor’s “Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition” (1992), which traces changing definitions of identity, beginning with a medieval conception based on honor and dignity for oneself, one’s family, and one’s community. This concept of dignity, connected to God and essential for full humanity, underwent an epistemic shift in the modern period, finding a new home exclusively in the individual subject. Even so, according to Taylor, subject formation was inevitably and fundamentally dialogical: “Discovering my own identity doesn’t mean that I work it out in isolation, but that I negotiate it through dialogue, partly overt, partly

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internal, with others.” 7 Hence the “new importance” that “an ideal of inwardly generated identity gives…to recognition. My own identity crucially depends on my dialogical relations with others.” 8 Taylor goes on to claim that contemporary feminism, race relations, and multiculturalism “are undergirded by the premise that the withholding of recognition can be a form of oppression.” 9 Yet as Taylor himself acknowledges, the bestowal of recognition, no less than its refusal, can also oppress. Recognition is not necessarily reciprocal, and indeed it is often about being recognized as “acceptable” according to standards that a subject might find alien, disempowering, and indeed identity-negating. 10 Still, he remains hopeful that a politics of equal recognition can and should be pursued, even if he offers no practical suggestions for how that project might proceed. 11

In a series of essays composed at the dawn of the twenty-first century, moral philosophers Axel Honneth and Nancy Fraser reflect on the relationship between recognition and redistribution, understood as the difference between being seen as equal and having equal access to educational, medical, and economic opportunities. Where Honneth contends that economic redistribution is essentially part of recognition (and is an essential part of it), Fraser resists the collapse of these concepts into one another. She advocates for a “perspectival dualist analysis that casts the two categories as co-fundamental and mutually irreducible dimensions of justice,” and she examines concrete social and political problems to illustrate their distinctiveness. 12 The important point for present purposes, however, is that Fraser and Honneth fundamentally agree that material redistribution must be an integral part of any movement for social and global justice. Recognition alone is not enough.

Honneth and Fraser, a German and a Canadian respectively, are philosophers working within domestic political systems that unashamedly attempt to balance neoliberal and social-welfarist economic models. Although the United States pursues both agendas at once, the proliferation of neoliberal market ideology makes even the most urgent sites of redistribution—education, health care, assistance to those in poverty—deeply controversial. Such projects are widely seen as antithetical to the American Dream, which imagines that through hard work and perseverance anyone—regardless of identity, background, or circumstances—can succeed both economically and socially. The fierce capitalism that lies at the heart of neoliberalism, therefore, downplays difference. Such characteristics as race, class of origin, gender, and sexual orientation, which were a priori obstacles to personal enfranchisement, are seemingly irrelevant in an age when formal barriers based on these traits have been (or are being) abolished. In the American ideology, recognition—in the form of what Marx called

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9 Ibid, 81.
12 Axel Honneth and Nancy Fraser, Redistribution or Recognition?: A Political-Philosophical Exchange (New York: Verso, 2003), 3.
political emancipation, the legal grant of full citizenship—obviates any need for redistribution.

In her ethnography of indigenous alterities and multiculturalism in Australia’s Northwest territory, Elizabeth Povinelli turns Taylor’s concept of recognition on its head. Povinelli examines “how recognition is at once a formal reconnaissance of a subaltern group’s being, and of its being worthy of national recognition and at the same time, a formal moment of being inspected, examined, and investigated.”\(^\text{14}\) She is particularly interested in the contours of what she calls “the cunning of recognition,” or “the ideological maneuvering and regulation of one’s own social performance required for recognition as a full citizen. In other words, subjects must cunningly adopt and deploy elements of dominant discourses in order to be recognized. In the United States, such adaptations are effectively assimilations into narratives of secularism and liberalism.\(^\text{15}\)

The assimilationist demands of recognition, however, are not exactly imperatives to erase difference entirely. As discussed earlier in this dissertation, the ideology of neoliberalism exists alongside one of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism acclaims difference, but only insofar as such difference can be reduced to identities and labels unmoored from any particularities of practice or belief that might be read as challenges to the dominant culture. Taylor himself criticizes multiculturalism’s ostensible celebrations of diversity as empty gestures “that package acceptance but create no change in the world.”\(^\text{16}\) Thus, an Arab-American may be recognized as such, but only by rejecting values and habits that are antithetical to “core” American standards: arranged marriages, say, or a veil in the case of Muslim women. Mamdani succinctly refers to this as the “Good Muslim/Bad Muslim” paradigm.\(^\text{17}\) A similar dichotomy applies to sexual minorities. The “homonationalists” identified by Jasbir Puar—monogamous, reproductive, affluent, and patriotic—are America’s “Good Gays,” while the polyamorous, gender-deviant, working-class, and/or dissident queers are our “Bad Queers.”\(^\text{18}\) Thus, both Arabs and queers in the United States face pressure to declare their difference while adopting mainstream culture.

The double-binds of recognition have been amply theorized when it comes to law and politics, but their affective dimensions remain largely unexplored, both at the level of specific interpersonal relations and in the context of specific artistic productions. Key’s The Eyes of Babylon and Adjmi’s Stunning offer opportunities for just such an affective analysis of recognition. In both works, a moment of impossible recognition instantiates or reflects back on particular forms of cunning. In Key’s monologue, cunning takes the guise of a magical queer connection that is able to transcend all forms of difference—a


\(^{16}\) Taylor, Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition, 11.

\(^{17}\) See Mahmood Mamdani, Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, The Cold War and the Roots of Terror (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2005).

queer transposition, if you will, of 1970’s global sisterhood. Although this moment of impossible recognition is hopeful, creating what José Muñoz would call a “glimpse of the future in the present,” its notion of a queer universal obscures the scene’s more civilizationist, Orientalist impulses. In the case of Stunning, both Ike and the aptly-named Blanche use trappings of whiteness as tactics to ensure inclusion under the umbrella of “recognized peoples.” Blanche’s eventual asphyxiation in a trough of white paint literalizes race as a social construct. Adjmi’s aim here is to move from a process of cunning to one of stunning—stunning his characters into the realization that equal recognition between them is impossible.

**The Kiss of the (Im)Possible**

Playwright Lance Corporal Jeff Key believes that historical patterns of racism and the ravages of war can be undone by manifesting a positive attitude and by fostering a sense of queer connection. Standing 6’3” and bulging with toned muscles from years of physical exertion, Key cuts an imposing presence, as noted by many reviewers of his one-man performance piece The Eyes of Babylon, adapted from diaries documenting Key’s tour as a reserve fighter in Iraq in 2003. The play follows many of the generic constraints of a queer monologue about identity. Following a trope of this genre, Key starts with an ode to his own superb virility. The performer is stripped to his briefs, Tom-of-Finland-style, an image similar to that used by queer theatrical forefathers like Tim Miller and Ron Athey. But unlike in standard queer autobiographical narratives, non-normative sexuality is not supposed to be Key’s main distinction. Rather, it is his anti-war stance that makes him truly exceptional and accounts for his queer (in)security. Indeed it seems to be by and through his political dissent that this marine attempts to transcend his own stigmatized homosexuality.

A vignette titled “The Kiss” is the only moment in Key’s play that makes clear the protagonist’s sexual orientation. In this scene, he recalls meeting Ahkmed on a summer day in 2003:

> I grew up in rural Alabama, so my gaydar is a very fine-tuned instrument. During my brief stay in the Middle East, I would see them there, in the crowd, on the street, in the market...those Iraqi versions of me, trying their best to get along in a horrible situation. When a man finds himself a part of something like war, he must let himself believe that he is here for a good reason. When our eyes would meet and what ever it is that happiness would happen, so much would happen in just that split second. The volumes of communication that can occur in a

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20 Muñoz sees queer Utopias in art and subcultures that attempt to use the past to instill in the present the hope of a better future. See Jose Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009).

Present in this text are number of problematic elisions of difference vis-à-vis the politics of recognition. Following Taylor’s model, Key seems to be describing a politics of equal recognition, one that is immune to the obvious power dynamics generally at play in encounters between American marines and Iraqi civilians. Indeed, Key’s reference to “those Iraqi versions of me” indicates a commensurability between himself and “gay” Iraqis. Does this equal recognition extend to other Iraqis—women and “straight” men? It would seem not. Queer connectivity and conviviality—“volumes of communication”—seem to be the keys to this identification. Such affective moments of communicative eye contact have lately been theorized as being a priori, chaotic, and “sticky,” catching subjects in their inter-connective web. Here, through the conjuring of a “gay tribe,” they are also magical, allowing certain Iraqis and certain Americans to transcend other forms of difference. At least that is Key’s account of it. He imagines “real connection,” but there is no Iraqi voice to affirm or deny this purported reciprocity.

This lack of reciprocity, however, does not make the moment of recognition that Key reconstructs any less emotionally affecting or sexy. A close reading of Key’s “kiss” with an Iraqi soccer player underscores the seductive Utopianism of a politics of equal recognition. Key describes himself “[a]top my vehicle in Badrah with my weapon at the ready,” when “a man in his early twenties passes on the opposite side of the street.” The man “is fit and good looking, in that brooding, Middle Eastern sort of way.” Key follows him with his eyes and gets leave from his fellow Corporal to go down to the street. The two men greet each other in Arabic and English, exchanging names and a handshake:

We grip hands tight and resist letting go just long enough so as to not get busted. We exchange small talk as much as possible for a few minutes and I begin to wonder if…I don’t know, I want more. There’s no way we can do anything but I’m desperate for a verbal acknowledgement of what we both know. He figures out how. ‘You have wife?’ he asks me? ‘No. No wife. You?’ ‘No wife,’ he answers, and then his beautiful brown eyes lit up. I’m a sucker for brown eyes.

22 Jeff Key, “Lance Corporal Key’s Middle East Vacation,” 71.

23 My use of the word “sticky” here is adapted from recent work on queer and of color affects. Following a Deleuzian turn to the random and the haptic, “stickiness” and viscosity have become ways of thinking about forms of feeling and connection outside of the easily quantifiable. Is the stickiness of affect always a positive attribute, one that cannot be co-opted by more powerful forces? What is the difference between the affective stickiness of real connection and that engendered by forces of hegemony and capitalism? For more on this topic, see Puar, Terrorist Assemblages; Sara Ahmed, The Cultural Politics of Emotion (New York: Routledge, 2004); Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth, eds., The Affect Studies Reader (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Touching, Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

24 This reading of a cross-cultural moment where any disparity in power is dismissed by volumes of communication can be seen as foreshadowing the militarization of homo-nationalism that occurred in the wake of the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” For more on this topic see the conclusion of Chandan Reddy, Freedom with Violence (2011), 219-246.

25 Key, “Lance Corporal Key’s Middle East Vacation,” 74.
‘Why?’ he says again flirting. We’re making out big time with our words. ‘You’re beautiful,’ he says quietly as his eyes dart around to make sure no one hears. ‘Yeah, you’re beautiful too.’ You can see the electricity in the air between us, and my cammie bottoms are getting tighter by the second. I think he’s having the same problem. We stand there enjoying the torture of our situation. ‘You have…’ and then he pantomimes ‘lip balm.’ I dig into my pocket and produce my dirty, half-used tube. I gotta tell you, I don’t think anyone’s ever put on lip balm in a sexier way. ‘What you call…’ And he kisses the air. ‘What’s this?’ I ask and make the kissing noise. ‘Yes.’ ‘Kiss. We call it kiss.’ ‘Kiss’ he repeats and hands back the Chap Stick. ‘No, no, you keep it.’ I put up my hand up to refuse it. ‘Kiss’ he repeats and pushes it into my palm. Well I’ll be damned, he’s giving me a kiss. I smooth the stuff onto my own lips as he watches.26

Key’s staging of this particular section utilizes the theatrical medium to amplify the pastoral contours of the tale. Utilizing the power of his imagination, Key’s words and eyes bring the Iraqi boy into being in front of the audience. Through Key’s channeling of a state of sexual arousal, we see the boy. Key uses no accent to imitate him, keeping Ahkmed a sense memory, a sensual memory. Amidst the insanity of war, a human moment of profound connection is staged. Key’s moment of recognition does truly bring into being a moment of queer Utopia, a fleeting snapshot of a better world. It is the spectatorial desire to see this image’s fulfillment that makes “The Kiss” one of the most memorable vignettes in The Eyes of Babylon. In this “kiss,” a positivist spectacle with erotic undertones is made manifest.

Key’s sexy utopian is at once historically specific and ahistoric, dependent on a socio-political reality and yet insistently apolitical. Perhaps inadvertently, “The Kiss” recalls the famous scene in Martin Sherman’s Bent where two gay men in a Nazi work camp “have sex” while standing next to each other, never touching, being watched by a guard pointing a gun directly at them.27 Sherman’s intensely sensual scene even includes a moment of climax (in which they reach ejaculation while remaining rigidly still) that makes Key’s exchange of lip balm seem timid. Yet in both scenes, the impossibility of full physical consummation only underscores the extent to which queer affect may be engendered by the apolitical force of the moment at hand and yet remain momentarily indifferent to the histories of geopolitics and military occupation that inform them. The power of queer connection, the stickiness of affect, is concretized in these two scenarios: in one there is the stickiness of actual release, in the other the stickiness of the lip balm that lubricates the participants’ public intercourse.28

Still, even as both moments evoke similar sensations, there is an important difference between the two scenes. Whereas Sherman’s piece involves two gay prisoners of war engaging in what is arguably a strategy of survival, the marine Key is both guard and prisoner, a victim and an enforcer of the American imperial project. No doubt this dynamic explains why “The Kiss”—again, the only scene in Key’s play to explicitly touch upon the playwright’s homosexuality—does not detract from the work’s coherence. Rather “The Kiss” functions as one more protest against the very war that enables it. Two Utopian visions—one queer, one pacifist—merge.

26 Key, “Lance Corporal Key’s Middle East Vacation,” 74-75.
28 For more on this, see footnote 20 on affect studies.
Though it is easy to be swept away by the Utopian sensuality quivering in “The Kiss,” transnational queer and feminist scholarship would counsel spectators to resist this sentiment(ality). Key’s insistent reference to a “gay tribe” belies an inadvertently colonizing impulse behind what is pitched as a moment of equal recognition. Key’s characterization of Ahkmed and other quarry caught by his “gaydar” as “Iraqi versions of me” exemplify what Jasbir Puar and Joseph Massad would call, respectively, the “homonational” and “the gay international.”²⁹ Key assumes that Ahkmed is gay in the same sense that he himself is gay. Key imposes his ethical and moral values, assuming the youth is sexually open and Western in his outlook, never considering that the boy might be “gay” and “Muslim,” or might sleep with men without any connection to occidental concepts of “identity” like gay and queer. Moreover, as mentioned above, Key never questions how the content of his interactions with his supposed Iraqi counterparts are conditioned by his obvious membership in the American military. It is as if Key’s queerness negates his nationality and his weapons, an effect that becomes particularly clear if one imagines a scene, similarly devoid of any outright coercion, involving a heterosexual version of Key and a female Iraqi. Under this critical view, Key’s pacifist and sexy story of queer recognition may also be a story of hegemony, one that, in itself and in its telling, “create[s] no change in the world.”³⁰ No change and no hope for the redistribution of power which would help American forces to retreat from consistent and persistent military occupation.

The Stunning of Recognition, or Investing in White Privilege

David Adjmi’s 2008 play Stunning portrays obsession with whiteness. The primary setting of the piece is Lily and Ike Schwecky’s new mansion in the Midwood section of Brooklyn, a house that epitomizes “the arid, philistine, nouveau riche—no art or anything, but terribly impressive in its own bombastic right.”³¹ The house is devoid of color “save for various shades of white and transparent surfaces, glass, mirrors, etc.”³² This white-on-white environment is emphasized by the use of theatrical device: as there is little to clean in the house, Lily tells her African-American maid Blanche, “[W]e have a bucket of paint in every room. So if things start to get dirty like if there’s spots? like on the walls? or if you have nothing to do and there’s down time you repaint okay?”³³ During this first scene between the play’s two protagonists, whiteness as a cultural construct, not just as a metaphorical conceit, is also highlighted. Stunned to find a black woman since “we’ve always had Puerto Rican maids,” Lily is put off by Blanche, who retorts by asking Lily, a young girl of sixteen partnered to a man twice her age, if marrying so young is “some sort of religious custom.” Lily admits that they are Jews. “You don’t look Jewish,” Blanche insists. “You look Middle Eastern.” After some coaxing, Lily admits that her family is “from the Middle East, somewhat...Syria I think.

³¹ Adjmi, Stunning and Other Plays, 20.
³² Adjmi, Stunning and Other Plays, 8.
³³ Adjmi, Stunning and Other Plays, 26.
… But we’re all white... We just tan easily.” 34 From its opening moments, whiteness in Stunning is a performative investment.

As the rest of Adjmi’s play makes clear, heterosexuality is also a performative investment. The narrative crux of Stunning’s satire concerns the short-lived sexual relationship between Blanche and Lily. An educated African-American lesbian with a PhD in semiotics from Brown, Blanche instructs the young woman in French, wine tasting, and Adrienne Rich’s lesbian continuum. Lily gives Blanche not only her heart but also a check for eight thousand dollars—“a loan,” she says. Although Blanche tries to dissuade her, Lily begins to adopt the older woman’s views on race, sexuality, and religion. The play’s dramatic climax is reached when Ike, the volatile and unintelligent owner of a jeans company, discovers his wife’s infidelity and his maid’s true identity. Blanche is not an educated lesbian of color who studied at the Sorbonne; she is a lower-class imposter who had attempted to kill her father.

In the fight that follows these revelations, Ike and Blanche have a moment of recognition. Their screaming ends and for one long moment, the two characters really look at each other. This look is loaded with animosity, the two actors looking furious, ravenous and ready to pounce. In this moment, long-held prejudices and the need for personal vindication make recognition impossible, and angry words turn to angrier fists. The two wrangle. Ike spots the bucket of white paint in the middle of the room. Then “IKE drags BLANCHE from her hair to the ... trough [of white paint], and shoves her face in it. Hard.”35 The tone has shifted from realism to surrealism. He releases her after an excruciating minute of stage time. Blanche is coughing, spitting up paint, and wiping it out of her eyes and hair. At this moment, whiteness in Adjmi’s Stunning shifts from a metaphorical concept to a literally embodied action.

Although not labeled as such, it is to precisely this image that many critics have gestured to as they discuss the first half of the play’s vivid dramatization versus its “startling, almost-schizophrenic denouement.”36 Marilyn Stasio of Variety reads the play’s latest production, sponsored by Lincoln Center Theatre, very favorably, calling the first half of the play very well acted, directed, and intellectually thrilling. “Had Adjmi kept this sort of thing coming,” Stasio argues, “Stunning would have lived up to its considerable promise. But from some misguided notion of ‘drama,’ he allows his hyper-real play to take a melodramatic turn that is probably fatal.”37 In the New York Times, Jason Zinoman compares the play to its youthful protagonist, calling it “sensitive, full of promise and stymied by its own self-awareness.”38 This self-awareness is seconded by Adjmi himself, who in an interview close to the play’s opening in New York, discussed the rigorous re-writes the end of the play was receiving: “Some people understand it’s

34 Adjmi, Stunning and Other Plays, 24-26.
35 Adjmi, Stunning and Other Plays, 125.
satire; others take it literally,” Mr. Adjmi said of the play’s audiences. “It’s meant to be broad. I’m always crosshatching the satire and the tragedy.”

Perhaps wishing to keep the play’s climax a surprise, critics who called Stunning’s incendiary last act a dramatic failure did not discuss its political and theoretical significance. At those levels, the play’s failure is not aesthetic but, for many spectators, ideological. Adjmi’s nihilistic worldview, in which racial and ethnic difference erupt in violence rather than reach resolution, is unforgivably dispiriting to a bourgeois audience that longs to believe that such differences can be transcended. This is embodied by the boldness, the chutzpah, if you will, of his climactic image. Beyond the symbolic significance of watching a (seemingly) white man choke a black woman in a through of her own fraudulent whiteness, audiences were also subjected to over a minute of this image, forced to watch, feeling both helpless and implicated, sad and angry. Although not as cheery a feeling as that created by Key, Adjmi indeed conjures up his own form of affective transmission for playgoers.

What makes Adjmi’s play unique is its emphasis on Syrian Jews. Like other Arabs, these Jews are “technically white”—and socially more so. As thoroughly examined by Michael Rogin, Andrea Most, Linda Williams, and other researchers, Jews in America, once a highly racialized group, are today almost thoroughly assimilated into an American conception of whiteness. As demonstrated by Al Jolson’s legendary blackface in The Jazz Singer, European Jewish performers literally donned the persona of “the Negro” and structurally set themselves as less racialized by comparison. In the United States and Israel, Jews of Arab descent (also known as Sephardim or Mizharim) occupy a particularly fraught racial position. According to Ella Shohat, they are “both dominated and dominators, simultaneously disempowered as Orientals or ‘blacks’ vis-à-vis ‘white’ Euro-Israelis and empowered as Jews in a Jewish State.” The inversion of blackface that Adjmi constructs by having Ike whitewash Blanche is a literalization of the ambivalent position marginally white Arab Jews occupy in a contemporary American context. It is perhaps because of their Arab heritage’s current stigmatization and labeling as uncivilized that many Arab Jews use religion to distance themselves from their Muslim and Christian countrymen. Exemplifying this is a scene between Ike, Lily, and Lily’s parents, in which Lily, echoing ideas heard from Blanche, informs her family that


they are Arab, not white. To contradict her, Ike and his stepbrother Jojo expound on their status as Jews and as Zionists. Lily’s claim is silenced.

Although able to pass as white, members of the Syrian Jewish enclave of Midwood have remained traditionally Arab in many of their customs. Despite over 100 years in America, the enclave has fought against assimilation, most notably through a rabbinical edict declaring that “No male or female member of our community has the right to intermarry with non-Jews; this law covers conversion, which we consider to be fictitious and valueless.” As explained by journalist Zev Chafetz, the edict has resulted in an inward-looking and close-knit community. According to one informant, a graduate of Harvard Law School, “You come home from school and there are 10 women in the kitchen, your mother and aunts and cousins, cooking special Syrian delicacies…The etiquette is what they call *fadal*—just come. Very Middle Eastern.”

Unlike Ashkenazi Jews, whose emphasis on schooling has encouraged a normalizing form of assimilation, the Syrian Jews of Midwood look at Western education as exposure to another world, the world the edict resists. Many women are barely educated at all and most are married by their eighteenth birthday, like Adjmi’s protagonist, the innocent and impressionable Lily.

The exile of Midwood’s most famous son, fashion designer Isaac Mizrahi, demonstrates the community’s repudiation of homosexuality, which defies not only Jewish law but also the principle of community perpetuation on which the rabbinical edict is founded. As Lily says after realizing that Blanche is a lesbian, the yeshiva taught her that “the Man…orientated to the woman” and that “the Sodomites had sodomy, ca’an?” For Lily, lesbianism is not a choice or even a thought. As a child bride, she was relegated to the performance of compulsory heterosexuality.

The arrival of Blanche, what E. Patrick Johnson would call a “quare figure,” one who “destabilizes normative notions of identity in relation to localized racial and class knowledges,” disrupts Lily and Ike’s cozy, whitewashed home. Blanche’s “false whiteness” is predicated upon both her sexual orientation and her oft-discussed educational credentials, including a PhD in semiotics and critical theory from Brown. Within the Syrian Jewish community, one could argue, the only thing more suspicious than extensive Western education is faking such a pedigree. In this climactic scene, Adjmi is re-citing the final fight between Blanche DuBois and Stanley Kowalski in Tennesse Williams’ *A Streetcar Named Desire* with a revision; instead of a coded rape, audiences are privy to a blatant whitewashing. With the outing of Blanche’s education as a sham, Ike can now literally remind her that her dreams of whiteness, epitomized by her fake PhD and her identity as a lesbian of color, are in fact nothing more than an illusion. Ike, the Syrian Jew who uses his possessive investment in whiteness to become a successful

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45 Chafets, “The Sy Empire.”
46 Adjmi, *Stunning and Other Plays*, 54-56.
but unethical businessman—he runs a sweatshop in China—and claim his wage. This wage includes tearing apart the idea that mutual understanding between peoples of different races, ethnicities, and orientations will ever come to fruition.

In *Stunning*, Blanche becomes the ultimate scapegoat for racial fronting. She is a con-woman, a magician of gender and race. Although she at first comes across as a positive representation of an intelligent, worldly lesbian of color, Adjmi shatters Blanche’s education, well-spoken manner, and sexual orientation into the fragments of a failed whiteness. Moreover, any redistribution of normative signs of success suggested by Blanche’s PhD are excised as nothing more than a fantasy. Certainly, Blanche reifies the problematic trope of the suffering but fraudulent black parvenu, not least by committing suicide after her humiliating brawl with Ike. But Adjmi reserves his sharpest critique for the Syrian Jewish community from which he springs. Lily actually thanks Blanche for “being a good teacher.” “I was **lacking**; I never learned any **lessons**. Now I have life experience.” And what “lessons” did Lily “learn”? Not to mingle with or try to understand people who different from her; to stay in her community; and to continue performing the social identities—wife, mother, Jew—that she has been assigned. Meanwhile Ike opens more sweatshops in China.

Apart from his re-citation of Tennessee Williams, the theatrical text closest to Adjmi’s in concept and execution is John Guare’s *Six Degrees of Separation*, first staged and then filmed at the apex of the early 1990’s turn towards political correctness and multiculturalism. Like Blanche in *Stunning*, Paul—a raced and sexually othered character that comes to symbolize fraudulent identity—is *Six Degrees*’ most intriguing figure. Paul is the ultimate confidence man; a black homosexual who enters the apartments of New York’s Upper East Side elite by pretending to be Paul Poitier, the son of Sydney. With the name Poitier, Paul is able to overcome his racialized status and accrue the cultural capital he needs to pass among the elite. That Paul is a gay hustler is not, however, *Six Degrees of Separation*’s main focus. Rather, Paul as a liminal, magician-like figure is used to shatter the illusion of Louisa and Flanders Kittredge’s upper class life. Louisa’s encounter with Paul changes her, and even though she acknowledges the fraudulent nature of Paul’s behavior, she cannot help but wish that her experience with him could amount to more than just a conversation piece:

> How do we fit what happened to us into life without turning it into an anecdote with no teeth and a punch line you’ll mouth over and over for years to come.

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50 I adopt this notion of the queer figure as liminal, as a magician, from Judith Halberstam, who reads the archive of media representations on slain transman Brandon Teena in order to reclaim Teena’s life as a one truly lived. When, Halberstam asks, will the popular notion of minority sexual identities be categorized as any other than a ruse? Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Queer Bodies, Transcultural Lives* (New York: NYU Press, 2005), 61-73.

51 Adjmi, *Stunning and Other Plays*, 128.

52 For an excellent study of Paul in Guare’s play as a child queered by race and class, see Chapter 5 in Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, Or Growing Sideways in the 20th Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).
“Tell the story of the imposter who came into our lives”—“That reminds me of the time this boy” and we becoming these human jukeboxes, spilling out these anecdotes. But it was an experience. How do we keep the experience?53

Guare’s examination of racial and class guilt on the Upper East Side is what gives Six Degrees its intellectual power. Although no more than six degrees might separate any of us, Paul’s catalyzing presence “reflects a deeper gulf between all those who believe themselves to share the world.”54 But that is all Paul is: a presence. He is given no real agency or accountability; he just fades out the picture. As in so many works meant for ideal neoliberal multicultural spectators, the othered figure exists solely to affect those in the majority. The perpetuation of this conceit is one of Six Degrees’ great flaws, even if many critics, perhaps too invested in the project of multiculturalism, have been late in conceding this.

Unlike in Six Degrees, the lines between “us” and “them,” between black and white, are never clear in Stunning. In the world that Adjmi portrays, everyone has a false claim to whiteness. For the Schweckys, their financial successes and Jewish identities allow them to possess white privilege. Blanche accrues her whiteness through intellect and a distinct form of queer identity. In the end, both forms of fraudulent whiteness are exposed. Whereas Guare reads Paul’s act as a positive memory for his victims, indeed “an experience,” Blanche’s fate is not so rosy. Paul taught audiences that even bad interactions with people of other races could be positive; Blanche’s assault and subsequent suicide results in the recognition that not all multicultural “experiences” are beneficial. Unlike Guare, who recognizes differences through a feel-good use of memory and experience, Adjmi will not let audiences congratulate themselves on the state of race relations in America. After constructing recognizable human characters with whom spectators can easily empathize, Adjmi pulls the realistic rug from under his dramatic situation and sensationally forces audiences to endure a graphic mutilation that abruptly cuts short any Utopian imaginings inspired by Blanche and Lily’s love affair. Following the play’s iteration of quotes by Hegel and Gramsci, Stunning proves that “The theatre of history is a theatre of unhappiness,”55 and that history is a never-ending vicious cycle that “must repeat like a bad case of acid reflux.”56 Rather than placating audiences, Adjmi, following his play’s title, is interested in stunning them into realizing the limits, perhaps the impossibility, of recognition.

Thinking Beyond Recognition

If the theatre of history is indeed a theatre of unhappiness, then what strategies and tactics are open to us to create a new theatre? If even the Utopian imagining of a different world in which two men can disregard the existence of war in the name of “queer connection” is fraught with the remnants of colonial subjugation, if history must

56 Adjmi, Stunning and other Plays, 53.
Indeed repeat itself like harsh indigestion, then what is the right prescription to help assuage this chronic disease? Maybe, contrary to Taylor, Povinelli, Honneth, and Fraser, what we are searching for is in fact not equal recognition or the re-distribution of assets but rather a politics of equal respect predicated upon recognizing the relative un-recognizability of the other. Following Wendy Brown, it would not just tolerate those different than we are, it would strive to “accept” people on their own terms, not those chosen by the ideological majority. It would also strive to create a version of success and acceptance that does not reify age-old conceptions of power.

If we are indeed hoping to live in a world where we mutually respect each other because of our differences, then we must reconsider the relationship between recognition and power. To follow Povinelli, having the ability to recognize someone as equal immediately implies an uneven power dynamic, one that either purposely or inadvertently brings into play a trove of historically situated binaries (man/woman, black/white, straight/gay) that still have affective contours for many people. Even if neoliberal multiculturalism makes differences of race, gender, and sexual object choice seemingly un-important, it still relies on the historic assumption that the power we are attempting to harness relies upon rules created by straight, white men. To quote Kath Weston:

When things (gender, visible) are moments (gender, temporal) conceived in relation to other things, analysis shifts from congealed gender differences toward shifting relations of power and production. What accounts for the places where gender effects are produced, the reconfiguration of looking and lingering and timing, under this set of historical conditions or that? Who labors, who wanders, who appropriates, who hits, who savors, who endeavors, somehow in this process coming up gendered? Might there by a way to retain gender without perpetuating inequality? Why not reconfigure gender relations so that they need not entail hierarchy or oppression? Why not reconceive power as a positive capacity instead of a resource to be seized or a weapon used to strike somebody down? Shouldn’t it be possible to have your gender and eat well too?

Although Weston’s prescient questions revolve around notions of gender, they are also applicable to questions of sexual orientation and race. For Weston, equal recognition can only exist under two conditions: the eradication of power or the use of power for positive means. Until this time, “equal recognition” will always be a fallacy, a Utopian performative with no hope of actualization, making clear the unchanging nature of power dynamics in regards to race, gender, and sexuality; they have not disappeared, they have merely been displaced. In other words, having power, even when it is re-distributed to those accustomed to not having any, is still gendered masculine and racialized white, while powerlessness retains its historical connotations of effeminacy and blackness.

When we apply Weston’s research questions to the two moments of theatrical recognition at the heart of this chapter, two very different types of answers seem to be enunciated. In Adjmi’s brutal worldview, Blanche’s education, erudition, and sexual

orientation in spite of her class background and skin color are constructed as bridges that help one reach the end of a progress narrative where one arrives: powerful and rich. Standing in the way of this progress are men like Ike who, in a post-9/11 context, disassociate themselves from their Arab identities in order to become Zionist American Jews, hoping to wield their Jewish-ness and economic expense (even, or especially at the expense of others) as their ticket to power and hence the social benefits and power oft associated with whiteness. Blanche’s status as a proud lesbian of color, as well as her seduction of Ike’s child bride, make her the ultimate threat to his sense of control, his identity as a man, and the sense of power attached to that label. In order to prove his dominance over her, Ike must literalize his control in terms of whiteness. The white trough of paint that sits in the corner of the Schwecky’s home from the play’s commencement becomes, following Chekov, the play’s gun, which must go off before the curtain closes. Here, power must be wielded as a weapon, and the power associated with masculinity and whiteness can be nothing but a resource to be seized. To put it another way, although neoliberal multiculturalism strips and harnesses differences of race and gender to allow the inclusion of once unacceptable subjects, the historical connection between these concepts and raced/gendered notions of power have not changed, a fact that Adjmi makes stunningly clear in his visceral, brutal moment of forced whiteface.

Contrary to Adjmi, Key believes that there is a way to have gender and racial difference without any differentiation in power, and utilizes his magical kiss as one such moment to demonstrate its feasibility. In Key’s Utopian vision, queerness is a subjectivity with which subjects have no fear, only pride, “in us, in our people, in our everlasting overcoming, in our ability to love, to show love no matter what” and that “We [queers] are everywhere” and that “We are love and we shall overcome.” Overcoming, however, seems to be replete with its own set of unwittingly gendered and racialized assumptions. For example, from the onset of their interaction, Key assumes the role of top. Showing off his “best cowboy American marine swagger” Key plays “man” to the Iraqi boys’ woman, the powerful soldier to the powerless civilian. The scene ends just at it begins with Key giving his “best cowboy-American Marine jumping on his horse leap,” the proud American made virile by his erotic triumph over the feminized other. Key’s sense of queer connectivity and belonging to a “gay tribe” allows him to depoliticize his subject position, seeing them both as equal. In “The Kiss,” “queer connection” and the sense of equal recognition that stems from it is a panacea for all forms of social ills and the negative effects of military intervention. Key’s moment of recognition and sexual attraction is wrapped in an uncomfortable discourse that conjures up some version of a gay universal, completely forgetting what normative, raced, and gendered structures of power are left intact in the claiming of such a universal.

What would a theatrical vision of a politics of mutual respect, one invested in destabilizing normative notions of power and success, look like? Although my critique of The Eyes of Babylon has been especially cutting, this is precisely because, unlike Adjmi’s cynical evocation of an unhappy future, the Utopian impulse of Key’s piece, misrecognized as it may be, aspires for a politics of equal respect. As Key makes clear in the documentary Semper Fi: A Marine’s Journey, he originally joined the army because of his love for his country and his desire to protect it. Before being deployed to Iraq, Key

59 Key, “Lance Corporal Key’s Middle East Vacation,” 74.
60 Ibid, 75.
read up on the history of Islam in an effort to ‘know my enemy.’”\textsuperscript{61} What he learned through his experience as an occupying peacekeeper was that someone “had suddenly switched the enemy!;” it was no longer Islam” but “George Bush and the American right,” forcing their own people to fight a war for no reason other than to prove that “they were the biggest, baddest boys club in the world.”\textsuperscript{62} Although Key inadvertently uses the rhetoric of being one of the biggest, baddest boys to woo a potential sexual partner, it still seems as if he hopes to approach Akhmed as his equal. Although this impulse results in a moment of misrecognition, Key attempts to look at the Iraqi boy as a full person, not just a puppet of war. The attempts at a politics of equal respect, both in real life and the stage, are merely that: experiments at trying to bring in a new type of world into fruition. Through trial and error, in everyday life and its’ theatrical representation, we will misrecognize our way to recognition and a different future; one where history does not repeat itself but rather cracks open to reveal a new world where respect, not recognition, tolerance, or redistribution is the new interpersonal modus operandi.\textsuperscript{63}

This new politics of “mutual respect” would also not valorize subjects solely for their ability to succeed in a neoliberal marketplace. Moving from the realm of intimate spectacle to one of the most garish and heightened forms of spectacle, the next chapter focuses on Muslim-American representation on contemporary reality television. Unlike in a theatrical context, where a politics of recognition is often an explicit aim of its creators, questions of recognition, mutual respect, and tolerance seem unimportant benchmarks, if not impediments, to creating entertaining reality television.

\textsuperscript{62} \textit{Semper Fi: A Marine’s Journey}.
Chapter 4
Muslim Heritage, American Identity?
Reality, Television, and the Narcissistic Reconfiguration of Normal

A Tale of Two Realities

On December 12th, 2011, national home improvement chain Lowes, succumbing to pressure from the Florida Family Association and other right-wing groups threatening a boycott, announced it was pulling its sponsorship of The Learning Channel’s newest reality series, *All-American Muslim.* Depicting the daily life of middle-class Muslim Americans in Dearborn, MI, the program, debuting in early November of the same year, gained immediate media attention not for its melodrama or absurdity, but rather because of its quotidian qualities. Rather than presenting a stereotypical view of Muslims as extremist, *All-American Muslim* represented Muslims as normal Americans: raising children, playing football, getting pregnant, fighting with conservative parents. As stated by FFA founding member David Canton, it is the show’s overwhelming normalcy, “its absence of the application of Islamic code” that makes it not only unrepresentative but ideologically dangerous. Commenting on the inherent absurdity of Canton’s remark, *The Daily Show’s* Jon Stewart retorted, “the problem with the show is the absence of radicalism…the problem is the televising of Muslims without the terrorist element…. You’re angry about that.” Although the controversy which developed as a result of Lowes’ (and a number of other companies) decision to pull their commercials put the show in the media spotlight, and despite good reviews from critics citing the show as depicting “an accurate view of Muslim-American life,” *All-American Muslim’s* ratings dwindled during its first season, resulting in its eventual cancellation.

Premiering three months later to little political fanfare was Bravo’s *The Shahs of Sunset,* a reality series centered on the lives of six wealthy Iranian-Americans from Beverly Hills. With its central cast including an out homosexual and two Persian Jews, *Shahs* was not interested in questions of religion or assimilation, but, like its sister programs *The Real Housewives of...*(New York, New Jersey, Orange County, Atlanta), focused on the spending habits and narcissistic behavior of its protagonists. Although critics acknowledged that *Shahs* amplified “the longstanding stereotyping of Los Angeles's Iranian-Americans as vulgar, materialistic show-offs who don’t fit in among

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2 See *The Daily Show,* season 17, episode 34, first broadcast December 11, 2011 by Comedy Central Network.

3 Ibid.


the city’s supposedly more cultured elites,” the show remained a success with viewers and was renewed for a second season.6

This chapter explores the ways in which community, capitalism, and the representation of Muslim and Middle Eastern Americans on reality television post-9/11 have become entangled with one another. What can the performance of “Middle Eastern community” on reality shows tell us about the connection between class, secularism, and the limits of American tolerance? What is it about the conflation of middle/lower-class subjectivity with religious practice, specifically Islam, that makes it so incredibly scary to American viewers? And, by contrast, what is it about the depiction of upper-class, secular Muslim Americans that is ideologically assuaging? By taking the study of popular culture, reality television, and the performance of everyday life seriously, we can begin to see that it is not Islam or even Muslim American communities that the average viewer/subject is trained to be frightened of, but the ways in which being a practicing Muslim is conflated with a disinterest in normalizing forms of neoliberal multicultural subjectivity, be they about either the free market or the free person.

This chapter argues the reception of the Muslims of Dearborn as both scary and boring and the Shahs, by contrast, as repellent but fascinating is reflective of larger trends in American society about the relationship between racial, sexual, and religious difference and newly created forms of acceptable citizenship. Rather than thinking about these examples in isolation, I am interested in the ways in which the communities represented in both shows can be read as being at different narratological points on the same road to inclusion as full Americans. On this trajectory, the families of All-American Muslim can be read as being “less American” than their Persian counterparts, not because of generational issues (both programs highlight the experiences of second-generation Middle Eastern Americans) but because of their more traditional, middle-class, and religious lifestyle choices. The Shahs of Sunset, on the other hand, represents a seemingly post-racial society in which questions of sexual/religious/ethnic/racial difference are superseded by access to an overabundance of capital. This trajectory from the boring normalcy of All American Muslim to the overindulgent narcissism of the Shahs is best reflected by seven shared features that are manifested differently in each program: 1) From Exceptional Normalcy to Abnormal Exceptionalism; 2) From Real People to Real Estate; 3) From Faith to Secularism; 4) From a Post-Racial Society to the Reification of Race; 5) From Feminist Coalition to Feminist Consumption; 6) From the Queerness of Islam to The Rise of the Homonational; and 7) From Drama to “Drama.” Following these trajectories, the romance of recognition and the dream of being wealthy and acceptable diasporic subjects might actually be something closer to a nightmare.

Are today’s stigmatized All-American Muslims destined to become tomorrow’s Shahs of Sunset? Or are these but two examples of very different types of neoliberal multicultural existence, the tale of two very different realities in two very different cities and two very different Middle Eastern-American communities? After all, Dearborn, Detroit’s largest suburb, epitomizes the effects of big business on the little man, an apocalyptic nightmare of the Fordist era gone awry; unemployment, budget cuts, the wholesale decimation of one America’s most vibrant multicultural cities and the creation of a new lower ethnic and white middle-class that must fight to simply remain in the middle with little hope of economic advancement. Among the Muslims of Dearborn who

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would immigrate post-1965, many were political refugees from Lebanon and Palestine who needed to prove not only to mainstream America but to their more assimilated 2nd, 3rd, and 4th generation Christian Lebanese and Syrian counterparts that they were worthy of being “average” middle-class Americans. Meanwhile, the story of Persians in Los Angeles after the 1978 Iranian revolution and the assumption of power by the Ayatollah Khomeini is comprised mostly of Western-educated, upper-class, secular Muslims, supporters of Shah Reza Pahlavi, who left the country in order to live in the West. Moreover, the children of these immigrants went to Beverly Hills High School and, rather than being schooled in All-American Midwestern values, they were taught that the American Dream was associated with material spending and the creation of an individual self through the means of the market. Is the gloss of Hollywood more acceptable and aspirational as a sheen to subjectivity than the working-class ethos and middle-class morality of post-Fordist Detroit? Is the performance of religious piety (usually considered a symbol of acceptance) of Muslims in America both scary and boring enough that audiences would rather valorize the life of the wealthy, secular, and immoral? In order to answer these questions, one must examine the relationship between neoliberalism, multiculturalism, religion, sexuality, and the “performance of normalcy” in our current moment.

From Performing to Lampooning Normalcy

The earlier chapters of this dissertation have engaged with the romance of recognition as it relates to Arab and queer subjects and their desire to surpass social stigma and be recognized as equal and full citizens. Whether these romances take place in the museum space, in an epic transnational coming-of-age novel, or in live performance, each is invested with an impetus to create stable, socially acceptable subjects who can be biopolitically folded into an ever-expanding definition of what it means to American. Present in all three case studies has been an over-arching teleology—one of progress and social acceptance, seeing blindness to differences of race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation, and financial success. In each of these cases, severe examples of stigmatization (racial profiling, the sexual abuse of children) are overcome by adherence to briskly normativizing logics of inclusion that posit subjects as simultaneously anti-racist and reifying race. It is precisely the undergirding logic of this narrative of normalcy that can be read as neoliberal, pushing subjects to identify themselves in market terms. In such a neoliberal model, identity is both homogenous and heterogeneous, heterogeneity creating niche markets, making identity (i.e. one’s individuality) both a symptom of and an antidote to neoliberalism as a lived practice. Like the narrative of secularization theorized by Ann Pelligrini and Janet Jacobson, the telos of all-inclusive normalcy is inflected with a moralizing Protestant rhetoric and set of values that disguise themselves as universal.

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inalienable human rights, often Puritanical vis-a-vis questions of sexual difference, and biased toward those from the Christian-Judeo tradition. 9 Hence, the romance of recognition is synonymous with being rendered socially acceptable, religiously un-threatening, and financially lucid.

If most fictional renderings of this romance of recognition result in the creation of happy, stable subjects, the dream of recognition when it meets the medium of reality television is either a boring lesson in the social history of the stigmatized or a nightmare. Indeed, comparing All American Muslim and The Shahs of Sunset is a bit like comparing apples to oranges. All American Muslim was created by The Learning Channel as part of their pedagogical programming, following successful series like Little People, Big World, Sister Wives, and Jon and Kate Plus Eight, placing the spotlight on under-represented, even “freakish” populations and teaching the American public that they are “just like the rest of us,” interested in faith and family. The Shahs of Sunset, on the other hand, is on Bravo, a network that prides itself on “lifestyle” programming. Bravo’s out director of programming Andy Cohen first stated of the Shahs that they “spend a lot of money,” but it’s “great because Bravo is always putting a spotlight on different affluent lifestyles” and that “this is a group of people that doesn’t exist on television anywhere.” 10 Although the cast members of The Shahs of Sunset may be of an unique ethnic group, their affluent lifestyle is eerily similar to those found on other Bravo “lifestyle” programs such as The Real Housewives of Orange County, Atlanta, and Miami, while also reproducing the youth-oriented version of lifestyle television produced in abundance by MTV (The Real World, Jersey Shore).

This analysis is indebted to Evelyn Alsultany, who in Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation After 9/11 argues that “the representational mode that has become standard since 9/11 is to seek to balance a negative representation with a positive one,” what she refers to as “simplified complex representations.” 11 She claims that most mainstream representations post-9/11 follow Mamdani’s “good Muslim, bad Muslim” paradigm, that one’s status as good or bad is about one’s relationship to the United States, not to Islam. Echoing Jodi Melamed’s sentiments on neoliberal multiculturalism, Alsultany argues that the effect of this good/bad Muslim paradigm is that it can create a “post-race illusion that absolves viewers from confronting the persistence of institutionalized racism.” 12 Alsultany defines “simplified complex representations” as “strategies used by television producers, writers and directors to give the impression that the representations they are producing are complex.” 13 In her work on television drama post-9/11, Alsultany identifies seven specific strategies that help to

12 Ibid, 15.
create a post-race world, in which even stigmatized Arabs and Muslims are rendered as seemingly complex subjects.

Following Alsultany’s method of identifying representational strategies, this chapter attests that, at least in the genres of pedagogical and lifestyle reality television, rather than attempting to construct “simplified complex representations,” producers and editors are more interested in giving spectators “overly-complicated simple representations.” Following the excellent research by Mark Adrejевич, Marwan Kraidy, Annette Hill, and Mischa Kavka on the role reality television plays in the creation of autonomous subjectivity, I am interested in the ways in which this relatively new form of television manages to entertain and undermine, causing spectators to simultaneously feel empathy and shame, and to both question/discipline their own performance of self in a Foucauldian sense and utilize the shows to feel better about their own subject positions. Although the aforementioned work is quite groundbreaking, little of it explicitly relates to literature on either neoliberalism or multiculturalism. My work wishes to fill this critical lacuna.

In her conclusion, Alsultany advocates for the proliferation of “Arab and Muslim characters in contexts that have little to do with terrorism, extremism and oppression; characters that break out of the good/bad Muslim dichotomy; and characters in more leading and recurring roles.” Although TLC’s All-American Muslim managed to transmit to mainstream audiences just such an even-handed, honest, “real” view of Muslims in America, it proved to be if not too real, then at least exceedingly dull. According to Katherine Sender, “reality television doesn’t fictionalize ordinariness—as in the novel, it represents ordinary people—or at least unusual groups of ordinary people willing to be represented in their ordinariness to potentially vast numbers of strangers.” Expanding on this idea, Laura Grindstaff argues that what trashy TV talk shows of the Jerry Springer and Sally Jesse Raphael variety share with other media is “the tendency to deny ordinary people routine access unless they engage in exceptional behavior.” As the first reality series about Muslims in America, post-9/11, it feels as if the producers of All-American Muslim had a pedagogical obligation to frame Muslims as unexceptional, as normal. This obligation may have portrayed Muslims as sympathetic, but it did not register for many as “good television.” Devoid of the cliffhangers and edited “dramatic tension” found in many reality shows, regardless of sub-genre, All-American Muslim seemed almost doomed to fail from its inception. On the other hand, The Shahs of Sunset seemed destined for audience fascination, given that it pairs two very different modes of

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15 Alsultany, Arabs and Muslims in the Media, 171.
exceptionalism: that of racial/ethnic uniqueness with that of extreme wealth. The form of exceptionalism most lauded on lifestyle television, extreme wealth and the caricature-like performances it abets always creates some new “drama” as the cliffhanger of an episode, thus making for “good television.”

By examining the fear and boredom associated with *All-American Muslim*’s failed attempt at depicting “real life” for those practicing Islam in the United States in conjunction with the fascination and schadenfreude that help to make *The Shahs of Sunset* a success, I hope to illustrate the ideological instantiation of yet another narrative of neoliberal multicultural inclusion. This narrative of inclusion expects exceptional behavior only from rich, secular, and seemingly unthreatening subjects at the same time as it coerces geopolitically stigmatized subjects into disciplining themselves into the performance of being model citizens. As manifested through changes in representational strategies from pedagogical to lifestyle programming, this narrative turns what could be “complex representations” into “overly-complicated simple representations” of Arabs, Muslims, and Middle Eastern Americans, in which complex subjectivities are erased and replaced with self-obsessed “drama.” Similarly, the trajectory of mainstream recognition can also be analyzed as a shift in Americans’ ethical and moral values. Whereas the middle-class, second-generation Muslim American residents of Dearborn seem to be disciplining themselves in order to be “good Americans,” the titular *Shahs of Sunset* might be good Americans, but they are most certainly not represented as good people; instead, they appear to be spoiled, narcissistic children driven by their basest desires.

This reverse trajectory from work to play, from self-disciplining to self-pleasuring is reminiscent of ideas about *Eros and Civilization* theorized by Freud and Marcuse. Extrapolating from what Freud called “the transformation of the pleasure principal into the reality principal,” Marcuse argues that the realities of a specific “socio-historical world” shape the animal man, allowing “a fundamental transformation of his nature, affecting not only the instinctual aims but also the instinctual ‘values’—that is the principals that govern the attainment of the aims.”

According to Freud and Marcuse, and later Michel Foucault, this developmental shift from pleasure to reality often requires a number of shifts in mindset: from immediate satisfaction, pleasure, joy, receptiveness, and a lack of repression to delayed satisfaction, the restraining of pleasure, toil (work), productiveness, and security. Marcuse locates the difference between these two dimensions or stages as structural: “the unconscious, ruled by the pleasure principle, comprises ‘the older primary processes, the residues of a phase of a development’” that “strive for nothing but pleasure,” until, through the process of socialization, “the individual comes to the traumatic realization that full and painless gratification of his needs is impossible,” resulting in man learning to give up “momentary, uncertain, and destructive pleasure for delayed, restrained but ‘assured’ pleasure.” For Freud and Marcuse, “the reality principal supersedes the pleasure principal.”

This move towards a reclamation of the pleasure principle elucidates important facets of what Boltanski and Chiapello coin “the new spirit of capitalism,” a concept that

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19 Ibid, 12.
Jodi Melamed refers to as “the spirit of neo-liberalism.” This spirit erases racial, sexual, gendered, and religious difference as long as financial sustainability is achieved. Moreover it creates sameness out of difference, conflating individualism with the creation of new markets. This move from “simplified complex representations” to “overly-complicated simple representations,” from the reality principal (i.e from the boring performance of normalcy) back to the pleasure principle (i.e. the performance of narcissism), can be best explained by examining different trajectories of subject-hood and citizenship.

If, indeed, being a good subject (and by extension, in our current era, being a good neoliberal multicultural subject) is predicated upon a refusal of the pleasure principal and an intense belief in the values of thrift, toil, and delayed gratification (so that one’s children will have more than they themselves did), then the cast members of All-American Muslim should come across as ideal neoliberal multicultural subjects. Conversely, the immoral, childlike behavior of the Shahs of Sunset should condemn them to being read as the worst kind of neoliberal multicultural subjects, obsessed with instant gratification and pleasure, motivated only by self-interest. Could it be that the cast-members of All-American Muslim are unacceptable precisely because of how acceptable they are despite/because of their belief in Islam (considered by many as a priori un-American) while the Shahs are acceptable because, following their other lifestyle television counterparts, they are unacceptable in expected, entertaining ways? Perhaps, then, what we are experiencing is not a teleological return to the pleasure principle, but rather a constant bouncing between the reality and the pleasure principal, a Deleuzian process of deterriorialization and reterritorialization, where certain subjects can live the pleasure principal at the expense of others. Unlike a normal model of bio-politics, the necropolitical subjects here are not the destitute but rather the middle-class.

In order to trace these bi-directional trajectories between the reality principal and the pleasure principal, I structure this chapter by examining seven different facets of this trajectory that taken together show the ways in which what is considered normal and acceptable behavior is different for different subjects, especially when differences in religion and class background are taken into account. Furthermore, although these shifts in representation attempt to imply success and acceptance, this return to the pleasure principle for some subjects and not for others might have more dystopian dimensions than one expects, making clear the limits of both neoliberalism and multiculturalism as social projects.

From Exceptional Normalcy to Abnormal Exceptionalism

Depicting the everyday travails of five families in Dearborn, Michigan, the U.S.’s largest Arab American enclave, All-American Muslim succeeds at depicting just how

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21 I adopt my use of the Deleuzian concepts of assemblage, de- and reterritorialization, as well as Agamben and Rey Chow’s concepts of bio-politics in a similar way to that of Jasbir Puar. For more on this please refer to the Introduction, 10-12.
nuanced and poly-vocal Arab American subjectivity is. Structurally, the show’s producers intersperse documentary footage of the five families with live debate in which different characters hash out opposing views on what it means to be a practicing Muslim in America. The debate portions of the program have a two-part pedagogical imperative: to teach Americans the basic tenets of Islam and to make clear the myriad ways different subjects decide to perform these tenets. These debates also surface unanswerable questions, such as “can a woman consider herself a Muslim if she is not veiled?” and “can one participate in ‘All-American’ activities such as tailgating, playing football, and owning a nightclub and still retain their identities as Muslims?” Watching five women, two wearing the hijab, three choosing not to, debate the religious and personal merits of the veil on American television is groundbreaking not only because of its content, but also because it demonstrates to mainstream viewers how the signification of religion and the personal practice of religion are not interchangeable concepts. In doing so, the program manages to dispel long held stereotypes of Muslims as uncivilized and misogynistic.

However, for each nuanced depiction of the Arab American community in Dearborn, there remains a pedagogical imperative to illustrate to Americans just how “normal” Muslims are. To this end, certain tropes of America are over-emphasized. Take the Zabaan family, led by patriarch Fuad, who introduces himself by saying the most important things in his life are his “family, Islam, and football.”22 Most of Zabaan’s storyline focuses on the trials he encounters scheduling practices for the Fordson High School football team during the month of Ramadan.23 To underscore their status as both Muslims and Americans, the team reverts to night practices after iftar dinner. Zabaan is even invited by President Obama to Ramadan Dinner at the White House, highlighting what a noteworthy Muslim American he is. This theme of portraying Muslims as not just acceptable but exceptional Americans, many of whom have careers supporting the homeland security state, became the show’s raison d’être as reinforced by the rest of the show’s cast. Mike Jaffar is Chief Deputy in Wayne County’s police force; Nadar Aoude is a CIA operative; Suhalia Amen not only works for the government but also flies to Washington to participate in panels about Muslim American profiling. Each depiction of Muslim American exceptionalism is paired with a signifier of American normalcy. Indeed, it is Zabaan’s status as an excellent football coach that in many ways is able to cancel out the “un-American” aspects of his Muslim faith, as made evident by gratuitous shots of Zabaan and his students on the football field. A similar juxtaposition of the normal and the abnormal occurs for Amen, a fiercely intelligent veiled woman. Amen is often depicted out on girls’ nights with her Christian Lebanese friends at bars and restaurants.

Whereas the featured players on All-American Muslim wish to depoliticize their Muslim identities through a rhetoric of normalcy, the Shahs manifest their apolitical subjectivities through their high salaries, individual style choices, and lavish lifestyles. All-American Muslim has a clear pedagogical imperative, trying to show viewers that Muslims are “just like us.” Shahs’ raison d’être is more voyeuristic. The performance of

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22 “How to Marry A Muslim,” All-American Muslim, season 1, episode 1, first broadcast November 13, 2011 by TLC Productions.
23 For more on the link between football, Arab-American identity and patriotism see Fordson: Faith, Fasting, Football, directed Rashid Ghazi (Dearborn: North Shore Films LLC, 2011), DVD.
community on display in *Shahs* is one that likens being an acceptable Persian-American—the subjects of *Shahs* are first introduced as having fled during the Iranian Revolution—to being wealthy, secularized, and fabulous. GG, the program’s resident eccentric “rich bitch,” prides herself on never wearing the same outfit twice, while Reza, the cast’s out homosexual, feels little to no form of social stigmatization from those of his generational cohort (and his liberal mother) for his object choice, due in large part to his financial success and his desire to find a monogamous partner. Exemplifying this even more is the program’s mixing of Persian Jews and Muslims, utilizing ethnicity rather than religion as the litmus test for what constitutes an “[L.A Persian.” In fact, the least accepted membrr of the *Shahs*’ clan is Asa, the self-identified artist and bohemian who prides herself as more authentically Persian due to her being a political refugee from a lower-class family. Asa’s thrift store style and bohemian presentation are immediately at odds with the ostentatious self-performance of her peers, making clear the link between community acceptance and an inherent belief in capitalism. Although Asa’s differences from her peer group should make her the vehicle for audience identification, her obsession with her image as “a Persian Pop Priestess” and her role as the homemaker/trophy wife to Jermaine Jackson Jr. make her seem, like the rest of the *Shahs* cast, too narcissistic for real empathy.

In her work *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*, Aihwa Ong postulates that the yoking of concepts of neoliberalism and exceptionalism allows one to “trace neoliberal technology to a bio-political mode of governing that centers on the capacity and potential of individuals,” a capacity that is often utilized by existing governmental regimes. For Ong, people are controlled by two dominant technologies of control: “technologies of subjectivity” and “technologies of subjection.” Although all individuals move between these technologies, those that have material or ideological access to technologies of subjectivity (creating an individual identity by, through, and in spite of cultural guidelines) are able to build identities that prove to be exceptions to the rule, what Ong calls “neoliberalism as exception.” Meanwhile those that must cover up, change, or assimilate parts of their identities due to their incompatibility in lifestyle choice or religious custom in America must prove themselves as exceptions to neoliberalism. Using such a logic, the middle-class families depicted on *All-American Muslim* must render themselves (and be depicted by producers and editors as) exceptionally unexceptional, under constant surveillance and subjection, while the *Shahs of Sunset* prove to be more exceptional, creating their own subjectivity with, in, and through the free market. Even though Dearborn’s *All-American Muslim*’s good behavior might make them come across as better Americans, this does not make for as good television as taking pleasure in watching the excessive misbehavior of the *Shahs of Sunset*.

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From Real People to Real Estate

As many scholars of television have made clear, the shift from scripted to reality/documentary programming that began in the 1980’s, reaching a saturation point at the beginning of the 21st century, was mostly motivated by economic factors. In addition to being exponentially less expensive then their scripted counterparts (replacing writers and actors with editors and voluntary participants), reality television shows also created a new form of subliminal product placement in which advertisers could embed their products into the everyday lives and the mise-en-scene of the reality television frame. Moreover, the recent popularity of the sub-genre of lifestyle television, in addition to providing a built-in platform for highlighting the latest in couture fashion (as modeled by the show’s titular housewives and Shahs), they also are cheap to produce, substituting a set designer with a location hunter and a constructed set with shots of many million dollar listings.

If the popularity of Million Dollar Listings, The Real Housewives, and Shahs of Sunset are any indication, many spectators responded to the economic crash of 2008 with an even greater desire to see the lifestyles of those unaffected by financial turmoil. The economic downturn only managed to intensify the relationship between reality TV and real estate. Moreover, the connection between sex and real estate, asserted by Marjorie Garber, is more of a displacement of sexual pleasure than an erasure, one in which the acquisition of material objects becomes a new form of sexually charged pleasure, a Keeping up with the Joneses with erotic undertones. In Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched, Mark Andrejevic relates this to both surveillance and libidinal economies:

The role of making oneself seen, and hence of the scopic drive, is central to the emerging surveillance economy in which the transparency of the subject has an increasingly important role to play in the rationalization of production…. Rather than retaining a fidelity to an ever receding goal, in short, it finds its idiotic satisfaction in the closed cycle of repeatedly missing its goal, and thereby, in the eclipse of the goal itself. In this respect, the connection between a psychoanalytic approach and social theory can be drawn; the logic of the drive describes the libidinal economy of the closed cycle of production for their own sake.

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26 See Jason Mittell, Television in American Culture (New York: Oxford University, 2009).
27 The crash can also have been said to humanize the 1%, making once selfish people into subjects of empathy. Epitomizing this is the success of The Queen of Versailles, a documentary that examines the plight of one wealthy family; begun originally as a critique of the excess of the rich, the film soon became a study of the family’s unraveling post the economic bust of 2008, making the film more complex. See The Queen of Versailles, directed by Lauren Greenfield (New York Evergreen Pictures, 2012), DVD.
29 This concept of watching the lifestyle foibles of the wealthy and lazy is not new, but was also a topic of great literature for gilded age writers such as Theodore Dreiser and F. Scott Fitzgerald. For more information on this concept historically, see Susan J. Matt, Keeping up with the Joneses: Envy in American Consumer Society, 1890-1930 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).
30 Andrejevic, Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched, 175.
Following the work of Lyotard, Andrejevic sees a libidinal economy as giving affective dimensions to material entities. As such, it should come as no surprise that the cast members of Shahs are almost uniformly high-end real estate agents and developers. In addition to giving spectators access to the lifestyles of the rich and the famous, Shahs also highlights a new form of market economy in which production exists for its own sake; no matter how beautiful, there will always be a new house to sell. The Persian community in Los Angeles can be seen as specializing in a trade that has no use value and creating its own new libidinal economy of use value. Moreover, real estate is but one aspect of the libidinal economy the Shahs of Sunset bring into being. The only two Shahs cast members who are not involved in real estate own their own businesses; GG’s hair extension company and Lilly’s swimwear line are emblematic of the ways in which even one’s body (their temple or home, if you will) is subject to constant alteration and renovation. These Shahs even turn animal companionship into another form of status symbol, each Persian Princess equipped with her purse-sized pooch, echoing the dog-as-accessory trend made popular by Paris Hilton and Nicole Ritchie a decade ago during the consolidation of lifestyle reality television as a genre.

Although the cast members of The Shahs of Sunset are more cognizant consumers, this does not mean that the middle-class subjects of All-American Muslim are any less complicit in the conflation of community and capital. In fact, the need to make Dearborn’s Muslims legible to the American mainstream results in the community’s pastoralization, making them embody many of the normative family values and gender roles found in sitcoms from the 1950’s like Leave it to Beaver or Father Knows Best. As Miranda Joseph eloquently argues, it is by “placing community in an idealized past, disconnected from the present as if by epochal break” that “the romance of community ‘elides the material processes that have transformed social relations.’” By utilizing a rhetoric of middle-class morality and traditional family values, the cast members of All-American Muslim aspire to make clear that their religion is compatible with the dominant values found in Judeo-Christian society. Often, this is done by demonstrating themselves to be good capitalists. Indeed, even the occasion of young girls taking on the hijab becomes an excuse for a shopping montage. Reflecting this entrepreneurial capitalist spirit is cast member Nina Bazy, whose family owns and operates Greenfield Manor, Dearborn’s largest catering and banquet hall. Bazy has hopes of expanding her empire into running a nightclub, even if promoting the consumption of alcohol (especially when spearheaded by a woman) is considered risqué and out of line with the shared values of the community. Even the middle-class Amen family makes some of their money through real estate, a fact revealed when audience members learn that newlyweds Shadiya and Jeff will move into a property owned by Amen’s mother, Leila. Jeff makes a joke about this fact, asking if renting from his mother-in law grants her full access to their house and their personal lives; this joke is reflective of the surveillance economy that subjects now find themselves in, especially those of the middle-class. Moreover, that it was Lowes, a resolutely neoliberal cooperation whose growth was catalyzed by the 1990’s real estate

33 “Muslims Moving On,” All-American Muslim, season 1, episode 5, first broadcast December 11, 2011, TLC Productions.
boom, that pulled sponsorship is doubly prescient; it epitomizes both the DIY middle class investment in home as property (devoid of sex) and is a obvious symbol of Arab American’s outsider status vis-a-vis this mainstream American middle class.

Perhaps the most controversial moment of *All-American Muslim* had nothing to do with religion but rather with dog ownership and allergies. The show’s biggest backlash occurred when Shadiya made Jeff give up his beloved dog, Wrigley, due to her allergies—and the facts that dogs are considered *najles* (unclean) in Muslim culture and that most Arabs are “traditionally not animal people.”34 The controversy over Wrigley the dog escalated with many bloggers calling Muslims “inherently un-American” due to their lack of desire for canine companionship.35 Unlike on *Shahs of Sunset*, where a tiny dog is a symbol of one’s worth in a capitalist community, the mentioning of man’s best friend as unclean and uncivilized makes the Muslim, not the canine, appear uncivil. The Wrigley controversy makes clear some of the ways in which some Muslims and Muslim Americans cannot/do not/do not want to participate in aspects of this libidinal economy.

**From Faith to Secularism**

Following Charles Taylor, Talal Asad, Jose Cassanova, and Saba Mahmood, I see secularism not just as the separation of church and state, or the relegation of the religious to the private sphere, but as a set of ideological assumptions and historically specific contingencies.36 This is of particular interest since, especially in the United States, secularism as a social project was created in order to safeguard religious freedoms. However, as Ann Pellegrini and Janet Jacobsen argue, America’s “secular constitution” has embedded within it a moral and ethical matrix based on Protestant thought.37 An inability to convert to certain secular modes of being is seen not only as threatening but also as intrinsically related to violence and barbarism. Exemplifying this were a number of audience members on Anderson Cooper’s CNN talk show who claimed that if the cast members were indeed “good Americans” then they must not be “good Muslims” since being a good Muslim is associated with despicable aspects of sharia law and the suppression of women and sexual freedom.38

On a FOX News broadcast from November 11th, 2011, three cast members of *All-American Muslim* appeared promoting the new series. The cast was first asked about their faith, a topic about which most of the “inconsistencies, inaccuracies, curiosities lie.”39 Nawal Aoude, a hijab-wearing new mother and respiratory therapist explained: “Our faith

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34 “Muslims Moving On”
38 See *Anderson Live*, season 1, episode 49, first broadcast November 17, 2011, CNN Productions.
39 “Interview with Cast of *All-American Muslim*,” *FOX News*, first broadcast November 11, 2011.
is like any other faith, there are rules and laws just like any other faith and we follow them to the best of our ability.” Nina Bazy, the more secular seeming of the two Muslim women chimed in that “we follow them in our own ways.” In order to prove the compatibility of Islam with American culture, the cast members of All-American Muslim emphasized the multifarious ways in which the religion is practiced. In doing so, they hoped to prove that Muslims in America can be folded into secular public life. Whereas Auode “follows her faith” by wearing the hijab and involving herself in Dearborn’s religious community, Bazy’s mode of practicing her faith might seem to some to be in name only, but as a self-identifying Muslim, Bazy manages to straddle the line between religious and secular, between being culturally Muslim and culturally Western.

Whereas Bazy’s subject position is presented as complex, involving constant negotiation between her various parts and identities, the Shahs of Sunset cast members might be of mixed religious background (Muslim, Jewish, and mixed), but their sense of Muslim-ness is purely cultural and secular. Although it represents a secular community, the program also makes clear how racial/religious mixing might be allowable socially but is not acceptable where procreation is concerned. Exemplifying this is the resident mean girl GG. GG hurls insults at homosexual Reza, repeatedly calling him “the turd that comes out when a Muslim and a Jew have a kid.” This insult is so incendiary for Reza that it prompts him to systematically blacklist GG from their shared social circle, setting the stage for most of the ongoing “drama” in the show’s second season. For a group of border-line alcoholic, sexually promiscuous thirty-somethings with no real connection to Islam, this loaded racist comment comes across as both an aberration and a persistent reminder that no matter how rich these Shahs may be, insecurities about their cultural and religious background still make them feel like second-class citizens. In fact, the only time religious practice is given in-depth coverage is when Mike and Reza are seen at family gatherings for Shabbat, Pesach, and Rosh Hashanah, allowing practicing Jews a seat at the secular table but relegating those of Muslim cultural heritage to practicing a rigor-less, unspecific, broad performance of androgynous Persian-ness. This androgynous Persian-ness is represented as ethnically unique, but unthreatening to mainstream Judeo-Catholic America.

From Post-Racial Discourse to Reifying Race

Whereas questions of the religious and secular are ever-present on All-American Muslim and barely mentioned on Shahs, the inverse is true when talking about race. During the eight-episode season of All-American Muslim, the question of race is never mentioned or brought up. When the practicing Muslim protagonists of the show talk about themselves in opposition to others, it is always in terms of them being non-Muslim. This reconfiguration of racial difference as religious difference is exemplified by the largest family on the series, the Amens. In the program’s pilot episode, Shadiya, the self-proclaimed “wild child” of the Amen family, is in the process of planning her wedding to Jeff McCarthy, a white, Irish Catholic from Chicago. In order to marry into the Amen family, McCarthy voluntarily converts to Islam much to the chagrin of his mother.

40 Ibid.
41 See “Please Bring a Man,” Shahs of Sunset, season 2, episode 5, first broadcast January 14, 2013, BRAVO Television Productions.
Although McCarthy converts of his own accord, the majority of his narrative arc concerns the difficulties he encounters attempting to practice his new faith. Surprisingly, McCarthy’s whiteness never seems to be at odds with his newfound identity as a Muslim American. Moreover, one of the most pious figures depicted on *All-American Muslim* is Leila Amen, Shadiya and Suhalia’s mother, a white woman who converted to Islam, wears the hijab, and has tried to the best of her ability to raise her children in the faith. Again, Amen’s racial or ethnic heritage is never mentioned and is not framed as a source of contention. Based on these examples, it is clear that the practicing Muslims of TLC’s reality program would subscribe to Nadine Naber’s paradigm of being Muslim first, and Arab second. Indeed, the featured characters on *All-American Muslim* seem to be acutely aware of the social construction of race, especially in relation to Islam, a religion that has practitioners from every ethnic and racial background. Although the Muslims of Dearborn wish to live in a post-racial world, post-racial discourse reifies race, turning these American Muslims into racialized subjects, regardless of their skin color.

On *The Shahs of Sunset*, however, issues of being Muslim or non-Muslim are never discussed, but questions of racial difference are constantly evoked. Due to the cast’s mix of religious backgrounds and various degrees of faith practice, what brings Jews and non-practicing Muslims together is a sense of Persian-ness as both an ethnic and a racial category. In the second-season opener, Reza Farahan and Mike Shouhed are seen complaining about “how crazy white people are”:

> White people do crazy shit, you know. If you go to a store and the clerk gives you an extra 20 by mistake you know a white person is going to return that shit real fast and you know a Persian is going to be like, you know what, they probably fucked me somewhere else down the line, this extra 20 is making up all the times that I’ve been screwed.

In another episode, Shohed, referring to drunk party-goers in Cabo San Lucas states that “White people are nuts. They do crazy things like wear fuzzy hats and Speedos. It’s crazy! I don’t get it.” Similarly, Reza consistently refers to his boyfriend Adam as “this white boy I’m dating” who is interested in “weird, hella white” activities like sea-glassing. However, it is precisely Adam’s boring/”white” desires and aspirations that make him a possible candidate as Reza’s future husband. Unlike on *All-American Muslim*, which tries to adopt a post-racial discourse in the name of a color-blind, all-inclusive form of Islam, all the while still inadvertently reifying race, *The Shahs of Sunset* capitalizes off of racial discourse, seeing power in terms of race and whiteness.

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44 “You Took an Ambian,” *Shahs of Sunset*, season 2, episode 6, first broadcast January 5, 2012, BRAVO Television Productions.
45 “Persh-a-Pelooza,” *Shahs of Sunset*, season 2, episode 10, first broadcast February 9, 2013, BRAVO Television Productions.
From Feminist Coalition to Feminist Consumption

In the conclusion of her work on the *Politics of Piety*, Saba Mahmood interrogates and destabilizes “the essential tropes through which knowledge of the Muslim world has been organized, key among them the trope of patriarchal violence and Islam’s (mis)treatment of women,” as exemplified by the veil, “the symbol and evidence of violence Islam has inflicted upon women.”46 Mahmood goes on to admit being struck by her audience’s “lack of curiosity as to what the veil might perform in the world beyond its violation of women.”47 Although the veil is not the only symbol of the ways in which the West thinks of Islam as uncivilized and backwards, it has indeed become the gateway drug for talking about all of the ways in which women are repressed. A veil signals the subjugation of women, making “modesty” seem unfeminist, implying that a woman cannot be strong-willed and veiled. Questions of the veil, drinking/partying, and immodest gender presentation, like those on other “guilty pleasure” reality shows, help to, following Jennifer Pozner, “foment gender-war ideology with deep significance for the intellectual and political development of a generation of viewers.”48

![Figure 10: Example of cropping normal: Veiled Cast member Amen framed by cocktail. Friday Night Bites” in All-American Muslim, Season 1, Episode 4, first broadcast December 4th, 2011, The Learning Channel Productions, 8:15-9:05, on Youtube, uploaded January 5, 2012, accessed October 26, 2013. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9KEDSZuQ3wE.](image)

*All-American Muslim* goes a long way in demonstrating how the veil can indeed perform something other than the suppression of women. Epitomizing the complexity of the hijab are the two veiled daughters of the Amen family, Suhalia and Samira. Samira

Fawaz’s narrative arc concerns her problems conceiving a child with her husband. After ten years of living without the headscarf, Samira decides to return to wearing the hijab in the hopes that by living a more pious lifestyle, Allah will bless her with a child. Fawaz’s reclamation of the veil stresses how one’s faith is always in flux, not a stagnant and unchanging part of one’s identity. Similarly, Samira’s sister Suhaila is a bit of an anomaly herself. During one girl’s night out with her more sexualized and non-Muslim friends, Amen is described as being a walking contradiction for most Muslim men in search of a pious, traditional spouse:

The dynamic with Suhaila is different than the dynamic with any other girl who is covered. Ok, for one, you look at her and she appears to be conservative but she likes to have fun just like us. The men who would normally go for the more conservative look are taken aback by the personality behind that look. She falls in between both worlds.\(^{49}\)

During these scenes, the camera takes effort to portray Amen as both traditional and modern, framing her veiled image with a martini glass in the foreground, as if to suggest that although she is religious herself and does not drink, she is a normal, American girl who likes to gossip and dance as her non-Muslim friends consume Cosmopolitans.

Juxtaposed with the Amen’s more traditional performance of Islam is Nina Bazy, a second-generation Lebanese woman with a wealthy husband and a young son, who is attempting to open a nightclub in Dearborn. Bazy is represented as the new face of American Islam, a provocatively dressed bottle blond who believes she is a practicing Muslim because of her personal relationship with God, even though her outward appearance and lifestyle choices might seem incompatible with most pious peoples’ definition of practicing the faith. Bazy’s narrative arc concerns the clashes she has with the community as she tries to open her nightclub, a task that many in the community see as unacceptable for a woman. Although Bazy’s attempts at balancing her religious identity with that of a successful, secular businesswoman are compelling, undergirding her choices is a particular relation to capital. Indeed, Bazy, the female character most compatible with American values, is also the wealthiest, as exemplified by numerous shots of her luxurious home and BMW. On the contrary, the Amen family, the most devout family depicted in the program, is also the most markedly middle class, demonstrated by numerous shots of their small ranch homes. Additionally, upper-middle class Bazy becomes the program’s voice of secular feminist reason. In the aforementioned girls’ night scene, Bazy chimes in about Amen’s man troubles by advocating that she “could be a little more open, too,” qualifying this racy comment by telling her “you don’t need to be like whorey or anything,” to which Amen suggests that she might trying flashing “a little ankle, chin, or calf.”\(^{50}\) Bazy tells Amen that she will make Amen a T-shirt, “a really tight one,” a compromise that will both sexualize her while still appearing modest enough for a practicing Muslim woman.

In line with Bazy’s aesthetized version of Muslim American feminism are the protagonists of Bravo’s \textit{The Shahs of Sunset}. Indeed, these \textit{Shahs} are never content,

\(^{49}\) “Friday Night Bites,” \textit{All-American Muslim}, season 1, episode 4, first broadcast December 4, 2011, TLC Productions, 8:15-9:05.

\(^{50}\) “Friday Night Bites.”
always unhappy with their current single lives, always searching for the next man, or kebab, or cocktail. This blending of Iranian custom with neoliberal economics, the pairing of the kebab with the cocktail, is what Miranda Joseph calls a performance of “assimilation to corporate culture, to production and consumption” that is “simultaneously the articulation of sameness and difference.” 51 Reality television programs of the past half-dozen years, such as Jersey Shore, the Real Housewives of Atlanta and Miami, and The Shahs of Sunset, harness these similarities and differences to make generic entertainment in which the same narcissistic behaviors become new in their pairing with a particular ethnic culture. Indeed these shows, and their rich, perfectly dressed casts of different races and ethnic backgrounds, seem to be reifying a form of second wave/materialist feminism, one that has been considered passé since the 1970’s.

Indeed, no image of a veiled woman ever appears on Shahs of Sunset, replaced instead by gratuitous overhead shots of the female cast members shoved into exceedingly small tops and bikinis, their breasts uncontrollable. Although Bazy might be the “whorey” cast member on All-American Muslim, she seems downright meek and modest compared with the performance of femininity found on Shahs. Second-season cast member Lilly Gallici happily refers to herself as a “Persian Barbie,” who, though skinny, is interested in liposuction in order to keep her looking young.52 The women both mock and praise each other for various forms of plastic surgery and the re-construction/constitution of their bodies. Indeed, their nose jobs, boob jobs, expensive wardrobes and “glam squads” (teams of women and gay men hired to style the women before particularly important social events) are exemplary of the ways in which the return to the pleasure principle that surveillance and libidinal economies engender are forms of labor and work. This “work of being watched,” as Mark Adrejevic calls it, is not only a “work on the self,” but a work that often reifies gender in the name of capital.53 Whereas the women of All-American Muslim are too busy raising children, paying bills, and “educating” the public about practicing Islam in the U.S.A. to be obsessed with shopping and body modification, the modus operandi of the female Shahs seems to be a type of consumerist feminism in which empowerment amongst women of color is about outer not inner beauty.54

This is not to say, however, that the piety and modesty on display in All-American Muslim is not also complicit with gendered notions of capital. In fact, while discussing the merits and demerits of wearing the hijab, Nawal Aoude jokes that “underneath my veil, I’m like any other girl. I like to get washed and colored and styled, it’s just that you can’t see it.”55 Like the moment of “global sisterhood” depicted in the last Sex and the City film, in which Carrie and her friends are saved by and bond with a group of wealthy, Prada and Gucci glad women in Abu Dhabi, Aoude’s declaration that she is “like any other girl” reifies the idea that what brings women of the world together is a belief in the

52 For more on the concept of feminism, diaspora and Barbie as a symbol please see Inderpal Grewal, Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).
53 See Adrejevic, Reality TV.
54 For more on “materialist feminisms” vis a vis spectatorship, see Dolan, The Feminist Spectator as Critic (1988).
55 “How to Marry a Muslim,” All-American Muslim, season 1, episode 1, first broadcast November 13, 2011, TLC Productions.
material aspects of femininity.\textsuperscript{56} Using this logic, the veil is only a covering for the true self, a self that is performed through the iteration of gender norms and through excessive spending.

From the Queerness of Islam to The Rise of the Homo-national

Although this study is in no way auto-ethnographic, I must divulge that each time I mention my research on Shahs of Sunset to queer SWANA friends, the reaction is usually one of disgust followed by a hearty “how could you watch that, let alone write about it?” The object of all this derision: Reza Farahan, one of the first out Middle Eastern subjects on reality television. An examination of gossip streams about Farahan on fan blogs proves that Reza’s mere presence is divisive for spectators; while some describe Farahan as “fabulous” and “fierce,” many seem to think of Reza as stereotypical, narcissistic and infantile.\textsuperscript{57} A bit of a bad role model considering his status as one of the most recognizable SWANA queers on national television, Farahan embodies many of the tropes of what Jasbir Puar coined the homonational subject. It is Farahan’s lifestyle and $6 million dollar net worth that allow him to come across as “an Iranian American who is gay” rather than as a “gay Iranian American.” Although spectators are privy to Reza’s “gay lifestyle” and friends, Reza is depicted as relatively happy to live between two worlds, Iranian and gay.

Although Farahan’s status as the token gay on Shahs is nothing new in the world of reality lifestyle television, Reza’s comfortability with his dual identities as gay and Iranian is rather novel. Before a night on the town with one of his gay friends, Reza states his hopes to stay sexually chaste, hoping that “if three yummy creamy white hos with gingy snatches and stinky armpits come across my path, I won’t want to hang out with them.”\textsuperscript{58} This comment along with Reza’s extra-ordinary behavior at the club, walking up to men twenty years younger than him and asking to sniff their armpits in exchange for free drinks, does not undo racial discourse, but reifies and reconfigures it. Farahan’s predilection for “creamy white, twinky ho’s” can be read as a form of reverse colonization, in which the sexually dominant man of color re-inscribes race through the conquering of the sexually passive white male. Despite his penchant for young white twinks, Reza does make clear a desire to “stop partying and settle down,” as exemplified by his relationship with “boring,” “nice,” “passionless” Adam. It is Reza’s ability to simultaneously inhabit the stereotype of the sexually lecherous homosexual of color and transcend this stereotype that makes clear how homonationalism is not about subjectivity but is rather a new facet of modernity.


\textsuperscript{58} “You Shouldn’t Have Worn That Dress,” Shahs of Sunset, season 2, episode 4, first broadcast December 23, 2012, BRAVO Television Productions.
Whereas Reza’s behavior could be read by some as neocolonialist and homonational, the argument could be made that morally questionable in his behavior, Reza is at least an out Persian homosexual, something rarely seen in mainstream media. Isn’t, following Harvey Fierstein, “any visibility better than no visibility?” On the other hand, difference in sexual orientation is never mentioned in any of All-American Muslim’s eight episodes, relegating sexual and gender difference to the realm of connotation and insinuation. This lack of literal queerness instead is replaced by highlighting the ways in which being a devout Muslim in contemporary America is its own sort of queer performative. Suhalia Amen, for example, talks about her own queerness in relation to other women of her age, given that she is thirty-two and still living at home with her parents. Certain community practices such as living with family till marriage and abstaining from alcohol, sex, and casual dating are looked upon as queer, almost freakish practices that need to be explained to mainstream Americans. Like in Dearborn’s Arab American National Museum, the lacunae of queer experience on All-American Muslim is most probably not due solely to suppressed homophobia but because 1) the program had a larger imperative to educating viewers about Islam in America and did not wish to complicate/obfuscate their message and because 2) very few GLBTQ subjects in Arab enclaves such as Dearborn are out to the community at large, choosing instead to dissociate their queer and Arab/Muslim identities from one another.

The lack of queer content on All-American Muslim might be read by some liberals as emblematic of the ways in which Islam is incompatible with a society that is rapidly becoming more inclusive for GLBTQ subjects. However, stereotypical representations of queer SWANA subjects, such as that embodied by Farahan, might be as detrimental to GLBTQ organizing and equality movements as the lack of explicitly queer representations. Indeed, the queer lacunae present in All-American Muslim and the gay excess represented on Shahs of Sunset depict polarizing, essentializing views of what it means to be queer and of Middle Eastern heritage in contemporary America. Most second-generation queers (regardless of their ethnic heritage or religious background) must balance their seemingly “modern” sexual orientations with their roles within more “traditional” communities. This is a complex negotiation, a making of the self that requires identifying and dis-identifying with various aspects of both one’s familial culture and mainstream American culture. To the detriment of these queers living complicated lives, The Shahs of Sunset reduces GLBTQ subjectivity to a matter of mere visibility, even if this visibility is achieved through the rhetoric and performance of self demanded by the creation of a new “gay market.”


From Drama to “Drama”

When reality television as a social phenomenon first gained traction in the 1990’s with the production of the first few seasons of MTV’s *The Real World*, the genre still had subversive potential. To quote Pozner, these programs originally had “diverse casts and explored issues such as racism, homosexuality, HIV/AIDS, and abortion with something resembling care” but were replaced in the 2000’s by “sensationalized sexism, racial prejudice, homophobia, sloppy hookups and drug and alcohol addictions as the main viewership draws.”61 It is this move from debate to debauchery, from getting fired up about difference to hooking up, that encapsulates perhaps the most self-evident trajectory present in reality television from its beginnings to our current moment: the move from drama to “drama.”

I utilize “drama” in quotations here for three distinct reasons: 1) to emphasize the difference between discussions of drama and “draaaaamaa”—the extended “a” sounds in this rendering (often accompanied by a vocal fry) make clear the exaggerated, performative nature of this act, in which one is cognizant of the drama they find themselves in and amplifies this for the sake of a real or imaginary audience; 2) as a specially queer and of-color reading practice, in which stigmatized subjects resist and perform an undisciplined, exhibitionist, and often liberating display of their grief, no matter how large or miniscule;62 and 3) in a manner after Sontag’s notes on camp, in which life is lived in quotation marks, and is exaggerated, heightened, and lampooned, both intentionally and unintentionally.63 In the realm of lifestyle reality television, this “drama” is usually presented as a series of catfights and public displays of disgust and unruly behavior. These moments of “drama” become the heightened scenes of fighting that structure each season’s narrative arc. The fallout from these fights and their subsequent resolutions also provide an opportunity for catharsis and a good deal of crying and making up.

“Drama” is by no means new, but has been reinvented for contemporary audiences. Moreover, this form of “drama” is and has been classed and gendered. In many ways, these lifestyle shows and their talk show predecessors can be read as the “feminine” counterparts to the “masculine” world of sports spectatorship. Discussing men and sport, Dennis Kennedy argues that,

In the post-industrial world male strength has been transformed in purpose, away from work and war and into symbolic power and sexual allure. This is a movement away from use value to exchange value, or away from the need for the masculine to the performance of the masculine. Male strength becomes male display. Clearly sports are crucial to this development since they require both

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62 Although this concept of “drama” may be undertheorized, many current scholars of queer of color critique, read the exaggeration of the self as a source for “dark camp” and “extravagant abjection.” See Kathryn Bond Stockton, *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), and Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power and Sexuality in the Literary Tradition* (New York: NYU Press, 2010).
strength and its display. In this light spectator violence is an extension of the same traffic; finding few legitimate outlets and almost no social need for ferocity and destructiveness, some spectators have channeled male strength into a public display of fighting.  

In many ways, the female catfights that provide the “drama” for lifestyle programming like The Real Housewives and Shahs of Sunset are the feminized version of blood sport, epitomizing both strength (both in the sense of verbal acuity and physical ability, often described in queer and of-color circles as “fierceness”) and the display of perfect femininity. Similarly, the act of watching Prada-clad women in six-inch heels scream and attack each other can be read as a channeling of our own baser instincts; spectators (especially women and gay men) can either invest in this display of “bitchy femininity,” siding with certain protagonists over others, or choose to dis-identify from the spectacle, watching with joy, contempt, and schadenfreude at the classlessness on display in these moments of staged “drama.”

The classlessness of this form of “drama” is perhaps why many academics have likened the subjects of these spectacles to “freaks.” Joshua Gamson’s study of “white trash talk shows” examines the ways in which the label “freak” shouldn’t be immediately associated with the negative, since these shows repeatedly and insistently boundary-cross into the realm of the sexually non-normative, often focusing on drag queens, queers, and other sexual “freaks.” For Gamson, these “talking monsters open up important cultural opportunities (as the categories on which the current system is based are cut open) while closing down important political ones (as legitimacy for non-conforming populations is threatened).” In a similar vein, John Dovey contests the pejorative use of the word “freakshow,” arguing that “the social changes that are part and parcel of neoliberal economics clearly open new domains for the expression of identity,” domains that are filled by voices proclaiming and celebrating their own ‘freakishness’, articulating their most intimate fears and secrets, performing the ordinariness of their own extraordinary subjectivity.” According to Dovey, “we are all learning to live in the freakshow,” a process that has fundamentally changed us and the way in which we perform ourselves, resulting in what Jerome Bourdon refers to as “a reign of self-despotism, in which a new political subject is brought into being.”

This new political subject must balance the cognizant performance of freakishness with a desire to be legible to mainstream American audiences as both “normal” and “freakishly individual,” as both harmless and exceptional. Pedagogical lifestyle programming like Freakshow, Toddlers and Tiaras, Sister Wives, and Little People, Big World use freakishness as a backdrop to tell “one American story” about the importance

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65 Please see Madison Moore, Fierce: Performance, Creativity, and the Theory of the Fabulous Class (PhD diss., Yale University, 2012).
of family, economic security, and shared values regardless of size, religion, or sexual orientation. This capitalization of the freakier aspects of Muslim culture is epitomized by a shot in the title sequence of *All-American Muslim* in which a young woman in a niqab is seen rollerblading through the park. The pairing of the quotidian with the exceptional, the rollerblading child with the niqab, pinpoints the ways in which certain Islamic practices are considered fascinating, dangerous, and possibly incompatible with the American way of life. However, like its sibling pedagogical programs, *All-American Muslim* can only hint at the freakish, instead insisting on the normalness of its characters and their lifestyle choices. In order to accomplish this, “drama” of the affected, performative variety must be avoided. In fact, in an interview on FOX News, Aoude and Bazy assure the anchor and viewing audiences that although they are “normal” the show is “not boring” and there is “plenty of drama.” It was precisely the program’s lack of “drama,” however, its inability to own its own freakishness, that made the show simultaneously suspicious and boring for spectators, advertisers, and Christian family groups.

On the other hand, “drama” of the embellished, performative type is the modus operandi for *The Shahs of Sunset*. Resident bad girl GG has a reputation for breaking out knives at dinner parties and stirring up “drama” at various girls’ nights out that turn into full-scale catfights. Accompanying these scenes of bitchy infighting are analogous scenes of making up or breaking up, with plenty of tears shed. Like their gendered brother genre, sports and extreme reality games, lifestyle programming like *Shaahs* and *The Real Housewives* tap into base emotions where one picks a side in a brawl and experiences the requisite set of emotions depending on that side’s success or failure. Although this type of exposed, exaggerated, and garish “drama” is one of the tenets of “first person media” as exemplified by talk shows of the 1990’s, this new breed of lifestyle programming signals a turn in the genre’s trajectory. Rather than focusing on just the poor and uneducated (a la *Jerry Springer/Sally Jesse*, etc), the freakish, the fat (*The Biggest Loser, Losing It*), the addicted (*Dr. Drew’s Rehab*), and the ugly (*The Swan*), new lifestyle reality programming retains its fascination with sigma but transposes it onto the bodies of America’s supposed 1% (see *Dr. Drew’s Celebrity Rehab, Celebrity Fit Club, The Real Housewives* franchise, *The Millionaire Matchmaker*).

This shift in class focus, especially since the economic downturn of 2008, can also be read as a transposition of spectatorial practice. Whereas critics of spectator theory still argue as to its accuracy as a viewing practice, the concept of schadenfraude (pleasure at the misfortune of others) remains highly present in most literature on reality television. What this new breed of celebrity/lifestyle reality programming seems to do is make schadenfreude an equal opportunity sport, exposing the freakishness of the rich. This new, all-inclusive representational strategy demonstrates how wealth might exacerbate drama, not sublimate it, turning the American dream into what some critics

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69 “Interview with Cast of *All-American Muslim*,” FOX News.

70 For more on schadenfraude and the politics of shame on reality television, see Sender, *The Makeover*, 80-105, and Jennifer Pozner who argues that “while the schadenfraude and escapism factors may get us to tune in, that’s not what hooks us. On a more subconscious level, we continue to watch these shows because they frame their narratives in ways that both play into and reinforce deeply ingrained social biases about women and men, love and beauty, race and class, consumption and happiness in America.” See Pozner, *Reality Bites Back*, 17.
have called an American nightmare. Although this is not a study of spectatorship, I infer that these shows were popular post-2008 for the ways in which, for the 99% percent, they were so easy to dis-identify with. As the bedrock of neoliberalism as an economic model was crumbling, audiences could laugh and mock those with more than them, proving that money is not always synonymous with taste or intelligence. Through its combined use of fabulous surroundings and freakish “drama,” The Shahs of Sunset taps into a cultural zeitgeist in which real equality means not having your ethnic/racial/sexual/physical differences make you the object of derision; rather, it is petulance, narcissism, and a desire to be even more rich, fabulous, and happy that make these individuals freakish and garish. Whether intentional or not, this form of equal opportunity schadenfreude gives way to “overly-complicated simple representations” of America’s rich. These representations reinforce a middle-class status quo in which being too rich is looked at as a Pandora’s Box in which normative ethics and morals are no longer followed. However, these wealthy subjects of lifestyle television are so fascinating to watch precisely because of their immoral and unethical antics. Meanwhile, the staunchly middle-class experience of second-generation Muslims in suburban Detroit trying to lead both economically successful and moral lives are constructed as not only boring but as threatening to “American values.”

No More Drama

Unlike the other narratives of neoliberal multicultural inclusion previously explicated in this dissertation, the one performed in contemporary reality television is not so uplifting in its conclusion. The performance of the self found on The Shahs of Sunset and other lifestyle shows give audiences a glimpse at what happens after happily ever after, and the view is often disconcerting. Rather than transcending their own previously stigmatized status as racial/religious/sexual others, the Shahs utilize post-racial discourse to reify race and prove that terrible selfish people exist regardless of ethnicity, skin color, or sexual orientation. Hence, the return to a living of the Freudian pleasure principal is not pastoral and Utopian but apocalyptic and dystopian, resulting in people who have assimilated themselves to the most unappealing aspects of neoliberal culture. Rather than making one envious of the wealth on display, the garish, caricature-like behavior of the Shahs cast (and those other shows following the same format) seems to have an inverse effect, making one careful as to what version of “the good life” they envision for themselves. If yesterday’s All-American Muslims, in order to make an impact and live the American dream, will become tomorrow’s Shahs of Sunset, then tomorrow might be a nightmarish place, not the rich and happy world that was dreamed about. This garish vision of a neoliberal multicultural world foreshadows the limits of neoliberalism and multiculturalism as economic and social projects, making clear the damage they can impose on subjects.

What this shift in representational strategies implies is that the “happy ending” contemporary American culture has disseminated across the globe might not be as happy as it is constructed to be. In fact, the middle-class Muslims of Dearborn seem to be more content in their daily existence, sustaining their familial relationships and spending time to incorporate faith into their everyday lives, than their Hollywood counterparts, The
Shahs, who are in constant feuds with their families and friends, always searching for the next material object that will hopefully engender them with a sense of fulfillment. My argument at its most audacious implies that subject formation in our current moment is both obsessed with and infuriated by the surplus value created by the dream of “making it” in neoliberal America. To quote Anita Berressi and Heather Nunn, I agree that

The zeitgeist of the affluent late capitalist social universe is of an intensified reflexivity in which ‘people reflect upon the consequences of their actions, in both the personal and social domains. The development of intensified reflexive rationality is linked to a heightening of individualization, so that as broader and institutional structures become subject to interrogation, the subject turns increasingly to seek an ontological security through calculations and assessments about personal life and lifestyle options… The route to personal equilibrium, happiness and financial stability is through re-modeling the inner self via its connection to the consuming self.”71

This desire for ontological security, however, creates subjects that are never secure enough, always attempting to better themselves, be it through psychoanalysis or therapeutic crying, through plastic surgery or retail therapy. Although this desire may have been present throughout different historical time periods, the want for security in the new century is more fervent than ever, especially because under the racial project of neoliberal multiculturalism, questions of racism, xenophobia, and homophobia are seemingly erased. If we take the constant complaints and desires depicted in lifestyle reality television from an array of multicultural citizens as any indication, the “good life” or “happy ending” may be defined by the constant search for a better or happier one.72

This persistent desire to be happier can be likened to what Christopher Lasch in the 1970’s coined the “new narcissism.” Lasch contends that, “to the performing self, the only reality is the identity he can construct out of materials furnished by advertising and mass culture,” and that “in order to polish and perfect the part he has designed for himself, the new Narcissus gazes at his own reflection, not so much in admiration as in unremitting search of flaws, signs of fatigue, decay.”73 Lifestyle programming highlights this narcissism, reveling in the decay of their spectacularly wealthy subjects. The Shahs of Sunset replaces the affective sensations oft associated with community (stability, normalcy, contentedness) with a new form of community, one that manifests the desires of a secular, libidinal economy. What keeps audiences members watching, I argue, is precisely the impossibility of seeing them ever being happy or “drama” free. This narcissism, according to Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, also has nationalist contours, exemplified by American’s beliefs about its form of democracy, identity, and economics.

being the best, causing the national collective to stare at itself in awe, both conspicuously aware and surreptitiously unaware of its own decay.\textsuperscript{74}

Whereas Dearborn’s Muslims are portrayed as having critical use value due to their everyday community roles as court clerks, coaches, and police chiefs, the realtors and developers of Los Angeles have entertainment value precisely because of their lack of use value. It is the lack of use value that gives the \textit{Shahs} their value, their social capital, making their material wealth and real estate what is “real” about them, rather than their personal subjectivities. The Lowes controversy made clear that rather than rendering these subjects more acceptable, the pairing of the pastoral middle class suburban dream with a narrative of Muslim faith was too normal, even suspiciously so. Too normal and too real; real to the point of seeming inauthentic. What was so threatening about \textit{All-American Muslim} is that it tried to undo a telos in which yesterday’s middle-class citizens of faith will inherently become tomorrow’s \textit{Shahs of Sunset}. To this end, it romanticized certain tropes (family, faith, middle class values) in an attempt to de-center notions of citizenship away from financial enfranchisement and secular enlightenment, all the while forgetting that it was the dream of success on one’s cultural terms that brought them to America in the first place, ignoring Islam’s complicity with capitalism. What is so frightening for the American right is that the narratives of capital success and secularism might not be as concurrent as they would like, creating a new enemy, one that is not uncivilized but religious and enlightened, capitalist but with a different vision of what constitutes the good life, creating the ultimate internal threat to American global supremacy.

In order to disguise this narrative and assuage American fears engendered by it, many mainstream media producers tend to revert to the usage of “overly-complicated simple representations.” These strategies try to make a color- and sexual orientation-blind world of privilege seem complex, showing that the depth behind the veil of superficiality are what make programs like \textit{The Shahs of Sunset} so compulsively watchable. In these shows, Hollywood becomes a place filled with not only celebrities but also human beings with flaws who audiences can identify and dis-identify with. Moreover, they become a symbol of a docile version of Iran, especially important given America’s continued contentions with them vis-a-vis nuclear warfare. On the other hand, in Dearborn, MI, lifting the veil of secrecy on middle-class, “normal” Lebanese Muslims reveals them to be inherently complex as subjects, almost too real. This idea of being “too real” turns practicing Muslim Americans into something to be feared lest the American mainstream realize that the roots of this fear lay in our own collective narcissism and doubt that anyone so “different” could actually be more like us than we thought, unaware of how what constitutes “different” is constantly shifting.

Stretching the spectacle of neoliberal multiculturalism to it’s moral and ethical limits, the last chapter of this project turns to a form of “difference” that ties certain Muslim, queer, and Mormon subjects in unexpected ways: non-traditional coupling.

\footnote{See Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, \textit{Flagging Patriotism: Crises of Narcissism and Anti-Americanism} (New York: Routledge, 2006).}
Chapter 5:
Two Weddings and A Tribunal: Queer, Muslim, and Mormon at the Crossroads of Acceptability

Anderson’s Baby, Monogamy Maybe

In the months before his public acknowledgement of his sexuality, Cooper’s daily talk show on CNN took a turn for the non-normative and non-monogamous. In addition to a number of episodes focusing on Muslims in America (in which questions of sharia law and women’s rights were discussed in relationship to questions of polygamy and Islam), Cooper devoted four episodes to the experience of fundamentalist polygamous Mormons. Cooper even went so far as to focus one episode on “polygamy copycats,” or everyday people who had seen the TLC Reality television show *Sister Wives* and, believing in the show’s message that “love should be multiplied, not divided,” began to imitate the reality program’s protagonists and create new, plural families.

On August 13, 2012, Cooper’s own life seemed to imitate one of his news stories, as photos of his boyfriend engaging in non-monogamous activity were leaked onto the internet. Within hours, the photos had found their way onto various gossip blogs condemning Maisani as a no-good cheating boyfriend. In the next few days, the story picked up traction in both local and national news, accompanied by written and filmed words of support from celebrities and close friends of the news anchor. In much of the press surrounding the event, Cooper is constructed both as the victimized scorned housewife with a philandering husband and as a cuckold, with gay gossip queen Perez Hilton making clear the severity of the indiscretion by saying, “Come on...he was going to MARRY this guy.”

Occurring a month after Cooper’s public coming-out in July 2012, the cheating controversy garnered as much attention for Anderson’s lack of a response on the matter as it did for the actual act of Maisani’s cheating. As gay columnist Michael Musto argued, it was not Cooper’s lack of anger at his boyfriend’s cheating that caused such a media frenzy, but rather the possible outing of his and Maisani’s relationship as an open, non-

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1 In fact, Cooper had an early episode devoted to a discussion with the cast of *All American Muslim*. See *Anderson Live*, season 1, episode 49, first broadcast November 17th, 2011, CNN Productions.
2 This interest in polygamy was present throughout the two seasons of episodes shot for *Anderson Live*. See *Anderson Live*, season 1, episode 14, first broadcast September 29, 2011, CNN Productions; *Anderson Live*, season 1, episode 153, first broadcast May 9, 2012, CNN Productions; *Anderson Live*, season 2, episode 46, first broadcast November 14, 2012, CNN Productions.
3 See *Anderson Live*, season 1, episode 118, first broadcast March 14, 2012, CNN Productions.
monogamous one. Lucas, the CEO of New York’s largest gay pornographic film company, now an op/ed columnist, argued that:

Now that Cooper is out of the closet, people demand that he be a role model; anything about him that deviates from the most conservative social mores is off-message. So if Cooper is getting married, then his marriage must conform to the most traditional ideas of what marriage means: jealous monogamy, children on the horizon, Cooper at the altar in his mother’s white dress.7

Although Lucas’ opinions on certain issues (i.e. Israel/Palestine) might be ethically questionable, his analysis of the Cooper controversy makes clear the ways in which acceptance for queers in our current moment still requires assimilating to concepts of “jealous monogamy” and wearing one’s “mother’s white dress.”8 This seems to be especially true for those able to have their object choice not be central to their identity, like Cooper, who might feel an obligation to frame themselves as model citizens, legible to the American, heteronormative mainstream. The mere mentioning of the possibility that Cooper could be in a functional non-monogamous relationship can only be seen as threatening to the homonormative ideal that he is supposed to embody. Although just a coincidence, Cooper’s vested interest in these non-normative nuclear units makes clear the ways in which Cooper’s journalistic fascination and his own life choices might overlap more than they seem to at first. In other words, diversion from monogamy does not a model minority make.

Couple Panic and the New Subjects of (Ab)Normale

Mormons. Muslims. Queers. I utilize this anecdote about Cooper, his lover, and his journalistic interests to demonstrate the ways in which, in the years after 9/11, concepts of what constitutes an acceptable couple and, by extension, an acceptable family have become entangled with one another, assembling “queer,” “Muslim,” and “Mormon” subjectivities together in unexpected ways. Central to all three of these populations is speculation about “non-normative” sexual and coupling practices, specifically around the concept of marriage.

For many LGBTQ citizens and their supporters, the legalization of gay marriage represents the last major hurdle towards turning “virtual equality” into a tangible form of

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8 In the realm of both queer and Arab organizing post 9/11, Michael Lucas has been likened to a Judas for his fundamentalist anti-Muslim opinions, his Men of Israel series of pornographic films (which are often described as pinkwashing propaganda) and for his advocating to limit free speech by not allowing pro-Palestinian Jews to give talks at New York’s Gay and Lesbian community center. See Josh Nathan Kazis, “Gays Debate ‘Pinkwashing’ as N.Y. Center Reverses Ban on Israel Related Events,” February 20, 2013, accessed October 23, 2001, http://forward.com/articles/171503/gays-debate-pinkwashing-as-ny-center-reverses-ban/?p=all.
equality.\textsuperscript{9} However, in order to persuade more conservative factions, the rhetoric that has been utilized to advocate for gay marriage successfully in six states has been one of what Michael Warner, Elizabeth Freeman, and Michael Cobb have termed dyadic couplehood.\textsuperscript{10} In this argument, gays should be entitled to marriage since they respect the institution’s key tenets, such as loving, honoring, and obeying one’s singular partner.\textsuperscript{11} Utilizing such logic of equivalence, however, results in the creation of a new form of abject, one that falls outside the bounds of normative coupledom. What the burgeoning acceptability of gay marriage does, in fact, is create two seemingly disparate forms of abject subjects. This chapter argues that by permitting gay marriage (the monogamous, responsible, normal kind), both socially conservative religious forms of polygamy (such as those practiced by certain members of the Muslim and Mormon faiths) and liberal, liberationist forms of polyamory, both queer and straight, are excised from ever being acceptable. Using this logic, the “equals sign” is less a signifier for “equality” than it is a new disciplinary structure, one that enforces compulsory couple-hood as a contractual obligation for those who want to be treated equally under the law.

In the years since 9/11, scenes of alternative wedding ceremonies as well as depictions of the fight for a more inclusive version of marriage have proliferated popular culture. Many of these have concerned Muslims/Arabs, queers, and Mormons, three seemingly unrelated groups that form a contemporary constellation due to the non-normative ways in which they approach the question of what constitutes a family. All three groups have been taken to task by the American right as being “un-American.” All three groups have also been the subject of works of fiction and non-fiction by liberals who try to humanize the characters on display and prove that these subjects can be included as fully American citizens.\textsuperscript{12} What can an examination of Mormon, Muslim, and queer marriages and weddings tell us about the potential limits of neoliberal multiculturalism as a political project? Can they help us envision a world in which an un-nuanced and normative equality is not the ultimate goal?

This chapter takes as its central objects of analysis three popular examples from North American television—one focusing on Muslims, one on Mormons, and one on queers—in an attempt to answer these questions. First, I examine NBC’s comedy The New Normal’s (2012) first season arc, in which a gay couple must go through two failed weddings before finally tying the knot during the season finale. Next, I analyze a first season episode from CBC’s culture clash sitcom Little Mosque on the Prairie (2007)


\textsuperscript{11} Many of these arguments try to prove that queer monogamous relations are exactly the same as straight monogamous relationships, utilizing a logical of equivalence, in which one man + one man or one woman + woman is equal to one normal couple, worthy of the same governmental benefits and equal rights.

\textsuperscript{12} For more examples of cultural production dealing with current anxieties about Arab-Americans and queer subjects, please see the first four chapters of this dissertation. For more on cultural productions about Mormons developed in the past decade, please see footnote 73 of this chapter.
entitled “Mother in Law;” it depicts the controversy surrounding not one but two tentative nuptials, one between two men, the other the proposition of a Muslim man taking on a second wife. Last, I turn to the “tribunal” that Senator Bill Hendrickson sets into motion when he forces members of the Utah State House of Representatives to discuss the possibility of legalizing polygamy. In this final episode of HBO’s Big Love, entitled “When Men and Mountains Meet,” patriarch Bill and his three wives must publicly account for and explain their non-normative lifestyle choices. Hendrickson’s push to “put polygamy on the table,” however, is considered too controversial, and not surprisingly, Big Love’s protagonist is murdered minutes later, before his dream of plural marriage having its moment in the sun can come to fruition. While certain white gay subjects can enact their fantasy wedding (replete with priest), those wishing to commit themselves to a relationship outside of the bounds of the dyad are martyred for attempting to fight for the same rights. What is it about marriage in the age of neoliberal multiculturalism that makes it both an affective sign of belonging and a claim for contractual civil rights, and what are the epistemic limits of conflating affect with policy? My analysis of queer, Mormon, and Muslim examples from popular culture illuminates a number of these conflations about what constitutes an acceptable citizen in our current moment. It is the spectacle of normalecy embodied by the wedding ceremony itself that in many ways creates which kinds of subjects can be rendered worthy of inclusion.

I Would “DO” if I Could “DO”: Marriage, Performativity, and Constellations of Queerness Post-9/11

Andrew Sullivan and other conservative critics have argued in the past two decades that the GLBTQ movement may be coming to a close; that is, if one sees the stakes of equality as solely those considering gays and lesbians rights to serve in the military and to marry. Underlying this argument is the presumption that, except for their lack of equal rights, GLBTQ citizens are normal like the rest of us, and, more importantly, that they want what everyone wants. If we are to take this assertion seriously, marriage in general, and the performance of coupledom exemplified by the wedding ceremony, becomes not just a one-time act but rather a world-making event. Following J.L. Austen’s work on How to Do Things with Words, the saying of “I do” is the quintessential performative, the example of when saying something is doing something which changes the world. For Elizabeth Freeman, the wedding is therefore not a only a performative and a theatrical event, but also an ideological imperative:

The wedding’s linkage of commodities (through monogramming for one) and bodies (through the duplication of brides with one another, flower girls as embryonic brides, guests coordinated by color and spatial arrangement) is a form of visual metonymy, connected what was heretofore unconnected. In this sense, “I do” is very like “Just Do It,” insofar as “Just Do It” translates into a dare: both “I Do” and “I Dare You”…are sanctioned by compelled witnesses; they depend

13 See Sullivan, Virtually Normal.
on and constitute a public of witness that acts as an accomplice to the scene before it.\textsuperscript{15}

For members of different ethnic groups, and indeed for queer subjects not afforded the opportunity to officially marry until very recently, the wedding ceremony itself is often constructed as “a portal to national belonging and to other technologies of membership that exist alongside or even counter to those of the official nation.”\textsuperscript{16} Indeed, same-sex wedding ceremonies, for a long time a counter-performance to “normal” heterosexual weddings, have become an imperative, a “just do it” to prove that one can, and indeed must, in order to feel like a proper, acceptable, and full citizen.

As Freeman so eloquently argues, the wedding can also be seen as one of the primary mechanisms by which neoliberal multiculturalism transforms “race into something like culture,” or more specifically, something “ethnic.”\textsuperscript{17} Freeman defines ethnic as “possessing a distinct collective identity that is distinguished from both biological notions of race and juridical conceptions of citizenship” that ultimately “promises to transcend the over embodied signs of race,” resulting in the disappearance of metaphorical whiteness altogether, “metamorphosing into a sense of benignly cultural, but always already familial belonging.”\textsuperscript{18} Despite her cognizance of the imperative to “just do it” and get married, Freeman also remains steadfast in her belief that “alternative weddings” can act to destabilize the wedding and the concept of marriage more broadly. For Freeman, the cultural imperative to “just do it” can be overcome by the impulse to “just do it your own way.”

In the ten years since Freeman’s seminal work on \textit{The Wedding Complex}, however, the subversive potential inherent in doing it your own way seems to have been subsumed by a rhetoric of individuality and inclusion that strip alternative weddings of what makes them alternative in the first place. Moreover, this desire for cultural acceptability seems to have surpassed the realm of the affective and can only be quenched by literal forms of citizenship, by the ability to have marriage as a contractual right of passage. Piggybacking off Siobhan Somerville’s work on naturalization and race, the desire for legal recognition naturalizes non-heterosexual forms of dyadic coupledom, while denaturalizing any form of kinship that does not fit into this template.\textsuperscript{19} Moreover, as Freeman suggests, the performative force of “I do” and the performing force of the wedding ceremony have seemingly become one and the same thing.

Examining the other quintessential example of a performative, that of gendered subjectivity, rhetorician Katie Horowitz argues that by cross-analyzing drag kinging and queening practices, we can start constructing a “theory of performance that does not limit itself to the realm of mere metaphor, one that, actually unapologetically, and without qualification breaks down the boundary between stage performance and the performance

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{15} Freeman, \textit{The Wedding Complex}, 34.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 38.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Freeman, \textit{The Wedding Complex}, 18.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 18.
\item \textsuperscript{19} See Siobhan Somerville, “Notes Towards A Queer History of Naturalization,” \textit{American Quarterly} 57, No 3 (Fall 2005), 659-675. For more on how citizenship functions as a form of naturalizing difference, see Chapter 1 of this dissertation.
\end{itemize}
of everyday life."²⁰ In other words, Horowitz bluntly asserts that “there is no difference between performance and performativity,” advocating instead for a “performance paradigm based on an ontology of bodily intra-action” that “accounts for both the theoretical fluidity and the apparent fixity of identity.”²¹ If identity is both fluid and static, then what performative utterances such as “it’s a girl” and “I do” do is try to curtail fluidity through a process of legitimation, naturalization, and concretization. Like the marriage contract itself, iconic gender ideals are predicated upon adherence to socially adjudicated contractual rules and regulations, rules that lose their power when identity becomes, like performance, slippery, ever mutating, and in a constant state of disappearance.²² For Horowitz, an ontology of bodily intra-action “explodes the idea that stage performances (like drag shows) reflect but don’t produce gender and sexual identities.”²³ If we think of the wedding as a staged performance, we can also read televised weddings about stigmatized populations as not exploding but producing a new type of identity, one in which monogamy, financially stability, and belief in a certain version of the good life replaces differences of race, religion, and/or sexual orientation.

The New Normal, Little Mosque on the Prairie, and Big Love exploit the importance of the wedding as a normative right of passage in an attempt to both emulate and critique the institution of marriage. The New Normal stages a performative where the gay male monogamous unit is both unique and generic, special but still normal—spelled out explicitly in the show’s title—and acceptable. In Little Mosque on the Prairie, the mere suspicion of a Western Imam permitting a congregation member to take a second wife and the threat of the town priest’s plan to marry a gay couple results in comic misunderstandings and no actual marriages officiated. In Big Love, an attempt to amend marriage to include polygamy is considered so insidious that it leads to the series’ main protagonist’s imminent demise. Taken together, these episodes demonstrate how the friction between performance and performativity, between affective and literal forms of belonging, between virtual and actual equality, has assembled queer, Muslim, and Mormon in unexpected ways. This yoking together of religious and sexual forms of difference at our current moment shows that the limits of neoliberal multicultural subjectivity are no longer about race, sexuality, ethnicity, or even class, but about adherence to ever-changing logics of what constitutes an acceptable citizenry. Currently, out and proud non-monogamists of the religious or secular variety are the new abject, citizens who must over-perform their inherent normalcy while underlaying their difference.

The New Normal and the Comedy of Marital (Mis)Recognition

Premiering in fall 2012 to mediocre ratings and average reviews from critics, Ali Adler and Ryan Murphy’s The New Normal depicts the everyday trials and travails of Brian and David, an upper-class, white, monogamous gay couple in Los Angeles, and

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²¹ Ibid, 321-322.
²³ Ibid 323-324.
their relationship with their new surrogate Goldie, a 25-year old single mother from Ohio who has moved West to reinvent herself. In order to make clear just how “alternative” this “normal family” is to some viewers, the creators have also recruited Ellen Barkin to play Goldie’s republican grandmother, who is socially and fiscally conservative, racist (especially to David’s African American assistant and co-producer Rocky) and homophobic (due to her husband’s own closeted homosexuality). Despite Barkin’s role as the purveyor of more traditional values, The New Normal does the ideological work described by its title, ending each episode with the consolidation of a new, queer type of nuclear family. Like the other shows produced by its creative team (Glee, Popular), The New Normal revels in stereotypes to both dismantle and reassemble them; by the end of each episode, all conflict is resolved and a new version of a post-racial and gay friendly world is evoked. ²⁴ Although the show espouses monogamy and child rearing to assuage fears from the right that homosexuality is an abomination, this type of “new normal” was considered incompatible with Mormon broadcasting heads in Salt Lake City, resulting in the show being pulled by its NBC affiliate station due to pressure from the Church of Latter Day Saints. ²⁵ Though many on the gay left have critiqued the show for replicating heteronormative gender roles (Bryan likes fashion and musicals, David sports and medicine) and coupledom, it seems like the trouble with The New Normal might be just how un-queer this new “normal” family may be.

The queerest element of Adler and Murphy’s sitcom might well be Goldie’s daughter Shania, a precocious pre-teen who spends whole episodes impersonating Little Edith Beale from Grey Gardens and Maggie Smith’s Lady of Grantham from Downtown Abbey. When Shania’s quirky personality interplays with Bryan, what could be read as a queer eye often gets turned into what Velasquez Vargas might call a “Queer Eye for Capitalism.” ²⁶ In an early episode entitled “Bryanzilla,” Shania announces that she been asked to “pretend marry” her young paramour Wilbur. ²⁷ After relating the news, Shania

²⁴ I see the ideological work of The New Normal as similar to that of what Tavia Nyong’o says about Glee: that “has used music to put forth the powerful idea (connected to neoliberalism in ways I could spell out) that life after the closet isn’t necessarily easier. As the adults on Glee intimate: life often gets worse, so endurance is not about normative futurity but about a kind of indefinite, lateral childhood...The braggadocio of pop and the pathos of musical theatre meet in uncanny and uncomfortable ways on Glee that seem to have a lot to do with accommodating the growing social visibility of queers. I shouldn’t be giving away all my ideas here because really I want to write a book on Glee and the unmaking of the American Dream. Tavia Nyong’o, ‘EMP Wrap-up: Where were the Queers?” Hear Is Queer, March 1, 2011, accessed October 26, 2013. http://hearisqueer.wordpress.com/2011/03/01/emp-2011-wrap-up-where-were-the-queers/heraisqueer.wordpress.com.


²⁷ The title of the episode, “Bryanzilla” is an example of wordplay derived from We Television’s reality program Bridezillas currently in its 10th season, its title a portmanteau combining the words bride and Godzilla. Since the show’s inception, the phrase “Bridezilla” has become part of popular culture, defined as a bride who becomes a monster. Although this not within the scope of this chapter, the garish narcissism of the Bridezilla (and by extension, the character of Bryan in
tells Bryan, David and Goldie that “they are registered” at Toys R Us, showing off the bling on her finger, a multicolored ring pop. Picking up on Shania’s visual cue from Beyoncé’s “Single Ladies,” Bryan tells the group that Wilbur has “put a ring on it.”

This ring, though made of sugar, as well as the registry at Toys R Us make clear how even in the realm of children’s fantasy the wedding is not just a performative of love but a material symbol, one that signifies romantic as well as economic stability. In love with the idea of being in love, Bryan decides to party plan a real pretend wedding, creating the narrative momentum for the episode. The next morning, Bryan is seen planning Shania’s wedding, taste-testing lamb sliders, arranging flowers and centerpieces. Conservative Nana enters the scene waving a wedding invitation, calling the whole affair an abomination, telling her family “that is what these gays do, they pretend you can define what marriage is. Today it’s two children, tomorrow it’s the banana polishers. Next thing you know they are going to have a wedding ceremony for their dog.”

She tells the gay couple that “marriage is not for dogs, it is not for children, and, I’m sorry boys, it’s not for you.”

When, countering Nana’s homophobic claims about marriage, David argues that up until forty years earlier it was illegal for people of different races to wed, she retorts, “it was good, it kept things organized.” This elision between gay rights, the civil rights movement of the 1960’s, and the threat of bestiality is telling of the ways in which certain concepts of difference—racial, sexual, and animal—become compounded. Like all three of the episodes examined here, the inappropriate nature of Shania’s pretend wedding uses the “slippery slope” mode of argumentation to depict how pretend weddings might still be performatives that could adversely effect the so-called “sanctity of marriage.”

It is the supposed sanctity of marriage that certain queer subjects feel the need, desire, or compulsion to prove themselves worthy of, not just “in fabulous commitment ceremonies.” Reflecting divisions within the gay community itself vis-a-vis gay marriage, “Bryanzilla” contains a flashback to an early moment between Bryan and David. When Bryan brings up the question of marriage, David says that until gay marriage is legally sanctioned, it will never be real, just an example of “playing house.” Although Bryan thinks David’s political commitment to “not getting married until every person who wants to get married in this country can” is “so unromantic,” he also finds it “political and Harvey-Milk-hot.”

David’s hesitation to marry Bryan, despite the fact that the two have vowed commitment to one another and to their newborn child, is what spurs him on to produce an elaborate fake wedding for Shania. The tensions between “real equality” and “affective equality” are also summoned up moments before the fake ceremony. David is seen life-coaching young Wilbur who likens his tie to a noose, telling David that he is nervous about “locking it down with Shania, like forever.” David assures Wilbur that “None of this is real, you are not signing anything, you have no legal obligations, it

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“Bryanzilla”) is quite related to the self-despotism of reality television participants discussed in Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

29 Ibid, 4:52.
30 Ibid, 5:24-5:44.
32 “Bryanzilla,” The New Normal 2:52-3:21
doesn’t affect your taxes or anything, so just smile and say ‘I do’...it doesn’t mean anything in the real world.”³³ As the two share a fist bump of camaraderie, Bryan is seen in profile having heard David’s opinions on fake weddings, looking devastated.

The tensions Bryan and David share about the difference between a real marriage and a fake one are similar to what Michael Warner calls “the recognition drama of marriage” which induces “a sort of amnesia about the state and the normative dimensions of marriage” falling into “characteristically American patterns of misrecognition” in which marriage is not an imperative but a free choice that can mean “whatever people want it to mean.”³⁴ Instead, Warner advocates, like Freeman, for “staging ceremonies with a difference,” in which people “celebrate a whole circle of intimacies, or dramatize independence from stage-regulated sexuality” instead of “the unreflective demand for state sanctioned marriage.”³⁵ In “Bryanzilla,” the wedding as a drama of (mis)recognition is literalized as Shania’s pretend wedding is interrupted by a group of conservative young girls who claim that Wilbur has been “pretend cheating on Shania.” These girls have been planted by Nana Barb, who recruited the girls “after seeing the Romney stickers on (their) parent’s cars in the school parking lot.”³⁶ Upon the outing of Wilbur’s infidelity, the wedding is cancelled, and Shania and Bryan are both left heartbroken.

In the episode’s denouement, all wrongs are made right as Shania cries and eventually laughs in the arms of her mother. Moreover, the disastrous fake wedding has given David a change of heart. In order to make it up to Bryan, he stages a fantasy marriage proposal in his medical office. Bryan is surprised to see Goldie in a medical gown, legs straddled down, surrounded by scented candles, but she tells him to “just ignore me.” As an ultrasound recording of their unborn child streams live, David tells Bryan:

I wanted to do it like this, in front of our baby, so that one day he or she could say, “I was there, I was there when my daddies got engaged.” There was this moment at Shania’s fake wedding when I looked over at you and the tears in your eyes were real. I always knew how important getting married was to you, but it wasn’t until that moment that I truly understood what commitment meant. We’re having a baby, Bry. This is our family: you, me, and that kid, forever. Family is the ultimate commitment, getting married just seems easy.³⁷

Bryan interrupts David to remind him that, “you don’t believe in it,” to which David retorts, “but you do, and I believe in us.” This image of a marriage engagement between two men, their surrogate, and their unborn child literalizes the show’s themes about alternative families, giving spectators the affective sense of a happy ending that reinforces the idea that marriage, be it legal or just a commitment ceremony, is the key to a happy future. Simultaneously absent and present, Goldie represents the queer remainder in this engagement equation, a form of surplus labor created by “a new normal economy.” Here, Goldie’s surrogacy makes her simultaneously part of a new extended family unit,

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³³ Ibid, 3:28-3:35
³⁵ Ibid, 134.
but due to her lack of a role in the rearing of the child, she remains simply a vessel for the aspirations of the formerly stigmatized; her “pay no attention to me” is symbolic of her necessary erasure, an erasure that ensures the construction of a new nuclear family that still defines a family as “you, me, and that kid.”

The season finale of *The New Normal* continues with the series’ theme that “families come in all forms,” while also demonstrating culture, progress, and tolerance, as David and Bryan’s wedding approaches just days before the birth of their child. On “The Big Day,” Bryan and David are battling pressure from both the Catholic Church, which will not let them marry under the eyes of God, despite a close kinship with a tolerant priest, and their mothers, who attempt to impose upon the couple old traditions that they would rather abstain from. During the course of pre-wedding comic conflict, David and Bryan continually wish that they could “do their wedding their way” as a symbol of their love. Despite internal conflicts, David and Bryan’s wedding is a success, their love turning Ellen Barkin’s Barb from a bigot into a PFLAG grandmother, telling Goldie and Shania that “if you would’ve told me then that I was accepting an invitation to the wedding of two guys I would’ve hung myself,” but now she is proud to toast to “the happiest couple” she knows. The happy couple, however, seem rather infelicitous as complications continue all the way up to the altar, where the wedding is stopped by the announcement that Goldie’s water has broke. After a commercial break, audiences are privy to a music video montage set to John Lennon’s “Beautiful Boy,” in which Sawyer Collins is born as his nuclear and extended families look on.

Hitting sweeps viewers in the emotional jugular, “The Big Day” gives audiences one traditional “failed” wedding, the birth of a child, and a second smaller, “different” beach wedding which ends with Bryan and David exchanging vows. In an attempt to sway her mother one way in her choice between remarrying her philandering but well-meaning first husband or embracing the uncertainty of a future as a single mom, Shania has run off to Venice Beach to see the vista that inspired the mother and daughter to move from Ohio to California and start a new life. Utilizing GPS technology, Goldie, Rocky, Brian, and David track Shania down. Shania tells Goldie that “we have a great life” and she loves “our family the way it is.” Goldie responds by asking, “what, just you and me?” to which Shania quickly retorts, “no way. Them, too,” the camera panning to the other main members of *The New Normal* cast. She tells her mother that “this is the family we built: you, me, Bryan, David, Rocky, Nicky, and Sawyer.” Confident in the new family she has chosen, Goldie tells Shania that she will not accept her ex-husband’s hand in matrimony.

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40‘The Big Day,’ *The New Normal*, 18:54-19:21. For those unfamiliar with the program, Nicky is the name of the two-year old girl adopted by Rocky during the course of the first season; Rocky decides to go through with the adoption and attempt to have a career and a child, even though she is single.
As the cast prepare to exit the beach, Bryan tells David, as he rocks their newborn infant Sawyer in a khaki-colored baby Bjorn and looks at the horizon over Venice Beach, that “this is all I wanted our wedding to be. Just us. This right now is so perfect, I wish we could’ve done just like this, right here on the beach.” After exchanging complicit looks with one another, audiences are subject to yet another montage; here David, Bryan, and the rest of their ad-hoc family are seen creating a DIY wedding in a few hours. Just as everything for the impromptu nuptials is prepared, Goldie reminds the couple that they still need someone to officiate. On cue, Father Michael arrives on the beach, having responded to David’s words that “it would mean so much” to Brian if the priest would marry them. Brian calls the priest’s act “amazing,” to which the clergyman calls it “half-assed” since he does not have his collar on. Taking his place within the makeshift alter, Father Michael tells them: “Look, I once told you to fight for change but I can’t ask you to do something that I am not prepared to do myself.”  

As Bryan and David say “I do,” not only is a new form of family unit concretized, but a new form of gay family that is sanctioned by a member of the Catholic clergy is also envisioned for American spectators. The New Normal’s iteration of “I do” envisions a very different world: one in which two men can be married by a member of the clergy without stigma. Their wedding remains legitimate yet done their own way, not unlike arguments that blend “freedom of identity” with a free market economy. This acceptance by religious authority is a direct result of David and Bryan’s status as “good,” if not exceptional queers, as moral, upstanding citizens. As Janet Jacobsen and Ann Pelligrini contend, the fairy tale-like narrative of acceptance surrounding Bryan and David reflects the ideas that “if (1) American national identity is dependent on a sense of moral purpose, and (2) moral sensibilities are collapsed into religious belief, and (3) sexual behavior is made out to be the last and best measure of the moral, then (4) religiously derived sexual regulations play a formative role in our national life.” Bryan and David’s beach wedding officiated by a Catholic priest reflects the ways in which their “lifestyle choices” (i.e. monogamy, child-rearing, upper-middle class careers) are considered morally and ethically appropriate, making them worthy of inclusion as full Americans under the eyes of the nation and of God.  

Although “The Big Day” manages to legitimize certain forms of queer love as acceptable, Bryan and David’s wedding also creates its own sort of queer remainder. Lying outside the frame of dyadic couple-hood are two single mothers, Rocky and Goldie. Although both are economically independent women who consistently state that they are better off without a man, they symbolize how the inclusion of some comes at the expense of some others. Though emancipated, both women remain loveless, or as Michael Cobb has coined, both are “avatars of the lonely crowd.” For Cobb, these figures allow spectators to be “alone but not lonely, not menaced by the feelings of loneliness that push

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41 Ibid, 20:35-20:50.  
44 Cobb, Single: Arguments for the Uncoupled, 18.
most of us into the couple.” 45 Although these women are indeed surrounded by a new form of “queer family,” their status as single still singles them out, maybe not as lonely but perhaps as morally and ethically questionable subjects. The avatars of Goldie and Rocky, black and white single mothers both, haunt the periphery of Bryan and David’s “perfect” wedding, proving that in order to instantiate a new normal, something abnormal, and alarmingly heterosexual, must take its place.

Gay Husbands and Second Wives: Conflating Queer and Muslim in Little Mosque on the Prairie

Leaving the wealthy liberal paradise of Los Angeles, we move to the prairie fields of Saskatchewan, and the little town of Mercy, the setting for CBC’s six-season surprise hit Little Mosque on the Prairie, which began airing in 2007. Whereas The New Normal’s urban world merely touches upon religion as a sign of tradition and cultural acceptability, Little Mosque on the Prairie takes religious tolerance as its raison d’être. In a June 2008 interview with Al-Jazeera International’s Riz Khan, actress Sitara Hewitt, who plays Rayann, describes the show’s worldwide popularity as having positive effects in the world.

I was quite honored when a friend of mine who is Muslim, wears the hijab—she’s a young woman who said to me, “You know, since this shown has been on the air, I notice people are nicer to me. They smile at me on the subway, they say ‘hi’ to me on the street, they do not either ignore me or make me feel like a strange breed of human being, and that’s nice...how it’s making Muslims feel, and it’s making other people go, ‘I can relate to that person, because I can relate to Rayann, or Fatima.’” 46

As Hewitt voices, the show is a success because it humanizes Muslims, who in contemporary North America are often misunderstood and read as outsiders, weirdos, monsters, and perhaps worst of all, as un-assimilatable, as different.

Since its premiere in 2007, the breakout success of Little Mosque on the Prairie, which has aired in some 92 countries, turned what was once a little show about Muslims in rural Canada into a barometer, a new litmus test for television that succeeds both as entertainment and as a lesson in cultural inclusion. Sandra Cañas reads the show within a post-9/11, North American cultural context, in which Islam is repeatedly Orientalized, essentialized, and monolithized. In this geo-political context, Canas argues that Little Mosque is a challenge to the “orientalist orthodoxy cultivated and nurtured by hegemonic media discourse” that “has emerged from within this very media space itself.” 47 Evelyn Alsultany sees the show as both “good comedy” and “unique” and “unprecedented” in its immersing spectators in “the specifics of observant Islamic life and [focus] on internal

45 Ibid., 18
debates between conservative and liberal Muslims.”

These internal debates between Christians and Muslims, and indeed between Muslims and other Muslims, is what makes the show, for Alsultany, “a departure from earlier tropes” and a deviation “from the standard patriot and victim molds.”

*Little Mosque* does an outstanding job of representing contemporary Islam as complex, made up of white converts, Pakistani and Nigerian immigrants, and second-generation children who have reclaimed the faith. The lines between conservative and liberal Muslims on *Little Mosque* are also constructed as a divide between generations and those who are educated/urbane/cosmopolitan vs. those with a provincial, “small town mentality.”

Exemplifying this battle between the traditional and the modern was the series’ fourth episode, “Swimming Upstream,” in which Fatima, the Nigerian owner of the town’s local diner, pulls a knee muscle and enrolls in an Aquafit class taught by Johnny, a tall, lanky, effete homosexual.

This episode concentrates on Fatima’s petition at the Town Hall to hire a female swimming instructor so that she can swim without showing herself to a man. At first, Johnny and Fatima’s relationship is filled with tension, but by episode’s end the two have come to a mutual understanding. The queer man and the Muslim woman from Africa, despite their differences, manage to share some queer feelings for one another. After petitioning for a female swimming instructor and losing her legal battle, Fatima returns to Aquafit class sporting a bright yellow, long-sleeved Muslim bathing suit with matching swim cap. Rather than making Fatima feel ashamed at her “get-up,” Johnny, a homosexual figure who can be assumed as understanding what it is to feel shame in not living up to cultural norms, tells her she makes the ridiculous outfit “work.”

For Sarah Ahmed, shame is ambivalent and is bound up with self-recognition.

By identifying with Fatima, Johnny and the women at the pool use queer feelings of inclusion to counter the shame Fatima might feel being at the public pool in Islamic swimwear. Just as *The New Normal* would show five years later, Fatima and Johnny’s moment of solidarity demonstrates how queer feelings of empathy and inclusion can be used to counter more instantiated signs of feelings, such as discomfort, exclusion, and xenophobia.

The tentative signs of affective understanding between Muslims and queers begun in “Swimming Upstream” are extended upon three episodes later in “Mother-in Law.”

The center of the episode concerns Western responses to Muslim polygamy.

Rayann, the Muslim feminist and doctor, plays host to her traditional grandmother, visiting from Lebanon, who has never liked the fact that her son married a white woman. Upon arriving, Mother Hamoudi tells the family that Yassir’s (Rayann’s father) cousin Samira’s husband has died and informs Yassir that he will take her as his second wife. During the course of the episode, Yassir must make clear to his mother that he does not

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49 Ibid, 175.
51 “Swimming Upstream” *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, 20:35.
wish to have a second wife. Meanwhile, the community members of the mosque debate the relevance of polygamy both in the Koran and in contemporary western life. The consensus: polygamy is an outmoded, non-feminist practice that is incompatible with life in the Western world, even if the Koran still deems it acceptable.

Supporting all of this talk of alternative marriage is the episode’s major subplot. Soon after the title sequence, we see Johnny and a male partner in Reverend McGee’s office. McGee’s back is to the camera, but we hear him ask the couple: “Are you absolutely sure you want to go through with this? You know, Mercy is a small town.” Johnny, holding his boyfriend’s hand, tells the reverend, “we’re sure,” and that “we’ve even written our vows in rhyming couplets.” Asking the reverend his opinion, Johnny recites in a lispy, stereotypical fashion: “I promise to honor but not obey, except on leather fetish day.” The reverend seems taken aback and, not knowing how to respond, smiles and tells them he will marry them on Sunday. Johnny and his partner (who, strangely, is not given a name nor a single line of dialogue) exit. Quickly, Joe, a farmer known for being a bigot and closed-minded, bursts into the Reverend’s office, telling the Reverend that he and many people in the town are against the gay nuptials as they “are against the sanctity of marriage,” and tells McGee “that I’ve been talking to the people and you are going to lose your congregation.” McGee’s response is melancholic: “I hope not,” he says, “because in times like these we all need to reach out to each other with understanding.” At the end of the interaction, McGee loses his humanistic tone and declares that he will marry Johnny and his partner “Come hell or high water.” Hence, in this episode, second wives and wives who are actually two husbands become the catalyst for a pedagogical lesson on how to engage with non-heteronormative conceptions of coupling. “Mother in Law” might just be the series’ most provocative episode in that, for once, the queerness of homosexuality and the queerness of Islam are placed together in generative tension.

Indeed, by placing polygamy next to gay marriage, series creator Zarqa Nawaz and writer Rebecca Schechter have stumbled upon some shared queer feelings, as epitomized by the series’ first episodes, in which characters are stopped and questioned at airport security for being possible terrorists. This connection between the taboo of queerness and the taboo of being Muslim in Western society isouted by Fred Tupper, Mercy’s radio host, who has made a career out of being a bigot on the airwaves. On a

54 For readers not familiar with Little Mosque: the town of Mercy’s mosque is located inside of the town’s Parish Hall, and hence the mosque’s Imam Amaar and the town’s Reverend McGee share the same quarters and are close friends and confidants. Canas reads the location of the mosque within the church as a symbolic gesture of how Muslim identities re-conceptualize public religious space. McGee comes across as a very humanistic priest and often sort out conflict at the mosque when Amaar is too emotionally close to his congregants.
55 “Mother-in Law,” Little Mosque on the Prairie, 2:42-3:26
57 In “Swimming Upstream,” Babur, a religious Muslim man trick-or-treating with his daughter on Halloween, is taken for being in an Osama bin-Laden costume, and complimented for being “so topical” in his choice of costume. As Nawaz has commented in interviews, her mission is to milk laughter from stereotypes and, in doing so, expose the civilizational missiles of racist/heterosexist culture. See “Zarqa Nawaz on ‘Little Mosque,’” interview by Terry Gross, NPR, January 17, 2007, http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6882876.
very special episode of his “Mad about Muslim Mondays,” Tupper draws the connection
between monster-terrorist and fag:

And now Mercy Anglican, the same institution that welcomed terrorists, is
opening up its back door to yet another evil, an evil that could very well
undermine our way of life: queer marriage. (chokes) Come on, wake up people!58

As opined by the town’s resident racist, the Church, historically the home of conservative
thoughts, has now become liberalized and, as a result, infected by terrorists and queers.
By marrying a pair of fags, Reverend McGee is weakening the church, and weakening
the power of long held values of what constitutes marriage. The actions of “Our Lady of
the Holy Fruit,” as Tupper calls it, forces all members of Mercy, Muslim and Christian
alike, to announce their personal opinions on what constitutes a holy union. Hence,
Islamic polygamy and queer monogamy can be read as both threats to and, in some odd
ways, supportive of, certain forms of Christian normalcy, at least in a Canadian context
where both are legal.

One thing the women of Mercy can agree upon is that polygamy is an outdated
and outmoded cultural tradition, and that “even in countries where it is legal, hardly
anyone does it.”59 The various women of the mosque insist that this point of view does
not make them feminists, but rather emancipated women who are “woman enough” for
their spouses. Though all the Canadian members of the mosque find the concept of taking
a second wife absurd, these various characters all have a different opinion on Mercy’s
upcoming gay wedding, showing the tensions inherent in linking the queer and the
Islamic as affectively similar. After being asked for advice by Reverend McGee, Imam
Amaar Rashid withholds his comment, saying that “this is definitely not within the
bounds of the Muslim faith.” Babar, the mosque’s most conservative member, on the
other hand, chimes in gleefully, stating repeatedly that the marriage is “an abomination.”
He vows to move the Mosque outside of the Parish where they will not have to share
space with “a tutti-fruity Priest,” and plans a protest in front of the Church on the Sunday
morning of the wedding ceremony.

Another more complicated negotiation of various queer subject positions comes
when Fatima must decide where she stands on the issue of Johnny’s marriage. The
tentative friendship between the queer and the immigrant developed earlier is put into
question as Johnny asks Fatima to cater his nuptials. At first, Fatima sticks to the beliefs
she was raised with, telling him “I will cater the wedding as soon as you find a nice girl.”
Johnny surprised, replies, “Fatima, color me shocked, I thought you got over the whole
homo thing by your second Aqua-fit class.” Fatima tells Johnny that although she likes
him, there are rules that she just cannot break. For a moment, it seems that the
understanding between Fatima and Johnny will only go so far, emphasizing how some
shared queer feelings between the Muslim immigrant and the homosexual are queerer
than others. Johnny informs her that he will have to go the Mercy Diner, Fatima’s major
competition. At the thought of her rival, Fatima slams the coffee pot in her hand on the
restaurant counter, slowly, begrudgingly saying, “I do not approve of homosexuality, but
I can’t stand the Mercy Diner”; she will get him a menu by the end of the day. Johnny

59 “Mother in Law,” Little Mosque on the Prairie, 8:48-8:54.
winks at her knowingly and tells her that he loves her, providing the caveat, “if that’s okay with grumpy old Islam.” Fatima shakes her head while laughing under her breath as the scene fades to black.

At first, Fatima downright refuses Johnny’s request, but after having her rival mentioned, Fatima’s subject position changes. A polite refusal of a request morphs into feelings of jealousy at her competition. As exemplified by her heightened slamming of the coffee pot, Fatima’s subject position as a practicing Muslim woman is placed in tension with her position as a businesswoman in a neoliberal economy. In choosing between her ethical (religious) and her practical (economic) modes of being, Fatima’s affective connection to Johnny (she actually does like him, a fact Arlene Jacobs as Fatima makes very clear in her line-readings) becomes the swing vote, allowing her to acquiesce to his request. Although Fatima does not approve of homosexuality, her connection to Johnny and her disgust of the Mercy dinner are enough to sway her into catering Johnny’s wedding.

What does it mean that Fatima’s ethical values are compromised as a result of the Mercy Diner? How does adherence to a certain type of Western, free-market economy allow Fatima to acquiesce to societal pressure and, despite her disapproval of Johnny’s sexual orientation, cater his reception? Although the situation in Canada is indeed specific and does not thoroughly translate, certain strands of Inderpal Grewal’s concept of “Transnational American-ness” seem to be useful in answering these questions. For Grewal, American-ness as a concept in an era of globalization has given rise to a new, constantly changing national subject who “could be, like the immigrant, transnational, moving across nations and national boundaries to produce American identities imbricated within a consumer citizenship that exceeds the bounds of the nation.” Fatima, who refers to herself as a landed immigrant, is able to function within Western society because, as the proprietress of her own business, she is imbricated in Western forms of consumerism. Is Fatima performing her “consumer citizenship” by taking on a client whose ideology is contrary to her own? Fatima seems to know that what she is doing is technically wrong according to Islamic scripture. Nevertheless, when hassled by Babar, Fatima proclaims, “Good food is a source of pride at a wedding.” As performed by Duncan, Fatima’s pride is actually a performance of pride, of trying to be proud of her choice to indulge both normative pride at succeeding as a caterer and her pride in the queer feelings she shares with Johnny.

If Fatima’s decision to cater the wedding can be looked at as an acquiescence to Western neoliberal culture, then Johnny’s act of marriage could be read as the culmination of assimilating into heteronormative society. Following Puar, I read Johnny as an example of Western homosexual exceptionalism. In the wake of debates on gay marriage and the virtually equal status many gay white men have with their straight counterparts, Puar posits homosexual exceptionalism is the idea that allows sexuality to be an afterthought to identity. Homosexual exceptionalism works by

60 Ibid, 10:15-10:42
63 Puar’s work on exceptionalism provides a worthy alternative too much other critical writings on the state of queer subjectivity in American society. Following the work of Lee Edelman,
glossing over its own policing of acceptable gender, racial and class formations. That is, homosexual exceptionalism does not necessarily contradict or undermine heterosexual exceptionalism; in actuality it may support forms of heteronormativity and the class, racial, and citizenship privileges they require.\textsuperscript{64}

Johnny’s nuptials represent his normalization, his losing his leather fetish and replacing it with more docile extracurricular activities. As a groom-to-be, Johnny is on his way to losing some of his queer feelings, feelings Fatima as Muslim seems unable to shed. Indeed, the happy, domestic homosexual leaves the scene asking if it’s O.K. with “grumpy old Islam” for him to love her. The docile, coupled homosexual subject hence seems more easily assimilated when compared with grumpy, backward Islam.

In the climax of the episode’s subplot, the negotiations between the Muslim and the queer are reconfigured as tensions between the urban and the rural. As the scene starts, Reverend McGee shows Johnny and his boyfriend the fliers protesting the wedding and reassures them that he is committed to marrying them and, in fact, is quite “pumped up” for the “brawl” with the locals it will stir. Johnny informs him that the couple has decided to have the wedding in Toronto, where “we found this fabulous little church, spa and massage included.” The Reverend, disappointed, misspeaks, blurtting out “Oh you people are all the same!” Catching himself, the Reverend emits an audible “Oh,” puts his hand over mouth, and says he is sorry. As he and his partner exit, Johnny tells the Reverend he understands; after all, “Hating Toronto can cloud anyone’s judgment.”\textsuperscript{65} In the end, the wedding is off, and the homosexuals have gone where they belong, to the big city.

The change in location of Johnny’s wedding becomes a signifier for what Judith Halberstam calls metronormativity. As theorized through her work on Brandon Teena and the transgender body in rural space, metronormativity gives way to the idea that to come out and live a gay life one must live in an urban, tolerant environment. For Halberstam, the narrative map of metronormativity is spatial and is characterized by the subject moving “to a place of tolerance after enduring life in a place of suspicion, persecution and secrecy.”\textsuperscript{66} By moving his wedding, Johnny is reifying the concept that rural spaces are not queer, and McGee calls him out on this, by saying that “You homosexuals are all alike.” Johnny’s retort about hating Toronto is thus an acknowledgment of the “false truth” that urban spaces are more progressive. In fact, a good deal of Little Mosque on the Prairie’s humor stems from Toronto-bashing, or trying to suggest, as does Halberstam, that the rural doesn’t need to be the space of intolerance, racism, and conformity to conservative ideals. Little Mosque can be read as queering the local, in that the Muslims in Mercy are often read as queer, as outsiders, and the show’s success rests on demonstrating how these queer, religiously different figures can be incorporated into small town life. Indeed, Little Mosque aims to show that the rural can

\textbf{Michael Warner, and Michael Sullivan,} Puar can be read as giving a queer of color critique of the politics of equality and normalcy that often does not mention the fact that queers of color are in no ways given the same access to such concepts of virtual equality.

\textsuperscript{64} Puar, \textit{Terrorist Assemblages}, 9.


\textsuperscript{66} Halberstam, \textit{In a Queer Time and Place}, 36-37.
be as cosmopolitan as the urban, even if homosexuals tend to leave for greener pastures, where wedding services come with free massages.

Threats of outsiders working against the constructs of heteronormative Western culture are also quelled in the episode’s other storyline. In order to convince his mother that he cannot and will not marry another wife, Yassir forges—and ages, using some Earl Gray tea bags—a prenuptial agreement between himself and his wife Sarah, with a clause against polygamy. In order to ensure that his relationship remains monogamous, Yassir fakes a legal document. As in *The New Normal*, legal contracts are as important a part of marriage as the feelings and commitments that first prompted them. Indeed, the happy, heterosexual couple of white woman and assimilated Lebanese immigrant remains intact. Moreover, at the end of the episode, Mercy, a small provincial town, is able to keep its stereotype of being squeaky clean, with no “monsters” like Muslims and queers to undermine the Western concept of marriage as a monogamous union between a man and a woman.

Shot five years before the launch of *The New Normal*, *Little Mosque’s* conflation of Muslim polygamy with gay monogamy, was, especially by 2007 standards, prescient of the ways in which, at least at the level of law and affective sentiment, sexual and religious difference began to get colluded in post-9/11 North America. By 2013, the various national campaigns to make marriage equality a reality in every state, as well as President Obama’s remarks making him the first President in support of same-sex marriage, illustrated the turn to homosexual coupledom as a burgeoning form of normalcy. However, to reiterate the primary argument of this chapter, it seems as if by trying to attain this normal form of dyadic couple-hood, both religious polygamy and queer polyamory have been excised from the conversation. It again goes to show how the American narrative of secular progress is not about freedom of religion and (sexual) expression but rather about how these freedoms are practiced within the bounds of a secular, but still Protestant-inflected, moral and ethical matrix. Hence, one can infer that GLBTQ marriage equality helps to transform the queer from deviant to normal, sharing in mainstream values; and, by necessary contrast, any form of non-monogamous engagement seems to open up a Pandora’s box of anxieties about polygamy, incest, and bestiality. Once we open that box and begin sliding down that slippery slope, there may well be no returning to “civilized” modes of being in the world.

**Finding Polygamy’s Place in the Sun**

Now we travel from the prairie flatlands of Canada to the desert brush of suburban Utah; but first a brief detour through Afghanistan. In the fall of 2006, Khaled Hosseini’s follow up to *The Kite Runner, A Thousand Splendid Suns*, was released to unanimous critical and popular acclaim.⁶⁷ The narrative convention that hooked readers: again, one of rape to redemption concerning Muslim sister wives who, after spending much time being emotionally and physically abused by their seemingly pious husband, decide to take justice into their own hands and murder their spouse. Similar to its author’s first novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is not only educational, “teaching” consumers about the “real” spaces in which polygamy and the subjugation of women exist, but it

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also creates an empathetic response in readers as they relish in the death of the polygamous antagonist. Although this threat of immoral religious polygamy evoked by *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is oft associated with the realm of the culturally and geographically other, the premiere of Mark V. Olsen and Craig Schaeffer’s HBO series *Big Love* months earlier made clear that sexual and religious cults exist as much in American culture as in any other. Dividing its time between depictions of rural, compound, fundamental Mormonism, and a new form of religious yet modern polygamous family, *Big Love* constructs two separate yet intertwined views of polygamy, one in which it is the newest normal, the other in which it is an uncivilized blight on society, in dire need of reform.

*Big Love* also illuminates how non-normative religious practice in America in our contemporary moment can only be seen through constant and insistent reference and allusion to Muslim and queer others. Having grown up on a fundamentalist Mormon compound, Bill Hendrickson was expelled from the compound, given his role as possible sexual and political threat to religious leader Roman Grant. As a childhood survivor of the compound, Hendrickson must become the professionally stigmatized, an expert witness against inhuman behavior. One Latter Day Saint colleague calls Bill to tell him, “I happened to catch a documentary on TV last night about a polygamous compound. (Really) unbelievable. They called it an American Talibain, women as prisoners, men as tyrants, you know a lot of people like that?” Rhonda, a child bride from the compound who escaped and was the object of much media scrutiny, was referred to as “the Talibain princess.” Although Bill and his family believe themselves to be the “normal exception” that disproves the rule that all polygamists are deviant, even Barb’s (Bill’s first wife, portrayed by Jeanne Tripplehorn) sister is still suspicious about her sibling’s post-cancer treatment decision to embark on a polygamous lifestyle, telling her that “you couldn’t have shocked us more if you had wrapped a towel around your head and converted to Islam.” The affective similarities between the queerness of Islam and fundamental Mormonism are complicated even further by the similarity of the rhetoric utilized by both religious and sexual minorities in our current moment. In the series’ third episode, compound leader Roman Grant is reminded by his closeted son Albert to “not forget about the gays,” as he tells the press “if the Supreme Court says yes to the privacy rights of homosexual persons, surely it’s time to recognize our right to live in peace too.” Grant is misquoted in the press, the headline reading “Roman Grant, prophet of Juniper Creek says we are just like homosexuals.”

Although the current affective frisson between Arab, Mormon, and queer as manifest in *Big Love* might seem to be an aberration, this is not the first time in contemporary history that these three signifiers of difference have resonated with one another. In the 1830’s, the Mormons and their founder Joseph Smith undertook a pilgrimage westward to what they claimed was the new Zion. Like other religious

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68 “Where There’s a Will,” *Big Love*, Season 1, episode 11, first broadcast May 21, 2006, HBO Productions, 42:45-43:00.
disciples of the time, Mormons purposely conflated westward expansion with the creation of a new Holy Land.\textsuperscript{72} As a result, many of the first major Mormon missions were to the Holy Land, where the early members of the LDS found not a clean and Utopian Jerusalem but a filthy land that they considered uncivilized, helping to solidify in American ideology what Samuel Huntington 1000 years later would call the “clash of civilizations” theory.\textsuperscript{73} Meanwhile, non-religious notions of westward expansion and manifest destiny during the period resulted in the creation of a new homo-social space, the American frontier. This move west set the stage for a number of well-documented sexual encounters between men, providing germinal experiences for what in the 1890’s would come to be known as homosexual subjectivity.

As Siobhan Somerville brilliantly argues in \textit{Queering the Color Line}, it was during the late 1800’s and early 1900’s, during America’s Reconstruction period and into the new century, that homosexuality became solidified as a concept; this occurred just as racial prejudice moved from being about African-Americans as property to the instantiation of a new racial project based on eugenics, or white’s “biological superiority” over other races was put into effect. Homosexuality, like race, became a mark of inferiority.\textsuperscript{74} Just as sexual and racial categories became institutionalized, a similar argument about the acceptability of polygamy was brewing in the American west. After advocating for the abolition of slavery in the 1860’s, novelist and activist Harriet Beecher Stowe took as her next cause célèbre the plight of polygamous Mormon women in need of saving from a cultish new religion in which they were second-class citizens. Stowe helped echo in what would come to be known as “the Great Mormon Wars,” in which the Utah territory was denied statehood unless they made the practice of polygamy illegal.\textsuperscript{75}

\textsuperscript{72} For more on the American obsession with the West as a new form of Zion and how this influenced the American conception of the Middle East, please see Michael B. Oren, \textit{Power, Faith and Fantasy: America in the Middle East 1776 to the Present} (New York: W.W Norton and Co, 2008); Jacob Rama Berman, \textit{American Arabesque: Arabs and Islam in the Nineteenth Century Imaginary} (New York: NYU Press, 2012); Ussama Makdisi, \textit{Artillery of Heaven: American Missionaries and the Failed Conversion of the Middle East} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009); and Fuad Sha’ban, \textit{Islam and Arabs in Early American Thoughts: Roots of Orientalism in America} (Ridgefield, CT: Acorn Press, 1990).


\textsuperscript{74} Siobhan Somerville \textit{Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

In response to this demand, the Church of Latter Saints experienced an internal fissure: one part became the “official” Mormon religion practiced and accepted today, while the other became the “fundamentalist” compounds, hotbeds of polygamy and incest. Just as Utah was granted statehood in 1896, America also experienced its first wave of Arab immigration, mostly from Greater Syria. Although the majority of these immigrants were Christian, their status as “questionably” white and as alternatively sexually threatening and flaccid remained during their first 20 years in America, until they were “given the legal designation white.” Although “marginally white,” the first Arab immigrants to America remained “white” but still suspicious of character to the mainstream, much like their “white” Mormon and homosexual counterparts.76 One hundred years later, the linkages between racial, ethnic, religious, and sexual difference may have changed in shape, size, and scope, but they remain intact.

The first four seasons of Big Love concern Hendrickson’s desire to show the world that his family is not just acceptable but exceptional, painting fundamentalist compound culture, by contrast, as uncivilized and in need of reform. The Hendrickson’s, the owners of a chain of “Home Depot-like” stores and an Indian reservation casino, much like their reality counterparts, the Browns of TLC’s Sister Wives, are shown to be like “any other American family.”77 Their scenes of domestic instability (overdrawn credit card bills, postpartum depression, Viagra usage) as well as their attempts to stay in the closet about their nontraditional lifestyle become the source of comedy in the show’s first three seasons. Juxtaposed with these scenes are those concerning Bill’s parents and brother who still reside at Juniper Creek, a fundamentalist compound run by Roman Grant, the father of Nikki Grant, Bill’s second wife. In order to create dramatic tension over the life of the series, Olsen and Schaeffer have created an antagonism similar to that found in Westerns, in which Grant is the villain to Hendrickson’s reluctant hero.

What this division and tension between “normal,” polygamous suburbanites and “abnormal,” abject, compound polygamists does, perhaps inadvertently, is further theories about a clash of civilizations. Civilizationist logic reinforces the idea that there are, indeed, good Muslims and bad Muslims, good homonational gays and bad, radical, non-monogamous queers, and lastly, by extension, good Mormon polygamists and bad compound Mormons. In all three of these cases, Muslim, queer, and Mormon subjects must over-perform their normalcy to fulfill the expectations of an ideal yet not existent neoliberal multicultural spectator. In doing so, they must pass as normal while also proving themselves exceptional citizen-subjects and model minorities.78 In the narrative world of Big Love, part of being a model minority is also being a reformer, demonstrated by Bill’s desire to clean the compounds, since it is in these hotbeds of fundamentalism that polygamy is given a bad name. This tension between the rural and the suburban, the civilized and the barbaric, is racialized. Using the logic of neoliberal multiculturalism, race may have disappeared, but being racialized, seen as stigmatized and barbaric, has

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78 See Nadine Naber, “From Model Minority to Problem Minority” Arab America: Gender, Cultural Politics, and Activism (New York City, NYU Press, 2012).
not; it has been displaced onto the bodies of Arabs, Mormons, and queers, quite often bodies that could historically pass as normal.

The desire to stop passing for normal and actually be normal is the narrative motor for Big Love’s first four seasons, culminating in Hendrickson running for State Senate, having decided to “out” his family as polygamists if he is elected. The stakes of this outing are visually represented by the series’ title sequence utilized in its fourth and fifth seasons. Replacing the first title sequence, an upbeat polyamorous dance set to a cover of The Beach Boys’ “God Only Knows,” is an abstract and disturbing video of the main cast members falling into the ether amidst a black background. Set to the dreamlike “Home” by The Engineers, this gratuitous, slow-motion falling, complete with the cast members making melodramatic gestures, reaching up to be saved, foreshadows the darker, more tragic tone the program took up in its final seasons. The changed title sequence is also a visual symbol for the fracture of subjectivity that can occur upon outing oneself to an un-accepting public. The title sequence literalizes the metaphor that social rejection and stigmatization can feel affectively like being pushed off a cliff, or drowning, as a total lack of physical and intellectual control. Given this title sequence, it should come as no surprise that season four ends with Hendrickson’s electoral win and subsequent coming out in his acceptance speech. As soon as he begins to introduce his three wives to the press, the realistic scene suddenly and surreally takes a turn for the magical, wind sweeping away chairs and passersby as the scene clears and Bill and his wives find themselves on the precipice of an imaginary cliff. The family’s outing has brought about an earthquake in their lives, one from which they may never recover.

As season five begins, rumors of an impeachment trial swirl before Hendrickson has even been sworn it, as many of friends and supporters begin to ostracize him. On Christmas Eve, Bill takes his family to the ice skating rink in Sandy, Utah. While talking with his first wife Barb, the announcer at the rink declares it time for a couples skate. Bill winks at his wife, declaring it “family night,” and the scene cuts to Bill and his three wives skating together as “a couple.” As ABBA’s melodramatic anthem of understanding, “Knowing Me, Knowing You,” begins to play, the Hendrickson women become agitated, nervous, stating things like “I feel uncomfortable” and “You’re not the only one,” as they desperately cling to one another. As they continue to skate, couples stare at them and quickly dash off the ice. One couple exits the rink while taking a photo of the family, the current public object of scorn as an unacceptable family. The camera pans out to a long shot: the four Hendrickson’s holding steadfastly to each other, skating around the Christmas tree, as scores of “normal couples” watch this alternative couple dance alone, afraid of acknowledging them as being legible within their ranks.

As created by a staff of gay and lesbian creators and writers, this scene can also be read as an allegory for the limits of tolerance vis-à-vis the GLBT movement. Like such generic scenes as those from Jonathan Harvey’s Beautiful Thing, and most every television series with characters coming out of the closet, this scene re-imagines the queer moment of acceptance in which a same-sex couple can partake in a couples dance

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79 See Title Sequence, Big Love, Seasons 1-3, first broadcast March 6, 2006, HBO Productions.
80 See Title Sequence, Big Love, Seasons 4-5, first broadcast January 10, 2006, HBO Productions
without feeling scorned, ashamed, or singled out.\textsuperscript{82} In this moment from \textit{Big Love}, this public display of outing and acceptance gets re-signified as one of familial perseverance in the face of societal shame. In a cultural moment when even the site of two nonnormative bodies (be they same-sex, religiously garbed, or of indeterminate gender) publicly displaying their affection is still bound to cause some attention, even if tolerated, the mere vision of a couple of four enacting a normalized ritual meant for two pushes the limits of our tolerance even further.

The Hendrickson’s road to public ruin continues throughout season five, resulting in the foreclosure of all of their business interests. This public shaming also affects the sanctity of the private sphere, as the bonds between Bill and each of his wives (as well as the bond between sister wives) are pushed to their collective breaking points. Hendrickson, though still retaining his seat in the state senate, has been stripped of nearly all power to attempt to legislate change. It is in this tattered and weary condition that spectators find the Hendrickson’s in “When Men and Mountains Meet,” \textit{Big Love’s} series finale. In the days preceding Easter Sunday, Bill and his family are facing financial ruin as they open a new church. Meanwhile, Margene, the youngest and newest of Bill’s wives, has made tentative plans to spend time volunteering on medical boats in Central America, while Barb, perturbed at her husband’s church’s inability to accept a female as priest-holder, sets off to be baptized in a more progressive church. Moreover, it is revealed that Margene lied about her age when first involved with Bill, and Hendrickson is charged with two counts of statutory rape; the evidence, his two sons. In an attempt to redeem his public image, Bill invites reporters from liberal newspapers like \textit{The New York Times} and the \textit{Washington Post}, telling them that if polygamy were legal, they “would have been allowed to marry like any other non-polygamous couple in the state and none of this three ring circus would be happening.”\textsuperscript{83} When asked why the smear campaign aimed at their family is so severe, Nikki tells the reporters it is “because we are calling ourselves Mormon polygamists publically, we’re moving forward, to clean up the compounds,” first wife Barb chiming in, “and to clear our husband’s good name.”\textsuperscript{84} This forward motion representing “progress” has eerie similarities with what Pelligrini and Jacobsen have referred to as the narrative of secular progress.\textsuperscript{85} The Hendrickson’s may not be secularizing but they are indeed modernizing, and attempting to give polygamy a new, legitimate, acceptable, and assimilatable image in the popular consciousness.

\textsuperscript{82} This scene of acceptance has become a staple of popular culture. For more examples see Jonathan Harvey, \textit{Beautiful Thing} (New York: Dramatist Play Services, 2000) as well as the penultimate episode of ABC’s adaptation of the Colombian program \textit{Betty la Fea}, “The Past Presents the Future,” \textit{Ugly Betty}, Season 4, Episode 19, first broadcast April 7\textsuperscript{th}, 2010, ABC Studios. These scenes of triumph over adversity are themselves referencing scenes in which a child’s moment of acceptance is met with derision and physical violence, as epitomized by the opening sequence of \textit{Camp} and the 1\textsuperscript{st} season finale of the American version of \textit{Queer as Folk}. See \textit{Camp}, directed by Todd Graff (2003: New York City, IFC Productions, 2004), DVD; and “Full Circle,” \textit{Queer as Folk, Season 1, episode 22}, first broadcast June 21, 2001, Showtime Productions.


\textsuperscript{84} Ibid, 11:25-11:41.

\textsuperscript{85} For more on the narrative of secular progress and how it informs this project, see 27-28 of the introduction.
Under threat of imprisonment and impeachment, Hendrickson decides to take matters into his own hands, “hijacking” the State Supreme Court. During his brief time in office, Bill has been attempting to pass legislation that would reform the fundamentalist Mormon compounds, seizing their assets for the state, and using this money to establish shelters and other public infrastructure for rehabilitating and feeding the thousands of people from these compounds.

I wish I could have started all this thinking that decertification would strip the compounds of their power, but I’ve come to realize that’s not enough. Juniper Creek is a grotesque manifestation of the Principal that has been allowed to fester and bloom like a cancer in a dark closet of illegality. I wish to offer an amendment to decertification. 86

When asked by the Senate’s majority leader the name of this new amendment, Hendrickson proudly proclaims the “Legalization of Polygamy.” Amidst the hullabaloo, the majority leader, pounding his gavel, shouts that “we are not wandering off in the weeds here,” and tells Hendrickson squarely that “you are not hijacking this body!” Senator Dwyer’s comment about “wandering off in the weeds” is telling of the ways in which polygamy is often considered so outside the realm of acceptable behavior that there can be no subjective discussion about the topic. Polygamy is reconfigured as a sickness, one that “hijacks” not only the bodies of its subjects but also attempts to infec the social and political body of the state itself. 87 Like other illnesses that are internal, the disease of polygamy should be kept cloistered, or closeted.

A short debate about the merits and detriments connected to polygamy now begins. Hendrickson argues that the old reasons for banning polygamy, likening it to mass murder and cannibalism, do “not pass the stink test” today. In response, another Senator declares that indeed “it does,” further arguing that “it is a remnant of a neolithic time, something from the dark ages that enslaves women.” Amidst a flurry of noise from the gallery, Hendrickson loudly interrupts his fellow Senator, pontificating as to how for

50 years the Utah territory, a polygamous territory was progressive, idealist…. Our polygamous women demanded and received the right to vote decades before the rest of this nation and it was this chamber that stripped them of their voices when you voted to make polygamy illegal, casting them into the shadows and then turning your backs on them. 88

A voice is heard from the gallery; it is Nikki, shouting to the press that she and Bill’s other wives “share a sisterhood.” Senator Dwyer tells Hendrickson and his wife that they are “out of order,” but is interrupted by Barb who scolds “the body,” saying that their “LDS religion suppresses women as well excommunicating us for speaking out and for attempting to bury the Mother in heaven doctrine.” As Barb speaks, she makes eyes at an

87 For more on how this concept of hijacking is related not only to questions of terrorism but also to the positive and negative attributes of our increasing viral/media saturated culture, see the “Viral” issue of WSQ, edited by Jasbir Puar. Women’s Studies Quarterly (Volume 40, No. 1 and 2, Spring/Summer 2012).
anonymous Senator, who sensing this, asks her quizzically, “are you talking to me?” to which Senator Dwyer, furiously pounding his gavel interjects that “no ones talking to anyone!”\(^8^9\) Indeed, when it comes to the question of legalizing polygamy (much like when it comes to gay marriage, or questions of sharia family law), engendering objective debate is near impossible. Bitter personal and political histories and wounds rise to the surface, creating non-generative cacophony in which no fruitful discussion can be held. Hendrickson’s last words to the Senate foreshadow both the character’s forthcoming assassination and his belief that he has completed the pivotal first step in what will eventually be a history-making campaign for a different kind of marriage equality:

> For the first time in 120 years this body and this state will discuss and debate the merits of the legalization of polygamy…[and] failure to do so lays its abuses, its victims at your feet, not ours. We’ve stepped out of the shadows and demand our day in the sun. This may not happen in this session or the next or even in my lifetime, but it will happen, and that conversation has now begun.\(^9^0\)

Hendrickson’s last words gesture towards a Utopian image of the future, of polygamists in the sunlight, happy, accepted. This gesture is in keeping with recent scholarship on the importance of queer Utopias, or examples of a radical better future existing in the now.\(^9^1\) Although Hendrickson knows that this dream is nowhere close to being a reality, he remains steadfast because he knows that, through his act of “hijacking the Senate,” he has made public his vision for a better, more just future.

Hendrickson’s speech, rather like the pronouncement “I do” at the wedding ceremony, is an example of saying something as doing something. However, whereas the wedding ceremony evoked by The New Normal concluded with the consolidation of a new type of family, in a felicitous performative, the repercussions of Hendrickson’s words manifest an infelicitous performative. Moreover, Hendrickson’s words foretell his own demise. Although his performance at the Senate might have been controversial, it also turns him into a new leader for fundamentalist Mormon polygamists throughout Utah, as exemplified by the hundreds of new disciples (480 to be exact) that have come to Bill’s church on Easter Sunday morning. As he proffers his sermon and looks out into the crowd, Hendrickson sees visions of his Mormon ancestors, another foreshadowing of the inevitable. While going out to pick up his mother for Easter dinner, Bill is approached by his neighbor Carl, a quiet man whose life has fallen apart during the course of the series. Carl and his wife have been unable to conceive, he has recently been laid off, and his wife has decided to file for divorce. He tells Bill that “I love my wife, I love my church, I will not be ridiculed, I will not be a failure.”\(^9^2\) Bill’s fight for polygamy has left “normal” men feeling emasculated and impotent, making Hendrickson the ultimate threat to normative values. The camera shifts to the Hendrickson’s kitchen where a gunshot is


\(^{9^0}\) Ibid 39:45-40:06.


\(^{9^2}\) “When Men and Mountains Meet,” Big Love, 56:51-56:57.
heard. The deed has been done; Bill’s infelicitous performative results in the performance of his own martyrdom.

Although this final scene is tragic, it also comes with one last generative, positive, performative utterance. As he is about to lose consciousness, Bill asks Barb to say a blessing over him, a rite reserved for male priest holders. During the course of Big Love’s final season, Bill and Barb’s narrative arc saw their marriage crumbling due to Bill’s inability to allow his wife to be a priest holder. Barb goes so far as to seek baptism in another church, a choice that would keep her from being reunited with her family in the heavenly kingdom, a tenet of Mormonism well discussed on the program. According to Michael Cobb, the Hendrickson “family’s impasse between quasi competing notions of the afterlife and eternity that forms of coupling offer in various strands of the Mormon faith…disturbs one into a sense of how marriage and family, polygamous or not, religious or not, are relationships inflected by an overwhelming sense of worry about forever.”93 Worried about forever, Bill’s performative utterance of “bless me” and Barb’s subsequent giving of said blessing envision a new version of the Mormon church, one that not only allows the family to stay together in heaven but also demonstrates how Mormon polygamy might be able to change with the times, motioning toward unexpected feminist applications. When we see Barb in a flash-forward, one year later, she is now the head of Bill’s church and has just baptized her first grandchild. Happiness has been restored to the Hendrickson household and all the women are “free” to pursue their passions. The death of the polygamous father has resulted in a future where religious belief and female enfranchisement can co-exist in peace.

Strange Bedfellows: Sexual and Religious Minorities

Although not foregrounded, HBO’s Big Love contains a number of queer characters and subplots that offer feuding images about the relationship between religion and sexuality. For Albert Grant, heir to Juniper Creek and Nicky’s brother, homosexual desire is something to be subjugated and repressed in the name of religious piety. Female sexual desire between sister wives is represented as well, exemplified by Bill’s best friend, who loses two of his wives to each other as they leave him and his first wife to start their own family. In both of these examples, homosexuality (or at least an ethical, monogamous, morally acceptable form of homosexuality) is valorized as a possible solution to end the vicious cycle of sexual and psychological abuse found in compound life. However, compound culture also gives spectators the most progressive view of sexual difference present on the show. Selma Green, Albert Grant’s aunt, is genderqueer, a woman in a suit, treated as a man and equal by members of her church and by her religious leader husband. This productive tension between sexual object choice and religious inclusion is also touched upon in The New Normal by the officiating of an actual priest and on Little Mosque on the Prairie by the community’s debates about a gay wedding and the possibility of a Muslim second marriage. It seems as if, in a post-9/11 era, the conflation of sexual and religious freedom is almost de rigueur.

At first, this yoking of freedom of expression with freedom of religion, of religious polygamy with queer non-monogamy might seem unlikely; however, it is precisely the ways in which these two seemingly disparate constituencies hit the same

93 Cobb, Single: Arguments for the Uncoupled, 98.
“panic button” within mainstream media that tell us an important lesson about what it means to live in America in our neoliberal multicultural present. This chapter has argued that our contemporary moment’s obsession with marriage equality is, contrary to popular consensus, not because it is an important civil rights issue but rather because the legalization of gay marriage represents the instantiation of a new contour of multiculturalism as an ideological project. According to Benjamin Berger, “the lens of legal multiculturalism…obscures the fact that the contemporary encounter between religion and the constitutional rule of law is a cross-cultural encounter.” Moreover, Berger argues that the terms of legal debates for religious minorities are “always already settled” to reflect dominant cultural views.

In the context of interactions between law and religion, this means that certain commitments and assumptions of the culture of constitutionalism are not up for grabs or open to debate because they are seen as solutions to or terms of analysis for, not aspects of, the underlying tensions. When this is the case, the rhetoric of pluralism, tolerance, and accommodation can be experienced as a language of power, coercion and enforced transformation.94

For Muslims, Mormons, and queers (of both the “good” and “bad” varieties) the stakes of this coercion and enforced transformation concern either being/passing as monogamous (as in The New Normal and Little Mosque on the Prairie) or representing oneself as a model non-monogamist (as in Big Love).

In addition to demonstrating the affective and structural similarities between certain aspects of Muslim, Mormon, and queer identity, my analysis has also been concerned with the similar legal battles all three of these cultural groups find themselves embroiled in. In all three of the examples discussed here, fighting for legal, contractual equality is staged as a community imperative. Here, a wedding is not enough of a performative; it must be paired with the citational force of law. Legal recognition, therefore, becomes the ultimate performative, one that, unlike the performative utterances “I do” and “It’s a girl,” creates tangible change in the world.95 Earlier in this chapter, I argued, following Katie Horowitz, that performance (i.e. wedding ceremonies) and performativity (i.e. the words “I do”) have become, and/or always were, the same thing, and that utilizing this framework helps to account for both the fixity and fluidity of identity as a concept.96 However, the performative force of legal doctrine seems to be an exception to this rule. For most minority groups in search of both affective and legislative recognition, law manages to trump any performance of equality/identity or fight for recognition; it remains the goal—a seemingly fixed, immutable manifestation of truly belonging in a pluralist state. In Big Love, the legalization of polygamy is the ultimate goal, a goal so important and impossible to Bill Hendrickson that he makes a martyr of himself in order to someday have his dream become a reality. However, the totalitarian

95 Ibid, 101.
97 See Katie Horowitz, “The Trouble with Queerness.”
regime of coupledom that has made itself manifest in the past decade ensures Hendrickson’s dream just that: a dream. It seems, when it comes not only to race, religion, or sexual orientation, but also to any form of non-monogamous lifestyle, the iterative force of law might be the only performance strong enough to have world-changing effects.

Is there a way to undo the authoritarian and totalitarian regime of compulsory coupledom? Is there a way to stage counter-performances that over time can begin to strip legal equality of its status as the ultimate signifier of inclusion and acceptability? In my estimation, there are two activist and ideological projects already in existence that are working in this direction. Firstly, there is the leftist/atheist movement’s attempt to make clear to the American mainstream that although we supposedly live in a country with a constitution that separates church and state, this separation is, in many ways, in name only. What a real separation of church and state would look like is not the government demeaning certain subjects worthy of marriage equality and others not, but rather the wholesale eradication of state-sanctioned marriage, replacing it instead with civil unions and/or domestic partnerships. This real separation of church and state would also uncover how supposedly secular forms of state control are inflected with a Protestant moral ethos, often in very undemocratic ways. Regarding Islam and other forms of religious difference, Saba Mahmood argues that perhaps America and other Western countries should follow Canada’s lead and legalize religious courts whose decisions would outweigh their secular counterparts in regards to questions of family law (i.e. marriage, divorce, elder care).98 The proliferation of these kinds of religious courts would serve two functions: 1) to provide a safe space for alternative religious families (be they Mormon, Muslim, Native, etc.) to seek justice according to their own moral and religious codes while also 2) proving to an American mainstream that these stigmatized populations, contrary to popular belief, have a highly developed and nuanced set of moral and ethical matrices, even if these morals and ethics might not be completely in line with normative Protestant notions.

Lastly, one could take the current constellation of Muslim, Mormon, and queer as an opportunity to look more at the similarities between these groups than at their differences. In A Call for Heresy, Anouar Majid provocatively argues that notions of cultural dissent are intrinsic in both American and Islamic culture.99 Rather than looking at dissent as barbaric and anarchic, Majid sees “heretical thought, or freethinking, as the only lifesaving measure left to avoid an apocalyptic future.” Although to many outside observers (as well as members of each constituency), coalition building between non-monogamous religious and sexual minorities might be a heretical conceit, they share a similar stigma and a similar need to dissent against a status quo which has lumped them together. Sexual and religious minorities embracing their current assemblage as strange bedfellows might productively expose the hierarchies, coercions, and ideological assumptions that lay behind the supposedly race-blind, religiously pluralist, GLBTQ-

99 Anouar Majid, A Call for Heresy: Why Dissent is Vital to Islam and America (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 1.
friendly face of secular neoliberal multiculturalism. Keeping this in mind, it is less surprising that, as discussed in the introductory anecdote to this chapter, Anderson Cooper would be interested in utilizing his television program to highlight the experiences of others made socially stigmatized due to their distance from the monogamous norm. What this type of queer/Muslim/Mormon coalition building could engender is a world in which Cooper could be a wealthy white homosexual man in an out open relationship, a world in which Cooper would no longer feel the burden to either play “model minority” nor shamefully closet his lifestyle choices. Indeed, if Cooper, with all of his white, secular, and economic privileges, feels the need to cover his queerness and/or pass as normal, then there can be little hope for the rest of us, queered by some combination of race, religion, class, and sexual object choice, of ever reaching a Utopian future in which one can proudly proclaim one’s differences in the light of day instead of keeping them sequestered in the darkness of our current socio-political moment.
Conclusion: Towards a Heretical Politics of Mutual Respect

Writing a history of the present is a precarious business; as you write and research current events occur that affect the outcomes of your argument. If a researcher is lucky, events will occur that will allow his/her topic to become self-evident. During the three years of researching and writing this dissertation, much of the content of this study was substantially revised to reflect the ever-changing representations of both queers and Arabs in popular media. For example, the chapter on *The Shahs of Sunset* and *All American Muslim* was developed out of necessity; in order to comment on the proliferation of reality television program and the ways in which Muslim/Arab and queer subjects were being used to further certain ideological ideals. This constant recycling of the Arab and Queer examples in relation to concepts of citizenship, recognition and larger questions of race and class makes clear how the neoliberal multicultural spectator sketched in these pages is not just a new phenomenon and can manifest itself in unexpected ways as cultural zeitgeist allows.

I would like to end on the question of dissent, which, though evoked at critical junctures throughout the dissertation, remains an under-developed component of “a politics of the present.” Dissent in our current era has become an embodied strategy, a way of demonstrating an awareness that the neoliberal multicultural spectator is no more than a specter. It is a way of emphasize that everyone’s vision of the good life is not necessarily the same. Quite often, contemporary American political acts as if it is above dissent and social unrest, unlike in other more “backwards” and volatile parts of the world. The events begun by the Arab Spring in 2011 in a number of Middle Eastern countries resulted in flurry of international press and a great deal of support for burgeoning revolutions in Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt and Syria. This support from the West, however, is contingent on the masses in these countries supporting Democracy, (something that is still uncertain throughout most of the region). The short lived American Occupy movement arrived on the heels of these protests, and like its Arab counterparts, mobilized collective dissent against the status quo. Although Occupy did not manage to change much on a legislative level, it made Americans aware that the American Dream was only tenable for “The 1%”, regardless of racial, sexual, religious, or ethnic difference. Both of these movements also highlighted how concepts of dissent and spectatorship were now intrinsically linked to the forms of their mediation: mass media - such as Twitter, Youtube, or film on a camera phone - became an increasingly acceptable piece of journalistic documentation.

In the years since this project’s inception, the links between concepts of Arab, Queer, and other stigmatized identities have continued to multiply. In 2011, a heterosexual American male was arrested for fraud after being exposed as the author of a blog purportedly written by a young lesbian in Syria. In 2012, “The Innocence of Muslims,” a propagandistic film depicting Mohammed the prophet as a sodomizing, lascivious misogynist, spawned a series of violent events in the Middle East, (including the siege of American embassies). A year later, Obama would announce his intention to reluctantly take military action against Assad’s regime in Syria, causing many citizens to question whether the use of gas on civilians was injurious enough to warrant a military response in the name of universal human rights. As Obama gave his speech to the nation, a months-long battle was brewing concerning what Tony winning playwright and
performer Harvey Fierstein wrote an op/ed piece in the New York Times likening Vladimir Putin to Adolf Hitler. Fierstein melodramatically suggested that the crackdown on gays in Russia might, unchecked, escalate into a third world war. The writer advocated for a possible boycott of the Olympic Games as a symbolic gesture of allegiance with GLBTQ athletes. This controversy followed two Supreme Court decisions from late June. The first declared the Defense of Marriage Act unconstitutional. The second struck down the section of the Voting Rights Act which ensures that all citizens are able to vote, causing a situation, to quote author Rabih Alameddine from his facebook wall in which “two brown men get married but can’t vote.” These ever-continuing world events make clear how new constellations of race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, class and ethnicity are constantly and consistently being produced.

As I argued in this dissertation, mainstream media and cultural production often work to simplify the complex and entangled nature of all these current events, and in doing so have helped to construct the figure of the neoliberal multicultural spectator, a non-existent model viewer who embodies the ideal morals and ethics of a neoliberal society. This spectator, though just imagined, reifies certain normative narrative expectations and renders race, class, gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation irrelevant. However, as I have argued, adherence to normative narratives of neoliberal multiculturalism does not help create a better, more just version of the world; it just creates a seemingly-diverse but culturally-bland landscape in which acceptable differences are exaggerated and unacceptable differences sequestered, covered, cropped and closeted. The widespread proliferation of this ideal, neoliberal multicultural spectator makes dissention within its normative logics and ethics so difficult.

What strategies of dissent can we use in the war against the “neoliberal multicultural spectator”? Although we are in many ways already neoliberal multicultural spectators, we must strive to be critical ones. Being a critical neoliberal multicultural spectator entails trying not to be easily swayed by the immediate affective responses we have to cultural texts but rather looking at the logics that undergird us having those feelings in the first place. It requires being able to dis-identify with the performance of normalcy mainstream culture continually re-enacts. It requires constantly reminding oneself that not everyone’s vision of “the good life” is the same, and not trying to see one’s moral and ethical matrix as being solely acceptable. Most importantly, it requires being cognizant that any turn to the “universal,” or utopian can reinforce an empty “We are the world ethos” which strips away difference. Although the act of becoming a critical neoliberal multicultural spectator might seem passive, in reality it is anything but. It is an active form of dissent like a weed that emerges from the shadow of a mighty tree. The more this weed travels and helps to regenerate its mode of being, the more new weeds emerge. Only through changing our ideological perspective, one critical spectator at a time, can we build a new kind of world, one that heretically goes against conventional concepts of “the good life” and acceptability, instead creating a space where mutual respect for difference and economic equality are the new narrative benchmarks of normalcy.
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**Narrative Films and Documentaries**


**Interviews and Invited Lectures**


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Appendix A: List of Images


