



ADVERSARIAL ISLAMIC FEMINISM

**Islam and Feminism
within the Western-Islamic
Public Sphere**

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Dilyana Mincheva

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*To My Parents,
My first teachers in Islam and feminism*



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Acknowledgments

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belief in the improvisational and transformative praxis of Western-Islamic exchanges. Research published in *Feminist Media Studies* (2021) and *Women in Popular Culture in Canada* (2020) articulates adversarial Islamic feminism as a new form of Islamic feminism, found recently on social media platforms, largely inspired by feminist discussions in Western environments and movements such as #MeToo and #TimesUp, but undertaken by controversial, highly mediated, and globally visible Muslim women and activists. I am grateful to the editors of *Feminist Media Studies* and to Dr. Laine Halpern Zisman, the editor of *Women in Popular Culture in Canada* for allowing a scholarly platform for preliminary explorations of this newly emerging trends in Islam and feminism. Chapters 2 and 3 on Irshad Manji and Mona Eltahawy, respectively, present expanded versions of previously published research. In chapter 4, following my inquiry into the political complications of adversarial Islamic feminism, I introduce the highly contentious figure of the Syrian-British screenwriter, Halla Diyab, whose prolific political and screenwork has activated Arab speaking and diasporic audiences in real and digital spaces. I am particularly indebted to my colleagues at McMaster University, Dr. Christine Quail and Dr. Melinda Gough from the Gender and Social Justice Program, who provided a platform in 2020 for me to share my research on Diyab within the context of Islam and feminism. I cannot miss to mention here the two graduate students at the time, Arianne Bedard-Provencher and Rahim Samnani with whom I have had the richest and most enlightening conversations through the years on topics of contemporary and historical Islam, feminism, and media. As my interests in evaluating Diyab's oeuvre evolved over time, I had the opportunity in 2021 to deliver an enriched discussion on her screenwriting work within the framework of Women's and Gender Studies in Canada. I am grateful, again, to Arianne Bedard-Provencher for organizing the discussion and for being, as always, the most engaged and illuminating conversational partner. The chapter on the cinematography of Waad Al Kateab's was originally published in 2021 in *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*. The writing of this chapter was enriched by the exquisite editorial recommendations of my colleague Dr. Sarah Arnold from Maynooth University in Ireland. I thank her sincerely for the care and curiosity with which she approached the subject of cinematic manifestations of the female war gaze. It has been the most exquisite pleasure to share many conversations on war, feminism, and Islam with my colleague at McMaster University, Dr. Iqbal Basit, whose anthropological work in Jordan with displaced refugees from Syria has been a source of inspiration for me and a lesson in intellectual humility in the face of the unspeakable dimensions of human suffering. The final chapter



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Preface

In my previous work I have articulated the project of a Western-Islamic public sphere as an essentially poetic, (self)-critical, and normatively groundless space of various encounters, driven by multiple agents and Islamic-Western and Western-Islamic entanglements in time and space. By this I meant that the Western-Islamic public sphere emerges as a precarious intellectual project in which Muslims from all corners of the Islamic world and from diasporic contexts critically examine the limits of their religious identities in ways that are simultaneously critical of Western forms of colonial, racial and civilizational power but which are also self-critical of the dogmatic constraints of reified religious practice and interpretation. Indeed, the Western-Islamic public sphere has never been articulated as a systematic space of debate or critique, even though, in its original iteration the case studies that comprised this project were mostly of Muslims intellectuals, writers and artists coming to terms of what it means to be a Muslim person, spiritually, aesthetically, agonistically, and antagonistically, in the post 9/11 world. Rather, I described the Western-Islamic public sphere as a serendipitous, liminal, infinitely open, and self-transformative time-space encounter between Muslim agencies and Western liberal institutions. Founded on creative-critical engagements with religion, identity, belonging and dogma, the works that I identify as indicative of an emergent space of critique and self-critique often arise from unrepeatable spontaneous moments, even if they are not translated into a finished product and remain as fleeting thoughts. However, these works come to fruition when they occupy a unique space and time. This space-time is intrinsically linked to the creation of the work and may be considered as its specific context. Once realized, fully formed, and objectified, the work becomes part of history's space-time. It may continue to exist or fade away, no longer bound by the creator's original intent or the limits of its initial composition.

The Western-Islamic public sphere is founded on what I defined, following Edward Said and modifying a great deal of the Frankfurt school thinkers, as the *secular* (linked to specific historical context) and *poetic* (linked to self-alteration and self-examination) practice of critique. It is important for me to emphasize, again, that what I call a Western-Islamic public sphere is primarily a practice rather than a firmly established theory, so any theoretical principles that have been used as its foundation at different points of its trajectory cannot remain the dominant concept forever. Although these theoretical perspectives may have asserted conceptual superiority in

their own time, they are always subject to change and are only temporary. Sometimes, these theories can re-emerge, with a certain level of repetition, while at other times, they inevitably vanish with the same ground-breaking force that they once had to begin with. As a practice, the Western-Islamic public sphere is constantly engaged in the deconstruction of dogmatic thinking, both secularist and religious, in its various forms and historical articulations.

Importantly, what the Western-Islamic public sphere stands for, in its experimental, precarious, and infinitely fluid dimensions, is a politics of transformation.¹ This refers not only to situations where religious beliefs occupy political spheres exhaustively but also to the less conspicuous secularist metaphysics of Western democracies. The term “Western democracy” is misleading and not just from a political or philosophical perspective; it is also inaccurate from a geocultural viewpoint, as societies with diverse cultural differences and global immigration patterns are often confined to the vacuous category of “the West.” Whether facing the legacy of Kantian transcendentalist morality or the pseudo rationalism of market economics and technocracy, the praxis of critique that founds the Western-Islamic public sphere employs the same questioning approach as it does when engaging with any politics of dogmatic religion. To engage responsibly in the poetical praxis of critique one must use its analytical capacity to scrutinize unchallenged secularist mentalities that have faith in an authority believed to transcend social-historical boundaries, one that is similar to religious believers’ unwavering faith in a ubiquitous and omnipotent divinity. In the final account, my argument has always been that within the Western-Islamic public sphere we encounter the work of a “double critique” in the capable formulation of Abdelkebir Khatibi, that of religion and that of

1 The most expansive theoretical articulation of such a political agenda, which exists beyond the scope of my description of the Western-Islamic public sphere, is offered in the oeuvre of Stathis Gourgouris in a range of works. See Stathis Gourgouris, *The Perils of the One* (NY: Columbia University Press, 2019); Stathis Gourgouris, *Lessons in Secular Criticism* (NY: Fordham University Press, 2013). And most recently in a chapter dedicated to the political philosophy of Etienne Balibar and the politics of left governmentality, Stathis Gourgouris, “Border-Concept (of the Political),” in *Thinking with Balibar: A Lexicon of Conceptual Practice*, ed. Ann Laura Stoler and Jacque Lezra (NY: Fordham University Press, 2020), 28–44. I owe much of my thinking on the emergence of the Western-Islamic sphere to Gourgouris’s critique of transcendence, and his quintessential dispute with Saba Mahmood on the historical-sociological parameters of politics of piety. For comprehensive discussion of how this debate features in my thinking on the Western-Islamic public sphere, see Dilyana Mincheva, *Muslim Intellectual Discourse in the West: The Emergence of a Western-Islamic Public Sphere* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2016; reprint 2022 by Liverpool University Press).

secularism as essentially metaphysical projects, which aim at justification of the human condition via references to extra-human authorization.² By contrast, the assemblages of works that belong to a wide range of Muslim artists, intellectuals, writers, theologians, and philosophers, that are at the core of the Western-Islamic public sphere are deeply embedded in socio-historical experiences and contexts that open up from within the multiplicity of the Muslim subject and her ways of being in the world in the company of other people, Muslim or not. This irreducible and often internally conflicted multiplicity of the Muslim agency is essentially what makes this communication realm an infinitely poetic space of possible (self)-alterations, grounded in human experience. Within that sphere, termed Western-Islamic, neither “the West” nor “Islam” are stable, universal, and thus once and for all reified entities.

The book that follows here is a continuation of the original project of describing the contours of the poetic-critical praxis of the Western-Islamic public sphere, with an enlarged focus on Muslim women and their complex engagement with feminist praxis. A focus on feminism also means altered theoretical vocabulary and new terms of engagement with the entanglements of Western and Islamicate agencies. Since 9/11 the Muslim woman has enjoyed much attention in practically all humanities and social sciences disciplines where liberal and religious perspectives on the feminist subject have clashed, complimented each other, or produced their common disequilibrium. In very broad terms the Muslim woman has been projected within a predictable binary, as either being a victim of religious patriarchal oppression; or as an agent who freely chooses to submit to the religious order of Islam, no matter how anti-feminist this might look from the perspective of liberal feminism’s well documented achievements throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Since the space-time component is always important in understanding this binary’s work, it is also crucial to note that differentially situated scholars, feminists, journalists, intellectuals, artists, activists, and ordinary Muslim women have participated in its elaboration in various ways. Postcolonial feminism, largely elaborated in Western academic contexts even if taking as its case study local Islamic contexts, has emphasized the agentic aspects of pietist Islamic feminism.³ It

2 Abdelkébir Khatibi, “Double Critique: The Decolonization of Arab Sociology,” in *Contemporary North Africa: Issues of Development and Integration*, ed. Halim Barakat (London: Croon Helm, 1985) 9–19.

3 A seminal text that exemplifies this trend is Saba Mahmood’s *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

has also projected the anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist spiritual potential of religion as a space of resistance to colonial encroachments in the world of Islam. Within that scheme religion is a repertoire of resistance and a political identity, which performs a dual task, one that restores the dignity of Islam as the only just way of life; and one that projects Islam as the better, culturalist, differentialist alternative to the colonial white feminism of the West. Islamic feminism, the alternative to white liberal feminism, is clearly “cultural” or “differentialist” in Nancy Fraser’s terms.⁴ Its objective is to restore femininity (or the perception of femininity) through an involuntary deconstruction of the androcentrism that characterizes white and secular feminism. Islamic feminism accuses white and secular feminism of turning women into men, of erasing the fundamental heterosexual distinction, which is foundational to the values of Islamic gender relations.

4 Nancy Fraser, “Mapping the Feminist Imagination: From Redistribution to Recognition to Representation,” *Constellations* 12, no. 3 (2005): 295–307.

Introduction

Islamic Feminism: Multiplicity and Contradiction

Islamic feminism is more than simply a refusal of emancipatory frameworks inherent in liberal and secular forms of feminism. And it certainly exceeds the anti-empire rhetoric of postcolonial studies, whose broader project is a comprehensive decolonisation beyond the feminist subject matter.¹ Islamic feminism is a broad and contested term, that covers a range of perspectives held by women who are trying to reconcile their desire for change in the contemporary world with their Muslim identity.² This movement includes various viewpoints, from advocating for Muslim women by working with those who are disadvantaged or vulnerable, to studying Islam's foundational texts to uncover the progressive aspects that may have been overlooked or misunderstood through the use of hermeneutic and contextualist interpretative methods.³ The macro-normative ambitions of Islamic feminism are to deconstruct the patriarchal readings of the Quran and the entire

1 An important text in this field is Saba Mahmood, "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation," *Public Culture* 18, no. 2 (2016): 330–35. See also, Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

2 Asma Barlas, "Secular and Feminist Critiques of the Qur'an: Anti-hermeneutics as Liberation?" *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 32, no. 2 (Fall 2016): 111–21.

3 At this moment of history, the multiplicity of the term Islamic feminism is beyond simple systematization with significant differences in its use signalled by geographical (from across the MENA region and the West) and confessional locations. Sunni articulations of Islamic feminism differ significantly from Shia Islamic feminist projects. Foundational texts in the field include Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "Beyond 'Islam' vs. 'Feminism'," *IDS Bulletin* 42, no. 1 (January 2011): 67–77; Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "Muslim Women's Quest for Equality: Between Islamic law and Feminism," *Critical Inquiry*, 32, no. 4 (Summer 2006): 629–45; Valentine Moghadam, "Islamic Feminism and Its Discontents: Towards a Resolution of the Debate," *Signs* 27, no. 4, (2002): 1135–71; Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992; repr. 1999); Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* (London: Oneworld, 2006); Margot Badran, "Toward Islamic Feminisms: A Look at the Middle East," in *Hermeneutics and Honor in Islamic/ate Societies*, ed. Asma Afsaruddin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 159–88; Zakia Salime, *Between Feminism and Islam: Human Rights and Sharia Law in Morocco* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2011), among many others.



authoritative corpus of religion, offering an alternative, feminist-centric interpretations to the public. In that sense, Islamic feminism is also an attempt at undermining religious orthodoxy and as such it has met vehement resistance from the religious establishment across the Islamic world.⁴ It is telling in that regard that the International Union of Muslim Scholars (IUMS) issued a statement in 2013, chaired at the time by Sheikh Yousuf Al-Qaradawi, warning against “the extreme views about gender issues, such as those expressed sometimes under the banner of ‘Islamic feminism’.” They argued that these views could lead to a “breakdown in the foundation of society and the disruption of its moral structure.”⁵

Simultaneously, as Marnia Lazreg insightfully shows, it is hardly possible to judge the liberatory or oppressive dimensions of any specific feminist praxis without taking seriously the local context of its origin. In the macropolitical reorganizations of the post-9/11 world, Islamic feminism becomes subsumed into the registers of state feminisms in certain Muslim contexts.⁶ Lazreg offers the term *wasatiya* Islam to explain the intricate phenomenon of parallel Islamisation, feminisation, and nationalisation of religion in present day Algeria. Derived from the Arab word for middle *wasat*, the Algerian *wasatiya* Islam, for example, artfully reframes sura 2.143 of the Qur’an, which refers to the “middle nation,” turning it into a program for the establishment of a specific kind of *authentic* Algerian-Maghrebin Islam.⁷ In Lazreg’s terms,

4 A quick example here to show the complexity of this debate comes from Iran, which in recent history has experienced a number of feminist-led revolutions and a strong iteration of the #MeToo movement, which, among other things, entered into a passionate clash with state-sponsored forms of Islamic feminism. See the forthcoming book by Claudia Yaghoobi, *The #MeToo Movement in Iran: Reporting Sexual Violence and Harassment* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), specifically Mincheva’s and Hooman’s chapter, “The Iranian #MeToo and the Double Bind of Iranian Feminism: Between Religion, the Global Gender Struggle, and Liberal Feminism,” 23–39.

5 International Union of Muslim Scholars (IUMS), 2013. Statement on Gender and Women’s Rights in Islam. Retrieved from <http://www.iumsonline.org/en/statement-gender-womens-rights-islam>. The document unfortunately is currently unavailable in English or Arabic (its original language). I suspect that the reason the full statement was taken down has to do with by Al-Qaradawi’s compromised international reputation as an extreme homophobe and apologist for female rape. For context, see Bettina Dennerlein, “Sexual Rights and Their Discontents: Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī on Homosexuality and the ‘Islamic Family,’” *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 17, (2017): 247–67.

6 Marnia Lazreg, *Islamic Feminism and the Discourse of Post-Liberation: The Cultural Turn in Algeria* (NY: Routledge, 2021).

7 “We have appointed you a middle nation that ye may be witnesses against mankind, and that the messenger may be a witness against you,” *The Glorious Qur’an*, trans. Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall (London: TAHRIKE TARSILE QURAN, 2001), Sura 2.143.

this is a spectacular cultural turn, which cannot be understood outside of its historical specificity, as it is simultaneously a response to the “war on terror” where Islam comes as a differentialist and culturalist way for holding on to an authentic, Islam-derived normativity, and as a way of satisfying Northern-centric pressures on Islamic societies to generate versions of “moderate” Islam that need to be counter-distinguished, in both theology and praxis, from “radical” Islam. Islamic feminism, in this scheme appears in Algeria, and across the Arab Maghreb with various state interventions and permutations in Morocco and Tunisia, as an integral part of the state’s burden of promoting an Islam that is seen as an antidote to terrorism.

Still, the comparative geopolitical role of the state distinguishes the cultural turn in Algeria from the versions of Islamic feminism in neighboring Morocco or other Middle Eastern countries. Lazreg sees Algerian women’s involvement in the cultural turn as more situational and less institutionalized compared to Morocco, despite both countries’ commitment to a moderate *wasatiya* Islam. In Tunisia Soumaya Mestiri reminds us that Islamic feminism is essentially a political force of the type, which is Islamist (interested in religiously founded polity) rather than Islamic (interested in the normativity of Islam) or Muslim (interested in the broad cultural forms of expression of the Muslim identity).⁸ This means that the main representatives of the movement are men; and the normative frameworks offered in the Tunisian context are developed by and for men, with women not even playing an ornamental, representational role in this context. This is different not only from the state-sponsored *wasatiya* Islam that Lazreg describes but also from other Muslim contexts, distinctly Kuwait, Jordan, and Palestine among them, where Muslim women’s inclusion within the Muslim Brotherhood and their push for reformulation of mainstream orthodoxies, has shaped the trajectory of political Islam.⁹ In that vein, associative Islamic feminism is yet another type of agency, found in multiple Muslim contexts where front and center we find feminist charities with various political commitments, from ensuring that Islamic feminism works within a framework of complementarity of gender roles where women are seen as the protectors of the Islamic family values to concerns with the normativity of the hijab

8 Soumaya Mestiri, “Arab Feminism: Between Secular and Islamic Models,” in *Routledge Handbook of Postcolonial Politics*, ed. Olivia Rutazibwa and Robbie Shilliam (NY: Routledge, 2018), 157–65.

9 For detailed examples from these contexts, see Stéphanie Latte Abdallah, “Islamic Feminism and Postcolonialism at the Beginning of the 21st Century [Féminismes islamiques et postcolonialité au début du XXI^{ème} siècle],” *Third World Review [Revue Tiers-Monde]* 209, no. 1 (2012): 53–70.



and niqab to emancipatory reformism and subversion of patriarchal norms from within religion itself.¹⁰

The biggest challenge facing Islamic feminism that claims to be first and foremost an intellectual scripturalist enterprise (as it must be because it claims a novel monopoly of interpretative knowledge over the sacred books of Islam), is to provide a full accountability for its methodological approaches and commitments. Islamic feminism, by and large, aims to deconstruct male supremacy (Arab. *qiwâma*) but in doing so it relies heavily on hermeneutic and critical approaches, which, indeed informed the uneven historical path of feminism in many Western contexts. Crucially, Islamic feminism derived from postcolonial and subaltern studies in the Western academia and has for its main interlocutor Western scholars and student audiences. For postcolonial scholars and Islamic feminists positioned in European and American universities, the primary goal is to respond to orientalist phantasms of the oppressed Muslim woman by searching for empowered Islamic alternatives. Under such a political pretext, which aims to deal with Islamophobia rather than with Islam; the emphasis on what Islam really has to say about the female condition in postcolonial feminism is, at best, perfunctory. Islam here naturally appears as a rescue camouflage identity, and, one might argue, an empty signifier, that aims to expose the deficiencies of the Western imperialist and Islamophobic establishment by pointing to racist discourses and anti-Islam measures in the West. The argument here is not against the validity of these efforts. It is rather an articulation of how the decolonization of feminism might happen without bracketing Islam and the plenitude of experiences and critiques from within that it mobilizes. Arguably, the non-Western Islamic feminists who do perform the hermeneutic work with the purpose of reading critically the texts get caught in another type of error: they are so stuck in the ontological debate

10 Instructive here is the Tunisian case where in 2012 Ennahda attempted to implement the complementarity of gender roles in the first draft of the Constitution as an alternative to the alleged Western-centric idea of gender equality. Similar debates around 'complementarity' as opposed to 'equality' have been prevalent recently in Iran as feminist activism in the country has pushed for legal articulation of equality and for laws that recognize and punish sexual harassment. The Iranian feminist Ziba Mir-Hosseini defends the concept of the complementarity of the sexes, see: Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "What Is Islamic Feminism," lecture, *CILE Seminar on Ethics and Gender at the University of Oxford*, Oxford, June 17, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fzf2D43wCtC&list=FLCXdMY3Hk125O3hz9ZwrCmw&index=108>.

Some of the most significant achievements of associative Islamic feminism could be the Malaysian *Sisters of Islam* whose determination to subvert the patriarchy from within Islam has been documented brilliantly by Azza Basarudin, *Humanizing the Sacred: Sisters of Islam and the Struggle for Gender Justice in Malaysia* (Seattle: Washington University Press, 2016).

on the complementarity of genders in Islam that they miss the real political action, which aims to point at patriarchy and correct it in its historical incarnations. After all, if the argument is that Islam already contains the perfect establishment of gender justice, as academic hermeneutic Islamic feminism insists, then what is there left to deconstruct within it?¹¹ Soumaya Mestiri's fascinating way of describing the double bind of Islamic feminism is helpful here: Islamic feminism effectively replaces the orientalist trope of the Muslim woman in need of saving (the myth of Scheherazade) with another equally powerful trope, the myth of Fatima, which stands for the empowered Muslim woman who ends up justifying religious patriarchy.¹²

At least two consequences follow from the awkward positioning of Islamic feminism between Islam and feminism, in the Western academia and beyond, in a wider, global, plurilingual public sphere, mobilized via interactive communicative platforms that also have the capacity of making the tensions, positions, positionings and transformative encounters globally visible. These two consequences comprise the interrogative backbone of this book. One has to do with the projection of liberatory Islam in classical and authoritative texts with the purpose of saving Islam from itself, i.e., with the purpose of reading into classical texts and histories presentist forms of empowerment. The opposite move is equally relevant to me: namely, resistance to a critique of religion, which does not acknowledge the historicity of Islamic praxis and how it inevitably changes as societies progress and collectively decide to outlaw certain practices as un-Islamic such as concubinage, slavery, polygamy, capital punishments for extramarital relationships, to name a few of the hot topics that become central topics to the feminist agencies that I explore in the book. The second consequence has to do with an interrogation of how feminism—Islamic, Islamicate or otherwise—could, indeed, be involved meaningfully in the lifeworlds of

11 Islamic feminism utilizes various religious disciplines to advocate for gender equality within the framework of Islamic authorities. These disciplines include hermeneutics (*tafsir*), the study and interpretation of Islamic texts; the prophetic tradition (*hadith*), which narrates the actions and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad; and Muslim jurisprudence and case law (*fiqh*), which provides guidance on legal matters in Islam. In addition to these religious sources, some Islamic feminists also draw on non-religious sources, such as international conventions on human rights, to support their arguments for gender equality. See Zahra Ali, "Islamic Feminists [Féministes islamiques]," *Work, Gender and Societies [Travail, genre et sociétés]* 32 (2012): 178–80. For an account of the theoretical foundations of the movement, based on the founding texts, see Malika Hamidi, *A Muslim Feminists, and Why Not? [Un féminisme musulman, et pourquoi pas?]* (La Tour d'Aigues: de l'aube, 2017).

12 Soumaya Mestiri, *Decolonizing Feminism: A Transcultural Approach [Décoloniser le féminisme: une approche transculturelle]* (St-Armand: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 2016).

Muslim women who are positioned differently and differentially yet they are discursively connected with each other and with the world beyond Islam in a globally circulating media network of images, activisms, resistances and struggles for gender justice.

Secular Liberal White Feminism: A Complicated Relationship

Regardless of how one would like to define Islamic feminism—through theology, politics, associational activities, pietist praxis or public, *umma*-tic expression of religious identity—it is important to keep in mind that this type of feminism is often articulated against a distinctly liberal, secular, white, and often associated with colonial maternalism, version of feminism, which is characteristic of Western feminist developments. While it is true that Western versions of feminism have been deconstructed by international feminist activisms and scholarship since the 1970s, Islamic feminism is often deployed as an ideological weapon against colonial elites in the Islamic world, which still recognize in the achievements of white feminism a type of universal trajectory, easily transferable to impoverished and underdeveloped rural areas in formerly colonized territories.¹³ By trying to force this trajectory on rural and pietist Muslim women, colonial elites in the Muslim world not only repeat the maternalism of white feminism but also performatively self-sabotage by displaying publicly and narratively their internalized self-colonisation. Central to elite expressions of feminism is the vocabulary of democratic rights and freedoms. A whole network of empowerment activisms, often sponsored by networks of Western NGOs in collaboration with local elites, introduces modes of thinking about patriarchy and agency, profoundly alienated from the mundane struggles of ordinary Muslim women.¹⁴ The encounter of metropolitan elites in the Muslim world with rural, pious women, often ends in mutual misunderstanding and frustration. This time around it is not the white woman who aims to save

13 Faye Harrison, et al., “The Marginalization of Third World Feminists in Academia and Politics,” webinar, Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies, University of Copenhagen & IUAES Commission on Transnational, Feminisms and Queer Politics, October, 2020, https://vimeo.com/474078212?fbclid=IwARoVCaEmpA_W6uqwVvn23l6X9x9r64RoO_6bkQLVT1HyS4XABfwZyj-ZC8.

14 Lila Abu Lughod's latest scholarship, which has introduced the term *securo-feminism*, describes in detail precisely this phenomenon. See her Global Lecture Series: Lila Abu Lughod, (lecture, Global Lecture Series, NYU Liberal Studies, New York University, NY, December 10, 2019). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JQXwiAXlsrl&t=5s>

the brown woman from the brown men; it is the elite woman of color who saves her sister from the oppressive brown men around her. Soumaya Mestiri documents this encounter in Tunisia, pointing to the utter disconnect between programs for female political leadership sponsored by UNDP and disseminated by internationally trained elite Arab women to rural female audiences whose problems cannot be articulated in the liberal language of trainings for electoral campaigns, political empowerment, rights, and freedoms.¹⁵ Knowing how to run an election campaign in a civil society could not be further away from the day-to-day struggles of rural Tunisian women.

None of this is to say, of course, that ordinary Muslim women do not live under the full brunt of male patriarchy. Especially in Tunisia rural women do the majority of field work in addition to doing the housework and childrearing with their labor neither financially nor symbolically compensated. From the non-differentialist, universal perspective of white liberal feminism, the only way to help these uneducated, rural women is by dictating their own interests. This type of feminism aims to impose a singular perspective on all women, claiming that this perspective is universal, neutral, and inherently beneficial. The underlying assumption is that women are not fully aware of their own interests and are incapable of expressing them, both verbally and through their actions. This approach seeks to dictate what is deemed best for women, disregarding their individual agency and autonomy. So, it is hardly surprising that the differentialist drive of Islamic feminism appears as an alternative. The counter effort against the white maternalistic feminism should not be, however, a romantic idealization of premodern pastoral life where a lived complementarity of religiously sanctioned gender roles pushes a harmoniously structured community forward into a transcendental Islamic utopia. Yet white, elite feminism seems irrelevant here, too, because of its inherently salvation-driven ideology, transparent through references of empowerment and democratic rights but ultimately unable to attune itself to the wavelengths of local subaltern contexts. To empower *all* women, indeed, means to care for the epistemological and moral scaffolding of their lifeworlds. This can only happen, as the argument in this book goes, if women's testimonies and narratives, as strange as they might sound, are taken seriously and with care for the multidimensional oppressions that compose the contexts in which they emerge.

Neither Islamic feminism nor secular feminism effectively perform that work. They are both central feminisms, of course, with their own historic(al) positionings that allow them to ally with political hegemonies (discourses

15 Mestiri, "Arab Feminism: Between Secular and Islamic Models," 159.

of religious universalism, nationalism, theocracy, anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, anti-racism, among others) in varied geopolitical contexts. These feminisms can be characterized as “border feminisms,” to use again a reference to Soumaya Mestiri’s fantastic term, as they claim to acknowledge and incorporate difference but ultimately find solace in inhabiting the border as a protected sanctuary.¹⁶ Instead of attempting to redefine their frameworks, under the force of the Arab Spring revolutions or through the pressures that intersectional feminisms put on identity, they remain tethered to romanticized notions of the East and idealized visions of the West. This positioning perpetuates divisions rather than challenging them. Both secular and Islamic feminisms, unable to transcend the border, contribute to its essentialization. In doing so, they perceive the border as a limit and closure, whereas feminism should consider the border as a porous boundary, which implies a limitation that can potentially be surpassed due to its inherent contingency. Certainly, it is essential to ask under what conditions borders must be crossed and whether when making a choice of crossing them we proceed to erase them.

Border Feminism(s) as Methodology

Whether clearly articulated or subtly implied throughout the book, the concept of the border is central to my understanding of decolonial differentialist feminism, which *might* be simultaneously Islamic and secular, which *might* be inherently multiple, and if understood as such is always open to interrogation of its own intersectionality. The *might* here signals my desire to approach the feminist case studies articulated in this book as inherently open to multiple articulations. But it also signals my full cognizance of the interpretative foreclosures that are inherent to any of them. Even within the central concept that my work develops, the Western-Islamic public sphere, the bifurcated notion alludes to a border, which needs to be carefully defined. First, the term “border” for me is as much a concept as a methodology. One could argue that the conceptuality of the border can be seen as a specific manifestation of the dialectical method. However, if we adopt this viewpoint, I propose that we approach dialectics in the manner in which Walter Benjamin understood the dialectical image.¹⁷ Instead of

16 Mestiri, “Arab Feminism: Between Secular and Islamic Models,” 162.

17 Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1989).

a process of sublation, where a concept ascends to a higher or modified state, what occurs is a simultaneous deformation and transformation of the concept by its inherent nature. The concept is undone by its own properties, while also enabling the reconstitution of these properties in an altered form through this undoing. It is crucial to emphasize that this process involves the simultaneous traversal of a substantive or concept by its property, which enables an act of de- or trans-formation. This peculiar dialectics highlights the dynamic nature of the dialectical image, as described by Benjamin, which pulsates and evolves without requiring the linearity of progressive time to facilitate dialectical developments. Only under the mechanics of this serendipitous dialectical transfiguration, the borders between West and Islam are perpetually open to multiple reconfigurations without ever being erased or annihilated.

It is important to note that the term “border” carries more significance than just matters of physical location. A border is always a historical institution that holds a certain geo-temporal context, even when it is used in a philosophical sense as a *limit*. Limits or thresholds are inherently ambiguous, functioning as gateways that can be either open or closed depending on various factors and circumstances that cannot be reduced to purely philosophical or historical categories. From a strict perspective, a border-concept resists precise definition, paradoxically because every definition establishes a border in some sense. Border, conceptually and methodologically, allows for the double process of uniting and dividing whether this pertains to a notion, category, meaning, or definition. *Border-ing*, in the analysis deployed throughout the book, creates an inherent ambiguity that becomes the method of operation.¹⁸ The essential here is that we cannot think of the West without Islam and Islam without the West in the same way in which we cannot separate either of these concepts from the colonial context that determines their operations. By extension, we cannot completely disintegrate Islamic from secular feminisms; we can only think about them simultaneously deconstructing their internal and external hegemonies with the purpose of arriving at more expansive notion of decolonial feminism.

Decolonial feminism, existing as a porous and transformative praxis of care is a feminism that has emancipated itself from its paternalistic and maternalistic ambitions. It no longer views helping women in distress who are facing difficulties as a favor. Consequently, decolonial feminism, founded on decolonial care, does not implicitly or symbolically demand allegiance.

18 For geopolitical elaboration of border as methodology, see Sandro Mezzadra and Britt Nielsen, *Border as Method, or the Multiplication of Labor* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

It operates outside the framework of a savior mentality. In a positive sense, decolonial care is characterized by the concept of stewardship, encompassing two crucial aspects: first, profound care for the histories, narratives, and cultural expressions of those different from us. And second, in the feminist sense, of being a guardian of one's personal history and experiences, which inevitably includes narratives of oppression and resistance. By preserving and protecting our own stories, we are collectively writing a history that is undoubtedly ours. We are co-authoring a shared narrative, but with multiple perspectives and voices. This always brings about gaps, shifts in focus, disagreements, and reinterpretations as Maria Lugones and Elizabeth Spelman accurately remind us in their co-authored work.¹⁹ It is important to recognize that writing collaboratively will never result in a singular voice, as the differences between us are significant and can only be partially reduced. These differences constitute the various if porous borders among us.

Decolonial feminism at the border of both Islam and feminism, therefore, is vulnerable and open to transformations. The border itself contains the principle of vulnerability because it mobilizes both recognition and protection as foundational to feminist solidarity across geographical locations and normative frameworks. It begs repeating that, as in all reflection so far, "foundational" is used tentatively because my principal argument will always be that there are no identities and foundations, as solid as they might look in a particular moment of time, that exist impervious to the transformative flow of time. Yet, foundational in this instance refers to a form of feminist solidarity that is borne out of human beings' capacity to empathize with others and recognize the truth in the proposition that "this other woman's suffering could be mine." It is this fundamental vulnerability that motivates decolonial quests for feminist solidarity to address and mitigate vulnerability. It could be even argued that only when interconnected with and balanced by the principle of recognition can the principle of protection avoid fuelling a maternalistic pursuit of invulnerability. The inherent vulnerability we possess means that we will always encounter instances of vulnerability of women positioned otherwise as social-historical processes emerge present themselves and new risks jeopardize what we and others value. In essence, this implies that there will always be limitations to what protection can or *should* achieve. Rights, even when declared and acknowledged, can be

19 Maria Lugones and Elizabeth Spelman, "Have We Got a Theory for You! Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism and the Demand for the 'Woman's Voice'," *Women's Studies International Forum* 6, no. 6 (1983): 573.



denied, or violated; social protection systems may be lacking, oppressive, or dismantled; institutions (derived from popular sovereignty or from God) can be destroyed or manipulated. However, viewed in the light of our fundamental vulnerability, and recognizing that the various circumstances that sustain our feminist vulnerability will never be uniformly present or uniformly meaningful across geographical and normative locations, requires a final attempt at decentering external (by way of being imposed on us) and internal (by way of being inherent in our own contexts) hegemonies without erasing the distinctions among us.

What does this mean? I draw inspiration from Black feminist Elsa Barkley Brown, who introduced the concept of “rotation.” Brown, as an educator, acknowledges the challenge of sharing her experiences as a woman of color with students who may not share her background. However, she highlights that everyone has the capacity to center themselves on another person’s experience, validate it, and evaluate it based on their own criteria, without needing to compare or adopt fully the other’s framework.²⁰ In alignment with Bettina Aptheker’s perspective, Brown asserts that centering someone else does not require decentering anyone; it simply involves rotating the center. Aptheker’s statement implies that it is possible to advocate for specific identities and perspectives without seeking isolation or replacing one dominant center with another. It also emphasizes the importance of making space for others by not only inviting them to the center but also by acknowledging their significance as centers in their own right.²¹ Decentering is not only necessary but also achievable without establishing new hegemonic centers. Decentering involves recognizing and embracing our own particularism. This self-awareness in the decentering process, in turn, facilitates our solidarity with others while safeguarding against the emergence of new forms of dominance. Vulnerability in the existential and political sense, in the final account, is also what unites the case studies presented in the book. While differently situated and always traversing spatial borders and normativities—in Egypt, Syria, United States, Canada, UK, and Norway—the Muslim women whose projects the book investigates closely are profoundly vulnerable as public figures and as human beings.

20 Elsa Barkley Brown, “African American Women’s Quilting: A Framework for Conceptualizing and Teaching African American Women’s History,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14, no. 4 (1989): 922.

21 Bettina Aptheker, *Tapestries of Life: Women’s Work, Women’s Consciousness and the Meaning of Daily Life* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989).

Book Structure

The analysis that follows takes us through an assessment of the feminist work of six contentious, global, border-crossing Muslim women. All of them exhibit an uneasy relationship with Islamic praxis yet none of them are willing to dispose of her Muslim identity. Specifically, the book aims to situate mediatized feminist activism of Muslim women within the above mentioned macro-theoretical, theological, and postcolonial debates of scripture-based Islamic feminism. Focused on agency, bodily integrity, familial duty, honour, and rights, among other things, adversarial Islamic feminism is a distinct social media phenomenon, utilizing the viral capacity of the platforms to deliver unambiguous and captivating messages and to generate communities of “love” and “hate,” while simultaneously (and perhaps inadvertently) making deeper and more complicated claims about Islam. What emerges in the multilingual, polyvalent discussions is the assertion that the ethical praxis of Islam is multiple, incoherent, historically situated and geographically dispersed; this praxis cannot and, indeed, *should not* be the monopoly of theologians, orientalists, clergy structures or professionals of any kind who discipline the understandings of Islam into fossilized and often misogynist prescriptions that are alienated from women’s lives. In an interpretative move that simultaneously brings me closer to these positions and critically distances me from them, I argue that this emerging, carried by the virality of new forms of media, adversarial Islamic feminism is situated critically and performatively at the border of both Islam and feminism. Here, Islamic feminism is confronted with two possible trajectories for its future development: inhabiting and/or traversing that border. Adversarial Islamic feminism might have the capacity to both inhabit and project itself beyond the border through a “double critique” of itself and of the hegemonies against which it articulates itself. Within this scenario adversarial, media- and performative-based Islamic feminism perceives the border as contingent, precarious, and ever-transformative space for encounter and self-exploration, which is also to say a space of a genuinely open and poetic feminist Western-Islamic public sphere. As always, what guides my feminist research is a core theoretical and intellectual commitment to transgression and performativity (understood philosophically, not trivially or locutionary), which is to say to a mode of reflection that allows ideas, concepts, thoughts, art forms, textual figures, and so on to break open the presumable closure of their existence and become entwined with the fluidity of social-historical forms and events. Only fully inhabiting the ever-shifting terrain of our border existences and



traversing these borders (without erasing them), driven by care in moments of solidarity with others, we can also begin to imagine decolonial feminism, which takes seriously the dogma and praxis of Islam.

The six women whose projects I engage in this book are strangely related even if they occupy different geographical spaces and their arguments exist often in tension. The choice to interrogate these six women's intellectual projects is as much driven by border feminism as a methodology in decolonial feminist care, as it is specifically entrenched in the nexus of convergence and separation that defines these projects when read coincidentally together. Nawal El Saadawi, Mona Eltahawy, Irshad Manji, Halla Diyab, Waad Al-Kateab and Deeyah Khan are all heavily mediated women; their public careers are either directly in the media or their political positions and provocations on feminist issues have happened to generate such an enormous transnational public debate that their mediation becomes inevitable. In fact, Nawal El Saadawi is the only feminist presented in the book who has not had a proper media career. Yet her rich biography of feminist activism in Egypt and prolific intellectual career in both Egypt and the United States, spanning over 60 years, as well as El Saadawi's iconic space in the pantheon of Arab women writers, is what motivates her inclusion here as a genealogical precursor to the adversarial feminisms that come later. Yet the rationale for the inclusion of Nawal El Saadawi exceeds her proper engagement with feminism and her larger-than-life personality that I present in the first chapter of the book. El Saadawi is the very real inspiration for the feminist thought and activism of Mona Eltahawy, who has expressed on numerous occasions admiration and indebtedness to the matriarch. In the months leading up to El Saadawi's passing, Mona Eltahawy not only informed widely about the medical campaigns in support of El Saadawi in Egypt but promoted her work passionately. In books, on Twitter and in her own feminist newsletter, *The Feminist Giant*, Eltahawy reminded her large followings about the giant influence of El Saadawi on global feminism by sharing memories about their physical meetings in Cairo and assessing the brand of feminist activism bequeathed to global networks of solidarity.

Deeyah Khan, a Pakistani-Norwegian documentary filmmaker and feminist, wrote the foreword to a reprint by Saqi Books of El Saadawi's novel *Two Women in One*. Khan has not only praised the feminist work of El Saadawi but featured her writing extensively in the online feminist journal for women from diverse Muslim heritage, *Sisterhood*, that she founded in 2015. Articles on family law and the female body, on xenophobia, racism, human rights, religion, hate speech, on capitalism and fundamentalism, on the rise of Donald Trump, accompanied by self-reflective assessment of one's

own legacy, appeared on the platform of *Sisterhood* in the years leading up to El Saadawi's demise. As gestures of appreciation and acknowledgment of El Saadawi's enormous influence on feminist thought in Egypt, in Muslim majority societies and globally, Khan invited El Saadawi, along with Mona Eltahawy, to be participants in an international feminist forum in 2015, organized by Fuuse, the media company that Khan founded in Norway to produce her own documentary films. In 2015 Fuuse produced short features with both El Saadawi and Eltahawy.²² In 2018, Fuuse featured again Mona Eltahawy in an interview that specifically focused on Eltahawy's viral Twitter campaign #MosqueMeToo, which I discuss in the second chapter of the book.²³ Irshad Manji, in her turn, has praised extensively Deeyah Khan's documentary work on social media, specifically her films on Islamism, martyrdom, and jihad. A popular Toronto-based site linked the queer critique of Islam by Irshad Manji with Deeyah Khan's documentary work on Muslims who have chosen to leave Islam, all under the banner of "liberal Muslims."²⁴ Deeyah Khan and Waad Al Kateab are the only two Muslim documentary filmmakers who have been distinguished with BAFTA and Emmy recognitions for their films, and predictably they have been placed alongside each other by a popular site, *The Muslim Vibe*, which aims to center Muslim voices for the global Muslims publics.²⁵

Importantly, Al Kateab and Khan are very different documentarists. From the way they approach camerawork to the way they carry Islam as they reveal their Muslim-ness to the publics that their projects reach, we witness two articulations of feminist Islam—a confessional one in Al-Kateab, and a liberal one in Khan—that nonetheless point us in a direction of a shared feminist project. The chapter on Al-Kateab is preceded by one on Halla Diyab, whose screenwriting and excessive and complicated relationship with the Syrian state puts her feminism and politics before, during and after the Syrian civil war in tension with Al Kateab's documentary work. Halla Diyab's liberal feminism in translation,

22 Nawal El Saadawi, "In Conversation: Nawal El Saadawi with Kenan Malik," interview, *Fuuse World Woman*, Oslo, April 12, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=giRhtxYRTzg>.

Mona Eltahawy, "Fuuse World Woman: Mona Eltahawy," lecture, *Fuuse World Woman*, Oslo January, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A46VsBV3nSw>.

23 Mona Eltahawy, "Fuuse Sisterhood Interview with Mona Eltahawy," interview, *Fuuse Sisterhood Interview*, May 31, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BljgrNMPqrk>.

24 EIYANAH, "Liberal Muslims Face An Uphill Battle," *Toronto Now*, October, 2016, <https://nowtoronto.com/news/liberal-muslims-face-an-uphill-battle/>.

25 Jessica Aya Harn, "Top 6 Documentaries to Watch that Were Directed By Muslims," *The Muslim Vibe*, April, 2020, <https://themuslimvibe.com/western-muslim-culture/top-5-documentaries-to-watch-that-were-directed-by-muslims>.

as defined in chapter 4, seems to reach and exhaust its moral legitimacy as the atrocities of the civil war, witnessed by Al-Kateab's anxious camera, reveal the monstrosity of Bashar Al Assad's totalitarian establishment. It has been fascinating to read the feminism of Halla Diyab and Waad Al-Kateab together not least because they present two Syrias that seem unable to meet and forgive each other but also because these projects expose the local borders of adversarial feminism. That is to say that seen from within the unfolding Syrian war, feminist allegiance to Islam reveals the radical refusal of state totalitarianism and its biopolitics of human erasure. Seen from a distance, feminist allegiance to Islam raises questions around rights and duties, as well as around global politics of the left and its commitment to a rhetoric of anti-empire and state sovereignty. As a side note here, which I later belabor in the chapters 4, 5, and 6 when I examine carefully Halla Diyab's, Waad Al-Kateab's, and Deeyah Khan's filmographies and broader political presence in the Euro-American public sphere, I note that the definition of all these women as "liberal" should be taken as a colloquialism rather than considered an identity marker. The reason for that is precisely the refusal of these Muslim women to fully adopt a maternalistic, white, classical liberal version of feminism even in the cases when they evoke human rights and democracy and engage in a strong critique of dogmatic Islam. Rather, their projects inhabit the borders of liberalism, feminism, and Islam.

Irshad Manji, Mona Eltahawy and Halla Diyab are simultaneously journalists, public figures, writers, bloggers, intellectuals, TV producers, and film directors. The links and differences between these three women are most easily discernible through focus on their media presence: Irshad Manji appears on Mehdi Hassan's talk show *Head-to-Head* on Al-Jazeera where Halla Diyab is an engaged audience member. Irshad Manji cites passionately Mona Eltahawy in her books and refers to her as the finest example of an engaged, polemical, critical Muslim voice. Mona Eltahawy appears on *Head-to-Head* to discuss a controversial article on Arab misogyny she wrote for *Foreign Affairs*. She applauds on social media the controversial Syrian drama series, *Ma Malakat Aymanukum* (Your Rightful Disposal) that Halla Diyab has written. Halla Diyab is a regular journalist and contributor for *Al-Arabiya* where Manji and Eltahawy have also contributed pieces or made the headlines. While Manji, Eltahawy, and Diyab are most obviously and uncannily linked through the media spaces they inhabit and through the type of interconnected dialogue on feminism that they generate in global digital audiences, their projects are not the same. In chapters 2, 3, and 4 I take a close look at these women's mediated political and feminist

positions and provide a nuanced account of the potentials and limitations of their distinct projects.

Because much of this book is written in Canada, it is also noteworthy that all six Muslim women have left an impact on discussions related to Canadian Islam. Recent debates around Canadian Islam have clearly shown the increasing difficulty of identifying who speaks authoritatively for Muslims in Canada. Muslim women specifically are often subject to othering and silenced on multiple fronts: as visibly Muslim, as predominantly women of color, and (simply) as women. In Canada, where multiple versions of Islam simultaneously reside, figures like Manji, Eltahawy, Diyab, Al-Kateab and Khan seem instrumental in bringing Islamic diversity to both internal conversations and those with the larger Canadian society. By looking at the online and offline reception of Irshad Manji (who is a Canadian Muslim), Mona Eltahawy (who appears frequently on CBC and TVO and participates in Canadian Muslim activism), Halla Diyab (who appears on CBC and whose films and series are in circulation among the Arab-speaking Muslim diaspora), Al-Kateab and Khan (whose documentaries have received wide circulation through the Toronto International Film Festival and other venues, and have triggered enormous discussion), it seems that precisely the engagement with these women's very public, very distinct, and often very controversial projects, give us the contours of an emerging Canadian-Islamic public sphere through a feminist angle.

"Adversarial Islamic feminism" is a construction that I use to distinguish the performative, provocative, and highly mediatized personalities of the six projects that I analyse carefully in the following pages from the established, academic, hermeneutic versions of Islamic feminism that exist in academic spaces. Unlike theological or scriptural approaches to Muslim female identity, all six projects presented in the book privilege the agency of those who invoke the term "Islam." These six women use personal testimony and media to openly attack authorities in Islam (such as mosques, imams, clerical figures, or figures of political Islam) and thus galvanize the Millennial and Generation Z publics more than any scholarly message. The language that these feminists use is simple, often visual, straightforward, it makes an appeal to the universal and in that way, it comes across as authentic. Ironically, this is precisely the reason why these adversarial feminists find little support or engagement in academic versions of Islamic feminism or in the Islam-focused scholarship of postcolonial and diaspora studies. Islam, taken seriously in the six projects under scrutiny here, appears as an ever-changing set of arguments, practices, and beliefs, which unfold in mediated environments. To discuss mediatized artifacts or figures of Islamic



feminism does not require that we define Islam. Rather, I analyze materials, agents and arising debates with an eye toward nuances of similarities and differences in how the proponents who are invested in Islamic ideas project their views. Mapping the discrepancies in the trajectories of high-brow, academic, Islamic feminism and adversarial, media-based, activist Islamic feminism is a contribution to scholarship that my book humbly aims to accomplish. The research on Irshad Manji, Mona Eltahawy, and Waad Al-Kateab has been partially published in *Feminist Media Studies*, *Alphaville* and in an essay collection dedicated to Canadian women in pop culture. The chapters in the book, however, contain the full-fledged arguments and evidence that, due to journal and editorial word limitations, I have not been able to share comprehensively elsewhere. Crucially, only when read together, the stakes and significance of decolonial border feminism come into full visibility. To my best knowledge, the current book offers the first arrangement of these six women together both as an embodiment and a limit of decolonial care. I hope that productive disagreements with and expansions of this assemblage of voices will appear within feminist scholarship on Islam in the future.

What motivates this book, in the final account, is my commitment to engage in the ongoing improvisation of existence, where the understanding that nothing is ever fully grasped or acquired in the face of individual or group difference, is the only commonality each individual shares with others. Recognizing this requires the effort to refocus attention on the other person, without necessitating an abandonment of one's own improvisation. Instead, it involves finding a place alongside the other person's improvisation. It is through this mutual accompaniment that solidarity emerges, a solidarity that arises not from expecting the other person to possess complementary knowledge, but from embracing the partial and limited understanding we have of each other. Ultimately, this solidarity is rooted in the freedom granted to everyone to be true to themselves, allowing them to express their diverse loyalties and sympathies. It is within this framework of freedom and self-expression that genuine solidarity can exist.

My very last point is that regardless of how critical we might want to be of all six projects in the book if employing in their analysis the postulates of doctrinal Islam (which, one should say is also a diverse corpus), or how tempted we are to insist that these six women betray Islam altogether, all six women are taken seriously as Muslim feminists here. However, to fully grasp the discomfort of recognizing them as Muslim, we also need to make the final distinction between identity and belonging. Thematized explicitly by Floya Anthias, identity and belonging are two registers of being

part of a community, which, however, allow for solidarity with the other to happen in drastically different ways.²⁶ Islam as an identity, similarly as liberalism or secularism as an identity, would refer to an adherence to an origin myth and an eschatological destiny, that prescribe and control the openings towards the other. It is impossible in this stance for the subject to fully escape from the clutches of essentialism and groupism. Belonging differs from identity by not being a mere matter of identification. It does not embody a fixed and essentialist perspective or rely on rigid group affiliations. Instead, belonging is shaped by the spatial dimension, which saves it from the inflexibility of identity.

Belongings are thus constructed from various shifting and adaptable places that inherently possess porosity. They are envisioned, imagined, and shaped within these contexts, which are constantly changing and evolving. This fluidity, heterogeneity, and disconnectedness, along with their narrative strength, are what Anthias refers to as “translocal positionality.”²⁷ It is essential to me to apply this lens to the six Muslim women presented in the book. In my analysis of El Saadawi, Eltahawy, Manji, Diyab, Al Kateab, and Khan I draw upon both the contexts and situations in which these women find themselves anchored, as well as the projections they create. It is a unique positioning that combines these two dimensions of the social. On one hand, there is the position, which is a result or product of this positioning. On the other hand, there is the positioning itself, which is dynamic and requires agency and action. This interplay between position and positioning, which is another way to say the interplay between space and time, between one’s biographical contingencies and one’s anchoring in context and tradition, forms the foundation of understanding the complex dynamics of belonging and identity. This is precisely the space—between identity and belonging—where I locate the six subjects of the book. On a personal note, this is also where I locate myself as the author of this book. Even though this is not a book about myself, it is also a book that has allowed me to come to terms with my own relationship to Islam and feminism. They both have played an integral part of becoming who I am today professionally and personally. Living through their tensions, articulating them, and being defeated by them, if only temporarily, is the only way I can envision the poetic praxis of the feminist Western-Islamic public sphere in its full transformative potential.

26 Floya Anthias, “Thinking Through the Lens of Translocational Positionality: an Intersectionality Frame for Understanding Identity and Belonging,” *Translocations: Migration and Social Change* 4, no. 1 (2008): 6–19.

27 Anthias, “Thinking Through the Lens of Translocational Positionality,” 6.

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