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Core: Ecologies of Muslim-American writing

Adnan Mahmutović

At the core of this analysis is the notion that world literature, here Muslim-American writing in particular, can be defined in terms of its way of working with(in) the dynamic between location and orientation. After 11 September 2001, Martin Amis argued, ‘all the writers on earth were reluctantly considering a change of occupation.’ In his view, the very *raison d’être* of literature was brought into question. There is no doubt that this infamous event has had global significance, but to ascribe a veritable global existential crisis to global writers says more about Amis’s location in certain literary ecologies than world literature as such. Such a crisis could perhaps be identified in the American literary ecology in the years that followed, for instance in the discourse developed by Richard Gray and Michael Rothberg.¹ However ridiculous Amis’s generalization may appear at first sight, there is, in my view, a truth in it that can help us approach what I have called Muslim-American writing, which indeed seems to have arisen from such a crisis, or an imposition of such a crisis through the escalation of the propaganda against Muslims in much Western media and the treatment of citizens of Islamic faith in most Western countries. Here we find authors such as Mohsin Hamid, Michael Muhammad Knight, Khaled

¹ Richard Gray, ‘Open Doors, Closed Minds: American Prose Writing at a Time of Crisis’, *American Literary History* 21, no. 1 (2008).

Hosseini, Mohja Kahf, G. Willow Wilson and others.² Their diverse works, often produced as some form of response to post-9/11 historical developments, stage a particular dialectic between the cosmopolitan notions of flexible world citizen (Ong) and location within national borders.³ Muslim-American writing in this reading contains two movements elaborated in the critical dialogue between Gray and Rothberg: 'centripetal' globalization and a complementary centrifugal mapping that charts 'the prosthetic reach of [the US] empire into other worlds'.⁴ In contrast to the pervasive domestication of change in post-9/11 American literary ecology, which is not only visible in a lack of *formal* innovation but also in a failure to engage the *global* dimensions of that change, Muslim-American writing does not exhibit Gray's 'imaginative paralysis'.⁵ What is more, the fact that this writing is read across multiple ethnoscares, to use Arjun Appadurai's term,⁶ and that it often inspires change in different demographics, is an example of an ongoing oscillation between location and a strong need for cosmopolitan orientation. Often using distinct American locations, Muslim-American writing seems to utilize an orientation towards cosmopolitanism as a way of showing hitherto unrepresented characteristics of those locations. Notable examples are Knight's Muslim-punk house in Buffalo, Hamid's New York with its gateways to locations around the globe, Kahf's Muslim missionaries in Indiana, and Willow Wilson's American-Pakistani Superhero in New Jersey.⁷ Location here entails a combination of several things, such as geographic place, social space, language, literary history, etc. While they are all important, in any given narrative, they may be more or less important. Location as such is mainly defined through a

² In contrast to globally popular ways of disseminating categories and discussing literature, the tag 'Muslim' does not appear much in critical reception (including reviews and interviews). A notable exception is for instance the work of Rehana Ahmed et. al. Rehana Ahmed, Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin, *Culture, Diaspora and Modernity in Muslim Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2012). Dealing with Muslim-related, often controversial subjects such as terrorism does boost sales and international distribution. Besides Mohsin Hamid's and Khaled Hosseini's work, we see this all over the world with for example Tabish Khair's *How to Fight Islamic Fundamentalism from the Missionary Position* (Northampton, MA: Interlink Publishing Group, 2013) and *Just Another Jihadi Jane* (Northampton, MA: Interlink Publishing Group, 2016). Works by, for instance, Leila Aboulela, which are more character driven, subtle stories of identity crises, do not reach the required heights of global literary markets to make any significant impact on the different ecologies.

³ Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logic of Transnationality* (London: Durham University Press, 1999).

⁴ Michael Rothberg, 'A Failure of the Imagination: Diagnosing the Post-9/11 Novel: A Response to Richard Gray', *American Literary History* 21, no. 1 (2009): 153.

⁵ Rothberg, 'A Failure of the Imagination', 135.

⁶ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

⁷ Mohja Kahf, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2006).

sense of limitations that these factors impose on individuals and communities. Orientation, in contrast, is an active attempt to look beyond those limitations as a way of (re)shaping any given location.

If Alexander Beecroft is correct in claiming that *a* literature is made mainly through the ways readers make connections between works – as well as authorial intentions in cases where writers aim to produce a particular type of literature – it is possible to speak of Muslim-American writing as *a* literature that simultaneously belongs to different literary ecologies: vernacular, national and cosmopolitan (given its dissemination, translatability and accessibility).⁸ Muslim-American writing may not only find itself pulled in several directions through the workings of literary markets and diverse audiences, but also deliberately, through form and content, orient itself towards different ecologies. This is the main feature I see as defining Muslim-American writing. It is the kind of writing that can be, at the same time, firmly located in American national literature but oriented towards other national literatures and cosmopolitan and global literary ecologies.

What we gain from seeing Muslim-American writing in terms of literary ecologies is an expanded sense of diversity and cross-pollination that explain certain defining features that pull together sets of works into a category which yields itself to analysis.⁹ The label 'Muslim-American' pulls together often very idiosyncratic works on the basis of interrelated sets of concerns as well as the fact that it is tied to and strongly defined by the American literary markets. To only locate certain writing in a national literary ecology and deem it niche would, for Muslim-American writing, effectively stage a forgetting of the cosmopolitan heritage of Islam, which informs this writing and de facto produces its particular dynamic between location and orientation. Indeed, Muslim-American writing is a product not only of our time but strongly informed by the continuous, fourteen-centuries-long form of what Alex MacGillivray calls 'archaic globalization',¹⁰ which includes the history of Muslim expansion and its economic and cultural impact on the world.

⁸ Alexander Beecroft, *An Ecology of World Literature: From Antiquity to the Present Day* (London: Verso, 2015). In his identification of basic types of ecologies – epichoric, panchoric, cosmopolitan, national, vernacular, global – Beecroft looks at the following factors: the linguistic situation, economy, the political world, religion, cultural politics and technologies of distribution.

⁹ Beecroft's model is useful because literature must 'be understood as being in an ecological relationship to other phenomena – political, economic, sociocultural, religious – as well as to the other languages and literatures with which it is in contact', *An Ecology of World Literature*, 19. An ecological lens helps us understand processes 'of survival and recognition' (20).

¹⁰ Alex MacGillivray, *A Brief History of Globalization* (London: Robinson, 2006), 15.

Moreover, we must not forget the notion of the Muslim Ummah as an early form of cosmopolitan consciousness, which strongly affects the very conceptualization of location–orientation of/in Muslim-American writing. Indeed, by positing itself as a global project, Islam not only achieved a transcontinental reach centuries before European colonialism and industrialization but continues to be an essential part of current globalization processes the effects of which are felt in world literature, especially the types of works produced by those for whom Muslim identity is at stake. Just looking at a recent anthropological study of South-East Asia by Khairudin Aljunied, we see how a spread of contemporary Muslim cosmopolitanism arises from a long history of Islamic expansionism through merchants and preachers which, ‘propagated a universalist rather than a communalist conception of Islam.’¹¹ Critiquing ‘theorists who have attributed the development of religious cosmopolitanism principally to the forces of European globalisation and technological revolutions,’ Aljunied shows ‘religious cosmopolitanism that includes both “elite” and “subaltern” as well as “official” and “vernacular” Muslim cosmopolitanisms.’ Such ‘Muslim cosmopolitanism can emerge both “bottom up” and “top down” from within individuals, communities and activists, just as emerging global factors can aid in the process of sharpening cosmopolitan outlooks in a particular setting.’¹² Although his argument focuses on South-East Asia, it seems to me that the history of Islam has countless examples where the cosmopolitan project of Islam has thrived despite ‘spectres of secular fundamentalism, nationalist particularism, religious fundamentalism and state intolerance.’¹³ This is why, in this analysis, I pay particular attention to Michael Muhammad Knight, who offers, in my view, perhaps the unique and rawest literary response.

Born Irish Catholic, Knight converted to Islam as a sixteen-year-old and went straight to what he called a hardedge Saudi Islam that is commonly associated with fundamentalism. This type of Islam drives a hardline, singular view of a few key issues in both the faith itself (*Al-Deen*) and practice (*Al-Islam*) with a particular focus on what is allowed (*halal*) and what is forbidden (*haram*).

¹¹ Khairudin Aljunied, *Muslim Cosmopolitanism: Southeast Asian Islam in Comparative Perspective* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), xx.

¹² Aljunied, *Muslim Cosmopolitanism*, xvi. Furthermore, he writes: ‘Muslim cosmopolitanism in Southeast Asia is a style of thought, a habit of seeing the world and a way of living that is rooted in the central tenet of Islam, which is that everyone is part of a common humanity accountable to God and that we are morally responsible towards one another. To embrace Muslim cosmopolitanism is to exhibit a high degree of receptiveness to universal values that are embedded within one’s own customs and traditions (*adat*)’, xix.

¹³ Aljunied, *Muslim Cosmopolitanism*, xxiv.

Believing that the fundamentalist movements suffocate the original potential of Islam, Knight sought a way to release the positive energies of Islam and highlight its heterogeneity. Knight's development as a young and troubled convert, which includes all manner of ideological and emotional jumps, is well covered in his fictional and non-fictional work, for instance *Blue-eyed Devil*¹⁴ and *The Five Percenters*.¹⁵ His first novel, *Taqwacores*,¹⁶ tells a story of Muslim punk rockers in a house in Buffalo who are trying to coexist and deal with their Muslim identity. The house represents the troubled house of Islam (*Dar Al-Islam*) in a modern age, fighting to keep the core of its cosmopolitan project in the face of fundamentalism, sectarianism, nationalism, etc. As such, it presents a strong dynamic between location and orientation, both in terms of its form-content and as a cultural product of the post-9/11 era.

The very labelling of *Taqwacores* as 'The Catcher in the Rye for young Muslims' and 'The Hunter S. Thompson of Islamic Literature' (on the cover) firmly situates the novel in the ecology of American national literature. The original nature of its distribution, as if it were some bootleg edition or DIY-zine, reinforces certain American cultural stereotypes of underground writing and the avant garde. It spread through niche venues, creating not only readers, but also followers, movements, and only much later, a film adaptation, which in turn led to new cultural phenomena. In *Taqwacores*, Knight reworks narrow understandings of Muslim identity by inventing a community of Muslim punks. He makes a vibrant synthesis of two *seemingly* opposed ideas: Islam as 'submission' (represented by *taqwa*, that is, God consciousness) and the hardcore rebelliousness of the punk movement. The members of the motley community are both highly individualized in their understandings of faith and religious practice, and partly representative of existing Muslim groups (e.g. sunni, shia, sufi, selefi, etc.). Their Islamic identities, in public and private spheres, often differ so much that it appears as if they do not adhere to one and the same religion. The signifier 'Islam' borders on being empty or very elastic. In this way, Knight attempts to explore a range of modern variations of Islam, or maybe even a post-modern Islam. He goes against the still operative East-West binary, but also the old binary that was created politically in the centuries following Muhammad's message:

¹⁴ Michael Muhammad Knight, *Blue-eyed Devil: A Road Odyssey Through Islamic America* (New York: Autonomedia, 2006).

¹⁵ Michael Muhammad Knight, *The Five Percenters: Islam, Hip-hop and the Gods of New York* (New York: One World Publications, 2008).

¹⁶ Michael Muhammad Knight, *Taqwacores* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2004).

Dar Al-Islam (the abode/house of Islam, that is, societies in which Muslims are secure) and *Dar Al-Harb* (the abode of war, that is, societies in which Muslims are not secure). To begin with, we can argue that Knight represents a tendency in contemporary Muslim discourses to see oneself as both a part of the American society and an alien in it, both a citizen and an illegal, like we see in for instance Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*.

While it would be easy to identify the house as *Dar Al-Islam* and boil down the problematic to the post-9/11 discrimination against Muslims in the USA, Knight shows that many Muslims also see certain things as dangerous for their Muslim identity (alcohol, music, sex). The main character is sent to this house because his parents thought this house, this *Dar Al-Islam* is going to protect him, socially speaking, from the dangers of American social life. The house turns out to be the microcosm of everything they consider horrendous. Knight's allegorical house of Muslims, as a location, is hardly a safe space because the ideological differences between the variegated Muslims are often causes of conflict. By creating a fake bubble, a location within a location (a house of Islam in the house of the American nation), Knight shows that which Tariq Ramadan points out in *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*: 'There is no longer a place of origin from which Muslims are "exiled" or "distanced", and "naturalized", "converted" Muslims – "Western Muslims" are at home, and should not only say so but feel so.'¹⁷ This is how the narrator of *Taqwacores* relates this insight:

I stopped trying to define Punk around the same time I stopped trying to define Islam. They aren't so far removed as you'd think. Both began in tremendous bursts of truth and vitality but seem to have lost something along the way – the energy, perhaps, that comes with knowing the world has never seen such positive force and fury and never would again. Both have suffered from sell-outs and hypocrites, but also from true believers whose devotion had crippled their creative drive. Both are viewed by outsiders as unified, cohesive communities when nothing can be further from the truth ... You cannot hold Punk or Islam in your hands. So what could they mean besides what you want them to?¹⁸

In many ways, *Taqwacores* is an American story about young people trying to find their way in *their* nation, but despite all the particularity of American culture, the location appears transnational. It is a petri dish of variegated religious dogma and global youth culture. Knight uses the typical metaphor

¹⁷ Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 53.

¹⁸ Knight, *Taqwacores*, 7.

of a microcosm containing the macrocosm to present both intra-religious and intra-national dynamics. The local here is therefore ultimately national and global. This metaphoric character of the house effectively situates Islam in the USA as part and parcel of the nation and, despite the sense of national claustrophobia, creates a centrifugal orientation towards the imagined global community of Muslim Ummah. What keeps the youth together is both the fact that they are American and that they are Muslim. Since Muslim Ummah has never been, at its core, homogenous, the house introduces a problematic of containing such a cosmopolis (of Islam), which acknowledges no borders, within the nation state. Every single aspect of the Muslim youth in the confines of this American house points to the core of that which they have in common: an orientation. However strange it may look, this house in Buffalo may be a hyperbolic metaphor for a mosque in its original meaning/intention, that is, not just a devotional place but a place where both spiritual and profane needs are addressed, a place of learning and politics, a place of the projection of 'the cosmopolitan temperaments' (Aljunied). If it were not for this orientation out, that is, this implied consciousness of a cosmopolitan project of Islam, the novel would have a very local, practically vernacular character (aesthetically and in terms of the content). In order to highlight and examine the novel's oscillation between location and orientation, I will focus on three things from Beecroft's model: language, content and dissemination.

Language: The making of a global vernacular

Linguistically speaking, though the core language of *Taqwacores* is the current global lingua franca English, whose literary history affects its craft (in particular American literature), the novel features a unique kind of translingualism which gives its language a vernacular character. It belongs to new types of writing which, according to Michael Boyden and Eugenia Kellbert 'allow their language of writing to be cross-fertilized by idioms, dialects, and literary traditions that most would consider alien to it'.¹⁹ Knight's discourse seems to posit a practically existential need to let other languages, most dominantly Arabic, seep into and

¹⁹ Michael Boyden and Eugenia Kelbert, 'Introduction: The Theory Deficit in Translingual Studies', *Journal of World Literature* 3 (2018): 127. For Boyden and Kellbert, although 'translingualism is now a commonly accepted label, it has to compete with many other, overlapping terms such as multilingual, exophonic, other-language, heteroglossic, hybrid, and accented literature' (131).

form his American English. This language is an attempt to represent, if not necessarily create, some form of a global vernacular that arises at the meeting of two cosmopolitan languages. Arabic is significant because, according to Beecroft, it 'perhaps uniquely, remains extant as a literary cosmopolis today'.²⁰ In other words, the cosmopolitan or global orientation is, language-wise, created not solely because English is a global lingua franca, but because of the previously mentioned global spread of Islam. Arabic is de facto a default language of Islamic practice and the official language of the Muslim Ummah. More specifically, it is not simply Arabic, but rather a particular Qur'anic Arabic mainly tied to its liturgic use and cultural significance. That is, given our contemporary 'postmonolingual condition',²¹ which implies serious challenges to the 'myth of monolingualism',²² when we speak of English and Arabic as cosmopolitan languages, we must do so in the plural: Englishes and Arabics (a consequence of being cosmopolitan or global). The English of *Taqwacores* is often skilfully broken up and stitched together with such liturgic Arabic to the point of appearing as some form of global vernacular that caters to global Muslims more than general American readership and yet it is also a lingo that, because of its local character, is bound to create cultural opacity for global audiences. While similar translingualism can be found in many national languages, this case is different because the discourse results from an interplay between two cosmopolitan languages. In contrast, for instance, in the Bosnian language (my own mother tongue), the slavic dialect was reshaped by Arabic, Turkish, Farsi, Russian and German. It is thus an official national language (with a literature) that is operative in a locality. For instance, Bosnians, like Turks, call the daily prayers 'namaz' (Farsi) and not 'salat' (Arabic). This would not happen, or even be possible in a work such as Knight's even with Iranian characters because the implied readership would be much more confined to certain localities and lose some cosmopolitan aspirations.

Although there are plenty of interesting examples of Knight's type of (cosmopolitan/global) vernacularization, I will only focus on the opening sentence because it represents, principally, what he does in general throughout the novel (and his oeuvre). The opening, 'Bismillahir, Rahmanir *and so on*',²³ speaks volumes. It consists of two distinct parts, the first in Arabic, transcribed

²⁰ Beecroft, *An Ecology of World Literature*, 143.

²¹ Yasemin Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).

²² Liesbeth Minnaard and Till Dembeck, eds. *Challenging the Myth of Monolingualism* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014).

²³ Knight, *Taqwacores*, 5.

in his own way, and the second in English.²⁴ The first part is a segment from the most uttered Islamic phrase – Bismillahi-rRahmani-rRahim (in the name of God, most Gracious, most Compassionate) – which opens every (except one) *surah* (section) of *The Qur'an*, and which you can see in Arabic at the beginning of this chapter. It is also a phrase that is uttered by Muslims before any action as an affirmation that it is done in the name of God (before meals, before work, and even before sexual intercourse). On the surface this could be rather basic code-switching in a translingual text, but stylistically, unlike many other works with foreign terms, in particular those written by Muslims or with Muslim characters, the Qur'anic phrase is used as if it were entirely natural in English, like 'once upon a time' or 'in the beginning there was.' A Muslim reader would know that the Bismillah-opening is obligatory for any type of halal work, that it would signal the narrator's intent (automatically reliable) and also that the narrator addresses a community (location and orientation). The second part, '*and so on*', is in italics as if that was the foreign segment, that is, as if Arabic was primary and English secondary.

This '*and so on*', at first sight, also appears disrespectful because the narrator does not complete the entire phrase by rote (missing 'Rahim'), as Muslims always do, but this speaking-by-rote of the phrase is implied.²⁵ It is the very relaxed way of translingual exchange or play that makes the language appear at the same time both very local and global (because it speaks to Muslims globally and most such passages would be entirely obscure to readers who do not know anything about Islamic practices). The fact that the novel opens with this phrase, albeit incomplete, is no doubt a statement of faith, but the omission with the partly mocking '*and so on*' seems to immediately cut at the heart of the ritual. In other words, with this translingual gesture, Knight forges *taqwa* and punk, as promised in the novel's title. Given the general anti-religious sentiment in the punk movement, this linguistic gesture may be read while giving primacy to the second half of the line, that is, as a form of negation of the first half.

²⁴ There are many ways to do a transcription from Arabic *بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ* to English, and other languages, because one attempts to represent sounds as well as reading rhythms (merging of words in reading). There is no consensus on this, though with time certain patterns have emerged as more popular.

²⁵ A possible interpretation of the missing second word may be related to the original meanings of the double name of God (Allah), that is Rahman *الرَّحْمَنُ* and Rahim *الرَّحِيمُ*. Rahman comes from the root R-H-M which means womb and is supposed to refer to God's relationship to His creation in this world, something which can be given and also taken away. Rahim, on the other hand, has the same root but it refers to God's relationship to those who are in Paradise, that is an unchanging relationship. One could speculate that the exclusion of Rahim, from the POV of the character, either makes him doubt he will actually receive R-H-M or, given his devotion, it is because God is above all things gracious/merciful/forgiving/loving, the forgiveness of this trespassing is implied/guaranteed anyway.

However, this is not the case. Both parts are in fact affirmed and negated and this is where Knight seems to find the drive for an otherwise plotless narrative. Tension and conflict are created. Neither side is supposed to take over but bring out, or tease out, the other's full potential. This is in keeping with what Knight states in the documentary *Taqwacore: The Birth of Punk Islam* (2009), that both Islam and punk are movements with great potential that is far from realized in the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries. It is important to keep in mind this mutual coexistence of two ways of thinking especially when the characters' actions appear to be blasphemous in the narrow religious sense of the word or are too religious from a punk point of view.

Knight's American vernacular arises at the meeting of two cosmopolitan languages and thus serves as a shifting marker of value. It is true that there is no language called 'the vernacular' – a term originally used in imperial Rome to designate the language of the 'house-born slave' – yet almost any language can be *positioned* as a vernacular. In the world of literary publishing and reception, this relational understanding of the vernacular is self-evidently true, given that print cultures always entail stratification, specialization and standardization, rendering variations deviant or exotic. If language can be defined as 'a dialect with a literature',²⁶ then print literature is a key factor behind what has been called the 'monolingual paradigm' (Yildiz 2012 and Anderson 1983) and the ensuing positioning of certain usages and modes of speech as vernacular. Value-coding of expressions and styles undergoes transformation. In the transcontinental marketing and importation of books, new juxtapositions of languages and linguistic registers can change local categories of value. Amélié Hurkens and Pieter Vermeulen point out how 'a world literary vernacular is a vernacular that is not just defined through its resistance to global circulation ... but participates in that circulation, and would be unthinkable without it'.²⁷ For Aamir Mufti, the global spread of English did not replace the vernacular, but rather enabled vernacularization and thus the vernacular became an effect of the dialectic of vernacularization and cosmopolitanization.²⁸

What we have in this example, in some way, is a cosmopolitan or global language which creates rich signification for Muslims regardless of their ethnicity,

²⁶ Beecroft, *An Ecology of World Literature*, 6.

²⁷ Amélié Hurkens and Pieter Vermeulen, 'The Americanization of World Literature? American Independent Publishing and the World Literary Vernacular', *Interventions* 22, no 3. (2020): 437.

²⁸ Aamir Mufti, *Forget English! Orientalisms and World Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 96.

nationality, particularity of religious practice and dogma, etc. While a vernacular would, according to Beecroft, prevent wider distribution of the work, the novel's outward orientation makes us revise this analysis. Disregarding its potentially controversial content, this novel would be highly accessible to a Muslim readership around the globe while at the same time also quite obscure for both national (American) and most global audiences which do read in English. In other words, it is defined by the dynamic it creates between its American location and (a particularized) cosmopolitan orientation. The fact that a global Muslim audience would be able to appreciate Knight's language produces a rather unusual situation within and across literary ecologies (especially national and cosmopolitan).

Another reason I call Knight's language a global vernacular is the argument by Tim Parks, in 'The Dull New Global Novel', that a perception of an 'ultimate audience as international rather than national', mostly changes the character of writing.²⁹ Using Kazuo Ishiguro's notes about trying to make his translator's life easier, Parks traces 'a tendency to remove obstacles to international comprehension'. Consequently, since authors deploy 'highly visible tropes immediately recognizable as "literary" and "imaginative", [is] analogous to the wearisome lingua franca of special effects in contemporary cinema', what is 'doomed to disappear, or at least to risk neglect, is the kind of work that revels in the subtle nuances of its own language and literary culture'. *Taqwacores*, in many ways, creates a private lingo that only the characters in the house can understand and that makes them even more isolated from their American location. As mentioned before, many scenes are not even connected to each other (plotlessness) and remain quite obscure even when little Arabic is employed. This is because they are written as some form of Socratic dialogues on specific ideological or political notions that are of concern for particular kinds of people undergoing identity crises: terrorism, gender trouble, economy, morality, etc. While one could argue that the issues they deal with are bound to their American, post-9/11 location, we know from global discourses that they have the same spread and become concerns for Muslims worldwide. As such, though the book caters to an envisioned global audience of Muslims, *Taqwacores* often satisfies the criteria for a local, culturally specific work, yet can feel obscure even for this implied audience. It evinces great awareness of both locality and globality, obscurity and presumed universality.

²⁹ Tim Parks, 'The Dull New Global Novel', *The New York Review Blog*, 9 February 2010, www.nybooks.com/daily/2010/02/09/the-dull-new-global-novel/.

This is where we can trace the theological, Islamic, notions of location and orientation as an influence. *The Qur'an* says: 'And God's is the east and the west: and wherever you turn, there is God's countenance' (2.115).³⁰ The omnipresence of God in Islam is stressed through the act of turning. Turning, or orientation, is primary in Islam and as such defines both human agents and places. Thus a Muslim praying in Buffalo must not just turn to Mecca in prayer (which is a location symbolizing God's singularity) but also always be oriented towards (turned to) God. Mecca as such, as a location, is also a point of orientation. It is not just, or really, Mecca, as a city, as a cartographic node, one turns to but the *house* of Abraham called Kaaba. Thus we have youngsters located in a house in Buffalo oriented to a house in Mecca. This orientation is both physical/geographic and symbolic, just as their American location is physical and symbolic. Kaaba is not just a real place that exists right now, but a place of the past and the envisioned future. Turning towards Kaaba entails certain atemporality. This means that because Islam is a part of their being, there can never be a location without an orientation (even when they are not in prayer). It is a default mode of being of any Muslim: orientation to God and orientation to Muslim Ummah as a concept of being-in-community. *Bismillah* as a liturgic phrase is the ultimate act of orientation. Now, the broken-ness of it with the added '*and so on*' signals a particularity of their American location. This '*and so on*' linguistically and in terms of character-attitude, locates the characters in Buffalo, America. This is a strategy which Knight uses throughout the book both in terms of language and content. He will typically lay out a scene which will treat some key part of Islamic theology or ritual, thus signalling an orientation, and then add or remove something, which will in turn give a unique character to the situation and the characters. The effect is the reshaping of a location by means of messing with the orientation, and the emphasis on the orientation by messing with the location. This supports Stefan Helgesson and Christina Kullberg's claim that translanguaging, in contrast to heterolingualism, can offer 'a broader canvas against which the literary uses of language can be assessed and actualized in reading'.³¹ Indeed, considering a 'staging of language',³² we could see how 'literary language may ultimately be read outside of identity and difference as a constantly adaptable assemblage of vernacular and cosmopolitan, private and public,

³⁰ Muhammad Asad, *The Message of Qur'an* (Bristol: The Book Foundation, 2003).

³¹ Stefan Helgesson and Christina Kullberg, 'Translingual Events: World Literature and the Making of Language', *Journal of World Literature* 3 (2018): 138.

³² Helgesson and Kullberg, 'Translingual Events', 138.

conventional and transgressive vectors.’³³ Thus, ‘different languages at play in politically charged colonial and postcolonial translingual contexts are certainly identifiable, but their meaning will vary depending on perspective, voice, mode, medium, and address.’³⁴ It is clear in Knight’s work that we have a strong sense of locality but not a local language that is shaped and policed in the way some other (even translingual) dialect may be. Knight’s imagined lingo is shaped, at its core, through an orientation to an envisioned global Muslim audience (Ummah). No doubt, while Knight’s global practice still happens locally, his use of a global vernacular, shows a need for a more dynamic sense of language practices.

Content: Global liturgic practice goes local

The previously analysed example of language-use already pointed us in the direction of the content, the matters of religious identity and liturgy. The dynamic between location (vernacularization) and orientation (cosmopolis) is stressed in many scenes where liturgy is changed, where it is made local and often individualized. Some scenes, such as the very first scene, contain a small plot in their own right that restates, or dramatizes the more abstract point I highlighted in the opening line. This scene is almost entirely a dialogue between two unnamed characters who are discussing a third character (no direct relation to a plot of any sort). This is what they say:

‘He lost his right index finger in a bet.’

‘Are you fuckin’ kidding? What was the bet?’

‘That he wouldn’t chop off his finger.’

‘So he won the bet.’

...

‘Yeah but when he’s in salat and it comes the time for the Tashahud, instead of the index he has to bob his *middle* finger up and down. It’s like he flips himself off every time he prays.’³⁵

I first want to point out that this already suggests that these characters live in some form of community and that they are extremely different from each other, that they affirm their differences, that they are partly judgemental, but most

³³ Helgesson and Kullberg, ‘Translingual Events’, 139.

³⁴ Helgesson and Kullberg, ‘Translingual Events’, 151.

³⁵ Knight, *Taqwacores*, 5.

importantly that these differences have not driven them away from each other. Second, as a connection to the previous section on language coding, I need to point out that Knight does not italicize 'Tashahud' and 'salat' but does the word 'middle'. This is immensely significant because it signals that the author does not care to fully explain the discourse to an American audience, or global readers of English (thus satisfying Park's preferences), practically assuming that this situation is just a part of everyday (American) life. In other words, an Islamic practice is fully naturalized and does not show awareness of possible outsiders/onlookers who do not understand what they are talking about. To understand the full brunt of this exchange in terms of location and orientation we need to grasp 'salat' (صلاة) and 'Tashahud' (تَشَهُّد). Salat is a Muslim prayer, performed at five prescribed times each day (morning, noon, afternoon, dusk and night). Each of the five prayers has an established ritual structure in which the recitation of Qur'anic verses is combined with specific bodily movements. After every two 'rakats' (ركعة),³⁶ and the very end of the prayer, there is a sitting when the person utters prescribed words and one of the smaller gestures done during the sitting is Tashahud (the witnessing), when the person bobs the right index finger up and down, uttering *La ilaha il-Allah* (There is no other divinity but God).³⁷ In Knight's novel, the unnamed character had lost his index finger and could not perform this gesture, but he still wanted to conform to the ritual, that is follow the Prophet's sunna (example), and decided to bob his middle finger, which entails an entirely different symbolism in the American location, as if he is giving the finger to his own religious drive. The character is therefore positioned between utter conformism to form and a sort of anti-conformist gesture (punk). The same gesture becomes both affirmative and negating at one and the same time. As before in the case of 'Bismillah', in the interpretation of this scene, it would be easy to reduce the reading to some simple anti-religious gesture, rather typical of many works in the American literary ecology. However, what the character gives the finger to is not really his faith but the notion of ritual for the

³⁶ A 'rakat' ركعة is a segment of a prayer 'salat' صلاة consisting of: 1. Qiyam قيام: standing and reciting, 2. Ruku رُكُوع: bowing down, 3. Sujuud سُجُود: prostration.

³⁷ While there is no singular explanation for this gesture (and many do not bob the finger but merely raise it), the most common is that it symbolizes monotheism. It is a gesture ascribed to the Prophet s.a.w.s. One can see for instance how the four major schools of Islamic jurisprudence interpreted how it should be done. So for instance the Hanafi school states that the finger should be raised when saying *laa* ('no') in the phrase *Esh-hedu en laa ilaaha ill-Allah* (I bear witness that there is no god except Allah), and it should be lowered when saying *ill-Allah*. The Shaafi say that it should be raised when saying *ill-Allah*. The Maaliki would argue that it should be moved right and left until one finishes the prayer. According to the Hanbali school one should point with the finger when saying the name of Allah, without moving it.

sake of ritual. The ritual is important, but only in the sense that the character must be fully aware of its implications. This essential paradox is crucial to Knight's entire novel, and it is not a disturbing middle zone that must be resolved by choosing a side between conformity and nonconformity or by creating a bogus synthesis. Knight wants to keep the two opposed elements at work, unresolved, feeding each other, emphasizing the importance of faith for the character, but also the importance of constant individual choice in how the faith is understood and practiced in a particular location. This seems to be the basic principle of 'taqwacore'. As such, this gesture is extremely individual and localized (in some cultures the middle finger has no significance or has a different one), but at the same time this scene, and this gesture, can only be fully understood if we think of it in terms of location and orientation.

What Knight brings about within variegated American mediascapes, to use Appadurai's term, are heterogeneous Islamoscapes.³⁸ The house may look like 'W. had bombed the hell out of it looking for evildoers',³⁹ but it is a place with extreme vitality. All characters, without exception, are portrayed as exhibiting contradictions in terms of what they say and do. Even the supposedly hardedge Umar, who is the only one in the house besides the protagonist Yusuf Ali who does not drink or have extramarital sex, swears a lot when he is angry with others when they disrespect the rules he adheres to. Just like the other youngsters, Umar too has unconventional ways of expressing his faith, such as tattoos, 'big black "X" on the back of each hand, star-and-crescent on outer right of forearm, Muhammad's name ... in Arabic on outer left forearm, and ... right on his throat, a green 2:219', which refers to chapter and verse in *The Qur'an*.⁴⁰ There is much in this supposedly fundamentalist character (named after the second righteous Khalifa) that one could criticize from a theological point of view. Then there is Amazing Ayyub, 'the bone-thin Iranian smack-head in tight blue jeans and no shirt and a huge KARBALA tattooed in Old English letters just below his collarbone, dancing like a bald idiot on the porch and hollowing'.⁴¹ The Shia and Sunni split between Ayyub and Umar is immediately obvious. In time for prayer, Yusuf Ali sees Fasiq Abasa sitting on the edge of the roof, smoking narcotics and reading *The Qur'an*. When Jehangir Tabari is introduced

³⁸ While Appadurai speaks of 'ethnoscapes', this term is limiting in the discourse I analyse. Islamoscapes, however strange it may sound, denotes social formation related to but not limited by the religion of Islam, which cross through any number of ethnoscapes.

³⁹ Knight, *Taqwacores*, 7.

⁴⁰ Knight, *Taqwacores*, 11.

⁴¹ Knight, *Taqwacores*, 10.

he is playing 'an electric-guitar adhan': the call for prayer.⁴² He 'stood statuesque with foot-high yellow Mohawk thick and bristly like the brush on an old Roman soldier's helmet'.⁴³ He gives the protagonist 'a sensation entirely new: a surging resonance of hope, a vibrant six-string promise that Islam's glory days were not the sole property of Abbasids and Fatimids but could be our days here, now, if we had the spirit to claim them'. Jehangir's unconventional behaviour is not met with fear for the faith, the way a fundamentalist would react, but with hope, even when Jehangir after the adhan says 'Fuck', thus 'returning us to Earth'.

Among the male characters, there is a single woman, and for Yusuf Ali she may be the most unconventional Muslim there is:

Rabeya sat content knowing that none of my existing scripts for male–female interaction, mumin or kafr gave me any frame of reference for dealing with her. ... While Rabeya was as staunch a Muslim as anyone there, it remained her own Islam as she saw fit to live it. This was the girl who jumped in front of the microphone at last night's party through her niqab singing slow and spooky-like Iggy Pop's withered Old Man Mortality voice – 'I want to fuck her on the floor, among my books of ancient lore' – the same girl who stood in front of our baseball-bat-through-the-wall-mihrab on Fridays to give khutbah and circulated handwritten rants on the sexism of both hemispheres in her self-published zine *Ayesha's Hymen*.⁴⁴

Again, the coexistence of religious terms 'mumin', 'kafr', 'mihrab' and 'khutbah' with popular culture (Iggy Pop and baseball) produce the tension and significance of the content, and thus also an extreme particularity, which gives the book its highly local character while it stages and maintains an ongoing dialogue with an imagined readership that is global Ummah. Before becoming the only woman preaching to men, as Umar informed him, Rabeya lived 'downstairs' and had her own entrance and no man could use the kitchen unless she was away:

She knew her stuff more than any of us, used books for furniture in her room – guests sitting on stacks of Betty Freidan and Simone de Beauvoir and Fatima Mernissi and Leila Ahmed and Amina Wadud and what-not – and gave everything she had, every stupid second of her life, to that Islam. But I felt like there was nowhere else in the world that she could give khutbah to men, and for that maybe we would be the vanguard of something new.⁴⁵

⁴² Knight, *Taqwacores*, 12.

⁴³ Knight, *Taqwacores*, 13.

⁴⁴ Knight, *Taqwacores*, 8–9.

⁴⁵ Knight, *Taqwacores*, 19.

The emphasis on individualism tied to a locality (often seen as Western) does not seem to go against a sense of communal bonding (seen as Eastern).⁴⁶ Going against Serge Latouches's dictum that 'Whatever is Western is Anti-Islamic', Tariq Ramadan argues,

more and more young people and intellectuals are actively looking for a way to live in harmony with their faith while participating in the societies that are their societies ... constructing a 'Muslim personality' that will soon surprise many of their fellow citizens. Far from media attention. Going through the risks of a process of maturation that is necessarily slow, they are drawing the shape of European and American Islam: faithful to the principles of Islam, dressed in European and American cultures, and definitively rooted in Western societies. This grassroots movement will soon exert considerable influence over worldwide Islam.⁴⁷

Although I doubt Ramadan would approve of intoxication and many other acts from the story (tattoos, sex, music, etc.), the point he makes is related to the way location in one place with an orientation out can actually create a healthy oscillation that has, and will continue to, (re)define Muslim Ummah. This is exactly what happens as Knight tries to cope with his complex identity. However extreme examples he may give (on-stage oral sex by a radical feminist in a burka spitting semen on the audience), what is interesting is that the *taqwacore* of Knight's imagination found resonances in the real sociopolitical life of Muslim-Americans. The phrase 'taqwacore' became an unintentional name for these silent processes that Ramadan assumes are in the workings, but which no one can actually predict or determine in advance. While Ramadan opposes Latouches's view that Islam has nothing in common with the West, for Knight it is not so much a question whether or not anything Western has a place in the reform of Islam, but more importantly, the place of Islam in the change of the West. This is why the firm location of his work in American literary ecology is so important in dialogue with its cosmopolitan aspirations. It is possible to dislocate fundamentalism by showing how it creates effects locally and globally, while not belonging anywhere, while trying to sell itself as universal. The political import of Knight's novel is that it dismantles both this modern binary and the potential misconception of what diversity entails within Islamic communities. Not only is there a much wider variety of Muslim expression,

⁴⁶ Communal prayers carry the value of twenty-seven prayers in solitude, according to recorded sayings by the Islamic Messenger Muhammad s.a.w.s., and what is more, the verses commonly recited in prayers are usually in the plural, such as the opening surah of *The Qur'an*, Al-Fatiha, 'You alone we worship, to You alone we turn for help' (1.4). Asad, *The Message of Qur'an*.

⁴⁷ Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, 4.

but neither has primacy over the other. Fundamentalist jihadists are just as modern a phenomenon as punk Muslims and any other formation because most of them define their particular standpoints from historically very specific socio-political space, or location, while also attempting to universalize the experience through cosmopolitan orientation and reaction to globalization.

Dissemination: Creating welcoming spaces

In the end, I want to highlight a few points regarding dissemination. It is not the movement of the text itself that defines it, that is the distribution and the sales of books, but ultimately the reception and the *taqwacore* effect: for instance, the creation of Muslim punk bands and other such alternative music scenes among Muslim youth. In other words, the content of the novel, though fictional, inspired a great deal of transnational movement among Muslims (LeVine⁴⁸; Fiscella⁴⁹). The increased demand led to distribution by the publishers (Alternative Tentacles and then Autonomedia). Asra Nomani has credited the novel as the source of the idea for woman-led prayer, which took place on 18 March 2005 with Amina Wadud acting as imam. Another example, from the previously mentioned documentary, is the performance of a *taqwacore* band at the ISNA (Islamic Society of North America) convention in Chicago. The band members that arrived with Knight expected a negative response due to the conventional connotations of loud music, female singers and dancing, all of which were against ISNA regulations. While the organizers pointed out the inappropriateness, the members of the audience seemed overwhelmingly positive. One woman said she found the performance fresh and used the expression ‘mashallah’, usually used in reaction to any positive thing. Moreover, one of the organizers commented on the importance of diversity within the convention.

Speaking with this band on a tour from Boston to Chicago, after their complaints about the misrepresentations in the media, Knight says that the media cannot understand that they can be a community and have no firm ideological ground, that some of them are interested in spirituality, some have a lot of faith

⁴⁸ Mark LeVine, *Heavy Metal Islam: Rock, Resistance, and the Struggle for the Soul of Islam* (New York: Broadway Books, 2008).

⁴⁹ Anthony T. Fiscella, ‘From Muslim Punks to Taqwacore: An Incomplete History of Punk Islam,’ *Contemporary Islam* 6, no. 3 (2012) and Anthony T. Fiscella, ‘Michael Muhammad Knight – An Interview,’ <http://vimeo.com/11294095>.

and some little, some drink and some abstain, that they have different political views and values, different tastes. They are as heterogeneous a community as it can be, and there is no political language for this type of personal expression. In fact, in an interview on QTV, Knight stated that he refrains from even calling taqwacore a movement because a movement implies that everyone should be on the same page.⁵⁰ He does not want to see himself as a representative of taqwacore because that would mean that he speaks for everyone. In other words, he has no desire to be an imam in such a hybrid and changing house as taqwacore. In the same interview, the director of the documentary, Omar Rajid argued that taqwacore is a name without a fixed essence. Its essence is its malleability. Their music may be a true attempt, albeit somewhat clichéd, to establish new possible mediascapes in which Homi Bhabha's notion of 'difference' can be articulated.

I have quoted Ramadan as claiming that much of the ongoing revolutions within variegated Islamic communities take place in silence. The reason for this, to go back to the comments on the media attention, is that the existing mediascapes cannot digest the heterogeneity of these revolutions. The taqwacore expressions are in a way producing possible mediascapes that can reach out across the boundaries of different ethnoscaes. What is important to note is that the taqwacore expressions of identity, albeit necessarily filtered through different media, do not seem to primarily seek media outlets. Fame is not an issue nor is it a goal. What they do is primarily turned towards the reform of themselves. In this way, they have, perhaps unconsciously or even deliberately, avoided the Baudrillardian dictum of postmodern hyperreality in the sense that they do not primarily seek to be media-people, that they instinctively react against being-a-copy, and they do not want their Islam, whatever it may be in the final account, to be a simulacrum of yet another media defined thing.

However, since their responses are indeed conditioned by the simulacra of Muslim realities represented in the media, taqwacore Islam too is partly a hyper-Islam, as much as it goes against the hyper-Islam of the media. If these two premises seem to stand in opposition, one being positive in the Romantic sense of the return to origins and the other negative in the sense that nothing is ever original and authentic, this contradiction is not a negative synthesized premise itself. Just as the phrase 'taqwacore' entails a creative contradiction, so does this double relationship to Islam and punk. The taqwacore people who have

⁵⁰ Michael Muhammad Knight, "The Taqwacores" on Q TV, www.youtube.com/watch?v=RKx2pvkD5Jw.

a relationship with Islam, be it as religion or faith or culture, seem to suggest that the only way to be respectful is to be partly disrespectful. In an interview during his visit to Sweden, Knight argued that the reason he imagined such a motley community is because he felt a need to remain a Muslim while being free to be honest about the elements of Islam he could not cope with, and that the only way he could remain a Muslim was to be creative about his approach to the faith and religion.⁵¹ This attitude is political in that it asks for active participation within the national and religious confines, and the right to try to reform both at the same time. The point is not to merely survive or be tolerated in a benevolent system, and thus affirm the system through a passive attitude, but to affirm it through participating in its reform. The importance of Knight's work is that it stresses a need to a form of affirmative unfaithfulness. This unfaithfulness is not a simple apostasy, or simplistic rebellion, but a need to produce a political and social space from which to speak with honesty in relation to oneself and community/nation.

Knight's imagination, which moves quite freely through Islamic history, seems to play with Al-Ghazali's notion of *dihliz* (threshold), which Ebrahim Moosa explains as 'the critical intermediary space between outside and inside, between exoteric (*zahir*) and esoteric (*batin*) ... a welcoming space', which allowed Ghazali to deal with conflicting discursive traditions.⁵² At the same time as he may be using such philosophical notions – especially in relation to the character of Jehangir, who embodies such locality where conflicts can take place as well as overlapping concerns and beliefs – Knight is aware of the wild directions interpretation processes can take. At times it appears that the characters interpret Western cultural influences in terms of Islam to reconcile the two, as when Rafiq reads the lyrics by Iggy Pop to entail a notion of spiritual transformation, and considers Iggy Pop a Muslim Sufi. In a sense, at the moment when Knight seems to endorse a simplified idea that anything goes, he finds it necessary to also state the opposite, there are limits to what a cultural text may mean, but it is important to maintain social imagination that can answer the question what it means to be a Muslim today, how to remain true to ones principles and generate a social capital that cuts across boundaries. To use Aryn B. Sajoo's words, '[i]n the bid for legitimacy, political and religious, where each side portrays the other as betraying modernity and

⁵¹ Incidentally, in this interview, Knight wore a T-shirt with Derrida's picture and the famous term 'deconstruction' above the print.

⁵² Ebrahim Moosa, *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination* (NC & London: Chapel Hill, 2005), 48.

tradition, the fertile middle ground best found in the *imaginaire* of ordinary citizens, which rarely sits at either extreme.⁵³

Conclusion

I have argued that Muslim-American writing can be defined in terms of its particular way of working with(in) the dynamic between location and orientation, between rootedness in American National literary ecology and a cosmopolitan orientation towards the Muslim Ummah. The example of *Taqwacoes* shows a particular way of treating this dynamic in terms of form and content, as well as through the book's place and role in contemporary youth culture. A unique feature of Knight's work is that it uses Islamic theology to shape the concepts of location and orientation and show how they work in terms of language, content and dissemination. This entails that the specific location is always subsumed to the social space that the characters create in relation to the Islamic notion of the global Ummah. This results in a general tendency to approach location allegorically more than in terms of the material conditions. Orientation, as the factor which infuses the local social space with allegoricity, can seem the more dominant part in the dynamic binary but this is not the case. The specific American location, with all the elements it brings to the discourse of identity formation, reshapes the very character of the orientation the characters envision. This is, I argue, perhaps most prominent in the use of a global vernacular language which is at the same time very much American and yet contains elements which suggest that it is directed to imagined global Muslim Ummah that would best understand it. What is more, having also looked at dissemination and the effects of the novel in youth culture, I find that an analysis of *Taqwacores* supports Helgesson and Kullberg's argument that 'world literature can be explored ... as uneven translingual events in which linguistic tensions are manifested either at the micro level of the individual text or at the macro level of publication and circulation – or both.'⁵⁴ A truly dynamic relationship between location and orientation becomes a general strategy of identity production and as such, in the post-9/11 era of global identity crises, the identifying feature of Muslim-American writing in general.

⁵³ Aryn B. Sajoo, ed. *Muslim Modernities: Expressions of the Civil Imagination* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2008), 14.

⁵⁴ Helgesson and Kullberg, 'Translingual Events', 137.

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