




October 2020

Queer Muslim Diasporas in Contemporary Literature and Film

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Recommended Citation

Muneeruddin, Hina (2020) "Queer Muslim Diasporas in Contemporary Literature and Film," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 24: Iss. 2, Article 6.

DOI: [10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.24.2.006](https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.24.2.006)

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol24/iss2/6>

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Queer Muslim Diasporas in Contemporary Literature and Film

Abstract

This is a book review of Alberto Fernández Carbajal's *Queer Muslim Diasporas in Contemporary Literature and Film*.

Author Notes

Hina Muneeruddin is a doctoral candidate at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in the Islamic Studies track of the Religious Studies program and a graduate certificate candidate in Women and Gender Studies. Her research lies at the intersections of islam(s), gender, race, affect, and performativity within the United States. More specifically, she is interested in the quotidian scenes of becoming of Muslim femmes.

Carbajal, Alberto Fernández. *Queer Muslim Diasporas in Contemporary Literature and Film*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019.

“Queer as not being about who you’re having sex with (that can be a dimension of it); but queer as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live.”
—bell hooks¹

bell hooks’ quote above succinctly captures the spirit of Alberto Fernández Carbajal’s monograph, *Queer Muslim Diasporas in Contemporary Literature and Film*. With astounding skill, Carbajal manages to carve a unique space for Muslim queerness within the diaspora—a space that he defines as quotidian, yet non-normative, and makes intelligible that which is inconceivable within the strictures of empire.

In *Queer Muslim Diasporas in Contemporary Literature and Film*, Carbajal constructs a multilayered argument. Firstly, by exploring the depiction of queer diasporic Muslims’ ordinary, affective struggles with their intersecting identities in contemporary literature and film, Carbajal attempts to complicate constricting assumptions about Muslim identities and sexualities (xii). Indeed, Carbajal maintains that “queer Muslims’ continuous flight from normativity demonstrates their micropolitical trajectories are publicly relevant, as they redefine the contours of macropolitical societal segments attempting to categorize humanity according to neat identitarian parameters” (252). In this way, queer Muslims seem to inhabit a space that routinely disorganizes and redefines normative, hegemonic categories

and identities—thus, queerness can be seen as disorientating, consequently proposing alternative ways of becoming. In addition, Carbajal posits this project as a double critique of Western anti-Muslim sentiment and their monolithic conceptions of Muslims, as well as of “Islamicate heteropatriarchal tendencies articulated in depictions of Western Muslim communities”—often manifested as homophobia (xiv). Ultimately, Carbajal puts forward alternative interpretative possibilities and assemblages (à la Puar) of queer Muslim being and becoming in opposition to normative categories and dominant modes of knowledge and power (à la Said) in examples of contemporary film and literature.

In terms of methodology and sources, Carbajal offers a study of mostly fiction, including poetry and film that present Muslims, migration, and same-sex desire from the 1980s to the present day. He aims to bring together the work of artists from a variety of backgrounds of nationality, class, migration, etc., in order to extend a distinct analysis of queer Muslims within the diaspora. Carbajal also conjures a theoretical framing that puts into dialogue Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Jasbir Puar, Gayatri Gopinath, Sara Ahmed, and others—while intentionally prioritizing the scholarship of queer, non-white women of color, as exemplified by Sara Ahmed.² Furthermore, Carbajal is meticulous in making sure not to apply a singular theory to the variety of texts he seeks to analyze, as each offers its unique vocabulary in regards to Muslim queerness and to ignore this “assemblage” would be akin to epistemic violence.

Carbajal has no hesitation when it comes to laying bare his positionality within this project and has clearly highlighted it in his monograph. He maintains that he is not Muslim but identifies as gay and is committed to a position of solidarity which stems from a sensitivity to social justice issues, especially revolving around systemic discrimination (xiii). This is important to note as it is indicative of his overall decolonial commitment to the interests and stories of queer Muslim diasporic subjects—one that expands beyond any academic investment. In this way, Carbajal makes it evident that he is primarily interested in the actual lived realities and futures of queer Muslim people and not just concerned with utilizing them as ‘objects’ of study.

Understandably then, Alberto Carbajal intends this monograph to be for Western audiences, so they may “begin to question the partisan pictures often painted by the Western media, and its creation of monolithic versions of the ‘average’ Muslim as being patriarchal, traditionalist, and violent...[and] begin questioning their own assumptions about Muslims” (23-25). However, this monograph could also prove useful to academics and graduate students, who would benefit from the analyses Carbajal has provided—especially given the exponential contribution this text makes within literature and film studies, as well as within queer and gender studies.

Queer Muslim Diasporas in Contemporary Literature and Film consists of a Preface & Acknowledgements chapter and an Introduction entitled “Queering

Islam and Micropolitical Disorientation,” both of which elucidate the theoretical framing, background, goals, and arguments of the project. The rest of the book is divided into three sections—each consisting of three chapters—that map out queer Muslim diasporas according to various perspectives of representation. In the first part (chapters 1-3), “Queer Interethnic Desire,” Carbajal describes the ways in which Muslim artists negotiate sexual orientations and ethno-religious identities across ethnic lines. Chapter one is entitled “Of Interethnic (Dis)Connection: Queer Phenomenology, and Cultural and Religious Commodification in Hanif Kureishi’s *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) and *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990)” and it explores the countercultural move that Kureishi’s film and novel make in establishing a mode of queer diasporic Muslim transgression across ethnic divides. In this chapter, Carbajal highlights how Kureishi’s work illuminates the colonial constructions of racial hierarchies as well as the urgency felt to challenge Thatcherite neoliberalism so as to formulate productive manifestations of queer interethnic relationships. Chapter two, “‘Are We on the Same Wavelength?’ Interstitial Queerness and the Ismaili Diaspora in Ian Iqbal Rashid’s Poetry and Film,” outlines the ways in which Rashid’s characters occupy the interstitial spaces between Islamic Ismaili traditionalism, colonial modernity, and diasporic modernity. In addition, Carbajal demonstrates how these characters attempt to reconcile inherited notions of Muslim identity and colonial social norms with their non-normative sexualities. In the final chapter of this first section of the book,

“Queering Orientalism, Ottoman Homoeroticism, and Turkishness in Ferzan Özpetek’s *Hamam: The Turkish Bath* (1997),” Carbajal excavates the ways in which Özpetek’s cinematic narrative was able to uncover and transform Ottoman homoeroticism from an interethnic perspective and in direct opposition to the contemporary authority of Kemalist and Islamist homophobia—despite being accused of Orientalist depictions of Istanbul.

In part 2 (chapters 4-6), “Negotiating Islamic Gender,” the author explores the ways various artists construct Islamic femininities and masculinities. This section opens with Chapter 4, “Counter-memories of Desire: Exploring Gender, Anti-Racism, and Homonormativity in Shamin Sarif’s *The World Unseen* (2001) and *I Can’t Think Straight* (2008),” which focuses on Sarif’s body of work that illustrates same-sex desire between diasporic Muslim women, British Muslims, and cosmopolitan Christian Arab women. Carbajal posits that even though Sarif heavily relies on the tropes of Euro-American lesbian cultures that not only dismiss queer Islamicate archives, but also succumb to homonormative constructions of sexuality, her work still manages to produce sites of counter-memories. In turn, these counter-memories construct a space for diasporic same-sex desire where the invisibilization of such non-normative sexualities of Muslim women is effectively subverted. The next chapter is entitled “Between Gang and Family: Queering Ethnicity and British Muslim Masculinities in Sally El Hosaini’s *My Brother the Devil* (2012).” Carbajal argues that this film offers Islam as the catalyst for a new

mode of masculinity that is both relational and empathetic. He maintains that this new version of masculinity operates to dispose of the hypermasculinity of gang culture, on one hand, and works to forgo the heteronormativity of the diasporic Muslim family, on the other. In Chapter 6, “The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly? Unveiling American Muslim Women in Rolla Selbek’s *Three Veils* (2011),” Carbajal underlines how effectively this film was able to capture the double critique of the patriarchy and homophobia in Western Muslim communities, while also considering Western stereotypes about Islam and Muslims. He maintains that this film, in showcasing a variety of controversial scenarios such as arranged marriage, rape, gender violence, and queerness, was able to successfully illuminate the humanity and complexity of American Muslims.

Lastly, in the third part (chapters 7-9), “Narrating the Self in Queer Time and Place,” Carbajal investigates the ways in which queer Muslim authors write diasporic subjects (through autobiography or semi-autobiography) into historical narratives of “Islamicate eroticism, nation, and migration” (xvii). The seventh chapter, “A Postcolonial Queer Melancholia: Matrilinearity, Sufism, and *l’errance* in the Autofictional Works of Abdellah Taïa,” examines Taïa’s construction of a postcolonial queer melancholia, which consists of the continuous stream of social injustices in the postcolonial Arab world, traumatic experiences of homophobia in Morocco, along with the marginalization and lack of freedoms found in Europe. Carbajal suggests that by delineating a postcolonial queer melancholia, Taïa

theorizes a model of queer fraternity within the diaspora which may temporarily disrupt European colonial hierarchies and the obstacles they create. The author further maintains that Sufism and women's religiosity can also endeavor to unsettle restrictive modes of literalist Islam. The next chapter entitled, "The Druzification of History: Queering Time, Place, and Faith in the Diasporic Novels of Rabih Alameddine," suggests that Alameddine's novels 'druzify' religious perspectives by offering an amalgamation of religious traditions and texts, such as the Qur'an and the Bible, as a means in which to subvert heteropatriarchal religious interpretation. Furthermore, Carbajal argues that Alameddine queers both time and place in his novel *KOOLAIDS* by merging and blurring the spaces and temporalities of the Lebanese Civil War and the American AIDS crisis—ultimately demonstrating queerness, AIDS-induced visions, and queer models of family as modes of resistance against heteropatriarchal values and ethno-religious exclusivism. The final content chapter, "Written on the Body: A Queer and Cartographic Exploration of the Palestinian Diaspora in Randa Jarrar's *A Map of Home* (2008) and *Him, Me, Muhammad Ali* (2016)" traces the embodied burdens upon the second-generation diasporic citizen of Palestine, while mapping the construction of the queer body as a mode of both personal liberation from Palestinian nationalism as well as from Islamicate heteropatriarchy. Moreover, Carbajal contends that within the context of an internalized Islamicate homophobia, Jarrar's work postulates a revolutionary queer exegesis as well as a liberatory

recuperation of the queer female body. Finally, the book ends with a concluding chapter that asks the reader to think *across* the multiple categories of thought and being that queer Muslims occupy in order to fulfill a greater decolonial objective.

Alberto Carbajal's monograph beautifully destabilizes assumptions of queer diasporic Muslim identity and seeks to not only illustrate the ways queer Muslims micropolitically redefine the hegemonic norms of heteronormative patriarchy, but also considers the multitude of ways they disorganize boundaries and categories within the everyday modes of action and affect. Furthermore, Carbajal also offers a biting critique of Western Islamophobia and its monolithic perception of Islam and Muslims. He manages to do this through a comprehensive theoretical framing, which, in the vein of Sara Ahmed, admirably foregrounds scholars that identify as queer women of color. He indeed provides a convincing argument and emphasizes the necessity of blurring the established colonial categories and identifiers.

However, this monograph does possess a couple of limitations. Oftentimes, Carbajal seems to elide or seemingly use interchangeably, without clarification, the following terms: 'Islam(ic),' 'Islamicate,' and 'Muslim.' Although Carbajal does provide an explanation of the term 'Islamicate' in a footnote at the beginning of the monograph, he continues to use these terms indiscriminately. For example, Carbajal writes that "the three sections of the book systematically examine the distinct struggles queer Muslims undertake when dealing with the cultural and

ideological negotiations of interethnic queer desire, the legacies of normative constructions of *Islamic gender*, and having to position themselves in time and place in the light of calcified *Islamicate histories and knowledges*” (emphasis mine, 250). This quote begs a few questions: what about gender makes it ‘Islamic’ and not ‘Islamicate’ or ‘Muslim’? Is a specific, monolithic understanding of ‘Islam(ic)’ being used here? Whose ‘Islam’ is being referred to in this statement? Which ‘Islam’? In this way, the text seems to reduce the nuanced differences between the terms—which is particularly of note, as it is a topic that has been extensively discussed within the field of Islamic Studies.³

Moreover, Carbajal offers Sufism as the “key to Muslim metaphysical decolonization, including queer emancipation” (255). He maintains that “de-essentializing Islam may be the most important task to be undertaken in order to break free from both Islamophobic and literalist Islamic conceptions of Muslim identities in the West and elsewhere; and coupled, potentially, with mystical manifestations of the faith, *such as Sufism, which are respectful to both pluralism and individualism and celebratory of human diversity*” (emphasis mine, 256). While Sufism indeed possesses its decolonial merits, it cannot be understood as a monolithic, separate entity or ideology from a ‘mainstream Islam’ that can offer a completely alternative epistemology. Many Muslims already incorporate Sufi practices into their daily lives *while* still adhering to Shiism, Sunnism, etc. Indeed, to complicate this further, the lived reality of any Muslim will very rarely see them

closely following the strict boundaries of the sect they claim to follow. Furthermore, proposing Sufism as this quintessential decolonial solution may reinscribe Western notions of ‘respectable Muslimness’ that is often associated with popular culture’s representation of Sufism.

Ultimately, despite its limitations, *Queer Muslim Diasporas in Contemporary Literature and Film* is a successful and noteworthy project. Alberto Carbajal indeed fulfills the objectives he proposed at the outset of his monograph and effectively provides a nuanced and thorough argument that sought to decolonize and destabilize hegemonic notions of queer Muslims in diasporic film and literature. Scholars of religion, gender, sexuality, and film will undoubtedly find this monograph to be a largely useful tool in their thinking as well as in their classrooms—especially as it insightfully surveys the plethora of ways in which queer diasporic Muslims complicate and disorientate the categories of their subjectivization.

¹ bell hooks, “Are You Still a Slave? Liberating the Black Female Body,” *YouTube*, uploaded by The New School, May 7, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rJk0hNROvzs>.

² See Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2017).

³ See Ovamir Anjum, “Islam as a Discursive Tradition: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27, no. 3 (2007): 656-672; Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam?: The Importance of Being Islamic*, (Princeton University Press, 2017); and Cemil Aydin, *The Idea of the Muslim World*, (Harvard University Press, 2017).