

## “A Space for the Spiritual”:

A Roundtable on Race, Gender,  
and Islam in the United States

Moderated by Sylvia Chan-Malik, with Evelyn Alsultany,  
Su’ad Abdul Khabeer, and Maryam Kashani

### **Sylvia Chan-Malik**

SYLVIA CHAN-MALIK is Assistant Professor of American Studies and Women’s and Gender Studies at Rutgers University, New Brunswick. Her research examines the intersections of race, religion, gender, and sexuality through critical frameworks of American transnationalism and comparative Ethnic Studies, with a specific focus on the history of Islam in the United States.

Over the course of the last decade, conversations around race and religion in the United States have shifted significantly, in no small part due to what has been called “the racialization of Islam.” The term names various processes by which those perceived to be Muslim and/or Arab have, to cite critical race and legal studies scholar Leti Volpp, undergone a “particular racialization, wherein members of this group have been identified as terrorists, and disidentified as citizens.”<sup>\*</sup> Such racialization processes have become a common subject of critique in the scholarly and activist left, and in particular for those working in Ethnic Studies and critical American Studies frameworks. At the same time, due to an increased interest in Islam’s history in the United States, new and exciting scholarship has also emerged documenting Islam’s complex and multifaceted presence across black American, Asian American, and Arab American communities, which extends to the earliest days of African chattel slavery in the New World.

As Islam and Muslims have become the focus of unprecedented interest and scrutiny, the existence and subjectivities of Muslim women within the U.S. remain largely obscured and/or ignored in both public and academic spheres. When Muslim women are visible, they are largely portrayed as “over there,” the objects of Western feminist pity living under oppressive regimes in the Middle East—representations that elide the historical lega-

cies of Muslim women in the U.S. and the profound entanglements of race, gender, class, sexuality, and religion which shape their narratives and subjectivities. Yet this too is also changing, as new scholarship addresses the lives and representations of Muslim women in the U.S., work which challenges existing assumptions around feminism, racial formation, gender identity, and religious belonging. It draws from and builds upon diverse discourses, including—but not limited to—black, women-of-color, and Third World feminisms, feminist theology, racial formation theory, critical and comparative Ethnic Studies, Cultural and Media Studies, and transnational American Studies.

For this special issue of *Amerasia*, I brought together a group of scholars working at the forefront of these conversations—Evelyn Alsultany, Su'ad Abdul Khabeer, and Maryam Kashani. Each participant provided a brief overview of her research, which was circulated and read prior to a Skype roundtable which took place in early December 2013, where I acted as the discussant. During the conversation, Alsultany, Khabeer, and Kashani addressed issues of terminology, acknowledged the pleasures and perils of feminist frameworks, and articulated their interventions and visions for the future study of race, gender, and Islam in the United States.

\* Leti Volpp, "The Citizen and the Terrorist," *UCLA Law Review* 49 (2002).

### **Evelyn Alsultany**

EVELYN ALSULTANY is an Associate Professor in the Department of American Culture at the University of Michigan. She is the author of *Arabs and Muslims in the Media*; co-editor of *Arab and Arab American Feminism*; and co-editor of *Between the Middle East and the Americas*. She is guest curator of the Arab American National Museum's online exhibit, "Reclaiming Identity": [www.arabstereotypes.org](http://www.arabstereotypes.org).

The main subject of my research and teaching is the politics of culture or cultural politics of Arab and Muslim identities in the U.S. I am fascinated by how certain identities—racial, ethnic, religious, gender, sexual, etc.—can become political, controversial, and a part of debates around whether or not a particular group of people is worthy of rights. How do we come to justify that a certain category of human does not deserve rights and what is the role of cultural discourses and images of that group in this process, for example, Muslim men at Guantanamo Bay prison? As an interdisciplinary scholar of Ethnic Studies, Arab and Muslim American Studies, Gender Studies, Media Studies, and Cultural Studies, I employ Cultural Studies methods and frame-

works to examine how media images of Arabs and Muslims participate in creating a larger field of meaning about race, religion, and gender. The core of my work is concerned with questions of representations, more specifically how the media produces racial meanings about Arabs and Muslims.

To me, racialization, following Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s seminal work, is the hierarchical meaning assigned by humans to physical, visible, or other human differences that are supported by power structures and that are subject to change. Thus when talking about the racialization of Islam, it is important to understand the meanings that have been ascribed to Islam as a faith and to the people that practice the religion—as backwards, barbaric, uncivilized, oppressed women, men who oppress women, violent, unreasonable, terroristic, etc.—and how such meanings are supported by power structures (e.g., USA Patriot Act, going to war in Afghanistan and Iraq, or even declaring a “War on Terror”), as well as how these meanings are not static but subject to change. How gender and sexuality operate in the process of racialization has been a fascinating part of my research.

Muslim men and women have been racialized differently during the “War on Terror,” and this takes place through articulations of gender and sexual difference. In innumerable ways, and from all ends of the ideological spectrum, Muslim women have been represented as veiled, oppressed, and in need of rescue. The government and commercial news media have been central to the circulation of stories about the “oppressed Muslim woman” and the imperative to “save brown women from brown men” (as Gayatri Spivak would say). The oppressed Muslim woman narrative derives its power from the strong emotions it provokes—pity and outrage.

Thus, this is not just about images of Arabs and Muslims, but also about the feelings evoked by such images and stories. Stories about oppressed Muslim women evoke deep sympathy and concern from viewers, who are encouraged to experience outrage at the injustice Muslim women face and an abundance of sympathy and concern for them. These feelings of concern and outrage for Muslim women simultaneously operate to justify withholding feeling/sympathy for Muslim men, who presumably deserve to be in Guantanamo Bay or Abu Ghraib prisons and do not deserve our sympathy. The treatment of these prisoners is especially stunning when considering that the vast majority of them have not been convicted of involvement in terrorism; many have not even been formally charged with a crime nor need to be cleared of any involve-

ment in terrorism. Even if not guilty of terrorism, Muslim men are still framed as guilty: guilty of anti-Americanism, oppressing women, and therefore, as potential terrorists and not worthy of sympathy or concern.

In my book, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation After 9/11*, I argue that sympathy is a key “post-race” emotion; that exclusion today is no longer contingent upon demonizing the enemy. Rather, exclusion today is contingent upon portraying the enemy at times in positive or sympathetic ways in order to project the United States as reaching a “post-race” society that no longer discriminates. Therefore, exhibiting sympathy and outrage for “the oppressed Muslim woman” is fundamental to passing policies that target Arabs and Muslims for exclusion from rights. I refer to this larger phenomenon as “simplified complex representations”—a representational mode that involves balancing a negative representation with a positive one in order to project sensitivity around stereotyping.

### **Maryam Kashani**

MARYAM KASHANI recently completed her Ph.D. in Social Anthropology at the University of Texas at Austin, where she was also a lecturer in Asian American Studies. Her research is concerned with the lived experience of Muslims in America through the lenses of knowledge practices, race, gender, visual culture, and political economy. Her films and videos have been shown at film festivals, universities, and museums internationally.

My current research engages the work of Zaytuna College and the Muslim spaces of the greater San Francisco Bay Area. I am particularly interested in the ways that diverse transnational histories and experiences are assembled, enabling/forcing a wider dialogue about the experiences of difference and commonality within Islam, across ethnicity and race, national citizenship, gender, and socioeconomic status. I explore how Islamic knowledge practices are a critical and liberatory framework of ethical and moral becoming for Muslims in the United States, how they enable Muslim scholars and their students to articulate and enact alternative epistemologies for being Muslim and “modern” in the twenty-first century. In my work, I try to draw attention to the ways living in a particular Muslim body is experienced in everyday life. At the same time, I am also working on thinking through how liberal conceptions of sexuality and gender are imprinted upon the ways we talk about Muslims, how the social construction of race imposes a racist logic towards our understandings of what it means to be modern, liberal, and humanist.

I am hesitant to “racialize religion” because I think racialization is done to people. However, I think Mahmood Mamdani’s concept of “culture talk” speaks to the ways that an idea of an Islamic or Muslim culture is often code for racializing processes. In the U.S. context, it is especially important to think about the palpability of Muslimness, in particular bodies. One can often “pass” (to use parlance from African American history) if one does not wear “Muslim garb” or have particular facial hair. The phenomenon of passing (amongst other cruel things) and the internment of Japanese Americans are both fundamental historical examples of how race functions in American history, and they inform our collective understandings of white supremacy in the U.S. At the same time, we also have examples of collective action that speak to the work that Muslims in America are currently doing. By thinking through the American history of racial formation, we as scholars are likewise able to place the experience of Muslims in America within these genealogies of suffering and promise, policing and self-determination.

I approach the intersections of race, religion, and gender by drawing attention to the ways such categories are formulated and contingent and used in multiple ways. In my Asian American Studies course, for example, I show how Asian American identity initially cohered as a political project for a pan-ethnic collectivity in solidarity with African American, Native American, and Chicano formations. In my approach to Critical Muslim Studies, I hope to do similar work in terms of drawing attention to the framings through which we talk about difference and commonality. While it is important to parse out identity formations and frames of “othering,” I also find it necessary to see how such categories rarely work in isolated ways. Seeing the intersections, the assemblages, the embodied natures of such ways of being lays out the complex nature of what work needs to be done on our end. I am consistently challenged by the complex realities “on the ground” in my research, and I have to work really proactively and reflexively to make sure that I do not participate in the occlusion of histories, experiences, and ways of being.

### **Su’ad Abdul Khabeer**

SU’AD ABDUL KHABEER is Assistant Professor of Anthropology and African American Studies at Purdue University. She is interested in identity and subjectivity, diaspora and Gender Studies, performance ethnography, Islamic thought and practice, Arabic and Spanish language and literature.

My research and teaching examines the intersections of race, religion, and popular culture in the United States and elsewhere. I am an anthropologist by training, and while I consider my work interdisciplinary, what I appreciate about anthropology—what drew me to the discipline—is that you actually talk to people. You don't simply read people as a text, but you engage them, and it's an embodied experience. For that reason, I do traditional ethnographic fieldwork, alongside performance ethnography, in which I create performances based on my field experience. I'm drawn to performance ethnography because of my own background as a writer and poet, but also because of how it is accessible to audiences beyond the academy. While I value the luxuries that come with being in the ivory tower, what brought me here wasn't to get the best corner office, but how scholarly methodologies could be used toward social justice struggles. In addition to anthropology, I also situate myself in African American Studies. I bring the black experience—and by black, I am speaking of the diasporic black experience, but also of the continental African black experience as well as the export of blackness going toward the East—to my analysis of Islam. The U.S. as an idea, as a location, as a space is central to much of my work, so I also see myself engaged with American Studies.

These interests and affiliations come together in my current manuscript, in which I introduce the concept of what I call "Muslim cool." Muslim cool is a way of thinking about and being an American Muslim that is directly informed by U.S. racial logics, discourses of hip-hop, the lived experiences of Islam and black America, the ethnoreligious norms of Middle Eastern and South Asian Muslim communities, as well as white supremacy. Muslim cool describes how young Muslims establish connections with specific notions of blackness in configuring a sense of U.S. Muslim identity and claims of belonging and citizenship. This allows one to move beyond limiting frameworks of immigration and assimilation, so when we think about the American Muslim experience, we are not describing some new American minority. And thus my manuscript is not about the curiosities of American Islam, but uses the complexities of the American Muslim experience to narrate the continuing significance of race and blackness in twenty-first century U.S. culture.

I think about race as both phenotype and behavior or performance. So this means to think about Muslims not only in terms of phenotypical characteristics—e.g., the Muslim is brown, swar-

thy, Middle Eastern, with dark hair, dark eyes, a particular kind of nose—but also how the Muslim “race” is a category of social meaning understood in terms of what the body looks like as well as what the body *does*. So there are phenotypical characteristics that identify you as a Muslim, but also certain actions, like having a beard, wearing a headscarf, praying a lot, etc. These come together to create a raced image of the Muslim. In terms of gender, we have to be careful not to assume that the male experience is representative of all Muslim experiences. As someone who works in Black Studies, the young urban male experience often becomes the default experience for all black people everywhere; likewise, we have to be attentive that the young male Arab/South Asian Muslim experience is not the proxy for all the other ways Muslims experience racialization.

Most are probably familiar with Mahmood Mamdani’s idea of the “good Muslim” and the “bad Muslim.” The “bad Muslim” is brown, foreign, backwards, dangerous. And the good Muslim is also brown—not black—and thus always foreign. In this distinction arises the triangulation of the idea of black people as domestic and non-Muslims, and Muslims as foreign and not black. Of course, this triangulation works, as Claire Kim has theorized this configuration, to uphold white supremacy. But this triangulation also reinforces hegemonies in Muslim communities, in which Arab and South Asian Muslims see themselves as superior to black American Muslims. In both cases, those racial codes are legitimized *vis-à-vis* the white gaze. So to me, the racialization of religion in the U.S. provides context for broader conversations that are not Muslim-specific, but also have iterations that *are* Muslim-specific, which then work together to produce (and re-produce) racial hierarchies and forms of racial-religious triangulation which uphold white supremacy and racial inequality.

## Roundtable

### I. Keywords

Sylvia Chan-Malik (SCM): In your initial responses, I see everyone addressing and intervening upon particular types of critical absences in the academy, the ways in which your respective disciplines and the conversations you’re working within and through don’t know how to address issues of religion, race, gender, and, in particular, Islam and the U.S. So I wanted to start our conversation by deal-

ing with questions of terminology, the ways in which we use, understand, and give meaning to certain terms. In my own work, there are a number of phrases that always cause me concern. So let me put them out there and get your thoughts. In no particular order, they are: “Islamophobia,” “indigenous-immigrant” (as a binary to differentiate between black American and Arab and South Asian Muslims in the U.S.), and “Muslim American vs. American Muslim.”

Su’ad Abdul-Khabeer (SAK): I have a question. Is the “indigenous-immigrant” opposition a term people use in Ethnic Studies and American Studies? Because in the American Muslim community, people are really familiar with that, but I don’t know if other people were familiar with it, in academia.

SCM: I think it’s gaining more traction. Of course, the usage is problematic in Ethnic Studies discourse, because indigeneity means something very specific (in relation to Native and First Nation peoples). Also, “immigrant” is both problematic and imprecise when referring to Arab and South Asian Muslims in the U.S., as it plays into the notion of Asians and Arabs as perpetual foreigners and disregards generational differences and issues of citizenship. Also, just to clarify, “indigenous-immigrant” gained more widespread usage after the publication of Sherman Jackson’s 2005 book, *Islam and the Blackamerican*, in which he situates black American Islam within the context of black protest religion, and critiques the elitism of Muslim immigrants as a symptom of colonialism and white supremacy.

SAK: In my work, initially, I would use indigenous and immigrant, but in scare quotes, because these terms appear in the field. But I stopped doing that, because I think the terms exist because of questions of whose authority determines authenticity both within the (Muslim) community but also *vis-à-vis* the state. I feel like we should just say what we mean: black people, Arab Americans, and South Asian Americans. This is who I’m talking about in my work. So just name them. One last thing I want to say about this, about the term “indigenous” as problematic. Indigeneity typically refers to Native people. Now



of course that is why African American Muslims were using the claim. Because we have a right. We have a say because we have an expertise that is indigenous to this place—we are native in comparison to Muslims who are more recent immigrants. But I wonder about that term, if we accept the fact that the U.S. is a settler colony, what does it mean for black people who are displaced to a settler colony to then claim indigeneity?

SCM: In your own work, do you use the term American Muslim or Muslim American, and why do you choose the term that you choose?

Evelyn Alsultany (EA): In my work, I use the terms “Arab and Muslim Americans” and, at times, people ask me, can’t you be more specific? But since I’m looking at representations, that is how it’s portrayed by the media—as monolithic, as conflated. I’m trying to talk about the portrayal of Arabs/Muslims as interchangeable, as one and the same. If I am not talking about media representations, then I try to be more specific: Muslim American, Arab American, Iraqi American, etc. I personally tend to use Muslim American because in Ethnic Studies it is customary when discussing hyphenated identities to place American last: Arab American, Asian American, African American. And I do not think it is about de-emphasizing “American,” but about inflecting one’s American identity with other important parts of one’s identity.

Maryam Kashani (MK): It’s a designation I’ve been thinking about as well. Like Su’ad, more often than not, I follow the terms that the people I’m working with use. In the introduction to my book, I write about something that happened on Facebook, where one Muslim posed this question, “Do you consider yourself an American Muslim or a Muslim American?” A long debate followed, but for him it was about foregrounding the fact that he was a Muslim and “American” described what type of Muslim he was.

SCM: Right. My understanding of that debate is that it is a question of what is the noun, and what is the adjective. Are you an American with “Muslim” being the adjective? Or are you a Muslim with “American” being the adjec-

tive? So the logic would follow that “American Muslim” emphasizes one’s identity as a Muslim, as part of a global community of Muslims. While “Muslim American” emphasizes the salience of one’s American identity, and is more in line with the ways people of color have self-identified in the U.S.

SAK: I use American Muslim, and I use it deliberately. I recognize the debates about how it can be about choosing one’s first allegiance—“America” or “Islam”—but the reason why I use it is because typically, in the U.S., the first term is a reference to your racial/ethnic/geographical background (e.g. African American, Asian American, etc.). But for Muslims, there’s no *place* (e.g., Africa, Asia, etc.). So my concern is that “Muslim American” racializes Muslims as Arabs only, because most are already conflating the two (Arab and Muslim), so I don’t use that term.

SCM: So let’s move on to another term that’s used all the time: Islamophobia. I have very strong feelings about this one, due to how Islamophobia has become a central organizing term in post-9/11 discourse.

SAK: I don’t use Islamophobia because my biggest issue or gripe with the whole conversation on Muslims in the U.S. is how 1965 and 2001 become these origin points, and everything begins after that. So after 9/11, there’s this whole new thing: Islamophobia. As a scholar, you want to pay attention to what’s new and different, but for me, it’s about continuity. Because Islam had a history in the U.S. before 9/11. Yet folks act as if only now, people see Muslims—they used to be invisible. Now, they’re becoming “citizens.” They used to be alien. All these binaries just over and over and over again, so Islamophobia just feeds into that. So the term I use is “anti-Muslim racism,” because it identifies the religion, but also identifies that racialization is at play and is not time-stamped in a way that erases the history of Muslims in the U.S. before 1965 and 2001.

SCM: Yes, I completely agree. I use “anti-Muslim racism” as well because it situates the violence against Muslims as part of a larger trajectory of racism in the U.S., of anti-black racism, settler-colonialism, xenophobia, and nativism.

- MK: Yes, I use it too! I only use the Islamophobia when I actually talk about the Islamophobia industry, which produces anti-Muslim racism. For me, it make sense to use anti-Muslim racism because it is based on the ways one is interpolated as Muslim, whether you are an Arab Christian or an Arab Muslim, for example, or a Sikh.
- EA: I think we're all on the same page with Islamophobia. It's not that I don't use it, but I don't prefer it, mainly because by approaching Islam as “the fear of Islam”—and yes, some people are fearful of it—it's easy to not pay attention to the way in which Islam is racialized and how that is a central component to understanding the post-9/11 backlash against Muslims. After 9/11, there were a lot of debates around this question: Is the backlash against Arabs and Muslim after 9/11 racism? Islamophobia? Is this “race” or not? Some scholars said this isn't race; this is something else. Other scholars, like us, said, no, this is a racialized process. And there is something about the term Islamophobia that takes the race and racism out of it. The racialization of Islam in the U.S. has involved assigning simplistic and hierarchical meaning to the diverse peoples and the practices of Islam—the faith, the dress, appearance, gender roles, etc. The process of othering has involved producing meanings that associate Islam as backwards and threatening to U.S. national security. Sherene Razack has it right in talking about “race thinking” or the logic of race and how it came to be applied to Muslims by marking them as a separate category of humanity who are assigned a separate and unequal place in the law.
- MK: Also, I think Islamophobia alludes to sort of an individual response to Islam as opposed to the structural ways racism operates.
- SCM: Agreed. When we think about all the language about phobias—arachnophobia, etc.—you're scared of spiders, elevators, whatever, but it's an irrational fear, and an individualized fear. So you can have therapy and learn how not to be scared of spiders, and this is something you do on your own. So by calling it Islamophobia, the implication is its irrational and individual response will fix it. Whereas with racism—though admittedly there is this very neoliberal take

racism, where individual contact can get you “over it”—by calling it “anti-Muslim racism,” we as scholars and as educators can once again highlight the systemic nature of racism and make it tangible in ways that Islamophobia doesn’t.

II. “How could you be a Muslim and a feminist?”

SCM: So at this point, I want to segue into a conversation around feminism, about Islam and feminism, and about how to approach the intersections of race, gender, and Islam in the U.S. Each of you in your work, either directly or indirectly, is addressing how feminist perspectives inform the study of Islam and Muslims, whether as a subject or as a subjectivity. So how would you theorize the role that feminism plays in conversations around race and Islam in the United States?

SAK: Your question reminds me of the recent debate around Michelle Obama as the “mom-in-chief,” how white feminists were upset with her because they feel like she’s this smart, intelligent, articulate woman, so how she could be doing all these things like gardening and taking care of her kids? While black women are thinking, *Are you kidding me? I would love to be able to just take care of my kids. She doesn’t have to go clean the White House, she can take care of her kids.* That sort of sentiment is very much echoed in many ways African American Muslim women encounter Islam and even patriarchy in Islam. I’m not denying this is problematic, but this thinking goes along the lines of, “I don’t need to be empowered in that kind of way. Let him pay my bills, I’m quite fine with that.”

So these women, they want something different. But then the challenge becomes wanting to have a domestic relationship with your husband, while managing how you are seen by your community. Because if you’re Muslim, and you’re female, and you have something to say about something, there’s a way which you get marked as “feminist” in a negative way, and they (the community) cut you off. So on the ground, people’s actual lives complicate “feminism” in terms of the demands women have, and what “empowerment” looks like. But then, there can be this almost trite way which feminism is used against you as a scholar, from the (Muslim) community itself.

SCM: That seems like the major tension. On the one hand, there is the hegemony of second wave feminist ideologies and how they've been deployed in the services of what Leila Ahmed calls colonial feminism. And the responses of African American Muslim women are very similar to the critiques of white women's feminism leveled by black and Third World feminists, about how they distort and erase women of color. At the same time, Su'ad, what I hear you saying is that within the Muslim community, there is also a distortion of feminism as this type of totalizing discourse that, say, if you speak out about certain things, you're not a good Muslim.

EA: A part of the impetus in co-editing a volume on Arab American feminism [*Arab and Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence, and Belonging*] was all of the time, people—from my parents' friends to random people you meet in airports and such—would say, “How could you be a Muslim and a feminist?” as if this was an oxymoron. The operating assumption is that if you are a woman and call yourself a Muslim, then it means that you accept the oppression of women. And so that was one real source of frustration: How many times am I going to be asked this question and why is this framed in this way? And the second impetus—and this is something I shared with my co-editors Nadine Naber and Rabab Abdulhadi—was how often I was asked to speak about topics like cliterodectomy, honor killing, and oppressed women, when that's not what my research is about. But by virtue of being a Muslim woman, you're expected to clarify certain topics for the public. And we all felt very frustrated by that, especially since it revealed the limited frameworks there are to talk about Arab and Muslim women.

So our anthology was really asking Arab American feminists—many of whom are Muslim—what feminism means to them. And we titled the volume *Feminisms* with a “s” to acknowledge that priorities change depending on their context—there is not one Arab American feminism. All our contributors agree on feminism premised on social justice for all people—it's an anti-imperialist vision.

MK: One of the questions I get often that is frustrating is: How can you be a knowledgeable person and an educated per-

son, and still be a Muslim woman as well? For me, in terms of doing research on knowledge practices—and especially, on young men and women engaged in knowledge practices—understanding how Islam impacts their ideas about gender, equality, egalitarianism, and social justice is really important to me. I can't say that the female students at Zaytuna are Islamic feminists, with Islam as their only working framework. Because growing up in the U.S. and being part of many different populations, they're formed by different feminisms. I think these come together in how they self-determine their futures and the role of knowledge in their self-determining of their futures. And how they talk back to the expectations of them.

But they are also really aware of how Zaytuna is posing itself as this place where you can—all students, male and female—have access to scholars, access to Islamic knowledge. So female students in particular feel the distances—spatial and otherwise—in how they are receiving that knowledge with their teachers and peers. It gives them a certain sense of what their futures are going to be like and the future of the landscape they're going to enter into, and the weight of their knowledge—what all of that means for them in terms of making life choices. That's what I think of when I think of feminism: women getting knowledge and determining their own futures.

### III. "A space for the spiritual": Future directions

SCM: So to extend this question, and to discuss the proactive ways your own work addresses and intervenes in distortions and misunderstandings around Muslim women, I wonder if you could discuss how you would like to see larger conversations about these intersections of race, gender, sexuality, class develop. Because the study of Islam in the U.S., alongside categories of race—we are in the process of field formation. So in pushing the conversation forward, what kind of topics would you like to see covered?

EA: With regards to how I'm trying to make a political intervention with my work, I tend to be most concerned with what's happening now and therefore I am always trying to examine and understand contemporary cultural log-

ics. How are we thinking about the “other” now? How are we justifying exclusion today? For example, in the classroom, many of my students think: “Racism is over. We’re at a time when we’ve resolved any and all inequality and we are living in the most perfect moment in history.” What I’m trying to do is illuminate how we’re thinking so that we don’t take it for granted, so that’s not invisible. Yes, progress is undeniable, but progress does not mean that we live in a perfect moment where everything is just and all peoples are equal. My overall goal in my research and in my teaching is quite simple: it’s to try to make us aware of how we are thinking right now about who the other is and how we approach the other, and what we think is an acceptable solution to the problematic of othering.

SAK: I think my work, or this work. . . I don’t know if this is going to sound too lofty. . . but I feel like we are really trying to eradicate white supremacy. Eradicating white supremacy, imperialism, patriarchy—that’s the point, right? [chuckles] But what that also means is advocating a more expansive vision of what social justice work is. As an academic, I have been accused of not doing anything and just critiquing. And it’s interesting because I’m black, Latina, and Muslim in Indiana. If you think me walking into that classroom everyday is not “doing something,” I don’t know what to tell you. And I’m tall and my body’s big [laughter from everyone]—I mean, my very person is an intervention. So if the vision is more expansive, what does the work look like, and how do we include self-care? We can run ourselves ragged and that’s not good for us, it’s not good for anybody, it’s not good for the ultimate goal.

Finally, the last thing I’ll say in terms of my work and what I want people to do: I’m Muslim and one of the things the Quran emphasizes over and over and over again is *reflection*—thinking, questioning, understanding. So where I hope our work continues to go, and what really motivates what I do, is thinking about binaries, and really trying to break apart these binaries. There are so many binaries. They’re like roaches, proliferating. So I feel like for students, readers, whomever, how can we undo these? How

can we break them apart, complicate them? How can we really get at something, that's not just putting up these diametrically opposed things that oversimplify the world?

MK: I think one thing Su'ad doesn't mention about her work that's especially powerful is the performative element of it. She's doing this performance ethnography, which I think is similar to the work I'm trying to do with my film work, is pushing what a critical engagement can be and what social justice engagement can be, both in terms of what social justice looks like, but also what intellectual work looks like. So part of this idea of embodiment is that every part of your body is part of the research experience and the data experience. And you use these different tools as ways to share and spread this knowledge.

SCM: On embodiment, working towards wellness, I think, is so important. Within the academy, in my own experience, what I have found is that there is at times a real lack of—or even an antipathy against—any and all notions of *spiritual* wellness, of how faith and religion can contribute to that. Perhaps this is due to the particular intellectual genealogies of Marxism, so prevalent in a field like Ethnic Studies. But I think we are now at a point where people doing work on the intersections of race and religion, looking at social justice and religion, are taking cues from liberation theology and different types of Third World movements in which religion is a key element.

MK: I think also in American history, religion is something really important, in politics and in liberation as well. And we forget that. Part of the reason I was drawn to my project was because I felt that there was a vacuum in the left. I felt like if I was to look at Zaytuna and their approach to Islam and American life, what would it mean to think about a liberatory framework at Zaytuna? That became something that really motivated me. In having an expansive sense of what social justice work can look like, we are recuperating a space for the spiritual. Especially in our medicated age. [laughs]

I think one of the things I learned in my field work—and it's something I think I knew intuitively—in the practice



of seeking knowledge, is I make this intention to seek benefit and to be of benefit, to gain knowledge and spread knowledge. There's a reciprocal relationship to our practices of knowledge. And I think some of that gets lost in academia. Why are we doing this? After all, a lot of our research interests are based in our personal interests. So how do we translate that to our communities and to our different interests and commitments? In that regards, I think resurrecting the political project of Asian American Studies is really important for me. I think this has a lot to do with our own mental health, and the ways we are in the neoliberal university. To remember our commitments, to remember our intentions—that's critical. That's not to downplay the really problematic structural ways the university breaks a person down, but I do think these original intentions and commitments get put by the wayside. And constantly resurrecting that, that is important for us to do.