LIVING THE MUSLIM ATLANTIC

Race, Gender, and the Politics of Marginality

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With deep social and political polarization in both the United States and Europe—and against a backdrop of rising anti-Muslim sentiment, heightened politics around race, and the #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo movements—how are Muslim communities across the Atlantic responding to renewed debates on gender, race, and marginality?

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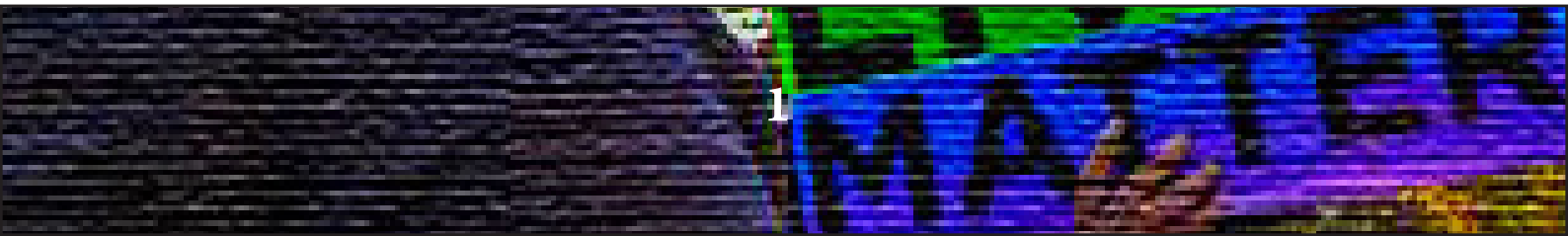

Introduction

This report—the second of two produced by the British Council Bridging Voices project on 'The Muslim Atlantic'—represents an analytic synthesis and presentation of insights arising from two workshops organized by the project in 2019 and 2020. The first of these convenings focused on the question of how debates and discussions about gender compare across Muslim communities in the United Kingdom and the United States. The second workshop explored Muslim experiences of race and securitization in transatlantic perspective.

This report is a companion to our July 2019 report *Mapping the Muslim Atlantic*. Where the first text sought to survey and trace the evolution of various forms of transnational Muslim engagement between the UK and the US, this second report focuses on identifying strategies for community and civil society engagement around the issues and challenges identified by the two workshops. Both reports take inspiration from the work of Paul Gilroy, a London-based scholar whose seminal book *The Black Atlantic* was published a quarter-century ago. Gilroy wrote of the 'Black Atlantic' as a cultural space forged out of a collective memory of the transatlantic slave trade. The 'Muslim Atlantic' is an analogous idea, placing focus on Muslim shared experiences of securitization and cultural racism across diverse transatlantic contexts.

This report reflects the insights and experiences of dozens of scholars, community organizers, activists, and artists who live, work, and think in 'the Muslim Atlantic'. It is a space replete with histories of human mobility (involuntary and voluntary alike), with intersections and disjunctures of identity, and with complex legacies of (post)colonialism/coloniality, violence, and exclusion. Most importantly we have come to view the Muslim Atlantic as an idea generative of modes of being and belonging uniquely suited to addressing contemporary challenges around inclusion, political enfranchisement, and civic life.

Paul Gilroy, author of The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness (1993), Image by Mjgw licensed under the Creative Commons BY-SA 4.0

This report comes out in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic—where we have seen disproportionately high caseloads and mortality rates in black and minority ethnic communities—and in the period immediately following the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police. These two events have once again shone a stark

light on the naked face of racial disparity and persistent social injustice, with Floyd's murder catalyzing new social mobilizations and a revitalization of the Black Lives Matter movement on both sides of the Atlantic.

The conversations which collectively produced this report were noteworthy for the presence of two of cross-cutting themes. In some respects it would be more accurate to characterize each as an ethos in that they reflected not only analytical insights but also forms of normative commitment.

First, it was clear that all participants placed a strong emphasis on the need to recognize the inherent intersectionality present in the issues we explored. While our work on the Muslim Atlantic has been built around three distinct themes—gender, race, and securitization—we found that it was impossible to discuss any one of them without recognizing the persistent co-presence of the other two. For example, we could not discuss gender without grappling with questions of race and securitization, or without recognizing that the experiences of black Muslim women differ significantly from those of white convert women with respect to the social construction of gender roles and expectations.

Second, our conversations were characterized by a high degree of intercommunality in the sense that while participants highlighted and often insisted on the specificity of their experiences and challenges as members of particular communities, they did so in a fashion that sought to engage, resonate, and align with those in other groups dealing with similar circumstances. In other words, while they saw their experiences as particular, they did not necessarily view them as unique. Where they perceived themselves to be victims, they did not claim exclusivity to their grievance and saw power in working collectively alongside others also subject—albeit in their own specific ways—to the same forces that generate systemic injustice and disenfranchisement.

Some of the contributors to the 'Gender in the Muslim Atlantic' workshop in 2019. From left to right: Peter Mandaville, Sylvia Chan-Malik, Renasha Khan, Kayla Renée Wheeler, Shabana Mir, Zainab Kabba, and Daniel Nilsson DeHanas

Gender and the Muslim Atlantic

The first Muslim Atlantic workshop was held in February 2019 at the British Islam Conference in London, UK, an annual event run by New Horizons in British Islam. We arranged a set of three roundtable workshop sessions around the theme of 'Gender in the Muslim Atlantic'. These were open to all attendees of the conference during the breakout session periods. The workshop sessions were structured to build progressively through gender-related themes experienced by Muslims, beginning with 'comparing the UK and US' along these themes, then 'the impact of #MeToo and social media', and finally looking at 'intersections of race, class, and discrimination'.

To promote transatlantic knowledge exchange and debate, we invited three female Muslim contributors each from the US and from the UK. Dr Shabana Mir, Dr Kayla Wheeler, and Dr Sylvia Chan-Malik joined us from the US, and from the UK, we had Dr Shuruq Naguib, Dr Khadijah Elshayyal, and Dr Zainab Kabba. They represented a range of institutions, from Rutgers University to Cambridge Muslim College.

For each of the workshop sessions, we asked two of our invited contributors (one US, one UK) to spark the discussion with a brief opening intervention. Following these openers, the roundtable format invited and encouraged attendees of the conference to join in the conversation. This led to a diverse range of contributors from scholars to activists to members of the public across a broad range of ages and backgrounds. The diversity of attendees lent a richness to the conversations and free-flowing debates.

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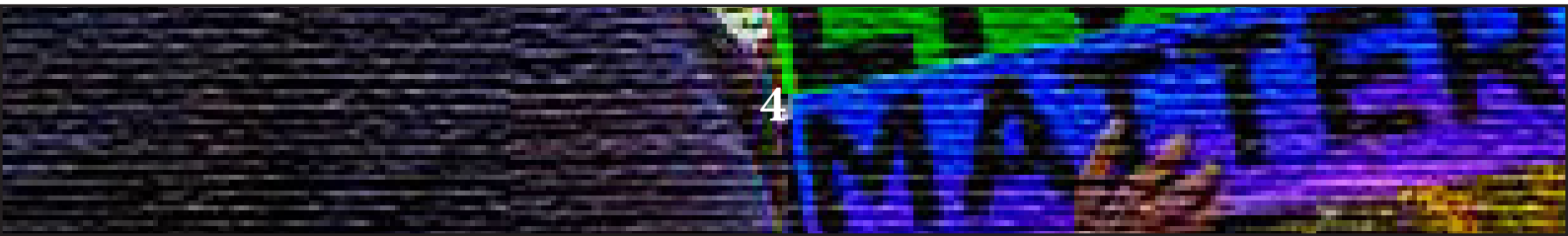
A common theme that emerged across the discussions was the experience of Islamophobia and the negotiation of Muslim identities in the public sphere, in the context of heightened scrutiny. Muslim women in particular must engage in multiple levels of role performance, as they constantly need to take in the world through a 'double consciousness' of not only their lives but also how their lives are viewed through the eyes of others.

A participant noted that the pressure Muslims feel to be representative of all Muslims in their public lives forces unreasonable and ultimately oppressive expectations. There was an understanding that sustaining this emotional work on a day to day basis is, as one contributor put it, 'exhausting'. It has tangible and negative consequences on an individual level and in ways that impact wider Muslim communities. There was consensus amongst the participants that acknowledging these deep challenges is a step towards rehabilitation, but that more widely Muslim communities lack productive spaces in which to address these issues on a systematic level. The session exploring the impact of the #MeToo



movement and social media in Muslim contexts highlighted the erasure of black female voices from the international #MeToo movement. The movement was started in 2006 by Tarana Burke, a black woman and survivor of sexual violence who started the hashtag as an attempt to support other victims of abuse. The hashtag was taken up more than a decade later in 2017 by the actress Alyssa Milano and went viral, with mainly white women taking up the cause. Despite the seemingly large impact the hashtag has had on societal awareness of sexual harassment and abuse, it was agreed amongst participants that the lack of credit to Burke for starting the movement is part of a longer narrative of silencing and whitewashing. This pattern of exclusion of black female experience was something that resounded as an unsurprising reality for many participants of the workshop who raised questions about how black lives can be centered going forward.

Another significant theme in this debate centered around the tensions felt within Muslim communities when abuse was perpetrated by high-profile spiritual leaders. This topic sparked some of the most heated discussions in the workshop. Focusing on cases of abuse by high profile Muslim figures, participants grappled with the need for awareness and open dialogue about abuse in the community, in line with the progress made by the #MeToo and #MosqueMeToo movements, and the recognition that as a 'suspect community' there were overriding pressures not to 'wash your dirty linen in public'. Two cases which highlight some of the difficult nuances of this conflict were those of Muslim 'celebrities' Nouman Ali Khan and Tariq Ramadan. Khan, a popular US-based preacher, was accused of grooming and manipulating several female devotees. His case, though exposing and embarrassing, was largely treated as an internal community matter by other influential US Muslims, allowing him to resume his spiritual leadership role. Ramadan, a Swiss academic who was based at the University of Oxford at the time he was accused in several rape cases, has been more controversial. As an international figure, Ramadan was seen by many to represent Muslims in Europe. As such, the contexts of the cases reflect differing degrees of accountability for their alleged actions, as Khan has largely resumed his practice while

Tarana Burke, civil rights activist and creator of the #metoo movement (Brittany B.Monét Fennell , Creative commons licence CC BY-SA)

Ramadan took a leave of absence from his position at Oxford and faces multiple criminal charges in France.

Despite these distinctions, in both cases victims have

not been sufficiently protected. Instead, Muslim women have had their details made public and doxed, shaming them and amounting to further harassment. The overwhelming feeling amongst participants was that this was a perpetuation of misogynistic norms of victim blaming, specifically targeting women. These norms further damage efforts to safeguard vulnerable groups, instead reinforcing a cycle of silence amongst victims. Significant questions were raised: How can restorative justice be undertaken for Muslim women? What role does the veneration of 'celebrity' male scholars play in the authority—or lack thereof—women have in Muslim communities? How does this affect perceptions of abuses of power and the need to self-censor or suppress abuse claims within communities? As one participant noted, many Muslim youth seek role models for guidance because immigrant parents have not sufficiently navigated cross-cultural contexts with their children. As such, male spiritual leaders are an attractive choice with a strong 'fit' religiously and culturally. Looking forward, participants emphasized the need to change the culture of deference to male authority and to move away from the need to put one's 'best face forward' and keep such affairs internal. It was suggested that Islamic religious spaces need organized support groups to proactively tackle these issues.

Shuruq Naguib (right) speaking in the first roundtable session of the 'Gender in the Muslim Atlantic' workshop.

A number of participants also recognized and raised questions about current constructions of Muslim masculinity and the phenomenon of 'Muslim bro culture'. One area in which this issue manifests itself relates to religious authority and conventional constructions of religious leadership as male. Women with impressive religious knowledge, scholarship, and credentials get dismissed as teachers or academics and men with similar (or sometimes lesser) qualifications become objects of heroization. Playing on the concept of the alt-right, one participant nodded towards the existence of an 'akh-right' (with 'akh' meaning 'bro') that perceives the critique of Muslim feminists as a threat to its masculinity.

When considering the intersections of gender with race, class, and discrimination there were several thought-provoking interventions on transatlantic differences between how Muslims discuss and experience

issues of gender. More specifically, several workshop participants noted that while race has a particularly important role in gender experiences in the US, postcolonial dimensions tend to predominate in the UK context. In the United States, the division—and fraught history—between black Muslims and immigrant Muslims is a defining feature. The experience of black Muslim women encompasses the dual dislocation of racial marginalization and membership in a minority religion viewed with suspicion (including sometimes by immigrant co-religionists). This distinctive positionality is rendered even sharper in the US where, in the present political context, the figure of a politically-engaged black Muslimah embodies everything that ascendant Christian, anti-feminist, white nationalism stands against.

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In Britain, the majority South Asian demography of British Islam and ongoing ties to the subcontinent have served to position postcoloniality as an immanent dimension of British Muslimness. British society has tended to bury issues of race under those of class, which has obfuscated Britain's central role in the transatlantic slave trade. Indeed, there is a perceived denial of black histories beyond the arrival of post-war Windrush immigration, with school curriculums providing very little of the substance of black British history. Black Muslims in Britain, therefore, find themselves marginal in relation to more prominent (post)colonial narratives, and this marginalization is all the more acute for black British Muslim women.

Ibtihaj Muhammad, US Olympic gold medallist (Marie-Lan Nguyen / Wikimedia Commons / CC-BY 3.0)

When discussing prominent Muslim female personalities, there was recognition that figures such as British television chef Nadiya Hussain and American gold-medal winning Olympian Ibtihaj Muhammad have attained a status as national heroes yet have been depoliticized and deracinated in the process. In effect, these figures were seen by workshop participants as sanitized Muslim women of color. Their status as 'winners' and a foregrounding of their patriotic attributes made them unthreatening symbols of national virtue. As one participant put it: 'we're all encouraged to "be more like Nadiya"'. This fed into a conversation around the pressure to conform to national ideals when

Muslim women in the UK were encouraged to wear hijabs decorated with poppies, a symbol commemorating patriotic sacrifices in World War I. Some participants felt that this was an example of the pressure for Muslim women to conform to a kind of colonial subservience. Across various sessions, participants put forward the need for more courageous and 'radical' role models of Muslim Atlantic life. Malcolm X was frequently mentioned as an exemplar who commanded much respect—though he is viewed in a range of different ways—on both sides of the Atlantic. There were also various mentions of female Muslim figures, including US-based feminist academics Amina Wadud and Kecia Ali. There was a recognition that these feminists and Malcolm X can be seen as touchstones of a kind of Islamic liberation theology which can be powerfully resonant for Muslim women, and may point to ways to address the pressures to conform to restrictive gendered, racial, and national ideals across the Muslim Atlantic.

Significant insights from the workshop included:

1) Muslim women face pressures to conform to domestic role models (like UK television baking star Nadiya Hussain) or to domesticated activities (like wearing a poppy hijab to commemorate World War I) that can signify colonial or national subservience.

2) Muslim women's performances of Muslim community expectations, expectations from wider society, their own intersectional identities, and their roles in work and family life accumulate into pressures that are 'exhausting'.

3) The #MeToo movement was muted among Muslim communities in the US and UK, with women being told 'don't wash your dirty linen in public' and not being taken sufficiently seriously.

4) The lack of female authority in Islamic institutions creates the power imbalances exploited by some Muslim male spiritual leaders.

5) Muslim women in the US, UK, and elsewhere need safe spaces where trust can be built and issues including sexual harassment, domestic abuse, and role performance pressures can be meaningfully addressed.

6) Key figures including Malcolm X and Amina Wadud can be the basis of a liberation theology by which black Muslims and Muslim women can confront injustices and seek equality.

Race and securitization in the Muslim Atlantic

The second Muslim Atlantic workshop sessions were held at the next British Islam Conference in London, in February 2020. These sessions focused on debates about 'race and securitization in the Muslim Atlantic' centering discussions on the current contexts of the Muslim Atlantic in the Trump/Johnson era, historical lineages traced from Malcolm X, and how policy is shaped in these securitized transatlantic contexts. The sessions culminated with practical steps to take forward.

Seeking to replicate the fruitful debates of the previous workshop, these sessions also operated on an open roundtable basis where we invited academics, artists, activists, and journalists from the US and UK to speak alongside members of the public and other conference attendees. As with the previous workshop, we invited a set of contributors to start the discussions: Dr Rasul Miller, Abdul-Rehman Malik, and Sughra Ahmed attended from the US, and Aina Khan, Muneera Williams, and Dr Aisha Phoenix represented UK perspectives.

This workshop opened with impassioned spoken word performance by poet and activist Muneera Williams—well-known from the hip hop duo Poetic Pilgrimage—who mapped black Muslim experience in a highly personal exploration of her upbringing in Bristol, England. Williams' performance laid bare the permanent physical presence of traumatic black history in the port city of Bristol's street names and large townhouses, built with wealth accumulated from the exploitation of black bodies. Williams' own self-understanding as a black Jamaican woman who converted to Islam emerges from this side of Bristol's history which is so often denied or erased.

Dr Rasul Miller, an expert in history and Africana studies, presented an insightful exploration of the role of the 'radical' tradition in black Muslim history in America. His presentation put forward the idea that the origins of the Muslim Atlantic world are rooted

Rasul Miller (third from left) speaking in a roundtable session of the 'Race and Securitization in the Muslim Atlantic' workshop.

in the intersection of Islamic history and racialized constructs which formed the basis of the slave trade and Atlantic economies. He traced the developments of the black radical tradition from Marcus Garvey in the 1920s through to the Nation of Islam and the importance of Muslim internationalist ideologies. An important element of Miller's remarks and the discussion that followed was the recognition that a culture of surveillance pathologizes Muslims in a way that is strikingly reminiscent, if not modelled on, the ways that African American communities (and particularly the Nation of Islam) have been criminalized in US history. Miller also explained mid-twentieth century black Muslim traditions of communal self-sufficiency. Much of the resulting conversation considered Malcolm X as a figure at the intersection of blackness and Muslimness, a beacon of the radical tradition who was a source of unity in the past and can be taken up again now.

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Turning more specifically to the challenges associated with the securitization of Muslim communities, much of the subsequent debate in these workshop sessions focused on the conception of the Muslim Atlantic as including the specific ways that Muslims have been subject to disproportionate surveillance and security measures, and how the enactment of these measures can differ across racial lines. The anti-immigrant policies and rhetoric of the Trump and Johnson administrations was seen in the workshop as a continuation (or perhaps escalation) of the global 'War on Terror' paradigm that has singled out Muslims as peculiarly dangerous. Workshop participants raised concerns about the sustained emotional impact of being a 'suspect community' in the two decades since the September 11th terrorist attacks. With police brutality, institutional racism, discrimination, and surveillance still a part of the everyday experience for Muslim communities and black communities, how does a new generation of young people cope?

Discussions considered the various roles played by the counter extremism policies of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) in the US and Prevent in the UK in creating a culture of surveillance. Prevent is a part of the UK government's wider counterterrorism strategy, CONTEST, and is aimed at preventing the radicalization of individuals within domestic British borders. Developed with the Prevent model in mind, Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) was initiated in 2011 in the U.S. by the Obama administration in an effort to proactively counter efforts by extremist groups to recruit, radicalize, and mobilize followers towards violence. Both policies

are highly contentious. While many participants agreed these polices made problems of disenfranchisement and othering worse in Muslim communities across the US and UK, some felt that despite their mistakes there were positive gains made by CVE policies. All agreed that there is a need for safe spaces for Muslims to explore and air their views in an open culture of enquiry.

A perception that many shared about CVE and Prevent policies was that they fracture unity amongst Muslims, reducing their capacity to collectivize and respond positively and effectively to shared problems. As one activist claimed, Prevent was 'holding the (Muslim) community hostage' by distracting Muslim organizations from self-organizing and leading to infighting between groups, especially when funding is at stake. But this challenge also extends to the appearance of increased polarization between those in Muslim communities who support the government's counter-radicalization policies and those who oppose and reject programs such as CVE and Prevent. This question also focuses our attention on the ways race functions within Muslim communities, where black Muslims often find themselves securitized in the eyes of their non-black co-religionists.

Significant insights from the workshop included:

7) Black Muslim history–including not only Britain and America, but also a wide range of African and Caribbean geographies–has a defining part to play in the narrative of Muslim Atlantic experience.

8) Black radical social policies in the mid-twentieth century US unified their communities and could be considered as a model for contemporary Muslim communities.

9) Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) is a transatlantic policy paradigm, with the British and American policies developed in tandem and reproducing some similar effects on the ground.

10) CVE disproportionately targets people of color, with black Muslims experiencing security measures differently due to factors that include the history of policing organizations such as the Nation of Islam. There is therefore a very direct relationship between the racialization of Muslims and the securitization of Islam.

11) Historic suspicions that many non-black Muslims feel towards black Muslims have hampered the possibility of a full accounting of the impacts of CVE and the ability to put forward all-encompassing community responses.

12) In the CVE climate, Muslim creatives have been stifled from free expression and starved of funding; more funding is needed to support ethnic/religious communities and artistic aims without ideological strings attached.

Conclusion and looking ahead

Both workshops affirmed the relevance and power of the Muslim Atlantic as a conceptual space for exploring the intersectionality of race, gender, and securitization in the everyday experience of Muslims in the United Kingdom and the United States. Perhaps more importantly, the workshops revealed the many ways in which Muslim experiences of racialization and securitization are very directly related to a broader politics of marginality that affects other minority communities and peoples of color. While Muslim experiences of structural discrimination have had their own specificity, they are also inseparable from and in many respects largely contiguous with the broader experiences of immigrants, black communities, and other minorities whose presence in the UK and the US has become increasingly politicized in the context of growing populist nationalism.

While the discussions that took place in our workshops focused primarily on surfacing the key issues and challenges being faced by Muslims in the US and UK—and on identifying points of convergence and divergence in their respective experiences—there were a number of moments where participants put forward concrete suggestions with respect to specific activities, mechanisms, and resources that could help to address the challenges discussed in the workshop sessions. Outside of the two workshops, other conversations with activists, educators, and cultural leaders who might be considered part of the Muslim Atlantic also generated ideas for specific initiatives and resources. With a view to helping inform future work that seeks to address mechanisms of marginality and injustice with respect to gender, race, and securitization within British and American Muslim communities, we offer the following five suggestions for the consideration of groups in civil society, philanthropic organizations, and (to a more limited degree) policymakers:

(1) **An ongoing transatlantic forum for discussing strategies to address in a more systematic manner the complex nature of Muslim women's roles and positionality in the UK and the US.** While a number of informal groups on social media spaces like Facebook currently serve this purpose, there is a need for such discussions to be facilitate and moderated in a more deliberative fashion and for the ideas and energy that come out of these conversations to be coordinated and directed in more constructive directions. Some of the topics likely to be a focus of discussions in such a space include (a) ongoing challenges regarding women's access to religious spaces; (b) appropriate infrastructures and best practices for encouraging (and protecting) women who experience abuse at the hands of religious leaders to speak out or report such behavior; (c) the 'double jeopardy'

experienced by women as members of marginalized communities viewed with suspicion by wider society.

(2) **Intercommunal interface mechanisms that would permit Muslims in the UK and the US to engage and coordinate with other (non-Muslim) communities facing similar challenges around exclusion, social injustice, and discrimination.** The purpose of such structures would be to enable the collectivization of resources and the development of shared strategies between groups who may have previously viewed their victimhood as somehow unique but who now want to work in tandem with other marginalized groups even as they affirm the specificity of their own experiences.

(3) **New funding streams for creative cultural producers working at intersectionalities including race, gender, and religion, with an explicit de-linking from any association with counterextremism or counterterrorism.** We are in the midst of time of great Muslim cultural creativity—as can be seen, for example, in the new 'Muslim Atlantic' issue of the literary journal *Critical Muslim*—and there is the prospect of sharing ideas, writing, and images widely across social media. Arts funding that is fundamentally intersectional by exploring the connection between at least two different categories of life experience (religious, racial, gendered, sexuality-related, etc.) will enable the diversifying of voices, the identification of blindspots of marginality, and the creative generation of new ideas. Funding streams of this kind would need to be open to allow the exploration of 'radical' traditions, without attempting to domesticate these as expressions of national allegiance or good citizenship. They would also need transparency and accountability in demonstrating without question that there are no links to CVE or similar government initiatives in order to be seen as trustworthy and valid.

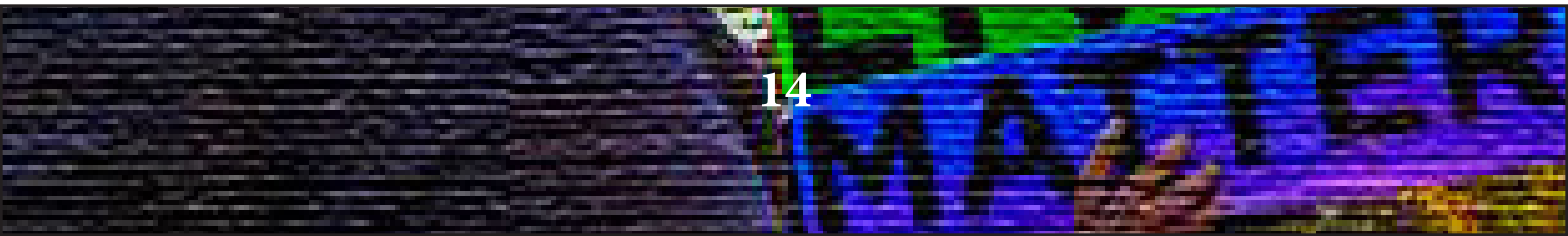
(4) **Increased research and data collection with respect to the various issues raised by the workshops and the Muslim Atlantic project more broadly.** This data and analysis would contribute to scholarship as well as providing resources for activists and community organizers as they seek to better understand their stakeholder communities and to develop solutions capable of responding to their needs. In addition to survey research that can provide a quantitative perspective on issues such as the nature and levels of Muslim racialization and securitization, there is also likely value in exploring the legacy and contemporary possibilities found in historical models of community organizing within disenfranchised milieus (e.g., urban Muslim approaches to communal self-sufficiency).

(5) **The problems with Prevent/CVE may run deeper than policymakers realize**. While controversy and debate about the pros and cons of government efforts to address radicalization have become a familiar part of the policy and security landscape for almost two decades, it is important for public officials to recognize

that in the eyes of some communities whose partnership they seek in implementing these programs, CVE and Prevent invoke—and in some cases may quite directly reactivate—previous government law enforcement and security initiatives (such as COINTELPRO) designed to identify and undermine supporters of political perspectives and ideologies deemed undesirable and/or 'dangerous'. Perceived continuity with earlier regimes of race and securitization reinforce the negative reception of current counter-radicalization efforts. This effect is further compounded when current counter-extremism activities and programs invoke or co-opt figures such as a sanitized version of Malcolm X divorced from black radical politics and redeployed as an advocate of universalist moderation.

This list does not represent a set of formal recommendations arising from the project, but rather an effort to flag several concrete suggestions that emerged from conversations across multiple lines of activity on the Muslim Atlantic. Going forward the list may help to shape future research agendas and to identify gaps in civil society or advocacy efforts.

We hope that the idea of the Muslim Atlantic—as it has been explained and expressed through perspectives captured in our two reports and in a forthcoming special issue of the journal *Critical Muslim* dedicated to this theme—will continue to generate new and creative responses. The idea enables the exploration not only of a wide range of contemporary experiences within British and American Muslim communities, but also of the ways these experiences connect with historical legacies of intellectual and cultural expression, violent colonialities, and migrations (forced or otherwise) that help to contextualize the Muslim Atlantic within a broader global history of cultural flows, social power, and resistance.



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