

Specters of Islam: Anti-Islamist (Re)Presentations in Secular Media and Feminism (1979–2011)

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Abstract

This article examines anti-Islamism in media and feminist discourse between the years of 1979–2011. It argues that modern feminism requires anti-Islamism, a relation that gives rise to anti-Islamist representations in the media. I situate the confrontation between secularity and Islamism—in both *The New York Times* and feminist theory—within a specific historical ordering that I term “Islamist periodization.” Beginning with 1979, the year of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the Meccan siege, the periodization examines three distinct phases: the 1980s as a time of consolidation and complexity; 1991–2001 as a period of US hegemony; and 2001–2011 as the age of perpetual war. During these periods, as the article demonstrates, there is significant ideological commonality between mainstream feminist theory and secular media.

Introduction

In this paper, I trace historical developments in Islamist politics and mainstream feminism in relation to media representations of Muslim women. By examining articles in *The New York Times* (NYT) published between 1979 and 2011, I suggest that secular representations of Islam, both in the media and feminist discourse, propagate what I call ‘anti-Islamism’ (developed below). By constructing a periodization based on signature events within contemporary Islamist history, I identify tactical shifts within the larger, global strategy of anti-Islamism. As a conceptual frame, anti-Islam-

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mism moves beyond articulations that either conceptualize Islamophobia as a behavioral-psychological disposition created through misinformation, or as a structural form of racial bigotry. Instead, anti-Islamism describes a consistent effort to counter and negate Islam's world-making aspirations. The Western discourse around gender, historically, has been a central site in this negation. Therefore, this article examines how feminism as a political and epistemic project (with three major exceptions) necessarily requires anti-Islamism—an incompatibility reinforced by media representations.

By examining articles published in the NYT between the years 1979-2011 and demonstrating their relation to feminist intellectual and political traditions, this article studies how patterns of representation within specific historical periodizations (re)articulate the structure of what I term anti-Islamism. As a conceptual term, anti-Islamism breaks with prominent theorizations that reframe Islamophobia as anti-Muslim racism.¹ Anti-Islamism as a framework allows us to understand not only how Islamophobia operates at the level of communal racial attitudes, but also in relation to the historical, epistemic, and psycho-social effects of secularization and the War on Terror. Having said that, anti-Islamism both precedes and exceeds the War on Terror and earlier forms of war in the Islamic world. It is both general and generative. Sociological case studies and ethnographic accounts provide us with empirical data, but frequently fail to narrate a theory of how and why the anxiety and fear towards Islam has a generalizing consequence in modern secularity.

Conceptualizing *anti-Islamism as secularization* is generative, for secularization produces particular kinds of histories, social relations, psychologies, reasonings, and cultural formations. It promotes and mobilizes certain normative European values and political concepts. Meanwhile, conceptualizing *secularism as anti-Islamism* performs a negative function: the discursive and material evacuation of the world-making project of Islamism. Modern secularity aims to reduce Islam into culture by negating the centrality of the Sharia. Because the Sharia is not law in the modern sense, insofar as it does not separate the legal from the political and ethical, secular regimes try to delink the Sharia of Islam from its socio-cultural expressions. It is precisely this disjuncture that demarcates the modern Muslim identity within the Western paradigm. But Sharia is not only law that is enforced from the outside, it is the mechanism that organizes the soul, trains the body, purifies the heart, refines the intellect, and disciplines the mind to produce proper Islamic subjects. By de-centering the Sharia, modern secularity de-subjectivates Muslims, and de-essentializes² Islam.

Methodology

In the documentary *Manufacturing Consent*—titled after a book by the same name—Noam Chomsky explains the central role of the NYT in not only organizing the social and political perceptions of its readers, but also in organizing historical knowledge. Chomsky explains that the

New York Times is certainly the most important newspaper in the United States and, one could argue, the most important newspaper in the world. *The New York Times* plays an enormous role in shaping the perception of the current world on the part of the politically-active educated classes. Also, *The New York Times* has a special role, and I believe its editors probably feel that they bear a heavy burden, in the sense that *The New York Times* creates history. That is, history is what appears in the NYT archives. The place where people will go to find out what happened is the NYT; therefore, it's extremely important, if history is going to be shaped in an appropriate way, that certain things appear, certain things not appear, certain questions be asked, other questions be ignored, and that issues be framed in a particular fashion.

I focus on the NYT for my analysis of media representation in relation to gender and Islam,³ examining its articles not only for a positivist analysis but also for its representations of Islamic discourse and subjects as part of a much larger social, political, and intellectual history. They are not simply structural results of an ideological apparatus. Rather, they signify the workings of power, within sets of networked institutions that have specific geopolitical interests—and all of this emerges from a specific Eurocentric discourse in which anti-Islamism is a driving force. My focus on feminist intellectual history is not accidental. In my analysis, I describe how the NYT specifically focuses on the bodies of Muslim women and their use of the veil, which signifies political visibility in relation to the body. This representational focus on women's rights and its mobilization also comes with a specific understanding of the body which has a particular genealogy in Eurocentric political-epistemic history. Because of this focus, then, I trace the relation between these representations in the media and more sophisticated intellectual discourse within the feminist tradition.

With that said, there are three kinds of texts sometimes considered part of the feminist tradition (yet existing in tremendous immanent tension with it) that are exceptions to the rule of hegemonic feminism, and/or the hegemony of feminism. By hegemony of feminism, I mean that within the ideological domain of mainstream and radical Western discourse, ques-

tions related to the condition of women are almost always readily addressed by the feminist systems of knowledge. I call into question efforts that try to make feminism paradigmatic for questions, concerns, problems related to women, sex, and gender in the Islamic world. However, I identify three specific texts that (alongside others like them) are crucial for understanding the uses and abuses of categories like gender, sex, and women in the contemporary discourse on Islam. While I emphasize the significance of the following texts for the mobilization of Islamism, I do not intend to make any evaluative gesture towards each author's oeuvre. De-authorizing these texts also helps in thinking of each text as an exemplar of a particular genre of critique against Western hegemony, in which secular feminism is a constituent part.

First, consider "White Wars: Western Feminisms and the 'War on Terror.'" In this 2007 paper, Sunera Thobani identifies feminist texts published in the aftermath of 9/11 that articulate Western feminism's working relationship with whiteness and the global War on Terror. Thobani demonstrates how texts with very different political orientations "share surprising convergences in their treatments of violence and in their representations of white imperial subjects and Muslim Others."⁴ While her dismantling of Phyllis Chesler and Zillah Eisenstein's writings are straightforward because one relies on civilizational arguments against Islam and Muslims and the other argues against patriarchy in a way that makes "American masculinity" and Taliban "misogyny" similar, Thobani's pointed critique of Judith Butler's psychoanalytic and philosophical approach to violence reveals the wide range of feminisms (liberal, Marxist, poststructuralist) entangled in anti-Islamist assumptions. Butler's secularity is obvious: she relies on "the primal vulnerability of the infant condition" which forms the basis for her notion of a collective 'we.' It is here that Thobani exposes Butler's uncritical comparison of the victims of 9/11 and the victims of US imperial aggression in Iraq and Afghanistan. Texts like Thobani's are outside of paradigmatic feminism because instead of offering prescriptions on gender and sex borrowed from a Western humanist tradition, they illustrate the relation between feminism (as a category) and the machinations of war.

Second, in the groundbreaking 1987 essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Hortense Spillers explains how the conditions of slavery and its consequent history have inaugurated a process of ungendering for Black subjects. The essay demonstrates the incompatibility of normative gender and blackness, not necessarily because of lack of interest in gendered relations, but simply because civil society concep-

tions of gender—available only to the non-Black, i.e. the Human—are articulated and organized through the subjugating structure of slavery or black social death.⁵ Spillers writes, “Under [the conditions of slavery], we lose at least *gender* difference *in the outcome*, and the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender-specific.”⁶ This theoretical observation troubles feminist conventions, and focuses the question of slavery onto the problem of flesh. She reads the “theft of the body” as “high crimes against the flesh” of the African female and male. In this sense, her analysis points to a generality of wounding, injury, and dishonor of bodies placed under slavery that become in their most immediate articulation, “a primary narrative” of the flesh. When she speaks about the enslaved African female subject, she discusses the specificity of ungendering as well: “This materialized scene of unprotected female flesh—of female flesh ‘ungendered’—offers a praxis and a theory, a text for living and for dying and a method for reading both through their diverse mediations.”⁷ A text like Spillers’—which is in conversation with feminism—is foundational for any consideration of Islam in the contemporary world, not only because of the large and influential presence of African and Black populations within the fold of Islam, but also because modernity itself is grounded in the originary rupture of slavery. In fact, one should point out that Islamism is frequently described as a response to colonial history, but almost never as a response to slave plantations by the millions kidnapped from the shores of Africa. Spillers’ essay provides the necessary historical, cultural, and material insights that help (re)position contemporary Islam, as a force in opposition to American (neo)plantations, as a retaliatory and guiding principle for the mobilization of slave revolts.

Third, in the 1983 essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” Gayatri Spivak deconstructs the Western philosophical and theoretical interest in representation and “subjective essentialism.”⁸ She examines the text “Intellectuals and Power: A Conversation between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze,” critiques their reductive theorization of Marx, and demonstrates how they operationalize the speaking subject. Spivak is careful in not reducing Foucault and Deleuze to represent them as simply assuming that the oppressed subject can speak, but rather, that what they consider “unnamed” and “nonrepresented” subjects are organized by power and desire. And, therefore, the intellectuals are self-represented as those who can in fact, “analyze (without analyzing).”⁹ Spivak also points out how the philosophers miss the international division of labor, and how Foucault in particular due to his monist view of power is unable to see the relation between “localized resis-

tance” and “macrological struggles.”¹⁰ She thinks that the two philosophers reinscribe the third world as a legible Other, reliant upon “naturally articulate” subjects of oppression.¹¹ In the latter part of the essay, Spivak explains how the subaltern woman disappears in some ways between the British and Indian nativist narratives, the first being an example of ‘white men saving brown women from brown men’ and the second a nostalgic assertion of indigenous authenticity. She then suggests: “The two sentences go a long way to legitimize each other.”¹² In another passage, she makes clear the space of non-place of the subaltern: “Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which the displaced figuration of the ‘third-world woman’ caught between tradition and modernization.”¹³ A text like Spivak’s is an internal criticism of Europeanist thought as well as indigenous claims of tradition and authenticity within a discourse of gender. Overall, it does not promote any explicit feminist project, nor does it promote or valorize traditions. It is relevant for Islam-related conversations, partly because of the large subaltern population in the Islamicate postcolony—subjects who are not recognized by civil society—and partly because of contemporary Islam’s calling into attention the line of conflict between programs of modernization and reforms of Islam.

It is important to note here that there are other very significant works of counter-hegemonic feminism—particularly in postcolonial and transnational feminist theory—that identify racial and colonial operations in traditional feminism. Works by Chandra Mohanty, Ranjana Khanna, and Rey Chow come to mind immediately.¹⁴ Whether certain texts by these scholars are to be included in the three exceptional genres I outline above, I leave to the reader. What I do want to state explicitly, however, is that my preoccupation in this article is not to deconstruct “Western” (colonial) feminism, but rather to think through how the epistemic, material, and historical grounding of feminism is secular. Just as identifying the Western orientation in particular forms of feminist discourse helps us determine their embeddedness in colonial power, investigating the secularity of feminism enables us to observe its embeddedness in what I term anti-Islamism.

It is impossible to generalize about an entire tradition. I do not use the feminist tradition in my argument to generalize it. I make a distinction between generalization and categorization. While the former requires a comprehensive study of patterns and systematic trends, the latter examines how as a theoretical form—something with historical unity and self-consistency—feminism requires anti-Islamism and therefore, cannot enter the

domain of Islamic orthodoxy.¹⁵ This incompatibility gives rise to a structural relation of incommensurability and irresolvable conflict between modern feminism and orthodox Islam. In other words, feminism as a category is incompatible with Islamism, and at times it is explicitly engaged in the disarticulation of Islam. Often, this disarticulation of Islam takes the form of keeping the Quran—with reinterpretations of verses related to “wife-beating” and polygyny—but rejecting the entire hadith corpus and the Sharia. The necessary assumption is that the secondary texts emerged in the context of pre-modern forms of Islamic patriarchy and therefore must be rejected for their lack of concern about the social, historical, and political position of women. Again, my argument in this article is not moral but rather structural. Whether Islamic societies need feminism as a project requires a prescriptive discourse from which this article shies away.

Because my criticism of feminism is not comprehensive, I select specific texts in that tradition to discuss the relation between feminism and anti-Islamism within specific periodizations. I methodologically draw from Salman Sayyid, who explains his own deconstructive reading of feminist writings:

The reason for selecting these writers is not because they are necessarily representative of attempts to theorize fundamentalism (though the argument could be made that their conceptualization of fundamentalism shares many features with other such attempts), nor because I think their account is paradigmatic, but rather because their work makes clear the conditions of its discursive possibility.¹⁶

While my selection of specific texts is also due to their ability to make clear “the conditions of [their] discursive possibility,” I want to stretch Sayyid’s point further by suggesting that categorially, feminist interests counter Islamism sometimes explicitly, and often implicitly. This incompatibility between modern feminism and Islamism arises from epistemic, conceptual, and material differences. Modern feminism’s basis is the sovereignty of the radical subject, the subject of the Enlightenment. It assumes that (European) women as persons must have access to sovereignty, and therefore that any form of submission to authorities that violate this sovereignty must be addressed as an inhibition for the ultimate freedom and autonomy of women. While liberal feminism’s preoccupation has been the enhancement of property relations, the politics of representation, and state-based ‘rights,’ Marxist feminism engages with the question of labor (reproductive and unproductive labor in particular), the wage relation, and value. But even with-

in Marxist feminism, the economic critique of patriarchy (often through theories of value) relies quite heavily on the idea that the exploitative structure of capitalism targets women in a specific manner, and as a result denigrates their sovereignty. If one were to take these accounts of the subjugation of women under regimes of illiberalism and capitalism to their logical conclusion, and expand their vision to include the Islamic world, then one would obviously be confronted with the question of how in these societies the sovereignty of women is inhibited by—or their inhibition is justified by—the textual (and by extension material) tradition of Islamic orthodoxy. In an interview published in the journal *Politics and Culture* (2009) Silvia Federici is suspicious of sovereignty because of its close affinity to history of the nation-state, but retains the political use of the term, and promptly connects it to autonomy. Federici remarks,

“Sovereignty,” in this sense, has none of the monarchical or nationalistic connotations historically associated with the term. It is a call for autonomy, for self-determination, and it is a rejection of the capitalist model of agriculture, that expropriates people from their lands and their traditional knowledge, subjects them to deadly international regulations, and turns food into a poison. As Mariarosa Dalla Costa puts it, “sovereignty” is an affirmation “of the right of populations to decide what to eat and how to produce it,” with a view of food as a “common good” rather than a commodity.¹⁷

It is important then to take note that sovereignty’s meaning in liberal feminism and Marxist-feminism goes through a significant shift, but the concept’s fundamental association with autonomy remains constant. Whether one desires autonomy via a politics of the nation-state and reform in its laws, or through a political economic change, it is still a desire for the autonomy of the subject, or more precisely, a desire for the subject as autonomy. And, it is this subject—and autonomy—that is fundamentally contradictory to Islam’s desire for subjects who are obedient to divine will, divine powers, and divine laws.

I begin each section with a contemporary periodization of Islamism. Without this periodization it becomes impossible to ground these articles within a system of contemporary history. I begin my periodization with 1979, the year of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, and end with 2011, the year that marks the death of Osama Bin Laden and a specific articulation in the history of Islamist leadership.¹⁸ Through this organization, I situate the discourses of media representation and feminism within a particular

political terrain. After periodizing a decade in relation to Islamist history, I discuss the sets of reasonings and arguments that are dominant in the feminist intellectual tradition for that decade and then examine how the NYT's representations carry similar assumptions about Islam and its traditions. Despite the tremendous similarities in media representations and intellectual discourse between 1979-2011, there are also significant breaks, ruptures, and contradictions. However, I look at how anti-Islamism as a logic is operationalized in both cases, through a particular exercise of secular power and reasoning that produces an ensemble of knowledge about Islam, which is then re-articulated and reproduced within a particular economy.

In this article, I do not expand on these theoretical claims or provide a methodological paradigm. Rather, I focus on a shorter history, a manageable time frame between the years 1979 and 2011, to demonstrate how anti-Islamism is operationalized and mobilized within a particular genealogy of modernist crisis. But this shorter history contains within it a larger historical speculation about the spectral presence of Islam.

1979: Grounding Contemporary Islamism

This article interrogates contemporary history by demarcating periods between 1979 and 2011 that were influential in the rise of contemporary Islamism as a threat to global colonial power. 1979 was a rupture in modern political history because it was the year Islamic clerics, under the leadership of Khomeini, were able to homogenize the rebellion against the Shah, seize state power, and create a constitutional basis for anti-Zionism. French philosopher Michel Foucault, working as a journalist at the time, wrote about the possible effect of the Islamic Revolution on Middle Eastern political geography: "Islam—which is not simply a religion, but an entire way of life, an adherence to a history and a civilization—has a good chance to become a gigantic powder keg, at the level of hundreds of millions of men. Since yesterday, any Muslim state can be revolutionized from the inside, based on its time-honored traditions."¹⁹ While such a fluent takeover of state power did not take place in other countries after all, one can easily recognize that Islam, in the thirty years since the Revolution, has become a stronger political force in non-Europe, and a concrete alternative to other forms of governance. The discursive political tradition of Islam with its tremendous corpus of knowledge provides for Islamists sets of laws, ethical structures, and political goals that are simultaneously stable and flexible. The stability originates from the structural fact that Islam, just like any other tradition, has its own discursive limit, and therefore has its internal texts, subtexts,

and contexts. But the flexibility of Islam complements, stretches, and shakes this stability, by allowing for the possibility of various political-ethical maneuvers that can deal with the modern condition, and in the process expand its own availability.²⁰ In other words, even thinking simplistically within a nation-state frame, the solution that Islam brings to Iran is different from what it brings to Palestine, which again is different from what it brings to Afghanistan. In terms of political strategy, the Islamic solution can be about consolidating state power, destroying state power, nurturing political terror networks, decolonial praxis, or even illiberal systems of governance. The structure of the Sharia and the central domain of jihad not only give Islam its substantive content, but they produce the condition for the applicability of each of the aforementioned strategies based on the historical demand of each situation.²¹

While the year 1979 inaugurated Islam's transition from a peripheral discourse to an authoritative discourse with concentrated State power, it also marked the possibility of an internal critique at the theological and geographical center of Islam—the Ka'ba. At the time, the revolution in Iran overshadowed the takeover of Mecca led by Saudi preacher Juhayman al Uteybi, but scholars now agree that this fanatic rebellion was in many ways the foundational event that created the possibility of al-Qa'ida. Yaroslav Trofimov observes,

The significance of the Mecca uprising was missed at the time even by the most sharp-eyed observers. Too many other threats preoccupied the West. The seizure of the Grand Mosque—the first large-scale operation by an international jihadi movement in modern times—was shrugged off as a local incident... But with the benefit of hindsight, it is painfully clear: the countdown to September 11, to the terrorist bombing in London and Madrid, and to the grisly Islamist violence ravaging Afghanistan and Iraq all began on that warm November morning, in the shade of the Kaaba.²²

While this journalistic observation may reify the events at the Ka'ba, it reveals a particular kind of transition in the genealogy of Islamism within the larger structure of secular modernity. While the seizure of state power in Iran allowed for an anti-imperialist position with established military and defense apparatuses, the Meccan siege demonstrated Islamism's ability to reconfigure itself for the purposes of a critique that questioned not only the deviance of the House of Saud but the very category of the state itself. The simultaneity of these events destabilizes the linear assumption that Islamist

politics merely changed its form from statism to anti-statism due to economic history.²³

The successful seizure of state power by religious clerics in Iran created the conditions for the possibility of Islamization at the level of political geography in the Middle East. The Islamic Republic's constitutional non-recognition of Israel and its persistent interest in developing nuclear energy continue to demonstrate this political transformation. While the uprising in Mecca signaled a possible political critique of the established order among religious clerics, it failed to subvert the political power of the Saudi regime, which remains central to American geostrategic interests. This difference in foreign relations relates to the respective media representations of Iran and Saudi Arabia. Hakeem Naim demonstrates that while Saudi and Iranian women both are represented as repressed and disciplined, the causal structures of repression are conceptualized differently.²⁴ Naim suggests that while in the case of Iran, *The New York Times* identifies the Islamic Republic to be directly responsible for the repression of women's self-expression, women's immobility and docility in Saudi Arabia are understood to be rooted in a particular interpretation of Islamic law by conservative religious scholars. In the case of Saudi Arabia, the media representation seems to suggest that the state is interested in modernization that *necessarily* elevates women's social status, while the Islamic *'ulema* (scholars) act as an obstacle in that process. Naim's comparative analysis demonstrates how the two major events of 1979—the successful revolution in Iran culminating in the seizure of State power, and the temporary siege of Mecca which was stifled with the help of Western intervention—launched these two trends in media representation. In the first, the coalescing of religious and state power appears dangerous (for Western interests), while in the latter, the disjuncture between religious rebellion and state objectives serves as a useful site of difference, through which it becomes possible to maintain liberal sensibilities towards women's rights while simultaneously supporting the Saudi state.

When it became clear in the early 1980s that Ayatollah Khomeini would likely head an Islamic government, bourgeois feminists—both Iranian and Western—initiated a counter-revolutionary²⁵ discourse deeply embedded in Islamophobia. In 1978 Atoussa H. published a letter in *Le Nouvel Observateur* that denounced not only the specific interpretation of Islam by Iranian clerics but the foundational text of the religion itself. In her writings, the Iranian feminist cited de-contextualized passages from the Quran, evoking feminist concerns in a manner that violates the Quranic text's own hermeneutic structure and promoted fear and suspicion among the French

Left. She insists, “Clearly, the man is the lord, the wife the slave; she can be used at his whim; she can say nothing. She must wear the veil, born from the Prophet’s jealousy toward Aisha!” At a press conference in Paris in 1979 philosopher and feminist Simone de Beauvoir delivered a speech targeting the Islamic revolution, and in her articulation promoted a universal feminist solidarity: “[It] is important to have a demonstration—on the part of a very large number of Western women, French women, Italian women, and others—of solidarity with the struggle of Iranian women.”²⁶ The fact that de Beauvoir understood the “struggle of the Iranian women” to be outside of the immanent plane of the Islamic Revolution itself reveals not only her political presuppositions about gender, Islam, and history, but also her particular alliance with Iranian women of a particular class position. In her uncritical conceptualization of “solidarity,” she failed to elaborate on the relation between historical differences and how the experience of patriarchy relates to divisions between “first” and “third” world. Her parochial view on the condition of “Iranian women” not only promoted a notion of authenticity in an unproblematic way, but also hinted at flaws in her feminist methodology. Instead of conceptualizing the Iranian revolution—which has a genealogical structure with tensions, ruptures, divisions and discontinuities—from within its own sets of reasons, arguments, knowledges, practices, and limits, both Atoussa H. and de Beauvoir assumed polemical positions against Islamism as a category, violating an entire corpus of knowledge for the sake of a politics that finds its originary impulse in a European crisis.

1980s: Consolidating Islamism(s)

In the 1980s, the Cold War split the world into two parts, generating an ongoing narrative of struggle in which dissociated political antagonisms are still represented as either products of a larger bipolar tension, or simply as peripheral moments. Beneath this bipolar tension between states—frequently misrepresented as a struggle between capitalism and communism—there remained the real narrative of the crisis of capital. Indeed, the United States and the Soviet Union shared the same world system as its basis, and the differences between their respective societies had more to do with the manner in which the institutions of the state were instrumentalized in relation to economic history than their divergences at the level of political ideology. This structural economic reality disappeared in the larger framing of the Cold War, which representationally subsumes all political formations within its paradigm. In this context, various Islamist formations during this decade became mere products of the larger bipolar

tension. Even after the revolution in Iran and the Meccan siege of 1979, there continued a full-fledged Islamic revival in the Middle East and South/Central Asia throughout the 1980s. Between 1979 and 1989 the *mujāhidīn* in Afghanistan engaged in defiant militant struggle against Soviet invasion; in 1982, Hizbullah formed in response to Israeli aggression in Lebanon; and in the aftermath of Palestine's First Intifada, Hamas emerged as a major political force. While these formations undoubtedly took place at the plane of world historical events, the idea that the almost decade-long fight by a heterogeneous group of Islamic insurgents under the banner of the *mujāhidīn* in Afghanistan simply arose under US tutelage is not only a misreading of that struggle, but a direct attempt at distorting history through orientalist techniques consistent with the structure of anti-Islamism. Such representational strategies are based on the assumptions that Islamists fight without any self-direction and are politically gullible subjects without a moral history, easily bought off with imperialist funding. Similar assumptions are made by right and left-wing experts about Hamas and Hizbullah. Hamas is described as a creation by Israeli intelligence for the purposes of undermining secular resistance by Palestinians, and Hizbullah is understood only as an extension of Iranian state interests in the region.

Lena Meari suggests that *The New York Times* articles of the 1980s provide us with representations that are “apparently multiple, unstable, and at times contradictory.”²⁷ In my own research, I encountered empirical evidence that suggests a similar structure of representation. The 1980s comprise the decade during which media portrayals consistently emphasized fluidity, multiplicity, and complexity. During this time, so-called ‘cultural practices’ rather than religion appeared in the media as the source of women’s rights violations in Islamic countries. The “instability,” “fluidity” and “multiplicity” of this period match the intellectual history of the time, during which Lyotard wrote *The Postmodern Condition* (published in French in 1979, in English in 1984) and defined “postmodern” as a form of “incredulity toward metanarratives.”²⁸ While the text focuses on the philosophy of science and how knowledge is legitimized within a particular epistemic history, it renewed scholars’ interest in marginal narratives across all areas of the humanities and social sciences. Lyotard’s emphasis on “local determinism” and “heterogeneity” contributed to the advent of Subaltern Studies and other forms of research on postcolonialism that questioned state-sanctioned historical archives and sought to mobilize history from the position of peasants, lower caste women, and dalits.

In feminist theory, Kimberlé Crenshaw, bell hooks, Angela Davis and others emphasized the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality to think critically about the complex subordination of non-middle-class women—particularly Black women.²⁹ Indeed, the political heterogeneity of Islamism *itself* impacts and mirrors the complex character of its critique during the 1980s, during which the theoretical and political targeting of Islam largely took place indirectly—except by more directly Islamophobic thinkers located in Islamic countries themselves, including Nawal el Saadawi. Despite her Marxist focus on patriarchal class structure, el Saadawi explicitly cited Islamic fundamentalism as a major contributor to women's oppression. In her anti-Islamist polemic, she conflated all fundamentalisms to suggest that they perform the same ideological function for global capitalism. She wrote, "All fundamentalists—whether Christian, Jewish, Muslim or otherwise—are partners in the attempt to breed division, strife, racism, and sexism; they help international imperialism to maintain its control and to overcome popular resistance to policies that lead to war and increased exploitation."³⁰ Her argumentation follows a pattern that is common in anti-Muslim writings. It begins with universal declarations against fundamentalism as a category, but ends with the specific targeting of Islam, its legal structure, and its practices in relation to sex separation. El Saadawi criticizes Islamist success in organizing large numbers of men and women by suggesting that it merely provides a sense of return to an authentic past without addressing *real* contradictions.

However, el Saadawi herself constructs a utopian past in which—both prior to Islam, and in very early Islamic history—women possessed rights that were subsequently overridden by Islamists, conceptualized as deeply patriarchal in the cultural sense, and antiquated in the political sense.³¹ There are two analytical errors in this supposition. First, the anti-modernism of Islamists is framed within a particular notion of teleology, in which the progress of man is determined by how closely he is able to mimic European history. Because of this, Islamist critiques of liberalism, women's rights, secularism, and European modernity more broadly are not only represented as reactionary in a cultural sense, but Islamists themselves are identified as political reactionaries who work against the directional imperatives of modernist time. In this analytical frame, Islam itself must be transcended in order to reach the telos of progress. Second, el Saadawi fails to understand the actual directional structure of modernity in relation to history. The implicit teleology in her thinking is external to economic history and consequently, lacks a proper conceptualization of the dialectical

determinations of capitalist modernity. In this sense, her Eurocentrism relies upon a non-dialectical idealism, in which Islamism becomes an abstraction disconnected from material life, existing only as a category to be denounced by feminists. Given this theoretical catastrophe, and failure to grasp the most elemental dimensions of Islamism in terms of its actual material grounding in history—modernity included—it is not surprising that the initial utopia in el Saadawi's account serves as a strategic ploy to place Islam in an earlier history, a history that in her analysis is in need of exhaustion. This unidirectional view of history structurally debilitates Islam by evacuating its political content.

As mentioned earlier, the targeting of Islam during the '80s —unlike el Saadawi's account—was largely indirect. Throughout this decade, media remained a central source of empirical information that validated a feminist project in which “cultural interpretations” of religion—rather than religion per se—are portrayed as the problem. This rewriting of religion as a cultural practice remains significant and relevant in anthropological debates. In *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Clifford Geertz describes religion as a “cultural system” to be understood at two levels—first, as an interpretive system of meanings and second, as a system immanent to social and psychological processes.³² Talal Asad critiques this two-level view by explaining how it essentializes religion, frames it within an interpretive hermeneutics, and places it outside of the field of power and social history. Asad writes, “The basic problem, however, is not with the idea of mirror images as such but with the assumption that there are two separate levels...This resort to Parsonian theory creates a logical space for defining the essence of religion.”³³

In a NYT article titled “Dispute over a Moslem Divorce Ensnarls Gandhi” (1986),³⁴ a woman appears to defy an entire community by using the courts to reclaim her rights against oppressive, local, and male-dominated cultural practices. Muslim men are represented as particularly and peculiarly violent and domineering, while Muslim women are portrayed as being in opposition to the cultural logic of Islamic patriarchy. In the article a leading feminist writer and lawyer claims, “It is a dangerous trend when a minority community says it should be exempted from a Supreme Court judgment because of religion. A woman's right to claim redress before a court of law should not be compromised.” Here, Islamic law is represented as the law of a minority culture that, in the end, should be subsumed within a universal (secular) law. In another article, “Islam: Feminists vs. Fundamentalists” (1985),³⁵ a feminist lawyer in Bangladesh insists on a separation between Islam proper and cultural practices. She argues, “Men play

upon the religious sentiment of the people, and the people believe it is Islam when it's a custom or a tradition.”

In the aforementioned articles, both feminist critics happen to be lawyers. Their reasoning demonstrates how secular law acts as a means of negating what is understood to be the cultural parochialism of Islam and/or Islamic law. While Lena Meari aptly illustrates how the NYT differentiates between Muslim societies and American society through discussions focused on veiled Muslim women, this paper focus on how the distinction made between the categories “culture” and “religion” is also consistently at work. For example, in the article “The Moslem Veil in the City: A Matter of Tradition” (1984)³⁶ that aims to represent New York City as a tolerant place for veiled Muslim women, the author focuses on cultural values as the marker of religion:

Of about 20 traditionally dressed women who were interviewed, most said they believe that Islam asks women to conceal all but their hands and feet. They said their outfits elicit little overt discrimination, but cause heads to turn [...] Despite objections to living in a city that clashes with their values, several women said New York gives them the freedom to live as they choose.

Other articles in the '80s focus quite heavily on the instrumental role of secular law, and the negative cultural dimension of Islamic law. In the article “Saudi Arabia’s Gospel Columnists” (1985),³⁷ Islamic law again appears as a set of parochial cultural codes:

Moslems consider Islam a complete system that governs every aspect of life, and Saudi Arabia takes its role as guardian of the faith particularly seriously. It is the only country in the world whose Constitution and legal system are entirely based on the ‘sharia’ or Islamic code of law. Details of social behavior, from what to wear to brushing one’s teeth, are the subjects of continual debate. The most burning issues of the day concern women.

This appraisal of the Sharia continues in the article “Pakistan’s Grim Islamic Law is not just a Threat” (1981),³⁸ in which middle-class women’s organizations frame Islamic law as a mechanism that works against the advancement of women’s rights. The author echoes the previous articles’ analytical separation of culture and religion:

Islam preaches equality of men and women and this Government is committed to providing equality of opportunity for all. Such things as the

favoring of the male children, these are not Islamic but rather they are cultural traditions of the subcontinent.

This representation of the subcontinent as a region where cultural influence makes Islamization processes deviate from Islam proper is evident in other articles published in the NYT during the 1980s. In an article titled “The ‘Islamization’ of Pakistan: Still Moving Slowly and Still Stirring Debate” (1986),³⁹ the appearance of the word Islamization in quotes represents it as an inauthentic expression of Islam. The article itself elaborates on how women are specific victims of Islamic programs. In “Pakistani Women Take Lead In Drive Against Islamization” (1988),⁴⁰ journalist Steven Weisman connects this notion of Islamization as a form of anti-feminism to the question of governance and religious authority’s incompatibility with liberal institutions and rights. He quotes lawyer Amna Piracha, “But the issue is more than just women’s rights. The issue is whether Pakistan is to be governed by elected representatives of the people or a group of clergymen answerable to no one.” The relation between governance and accountability in this articulation is curious. Here, if Islamization takes place—in which the clergymen do not derive their legitimacy through a secular notion of the law, due to their allegiance to a concept of divine order which is unverifiable—there is an absence of juridico-political legitimacy. This notion of juridico-political legitimacy, however, arises from a provincial history that is universalized through a logic of Eurocentrism which is itself unaccountable.

1991–2001: US Hegemony and Islamic Reconfiguration

With the end of the Cold War in 1991, the US emerged as a global power inaugurating a unipolar world. With the demise of the Soviet Union, the focus of foreign policy largely shifted to the singular force of militant Islamist discourse in its various forms. By singular force, I refer to the concentration of Islamic discourse—regardless of its heterogeneity—conceptualized as a totality in opposition to the hegemonic and material expansion of the US. While Islamic discourse is not without historical unity, it is not operationalized in the real social world by focusing on an essential enemy. Rather, militant Islamic discourse demonstrates tremendous flexibility in its ability to (re)ground itself within the domain of power. For instance, the assumption that Islamists were simply funded by the US to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan demonstrates itself to be simplistic and false by the 1990s, a decade characterized by a new unipolar globality. During this period, Islamists took US hegemony as its fundamental opponent with tremendous moral

and political seriousness. Between 1996–2001, the emergence of the Taliban as a governing force signified a transition from Islamic insurgency against foreign occupiers (in the '80s) towards a re-theorization of classical governance. 1996 is also the year of Osama Bin Laden's relocation from Sudan to Afghanistan, inaugurating a new, tensed yet functional moral-political relationship between al-Qa'ida and the Taliban. In the '90s, the overlapping and simultaneous development of Islamic governance on one hand, and militarization on the other, created strategic pressure on US hegemony and Zionist ideology. This becomes evident in Hamas's creation of the al-Qassam Brigades in 1991, which works independently of Hamas's political wing. This period also marked Hizbullah's entry into the mainstream political sphere in Lebanon. These developments indicate how Islamism works through the distribution of tasks without isolating particular elements from the larger scope of its discursive tradition. In 1997, Hizbullah's leadership in forming multi-confessional Lebanese Brigades demonstrates Islamism's extra-discursive potential and political imagination beyond self-identity. Not only do we see the collaboration between various elements within the Islamic discourse itself, but also an interest to influence other forces of politics that are identified as functionally effective against Israeli political-geography. Because of the concretization of Islam as the main enemy in foreign lands after the end of the Cold War, it is not surprising to see representations in media and feminist discourse to be more direct in their Islamophobia.

Contrary to the 1980s, the representation of Islam between 1991–2001 in the NYT is interventionist in a more pronounced way. The interventions—both political and intellectual—are rooted in a liberal, humanist internationalism. A collection of essays written between 1990–1997 by renowned feminist philosopher Martha Nussbaum under the title *Sex and Social Justice* is representative of this framework. Although her text is a broad, philosophically illuminating elaboration on liberal categories (e.g. justice, rights, universals, equity, reason, liberty), she is blunt about its purpose when she states in the introduction,

The approach defended here refuses to take that step [of cultural relativism], arguing that an account of the central human capacities and functions, and of the basic human needs and rights, can be given in a fully universal manner, at least at a high level of generality, and that this universal account is what should guide feminist thought and planning.⁴¹

Nussbaum uses Aristotle to conceptualize notions of “human functioning” and “capability” in order to make a philosophically grounded political case for liberalism. She thinks through the works of Kant and Rawls for the purposes of examining and justifying concepts like dignity, liberty, and justice. She also re-interprets John Stuart Mill via Aristotle to think of his work outside of utilitarianism. It is curious that while this philosophical-political project aims to reconstitute liberalism, by returning to Aristotle—an ancient philosopher—it grounds liberal categories in a discourse that is almost as old as philosophy itself. By doing this Nussbaum’s philosophical project of “Kantian/Aristotelian liberalism” slips into a transhistorical imperative. Her text’s emphasis on liberalism, which claims to ground itself in universally valid concepts of justice and rights, actually grounds itself uncritically within a naturalized vision of capitalist property relations.⁴²

Nussbaum specifically addresses Islam with the following quoted conversation at the beginning of chapter 3, titled “Religion and Women’s Human Rights.” Here, a Bangladeshi woman involved with a literacy and skills program sponsored by the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee asserts,

The *mullahs* say: “When they will die we shall not bury them.” Villagers say, “Wherever they want, they go. They do not cover their heads. They talk with men. They will be sinners.” I said: “If Allah does not see us when we stay hungry then Allah has sinned.”

This is not simply an articulation related to concerns about women’s rights, but rather, an anti-theist questioning that foundationally and negatively interrogates Islam. The concept of Allah becomes reliant upon liberal categories. In fact, in this line of reasoning, it is only through liberalism that Islam can legitimize itself. Nussbaum’s rhetoric against the Islamic Republic of Iran signals her political complicity in contemporary anti-Islamism. She defends her liberal universalist position by suggesting that Islamic tradition and history has many examples of toleration, and therefore, her critique of specific practices under the name of Islam is not a totalizing critique of Islam. While it is true that Islam has within itself a tremendous history that covers many spatio-temporal contingencies, it is misleading to think that Islam does not carry within itself its own systematicity that gives it a historical unity. One can think about this systematicity in a genealogical way, therefore not essentializing the internal history of Islam, which allows for both the maintenance of a certain kind of orthodoxy as well as reconstitution of its social dynamic within particular histories. There is much

scholarly work on orthodoxy in relation to distribution of power and the immanent development of an authoritative discourse within the Islamic tradition. To reduce this corpus of knowledge to a matter of basic pluralism for the purposes of teasing out values commensurable to liberalism is anti-Islamist in the most elemental sense: it denies Islam its internal consistency, objectifies it as a simple whole with many parts, and breaks it up according to the rules of liberalism. Nussbaum, who in the introduction to her book openly rejects relativism in order to revive liberal universalism, paradoxically justifies plurality within Islam to select parts of it for the purposes of disciplining and domesticating Islam within a structure of liberal feminism.

Articles published in the NYT in the 1990s are less nuanced, and more directly anti-Islamist. They are consistent with Nussbaum's intellectual interest in women's human rights and her universalism. Here is an excerpt from an article titled "Turks March in Campaign To Preserve Secularism"⁴³ published in 1997:

Thousands of Turks, most of them women, marched through the streets of Ankara today in the first major public protest against the policies of the Islamic-led Government... 'Let Turkey shout 'Down with Sharia!' they chanted. One banner proclaimed, 'Women's Rights are Human Rights,' while another simply, 'Women Exist.'

This article frames local women in an Islamic country as authentic yet subversive subjects who question Islamic law. The specific focus on the Sharia works as a technique to reduce Islamic governance into a particular orientalist imagination of religious jurisprudence. The NYT, of course, has no interest in the details of the massive history of jurisprudence and law in the Islamic tradition, and therefore, this kind of selective reporting does little more than supply the anti-Islamic historical unconscious of the Western reader with more raw data to help reproduce racial archetypes.

Barbara Crossette's article "Women's Rights Gaining Attention Within Islam" (1996)⁴⁴ focuses on women in various Muslim majority countries who are organizing to develop specific sets of demands that are consistent with liberal values. Crossette writes:

Throughout the Islamic world, from North Africa and the Middle East to Southeast Asia, a diverse assortment of individuals and women's rights groups, different in cultures but sharing a powerful faith, are creating a momentum for change that few would have predicted a few years ago.

While the status of women can vary widely from country to country in the Islamic world, advocates of Muslim women's rights share a core group of demands. They want the right to education, both secular and religious, which is often denied to girls. They seek changes in economic practices to allow them to own and inherit property, enjoy the freedom to start businesses and share in decisions on the distribution of family income. They also want reform in Muslim family laws that often leave them at the mercy of men who can divorce them without warning, take away their children, deny them the right to travel and bequeath them as chattel to the next male relative.

This article demonstrates direct, structural similarity with Nussbaum's arguments, insofar as it locates women in Muslim countries who, in efforts to 'modernize' Islam, advocate for human rights. In this sense, Islam becomes a site for liberal interventions.

Another article by Barbara Crossette (1998)⁴⁵ focuses on Afghanistan and vilifies Islamic militants. Here it becomes clear that the reasoning structure of anti-Islamism forcibly reduces and compares historically different regimes of power by essentializing women's autonomy:

The circle of teachers, a doctor and several homemakers—sitting cross-legged on the carpeted floor of a mud-walled house—wanted to tell Ms. Bellamy, a woman to woman and without inhibitions, what life was like in Afghanistan after decades of political upheaval, a Soviet invasion, a holy war, a civil war and now an era marked by enforces of Islamic militancy riding around in jeeps and pickups beating up sinners.

In this article, "Soviet invasion," "holy war," and "civil war," three different regimes of power, are portrayed as commensurate and culminate in an "Islamic militancy" that restricts women's autonomy. Woman as a category becomes central in this discourse, and is used as a way to promote internal tension within Afghan society. The following quote illustrates this logic:

In the midst of the session, when a man tried to deliver a message to Ms. Bellamy through an intermediary, she said firmly: "No men here! This is a meeting for women." Faces around the room broke into smiles.

This kind of framing strategically manipulates the discourse to not only compare different regimes, but to highlight Islam as the higher point of domination. It also falsely identifies a cultural logic instead of an economic one for patriarchy, and fails to address the centrality of modern power

within imperialist history. All of these errors contribute to the discursive rationale of anti-Islamism.

Islamic polygyny is frequently at the center of representational techniques that frame Islamic jurisprudence as a force of patriarchy. This particularly controversial subject helps to locate patriarchy within the instrumentalization of religion itself. The NYT published a Letter to the Editor in 1991 that critiques polygamy:

The institution of polygamy is legal in Islam, but most Muslim countries, under the pressure of women's rights groups and others interested in strengthening social welfare, have since the 1960s placed legal restraints on its practice. These include requiring the prospective polygamist to obtain the written consent of his first wife before marrying a second. This consent is rarely given. The legitimacy of polygamy in Islam originated in the need to provide legal and social protection to widowed women and their children, as well as to unmarried women with little chance of finding a spouse, when Muslims were few in number and severely persecuted by the pagan Arabs among whom they dwelt... The Koran is explicit, however, in making polygamy conditional on a man's being able to provide equally for all his wives, a theoretical possibility that is highly unlikely in fact.⁴⁶

Another article published in 1990 reduces the heterogeneity internal to Islamism in a manner that allows for liberal interventions against a supposed coherent enemy: the category of the fundamentalist.⁴⁷ The article begins by recognizing how Islamists in specific places (Algeria, Egypt, Jordan) have come to power through peaceful means, but “[e]lsewhere, Islamic fundamentalists are seeking or consolidating power through the use of arms and intimidation.” The article continues, “In the Sudan, a military dictatorship is implementing religious edicts by force. In Lebanon, Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco, armed fundamentalists are seeking to overturn secular regimes.” Not only does the representational technique dominant in this article essentialize the formation of Islamism, but it also involves an inversion in which it appears that “Islamic fundamentalists” have full agency to “break with secularism.” This kind of inversion fails to grasp the genealogy of historical power that comes with secularism. To suggest that Islamists have political agency and can simply attempt to “overturn secular regimes” is to miss the force with which Eurocentrism establishes the secular—not only as a political doctrine, but as an epistemic field. To give Islamists full agency within secular modernity—a category with a particular genealogy in En-

lightenment history—is to misconceptualize the materiality of the secular political episteme. The article suggests that “Islamic fundamentalists” share a common dream of disrupting secularism. Such journalistic attempts reveal a historical unconscious deeply anxious about the return of Islam—an unconscious beneath the spectacle of the modern West’s self-perception.

2001–2011: War on Terror and Discourse of Ethics

9/11 inaugurated a new global history. Two planes flew into the Twin Towers, a third plane managed to damage the western side of the Pentagon, and a fourth plane aiming to hit the White House fell short. The state immediately blamed al-Qa’ida and considered the attacks an act of war, and al-Qa’ida took responsibility through the release of a video. September 11 is objectively the most comprehensive attack on the security, intelligence, and economy of the global superpower. Even though 9/11 clearly represented a global jihadist attack on the political and economic structure of Western domination, much of the commentary in the immediate aftermath of the attacks—leftist as well as rightist—involved civilizational, cultural, and identitarian explanations. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the Afghan Taliban government fell and refused to hand over Bin Laden to the US, launching a full-fledged war. The war in Iraq, however, took a different form. Within the Sunni resistance, under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, al-Qa’ida in Iraq began a series of terrorist attacks and suicide operations. Zarqawi also released several beheading videos during this time. The central leadership of al-Qa’ida criticized Zarqawi, and considered his brutal sectarian tactics antithetical to the values of global jihad. Despite such internal critiques of political sectarianism, however, in this decade sectarianism became mainstream political culture—particularly given Iran’s major role in re-configuring the governing powers of the Iraqi state. The 2006 July War in Lebanon between Hizbullah and the Israeli Defense Forces, however, demonstrated an exception: the possibility of Islamic unity. Specifically, the collaboration between Shia Hizbullah and Sunni Hamas demonstrated the type of Islamist political action that, as Salman Sayyid claims, sustains Islam itself and keeps the tradition from dissolving into its constituent parts.

During this decade after the London bombings of 7/7, there was also a shift inward. Western and secular states not only focused on the external enemy combatant, but also conducted sophisticated and detailed surveillance of potential homegrown terrorists. By 2009, with the beginning of the Obama presidency, US foreign policy moved towards contingency

operations and precision warfare through the full-scale use of drones. The war expanded in depth and precision, and the state rhetorically and diplomatically shifted from emphasizing civilizational differences towards promoting a moderate “reformation” from within Islam. On June 4, 2009, Obama delivered a historic speech in Cairo in which he acknowledged the history of colonialism and tension between the West and Muslim world, but emphasized a dialogic ethical discourse:

I have come here to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world; one based upon mutual interest and mutual respect; and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive, and need not be in competition. Instead, they overlap, and share common principles—principles of justice and progress; tolerance and the dignity of all human beings.

This decade’s state interest in promoting a (liberal) reformation within Islam parallels scholarly developments during the same period.

Seyla Benhabib’s *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era* (2002) provides a detailed theoretical grounding for this form of state intervention in a world shaped by a universalizing globalism. Her argument is a critique of naive cultural relativism in the post 9/11 era, and a call for a “discourse of ethics,” a framework that allows for all morally autonomous individuals and social/cultural groups to arrive at a meeting point acknowledging each participant as a moral equal. “Discourse ethics” is informed by critical theorist Habermas’s notion of “communicative ethics.”⁴⁸ For Habermas, unlike the first generation of Frankfurt School thinkers, modernity is an unfinished project. Habermas encourages the maintenance of Enlightenment-based values and believes that while history took a devastating turn with the Holocaust, revitalizing the modern project remains important. Benhabib’s “discourse ethics” relies on this concept of modernity and remains open to all except indigenous people and “fundamentalists” (read: Islamists). She writes,

It is the rejectionist fundamentalists who find it most difficult to live in a globalized world of uncertainty, hybridity, fluidity, and contestation. Unable to make the daily compromises that the practice of any firmly held religious belief in the contemporary world would require, these groups declare war on global civilization or consume themselves in acts of apocalyptic fervor... the ‘true Islam’ dreams of the twenty-first century—are

doomed to failure, but not before they cause a great deal of mischief and human suffering, instability, and fear.⁴⁹

The specter of 9/11 looms behind the state policies, intellectual production, and popular media representations of this decade. Media representations during this decade reflect a realization that overtly interventionist approaches within the logic of imperialism have been ineffective, and that 9/11 may epitomize this failure of liberal-humanism. This decade involves a strategic shift from the militarist exportation of liberal values towards the encouragement of reformation within Islam itself.⁵⁰ In this decade the question of “women’s rights” in Islam becomes a site of central contestation, and Islamic women interested in projects of liberal reform are represented as active actors working to challenge the threat of Islam from within.

While Benhabib’s Habermasian notion of “discourse of ethics” gives us a quick preview of the epistemic environment during this period, it does not tell us much about Muslim scholars and their involvement in furthering the agenda of this decade. During this decade, not only secular feminists but some Muslim women scholars also participate in the discourse of internal reform. Through Quranic hermeneutics, these scholars attempt to overhaul the orthodox tradition of Islam from within, to free Islamic orthodoxy from patriarchal interpretations and other forms of exegetical distortion. Asma Barlas—a scholar critical of making hybrid Quranic and Western/Feminist epistemologies—suggests that patriarchal readings of Islamic discourse result from historical patriarchy at particular periods, not from the Quran itself.⁵¹ Her aim is to return to a hermeneutic arrangement in which the Quran—as Divine ontology and Divine speech—is at the very center, and other secondary texts of the Sharia like the hadith corpus are read with a close eye on historical contingencies. Along with Barlas, Kecia Ali and Amina Wadud also publish texts dealing with similar themes during this decade. While the authors of these works have different political investments, during the 2001–11 period, Quranic hermeneutics as a genre was ideologically mobilized in conjunction with the reformist agenda of a “discourse of ethics.”

A similar pattern is noticeable in NYT articles during 2001–11. For instance, in an article titled “Daughter of the Revolution Fights the Veil” (2003)⁵² we see the representation of this reformist argument from within the authentic representation of the Islamic revolution in Iran. The article suggests that there is internal tension within the Khomeini family about

the status of the veil in revolutionary/reformist Islamic discourse. Elaine Sciolino writes,

When it comes to credentials in Iran's Islamic Republic, Zahra Eshraghi's are cast in gold. Her grandfather was Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the cleric who overthrew a king and led a revolution in the name of Islam. Her husband's brother is the reformist president, Mohammad Khatami. And her husband, Mohammad Reza Khatami, is the head of the reformist wing of Parliament. In a society where women can derive enormous power from the men in their lives, those three pillars give Ms. Eshraghi enormous standing. Yet the 39-year-old government official and mother of two has a confession to make. She feels trapped by her family history. And she hates wearing the black veil known as the chador.

The author is suggesting that Eshraghi is perfectly positioned within the discourse of Shi'i Islamic orthodoxy to question the Islamic Republic's normative legal focus. In another article, titled "Half the Afghans, the Women, Fight to Establish Their Rights" (2002),⁵³ Barbara Crossette more openly highlights internal tensions within the discourse of Islam to promote women's rights. She discusses the significance of ideologically training women in Afghanistan so that they can question the Islamic legitimacy of the Taliban, and establish "clandestine home schools for girls". She writes,

Ms. Kabuli, 41, was among those who stayed and worked underground, and she is now a judge dealing with youthful offenders...During Taliban rule, from 1996 until last fall, she ran one of hundreds of clandestine home schools for girls. Ms. Kabuli said the problem with the Taliban was not that they were Muslims. "Islam brought a certain equality to men and women," she said. "The laws that the Taliban brought were from pre-Islamic times, based on traditional law."

The author, in this case, is using an argument similar to scholars of Qura-nic hermeneutics, namely de-authenticating one normative gender focus in traditional Islam on the basis of another, particular liberatory reading of Islam.

Sabrina Tavernise explores similar concerns in her article, "In Quest for Equal Rights, Muslim Women's Meeting Turns to Islam's Tenets" (2009).⁵⁴ She discusses the patriarchy demonstrated by the National Fatwa Council in Malaysia in their call against the practice of yoga. The journalist uses local women's voices that argue for reform within Islam, instead of the 1990s tactic of dwelling on secular feminist critiques. Tavernise observes,

[Muslim women's] mission was to come up with ways to demand equal rights for women. And their tools, however unlikely, were the tenets of Islam itself. "Secular feminism has fulfilled its historical role, but it has nothing more to give us," said Ziba Mir-Hosseini, an Iranian anthropologist who has been helping to formulate some of the arguments. "The challenge we face now is theological."

This article fits neatly with the imperatives of Quranic hermeneutics and discourse of ethics, namely discourse within Islam via interpretive and reading strategies to dispel patriarchy. The article also provides an interesting periodization, demonstrating how secular feminism exhausts its utility, giving way to a reformist agenda concerned with theology. This is interesting, given the fact that the decade prior to 2001–11, as explained in the last section, was a decade of internationalist and interventionist secular feminism.

In an article titled "Turkish Terror Victim Espoused a Tolerant Islam,"⁵⁵ Stephen Kinzer represents Islamists as violent against Muslim feminists who fight for women's rights. The article suggests that male domination is not part of the essence of Islam, and is the result of a perversion. Kinzer writes,

The woman, Konca Kuris, was often described as a Muslim feminist. In books, articles, lectures and television appearances, she had described Islam as a religion that guarantees women's rights, and asserted that male commentators over the centuries had twisted its essence in ways that led to the oppression of women.

The message in this article resonates with the arguments in Barlas' monograph. The main point in this article is to historicize the orthodoxy of Islam as patriarchal. In other words: keep Islam, but deconstruct and dispel its orthodox structure. In this sense, the "discourse of ethics" has a reductionist agenda. Islam's massive corpus, systematized over fourteen hundred years, is reduced to a certain modernist interpretation of the Quran. Much of the hadith corpus and Sharia are questioned, and selective texts from different periods in Islamic history are kept so long as they adjust to modernist sensibilities. In NYT articles like the one by Kinzer above there is a tendency not only to show that interpretive textual manipulation and "perversion" create the basis of patriarchal societies, but to insist that Islamist men are also obsessively violent and perverted in their responses to feminism.

Interpretive openness is central for both Quranic hermeneutics and discourse of ethics. An article titled “In Jeans or Veils, Iraqi Women are Split on New Political Power” (2005)⁵⁶ illustrates this method well. The author expresses concerns about the future of Iraqi women, cites a scholar who argues for pluralism within Islamic thought, and suggests that this internal diversity may allow for women’s rights and other forms of reform from within Islam’s discursive tradition. The article states:

Many secular women in the assembly agree that Western models cannot always apply in Iraq, and that Islam must play an important role. But, like Dr. Raja al-Khuzai, they argue that there are many schools of thought within Islam, and plenty of room for differing views, and they worry that Islamists will make inroads into Iraq’s secular family law, which was established in 1959 and remains among the most liberal in the region. Today, for example, men can take more than one wife only under strict conditions.

While it is certainly true that Islam’s corpus of texts, reasoning structure, and scholars are full of contradictions and paradoxes, there is still a systematization of knowledge in which an orthodoxy is articulated. And to assume that the complex mechanism through which this articulation takes place over a period of fourteen hundred years is simply a determination of history is to commit tremendous violence upon Islamic epistemology and methodology. The multiple contradictions and the existence of plurality of thought within the epistemic unity of Islam does not necessarily negate, undermine, or delegitimize orthodoxy. To assume such a delegitimization is to essentialize difference.

Concluding Remarks

This paper’s primary aim is to reveal a structural homology between two forms of secular representational strategies vis-à-vis Islam: media and feminism. My analysis covers the years 1979–2011, which I divide into three periods—1979–1990; 1991–2001; and 2001–11—according to signature Islamist events. I examine how media and feminist discourse for each period overlap in their assumptions and disarticulation of Islamism. I also demonstrate that modern feminism (with three key exceptions) and Islamism are incompatible in their foundational assumptions—not only in terms of how they articulate subjectivity, but also how they contradict (and antagonize) each other’s visions of the world. Though I find three exceptions to this secular paradigm of feminism in Thobani, Spillers, and Spivak, I do not

attempt to redeem feminism through them. Rather, I want to consider how their works generate, map, and deconstruct the categories of gender/sex outside the frame of anti-Islamism that modern feminism upholds. In this sense, there is a primary difference in their desires. At the risk of sounding too metaphysical, one may remark that at the most elemental level, there is a difference in each respective tradition's ethical dispositions.

The killing of Osama Bin Laden in 2011 marks the end of a particular history of contemporary jihad. With the Arab uprisings in full effect, many Western and secular journalists and critics during this time begin to discuss the Arab Spring in relation to what they predict to be an "Islamist Winter."⁵⁷ In other words, there is a re-mobilization of a binary between Islam and the secular. Similarly, in 2012 controversial philosopher Slavoj Žižek suggests that the 1979 revolution in Iran was an authentic moment until the Islamists de-authenticated it by taking over its direction, and locates in Iranian reformist Mousavi (during the 2009 election scandal) the possibility of a political "return of the repressed [Leftists and secularists]." Elsewhere Žižek writes of Tahrir Square: "But then there are the Arab uprisings. Do they not offer an example of a collective act of resistance that avoids this false alternative between self-destructive violence and religious fundamentalism?"⁵⁸ For Žižek and others, the period between 1979 and 2011 is a history of political defeat and repression. And, the period in the aftermath of the Arab Spring and death of Bin Laden is a time for the renewal of secularity. Of course, we know by now that the seductive dream of a new secularism ends very quickly—already we have witnessed Hamas militants firing rockets at Israeli forces in response to the Gaza massacre, a full-fledged and uncompromising jihad in Syria with hundreds of local rebel groups with more than fifty thousand fighters, and a number of deadly attacks in the heart of Europe. Perhaps we have entered a new history of jihad with a new ensemble of problems and potentialities.

Endnotes

1. See Mohammed Sidiq Seddon, Dilwar Hussain, and Nadeem Malik, *British Muslims Between Assimilation and Segregation: Historical, Legal and Social Realities* (Leicester: Islamic Foundation, 2004); Annelies Moors and Rubah Salih, "Muslim Women in Europe: Secular Normativities, Bodily Performances, and Multiple Publics," *Social Anthropology* 17, no. 4 (November 2009): 375–378; Abdoolkarim Vakil and Salman Sayyid, *Thinking Through Islamophobia: Global Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University, 2010); Sohaail Daulatzai, *Black Star, Crescent Moon The Muslim International and Black Freedom beyond America* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Tariq Modood, "Multiculturalism, Interculturalisms, and the Majority," *Journal of Moral Education* 43, no. 3 (2014): 302-315.
2. By de-essentializing, I mean Islam is forcibly conceptualized through a modernist discourse of state-based individual and group identity, instead of the Sharia. Islamic discourse is de-essentialized when the primary focus of the discourse is to figure out how Muslims can live within the national and international imagination of the history of the state.
3. The majority of my analysis of NYT articles in this paper emerged out of research conducted in the Suad Joseph Lab at the University of California, Davis, as part of a larger project on the representation of Muslim women in media. I accessed the articles by searching for key terms on ProQuest. The search was wide: it covered specific countries including Iran, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon, Pakistan, and Egypt; various terms related to the veil (e.g. veil, hijab, chador, niqab), terms related to women and Islam (e.g. women's rights, women in Islam, women and Islam, Muslim women), Islamic law and jurisprudence (e.g. various spellings of Sharia), and names of key figures and organizations (e.g. Khomeini, Hamas, Hizbullah, Taliban).
4. Sunera Thobani, "White Wars: Western Feminisms and the 'War on Terror,'" *Feminist Theory* 8, no. 3 (2007): 174.
5. See Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982) and Frank Wilderson, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms and Slavery and Social Death* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).
6. Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 67.
7. *Ibid.*, 68.
8. Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 74.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, 85.

11. Ibid., 84.
12. Ibid., 93.
13. Ibid., 102.
14. Chandra Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *boundary 2* 12/13, no.3/1 (1984): 333-358; Rey Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading Between West and East* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); Ranjana Khanna, *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Khanna, *Algeria Cuts: Women and Representation, 1830 to the Present* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).
15. In Talal Asad's conceptualization of Islam as a "discursive tradition," the relation between Islam and Islamism is grounded in a specific description of orthodoxy, which he defines in his now classic 1986 essay: "Orthodoxy is crucial to all Islamic traditions [...] [O]rthodoxy is not a mere body of opinion but a distinctive relationship—a relationship of power. Wherever Muslims have the power to regulate, uphold, require, or adjust correct practices, and to condemn, exclude, undermine, or replace incorrect ones, there is the domain of orthodoxy." See Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam" (Washington, DC: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1986). Islamism, then—as part of Islam's discursive tradition—is quite explicitly reliant upon the mobilization of orthodoxy. The contestations and disputations on whether orthodoxy is ontological or historical are irrelevant for a genealogical understanding of Islamism. For genealogists, the important question is not whether orthodoxy is real or true, or if it is contestable, but rather the manner in which orthodoxy is mobilized, and what such a mobilization enacts. This paper, then, should not be taken as a defense of orthodoxy but rather as an elaboration on how Islamism structurally legitimizes itself through a concrete engagement with orthodoxy, and therefore must have the appearance of a system of orthodoxy. In parts of the paper where I use "Islamic orthodoxy" instead of simply "Islamism," I do so to ensure that readers understand that the antagonism secular feminism has with Islamism is due to its reliance upon the mobilization of orthodoxy. In other parts, where I do not explicitly mention orthodoxy, it should be assumed as inherent in my definition of Islamism. Moreover, it must be added that secular feminism's antagonism may also extend to forms of Islamic orthodoxy that do not necessarily fall within the explicit social, historical, and political projects of Islamism. For this reason, I cannot delimit my reading of feminist antagonism to the realm of Islamism alone. Feminism appears to have a broader antagonism with Islam itself—as long as it reflects orthodoxy—regardless of whether it organizes an Islamist programmatism.
16. Salman Sayyid, *A Fundamental Fear: Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism* (London: Zed Books, 1997), 27.

17. Max Haiven, "Silvia Federici, On Capitalism, Colonialism, Women and Food Politics," *Politics and Culture* 2 (2009): 32.
18. There are significant works in religious studies that examine Islamism as one form of "religious violence" (e.g. Juergensmeyer's *Terror in the Mind of God*) or "fundamentalism" (e.g. Lawrence's *Defenders of God*). In his *Shattering the Myth: Islam Beyond Violence* (1998), however, Bruce Lawrence moves beyond essentialist accounts that represent Islam as violent, and suggests that the tradition is not a monolith. Bruce Lincoln, on the other hand, in the text *Holy Terrors: Thinking About Religion After September 11* (2002) identifies religious reasoning behind the 9/11 attacks, and discursively investigates speeches and documents to suggest that figures like George W. Bush and Osama Bin Laden are similar insofar as they both share a Manichean worldview. While this literature raises important points, it understates relations of power, and fails to specify Islam's dynamic with global secularity. In other words, to conceptualize Islam through the category of "religion" is to already be entrapped in a secular logic. Moreover, the main point in my article is to show how the secular—both as media and feminism—is exceptionally oppositional and antagonistic to Islam in particular, not necessarily religion in general.
19. Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 241.
20. Sayyid writes about the relation between Islam and Islamism in terms of "availability." He writes, "Islamism is not the mere reflection of Islam, but rather it is a political discourse that takes the availability of Islam as a means of undermining the Kemalist anciens régimes. Islamism makes use of the availability of Islam, but, at the same time, it increases the availability of Islam. In other words Islamism is organized around Islam, but this is a two-way process since Islamism also organizes Islam" (*A Fundamental Fear*, 77).
21. See Wael Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012) for his use of Carl Schmitt's conception of central domain to discuss the significance of jihad in the Islamic tradition.
22. Yaroslav Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca: The 1979 Uprising at Islam's Holy Shrine* (New York: First Anchor Books, 2008), 7.
23. Another iteration of the same simplistic assertion is that Islamism changed its form from "culturalism" to "economism" due to capitalist crisis. Islamism's critique of colonialism in an earlier moment in history had cultural, economic, political, and ethical dimensions, and therefore, other than pointing at the general directional structure of capitalism, such assertions fail to recognize even the most elemental grammar and syntax of Islam.

24. Hakeem Naim, "Friends and Foes: The Pragmatic Liberal Biases in Representation of Saudi Women vs. Iranian Women in *The New York Times*," in a yet-unpublished volume edited by Suad Joseph.
25. I use counter-revolutionary here specifically to mean any set of political articulations that deliberately attempted to subvert the massive clerical orientation of struggle in the late '70s.
26. Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 114.
27. Lena Meari, "The Material Life of Representation: 'Veiled Muslim Women' in *The New York Times*," in a yet-unpublished book edited by Suad Joseph.
28. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.
29. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, *On Intersectionality: Essential Writings of Kimberlé Crenshaw* (New York: Perseus Distribution Services, 2012); Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, & Class* (New York: Random House Inc, 1981); bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Cambridge: South End Press, 1984).
30. Nawal El Saadawi, *The Nawal El Saadawi Reader* (Zed Books, 1997), 93.
31. *Ibid.*, 74.
32. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).
33. Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1993), 32.
34. Steven R. Weisman, "Dispute Over a Moslem Divorce Ensnarls Gandhi," *The New York Times*, 9 February 1986: A3.
35. "Islam: Feminists vs. Fundamentalists," *The New York Times*, 25 July 1985.
36. "The Moslem Veil in the City: A Matter of Tradition," *The New York Times*, 24 September 1984: B7.
37. Elaine Sciolino. "Saudi Arabia's Gospel Columnists," *The New York Times*, 5 May 1985: E9.
38. "Pakistan's Grim Islamic Law is Not Just a Threat," *The New York Times*, 17 September 1981: A2.
39. "The 'Islamization' of Pakistan: Still Moving Slowly and Still Stirring Debate," *The New York Times*, 10 August 1986: A10.
40. "Pakistani Women Take Lead In Drive Against Islamization," *The New York Times*, 17 June 1988: A1.
41. Martha Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 8.
42. Nussbaum defines "control over one's environment" as the ability "to hold property... having the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others... In work, being able to work as a human being, exercising practical reason and entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers" (*Ibid.*, 42).

43. Stephen Kinzer, "Turks March In Campaign To Preserve Secularism," *The New York Times*, 16 February 1997: 4.
44. Barbara Crossette, "Women's Rights Gaining Attention Within Islam," *The New York Times*, 12 May 1996: 3.
45. Barbara Crossette, "Afghan Women Demanding End To Their Repression by Militants," *The New York Times*, 6 April 1998: 1.
46. Sarah Akhtar, "For Women, Polygamy's Just a Rotten Deal," *The New York Times*, 2 June 1991: 169.
47. Youssef M. Ibrahim, "Islamic Fundamentalism is Winning Votes," *The New York Times*, July 1, 1990.
48. Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousnesses and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1990).
49. Seyla Benhabib, *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 186.
50. Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Three Leaves Press, 2004).
51. Asma Barlas, *"Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).
52. "Daughter of the Revolution Fights the Veil," *The New York Times*, 2 April 2003: A6.
53. Barbara Crossette, "Half the Afghans, the Women, Fight to Establish Their Rights," *The New York Times*, 7 June 2002: A7.
54. Sabrina Tavernise, "In Quest for Equal Rights, Muslim Women's Meeting Turns to Islam's Tenets," *The New York Times*, 16 February 2009: A8.
55. Stephen Kinzer, "Turkish Terror Victim Espoused a Tolerant Islam," *The New York Times*, 26 January 2000: A3.
56. Worth, "In Jeans or Veils, Iraqi Women Are Split on New Political Power." *The New York Times*, 13 April 2005: A1.
57. Rabah Ghezali, "Arab Spring, Islamist Winter?" (HuffPost, 2012); Micheal J. Totten, "Arab Spring or Islamist Winter?" (World Affairs, 2012).
58. Slavoj Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* (London: Verso Books, 2012), 61.