Culture is a constant reference in debates surrounding Islam in Europe. Yet the notion of culture is commonly restricted to conceptual frames of multiculturalism where it relates to group identities, collective ways of life and recognition. This volume extends such analysis of culture by approaching it as semiotic practice which conjoins the making of subjects with the configuration of the social. Examining fields such as memory, literature, film, and Islamic art, the studies explore culture as another element in the assemblage of rationalities governing European Islam.

From this perspective, the transformations of European identities can be understood as a matter of cultural practice and politics, which extend the analytical frames of political philosophy, historical legacies, normative orders and social dynamics.

Frank Peter is Assistant Professor of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Bern, Switzerland.
Sarah Dornhof is a Postdoctoral Fellow in Cultural Anthropology at the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt (Oder), Germany.
Elena Arigita is an Assistant Professor in Arabic and Islamic Studies at the University of Granada.

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Islam and the Politics of Culture in Europe:
Memory, Aesthetics, Art

Introduction: Islam and the Politics of Culture in Europe
Frank Peter, Sarah Dornhof, Elena Arigita  | 9

The ‘Cordoba Paradigm’: Memory and Silence around Europe’s Islamic Past
Elena Arigita  | 21

Culture, Identity and Civilisation: The Arabs and Islam in the History of Spain
Fernando Rodríguez Mediano  | 41

Istanbul’s Multiculturalism Reimagined in Contemporary British Fiction
Nagihan Haliloğlu  | 61

Narratives of Belonging and Exclusion: Offering the Museum of Islamic Art as a lieu d’identité
Riem Spielhaus  | 75

Visual Government and Islamophobia
Frank Peter  | 93

Veiled Bodies, Vile Speech: Islam, the Carnivalesque and the Politics of Profanation
Maha El Hissy  | 127

On Tattoos and other Bodily Inscriptions: Some Reflections on Trauma and Racism
David Tyrer  | 143
Seeing Difference, Seeing Differently
Sarah Dornhof  | 163

Fun and Faith, Music and Muslimness: Dynamics of Identity of Dutch-Moroccan Youth
Miriam Gazzah  | 187

Performing Vision: Re-presentation in Islam
Wendy M. K. Shaw  | 203

Confronting Images: Jahangir versus King James I
Valerie Gonzalez  | 219

From Haptic to Optical, Performance to Figuration: A History of Representation at the Bottom of a Bowl
Laura U. Marks  | 237

List of Authors  | 265
Introduction: Islam and the Politics of Culture in Europe

Frank Peter, Sarah Dornhof, Elena Arigita

In debates about Islam, references to multiculturalism are manifold. While the meaning and the very legitimacy of the term multiculturalism are hotly contested, the meaning of culture is given a relatively easy ride. ‘Culture’ in multiculturalism is confined to group identities and collective ways of life. These group identities are problematized in multiple ways; not only are the homogeneity of cultures and the boundaries of cultural groups debated, but the very feasibility of talking about discrete cultures is regularly questioned. Nevertheless, the debate about multiculturalism builds strongly on notions of culture as group identity, while controversies about multiculturalism center around issues of recognition and legal rights. The studies assembled in this volume suggest shifting the focus and exploring other dimensions of ‘culture’. In the fields of film, literature, commemoration, comedy, music and art institutions, the chapters study ‘culture’ in relation to the political rationalities of governing Islam in Europe. Culture is approached here neither as group identity and collective way of life, nor as the fundamental symbolic structures enabling the cognitive organization of reality. Nor is culture simply what the professional practitioners of culture claim to do. Rather, culture refers to semiotic practices which link the making of subjects with specific configurations of the social in which ‘culture’ is represented as a distinct sphere (Bennett, 2003). Culture signifies here a set of knowledges, traditions, techniques and authorities which act upon the social by building on and shaping the aesthetic and affective dispositions and faculties of subjects.

Over the past two decades, there have been significant developments in European cultural production. The ways in which Islam as religion relates to culture have become more complex through a number of interrelating processes. In the course of the 1990s, the predominant trend in the public perception was the
emergence of Muslim religiosities which, to varying degrees, had been disconnected from specific cultures (Roy, 2002; Mandaville, 2001). Much has been said about community bonds newly created beyond the homeland and about the growing importance of references to universal Islam. Another process was intersecting with this one, although less noticed back then, and it complicated the narrative of ‘deculturalization’. This was the emergence of “popular cultural manifestations of ‘Islam’ in Europe” (Swedenburg, 2001). In the 1990s, it was particularly important in the field of music. Today, Muslim writers, artists and musicians have achieved varying degrees of prominence (Chambers, 2011; El Asri, 2009), and a new market for pious art forms is emerging in Europe and North America (Gazzah in this volume; van Nieuwkerk, 2011). Separated from this pious art scene not by a boundary, but rather by zones of passage and interstitial places, there are numerous artists with complex personal relations to Islamic cultures who cannot easily be placed in a distinct category. Impressionistic evidence would suggest that many artists – writers, filmmakers, visual artists, etc. – with biographical ties to Muslim countries have been led in the course of the past decade to engage intensively with Islam, previously a topic of minor importance (Bourget, 2008; Tarr, 2005, pp. 198-202). Indeed, the place of Islam in public culture more generally has changed, particularly since 9/11.

While Islam and Muslims have, as is widely acknowledged, been providing material for various cultural practices and artifacts in Europe for many centuries, European Muslims have rarely been featured in this kind of production. This is now changing fast. Numerous novels, comedies, films, and comics attest to it. At the same time, many efforts are being made to incorporate Islam into European cultural memory and art. A number of art institutions have embarked on initiatives to define the field of historical and contemporary ‘Islamic art’ and to promote it (Spielhaus in this volume; Winegar, 2008). The logic at work here, it has been argued, is that of the ‘cultural game’, turning the work of non-European artists in general into representations of ‘their culture’, and charging the individual artist with the burden of the group (Oguibe, 2004; Kosnick, 2007). Likewise, a conflictual process of rewriting European memories has been initiated, aiming to recognize the entangled and shared histories of Islam and Europe. The history of Spain, and al-Andalus in particular, has become a paradigm for the ideal of multiculturalism and tolerance.

Today it is reformulated in multiple variations and has been subjected to critical questioning (Arigita and Rodríguez Mediano in this volume). The topos of intercommunal coexistence in the Ottoman Empire is emerging as another narrative of tolerance (Haliloğlu in this volume). Rewriting Islamic histories of Europe intersects in many ways with an ongoing surge of interest in Europe’s
colonial history. Whereas the history of colonialism had long remained a minor academic field, these debates are now fought out in public. They are taken up in novels and movies and broad public debates, and contribute to defining the present of Europe as a postcolonial one.

As suggested above, these developments relate to a broader political picture. There can be no doubt that they are facilitated by sometimes powerful institutional incentives. Winegar has argued that US art professionals who organize events displaying “‘another side’ of the Middle East” are “(m)otivated by the rationale of building what is often referred to as a ‘bridge of understanding’”. In her view, this motivation is inscribed into a broader strategy of “American cultural elites” who seek to safeguard their “liberal belief” in universal humanity against the polarizing war-mongering (Winegar, 2008). In some European countries, Muslim cultural production benefits from State subsidies under programs to contain radicalization, and for several years the US State Department has been sending “hip-hop ambassadors” to various parts of the world to win over young Muslims (Aidi, 2011). The examples could continue at length.

One way to frame this development in broader terms is proposed by Žižek, who has described how a “tolerant liberal multiculturalism” is being reshaped in the 21st century. Žižek’s starting point is a shift in the political constellation of Europe which results from anti-migrant racism going mainstream. According to him, opposition to such racism by “progressive liberals” is less categorical than it appears at first sight. What this seemingly outright rejection of racism affirms as possible and necessary is, indeed, only the “experience of the Other deprived of its Otherness – the decaffeinated Other” (Žižek, 2011). It is, as Lentin and Titley pointedly formulate it, a “cost-free politics of multiculturalism” which is emerging in the current context (Lentin and Titley, 2011, p. 5). The various initiatives currently directed at Islam fit within this political framework of ‘depriving the Other of its Otherness’: they aim to promote recognition of the civilizational achievements of Muslims, many of which are now shared globally, and to promote artistic work by Muslims designed for global consumption.

This analysis certainly has its merits. It correctly identifies how many in this field of culture rationalize their support for Islam-related initiatives. At the same time, this perspective also raises questions. For one, we can ask what conditions are necessary to secure liberal multiculturalism as cost-free in the long term, and how the threshold of ‘cost-free’ would be defined for different configurations of multiculturalism. More importantly, one wonders if the political transformation sketched out here is supported to determine cultural practices on all levels fully and in identical ways? What would be the effect of adopting different analytic
scales when examining how practices are connected to these broad transformations (cf. Graham 2012)?

Another set of questions, more central to this volume, has to do with the concept of culture in debates about multiculturalism. Briefly put, these debates are marked by a tendency to consider ‘culture’ as subordinate to politics and to define it in relation to group identity. Culture, in this logic, is what enables the identity of a group, and it is this identity which legitimates or renders necessary a debate about collective ‘rights’ (Reckwitz, 2001). As to cultural practices, they are of interest in this debate primarily as the expression of a given identity whose protection is debated in terms of (il)legitimacy, in both the political and the judicial sphere. In a sense, the very structure of the debate about ‘multiculturalism’ – a debate where the rights of culture are ultimately decided by politics – reinforces the idea that culture can be controlled and contained in political programs. The inverse question – about how political programs are reshaped, intentionally or otherwise, through individual or collective practices of culture – is asked less often.

The predominance attributed here to concepts of law and politics is no accident. It fits into a wider pattern of how the category ‘Europe’ is approached in scholarly studies. Broadly speaking, we can currently identify three dominant ways of rationalizing Europe in relation to Islam, and to some extent they overlap. First, Europe and the nation-states constituting it are defined as normative orders. Normative orders may refer to values, legal norms, or to the political theories to which these orders of justification refer back. The reference to conflicting norms and values (both terms are often used interchangeably) – whether with regard to freedoms, gender or secularism – is an indispensable element in analyses of current controversies, and it is one way to conceptualize ‘Europe’ as a space. Second, Europe is defined as a set of social spaces. It is certainly difficult to avoid thinking of Europe or, for that matter, religion, in social categories. Sociological studies of migration have greatly shaped current debates about Muslim religiosities. Nevertheless, it is hotly debated today whether we are witnessing an undue ‘Islamization’ of problems which are basically social. The notion that controversies about Islam need to be understood in relation to social processes which are more fundamental than normative orders and partly independent of them is increasingly widespread. Third and finally, Europe is conceived as an entity whose identity is a historical one. From this perspective, the space for possible configurations of Islam in Europe and its representation are examined on the basis of the historically constituted matrix of the present day.

This volume broadens the perspective and offers a number of analytical approaches to explore the relationships between Islam and the politics of culture.
in Europe. Our focus is on Europe as a space emerging through images and sounds, narratives, laughter, fantasies and memories which are inscribed in bodies and sensibilities. A common thread throughout these chapters is the visibility of Islam and the way it is visualized. The accrued visibility of Islam has been much commented upon since the 1990s. Its relationship to processes of Islamic revival among ‘second-generation’ Muslims, not least women, has been highlighted (Göle and Ammann, 2004; Jonker and Amiraux, 2006). As a central locus to many conflicts, it has become the quintessential expression of the transformation Europe’s Muslim populations and Europe herself are undergoing. In the context of debates on multiculturalism, the visibility of Muslims has often been approached as a problematic of representation, and the challenge it implies has been formulated in terms of recognition or misrecognition. Research into the visibility of Muslims is thus centrally concerned with the nature of images and narratives representing Muslims as a social group, which – historically situated or ahistorically – serve as the Other to European identity. Visibility tends to be used synonymously with representation and referentiality. Images are taken for cultural codes whose semantics offer the possibility to arrive at an unambiguous interpretation. While the struggles over interpreting offensive images are endless, they have not shaken belief in the transparency of meaning.

The idea that images are readable subsumes visuality to semantic codes – often identified as frames – and marginalizes the aesthetic and sensible experience involved in any encounter with images and words alike. This relative disregard for the visual is by no means exceptional. W.J.T. Mitchell (2002) has argued that this disregard is part of a more general pattern. He maintains that we tend to analyze only the social construction of the visual field without paying much attention to the visual constitution of the social field. Given the status of Said’s critique of Orientalism in studies of representations of Islam, it is not uninteresting to note that Said himself pointed out his uneasiness with regard to the visual. In an interview conducted in 1998 by W.J.T. Mitchell (1998), he claimed not to have an elaborate vocabulary for talking about visual arts.

Some chapters in this volume focus more particularly on the visibility of Muslims in its problematic dimensions. They devote serious attention to the fact that, as the many controversies about images and their interpretation demonstrate, ways of seeing images cannot be completely regulated and controlled. Indeed, as we shall see here, images themselves can be used to evoke complex meanings that play on ambivalence and excess. Learning to see such complex and ambivalent representations of difference, capable of disturbing and extending established modes of perception, is one way through which the subordination of the image to linguistic codes can be overcome (Dornhof in this volume). From a different point
of view, the problematic racialization of Muslims offers grounds to challenge the idea of sweeping visual regimes that neatly determine the representation of Muslims. Like Jews, Muslims in Europe can be seen to be in a position of indeterminacy, i.e. difficult to categorize in ethnic terms and at the same time adherents of a religion deemed excessive by comparison with conventional notions of religion. Europe’s Muslim subjects metaphorically display a kind of ghostly visibility, where the tension between different bodily inscriptions creates indeterminacy and excess (Tyrer in this volume). This reflection opens up new perspectives for analyzing movies like Submission by Theo van Gogh and Ayaan Hirsi Ali, often referred to as the paradigmatic expression of European Islamophobia. The indeterminacy in identifying Muslims as racial subjects raises the problematic of recognizing anti-Muslim racism as racism which still entails notions of race as naturally and transparently manifest in the body.

The visibility of Muslims must also be discussed in relation to the various modes of spectatorship and rationalities of governance which structure them. When analyzing specific media, it is important to reflect upon the way in which meta-categories such as liberalism, secularism, or multiculturalism are used. Many understandings of these notions tend to obscure tensions and contradictions within practices of government. They lead us to think about practices in terms of systems and to conceptualize change exclusively as systemic change. When we shift attention to the heterogeneous rationalities of spectatorship and visualization coexisting in governmental practices, we are better placed to discern the moments and spaces where inconsistencies and tensions within government enable shifts and transformations in the visualization of Muslims. These shifts are important in the cultural media produced today (Peter in this volume). While often related to the promotion of Muslims as the ‘decaffeinated Other’, these media cannot necessarily be reduced to it. Indeed, the very idea that alterity – the Other – can be reworked at will through cultural media needs to be interrogated. As many ongoing debates show, questions eventually arise about what is shown, the right way to see it, and whether it should be shown at all. How these questions are debated and answered is not arbitrary, but will always, to some degree, escape direct programming and control.

In current cultural productions, humor appears in different ways as a means to create common subjectivities, whether by breaking up and differentiating categories such as Muslims and Europeans, or by turning social norms and hierarchies upside down in a carnivalesque manner, or through acts of profanation. Profanation can be seen in the way in which satirical works appropriate religious icons and religious norms to reformulate them in vilifying, pornographic or otherwise distorting words and images (El Hissy in this volume).
But we can also see how such appropriations of religiously regulated visualities simply offend Muslims while relying on institutionalized polemics against Islam. This kind of offense, which often claims to criticize Islamic fundamentalism, must be distinguished from profanation. While the former reproduces symbolic otherness, the latter creates differences void of any determined use. Whether we focus on acts of profanation, humor or differentiated views, such approaches share an understanding of cultural politics that does not subsume culture to a predefined matrix of ‘politics’, considering instead the political transformations that are effected through cultural practices. By putting forward this perspective on cultural politics, the limits of asking whether or not art productions should be permitted, tolerated or desired as ‘cultural expression’, as something that finds its ultimate rationality in the culture and identity of a group, become apparent.

‘Memory’ functions today as a partial proxy for culture, and just like culture it is closely constrained by geopolitical boundaries which at the same time it serves to define. Memory politics are examined here as a major site to flesh out and make legible notions such as European culture and Western civilization and how they relate – or not – to Islam and Muslims. Indeed, the ‘memory boom’ which Europe has witnessed in recent decades has in many ways been furthered by the aim to incorporate Islam. In the context of this recent ‘boom’ in academic and political interest for cultural memory, historians like Jay Winter (2006) and David Berliner (2005) have warned against the conflation between memory, culture, and national identity. They draw attention to a specific kind of memory act which “overextends” memory so that past histories are remembered as the foundation of a group’s cultural identity. In the process, such memory acts produce an essentialized and competitive notion of culture.

The memory of al-Andalus is a case in point when it is turned, as today, into a paradigm for tolerance and ‘convivencia’. Representations of Europe’s history in ‘grand narratives’ of a tolerant cohabitation of different cultures and religions terminated by the Reconquista tend to employ the memory of al-Andalus to make exclusive claims about whether or not Islam is part of Europe. Unlike these exclusivist representations of the European heritage, chapters in this volume show how memory is a heterogeneous complex, combining narratives, counter-narratives and silences that are expressed through manipulations, appropriations and mediations, but also through forgetting and oblivion (Arigita in this volume). From this angle, the analytical focus shifts to how memory can introduce ruptures and changes into the present, disrupting narratives of cultural or civilizational continuity based on a dualistic divide between Europe and its Other. Rothberg suggests the notion of “multidirectional memory” to analyze the dynamic processes of transfer, “interference, overlap, and mutual constitution of seemingly
distinct collective memories” (Rothberg, 2006, p. 162). Memories of the Holocaust, Rothberg argues, have not always blocked other memories from view, but have helped to articulate traumatic legacies of colonialism and decolonization. Turning to recent representations of Muslims in Germany, Bodemann and Yurdakul (2008) have similarly shown how public interventions and novels relate to and “borrow” from Jewish narratives.

Crucial for any traumatic experience to be remembered and worked through is the notion of testimony, or the listening of another (Felman and Laub, 1992; Caruth, 1996). This is also true of what Marianne Hirsch (1997) has called “postmemory”, designating a transgenerational space of remembrance that is dominated by traumatic events and narratives of previous generations. Postmemory may be helpful in understanding how postcolonial writers, filmmakers and artists explore an emphatic and imaginative remembrance of slavery, colonialism and decolonization in the absence of direct experience of such traumatic histories. Postmemory is not limited to a cultural group but can draw connections across temporalities and cultures (Ward, 2007). Notions such as postmemory or multidirectional memory thus transform the idea of testimony from an act of witnessing into more heterogeneous aesthetic assemblages of fictional and documentary writing, film and other artistic work. Memory, and the aesthetic innovation it inspires, can create what Rothberg, drawing on Michael Warner’s work, calls a “counterpublic testimony” (2006, p. 179). Here, a public is characterized by the reflexive circulation of discourse, constructing a social entity among strangers through multiple forms of address. From this perspective, memory does not necessarily function as foundational history, but creates associative links between different collective histories.

Recent controversies in Europe about offensive images have led to a broader debate on the status of images and the arts in Islam. As so often, the positions adopted in this debate have tended to become polarized. On the one hand, the (partial or general) prohibition of images is presented as a feature of Islam and, of course, evaluated in different ways. For some, it is yet another addition to the list of Islam’s deficiencies, for others, part of the normative edifice of Islam and of Muslim sensibilities requiring protection. On the other hand, numerous voices have rejected the case for Islamic aniconism or iconoclasm, drawing attention to historical image-making traditions with Islamic or other themes. This debate has its limits, not only because it is primarily interested in the regulation of images, but also because it presupposes that images are understood as either mimetic representation or, as supposedly is the case for Muslims, as its denial, i.e. a refusal to distinguish between the image and its referent. What is lost in this debate is the broader question about how to conceptualize the making of images, their
ontological status, and the way they are seen. This obscures the possibility that Muslim protests about certain images emerge from within a different practice of visuality (see Mahmood, 2009). That is the question this volume seeks to highlight as both prior to and inseparable from any discussion about the meaning and offense caused by images.

This problematic can be approached from different perspectives. The critique of European art history and its implied normative understanding of what constitutes an image is one important starting point. Adopting such a perspective can lead to an examination of how Muslim practices of prayer rely upon a performative gaze of believers which does not fit conventional categories derived from histories of European art (Shaw in this volume). In this account, the directed gaze of Muslim believers is led through and beyond a focus on specific objects – such as the negative space of the mihrab in prayer – and the sensory field more generally. This means that the act of gazing ultimately turns inward, and what it accomplishes can be described as the believer drawing closer to God.

Differences in visual practices and perception are not necessarily a question of different aesthetic traditions, but may also appear in the form of tension, disruption or paradox within an image. From this point of view, Mughal art, so often read as a typical example of aesthetic syncretism, presents dynamic forms of appropriating the Other in or as an image. The encounter between the opposed logics of Mughal allegorical, and European illusionist portraiture, for example, creates a powerful dialectic tension within the image which unsettles the power constellations associated with different ideas of representation (Gonzalez in this volume). From a different perspective, the particularity of Islamic non-representational art can be approached through certain of its forms. Among these, in particular, haptic space, emerging through the breakdown of the figure/ground distinction, which invites “not distant contemplation but intimate involvement, the eyes moving over the surface as though touching it” and discovering “momentary ways to make sense of them” (Marks, 2010, p. 54, 63); and the abstract line, a line that “seems to move for the pleasure of moving rather than to reproduce a preconceived form”. These forms enable an aesthetics of becoming which is specific to Islam, but not exclusive to it nor simply the opposite of ‘representational art’. On the contrary, these forms contribute to European artistic production, which adapts them in multiple ways (Marks in this volume). The history of how ceramics from Islamic Spain travel to Christian lands in Europe and transform shows how the abstract line is tamed and becomes figurative during the Renaissance. However, the broader history of the unfolding of Islamic aesthetics in Europe is more dialectical and includes an inverse movement with the rise of abstract art since the late 19th century.


