

Hymn of the hyphens
Narrations of American–Muslim identity in taqwacore songs

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Abstract

Taqwacore is a musical genre that fuses punk rock with South Asian and Middle Eastern influences. It is also a post-9/11 cultural phenomenon involving mostly young American and European Muslim artists trying to make sense of a world falling apart in song and music. This article explores how young American-Muslims perform complex, contradictory identities in taqwacore songs. Three songs from the taqwacore band The Kominas' first album, *Wild Nights in Guantanamo Bay*, are analysed. Each song, the article shows, constitutes a narrative in which the singer/songwriter negotiates seemingly irreconcilable identities. But the clash is not simply between "Islam" and "America" as social constructs: it is also over the interpretation of Islam itself as an individual faith and an institutionalised practice. Theoretically, the article draws on the concept of narrative identity to show how seemingly contradictory views of the self are made coherent in cultural production.

Keywords

American-Muslim, Islam, taqwacore, punk, identity

Her dreamy eyes are partially closed, her flushed face partially covered by a *hijab*,¹ which has parted enough to reveal a partially smoked cigarette dangling from her lips. The monochrome monotony of the photograph militates against its rainbow of absurdities. A pious, *hijab*-clad Muslim girl, such as her, would hardly be smoking; indeed, she may not even allow herself to be photographed. But here, she does. The photograph is the insignia of The Kominas, a Boston-based "Muslim punk" band.² There's an absurdity again: Muslim and punk aren't supposed to go together. But here, they do. That, in fact, is the whole point. The absurdity is the medium—and the message.

The Kominas are among a clutch of musical groups that have sprouted across the United States over the past decade-and-a-half, fusing religion with rock, the sacred with the salacious, attempting to create an existential harmony from the essentialist dichotomy of simultaneously being Muslim and American. Together, such groups have come to form a subculture called "taqwacore" (see also Shahin 2016a). The term combines the Arabic word *taqwa*, meaning consciousness of God, and "core," which "signifies the foundational codes of punk: oppositional attitudes and DIY cultural production" (McDowell 2014, 257). This cultural phenomenon has fluttered out of the pages of *The Taqwacores*—a fiction written in 2004 by Michael Muhammad Knight, an American convert to Islam, about a group of Muslim punks living in New York. Every character in the novel is a melting pot of multiple identities: a religious rocker who is perpetually drunk and chasing women, a Sunni Muslim "straight-edger," a Shia skinhead, a Sufi skater addicted to drugs, and a feminist who wears the *burqa*.³ Together, they lead lives that blend the hallowed and the hedonistic: the house they share alternating from place of worship on Friday afternoons to extravagant party venue on Friday evenings (Knight 2011, see also Hosman 2009).

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As Knight prefaced in a later edition of *The Taqwacoes*,
They (Islam and punk) aren't so far removed as you'd think. Both began in tremendous bursts of truth and vitality but seem to have lost something along the way—the energy, perhaps, that comes with knowing the world has never seen such positive force and fury and never would again. Both have suffered from sell-outs and hypocrites, but also from true believers whose devotion had crippled their creative drive. Both are viewed by outsiders as unified, cohesive communities when nothing can be further from the truth. (2007, 7)

It's this creed of cultural confusion that motivates the music of The Kominas and other taqwacore bands (McDowell, 2018). The subculture is very much a product of its times, coming into being in the years following the 9/11 attacks by Islamist terrorists. It had never been easy to be a Muslim in the United States (GhaneaBassiri 2010, Kumar 2012). After 9/11, as hostility toward Muslims went berserk on the streets and the screens, understanding what it means to be a Muslim and simultaneously an American became all the more complicated, especially for the youth (Peek 2005, Sirin and Fine 2007). But that wasn't the end of it. Many Muslims now found it difficult to be "Muslim" too. Islam post 9/11 took on very specific meanings in the popular imagination. Like the airplanes that plowed into the Twin Towers, the religion itself now seemed hijacked by absolutism, flying off on a crash course many of its followers did not identify with but felt too numb to protest against. Together, these dilemmas reinforced a deeper existential concern—that of agency. In a world where the social affiliations one is born into often appear to determine who a person is and how he or she is perceived by others, what does it mean to be a sentient, self-conscious individual? What, indeed, does it mean to *be* (Ali 2011, Ramadan 2004)?

In this paper, I analyze three songs from The Kominas' first album, 'Wild Nights in Guantanamo Bay.' Each song, I show, constitutes a narrative in which the singer/writer tries to reconcile multiple dichotomies while performing his or her identity. This research is a hermeneutic effort to understand how young American-Muslims try to make sense of and perform their complicated identities in punk poetry. Taqwacore songs, I argue, are illustrative of their attempt to locate their identity across three axes: (1) between Islam and America, (2) between individual spirituality and institutionalized religiosity, and (3) the degree of agency in the construction of the Self.

Theoretically, this paper develops ideas about how contested and contradictory identities are given coherence in symbolic communication by drawing upon the concept of *narrative identity* (Appiah 2005). I focus especially on how linguistic expression can be used to negotiate agency as the narrator navigates the self over cultural crosscurrents. Communication, as a social practice, can thus be an instrument of critical awareness and critical action, allowing individuals to confront political and clerical classes and challenge their hegemony over the intersubjective constitution of social categories and their meanings.

Islam and America

The history of Islam in America goes back to the earliest European arrivals in the 16th century (GhaneaBassiri 2010). The first American-Muslims were slaves brought here by European colonialists from Africa. The complexities of race, class, and colonialism have bedeviled the relationship between Islam and America ever since. Islam later served

as an alternative “national” identity for many black Americans struggling against racial discrimination—especially those who chose to reject “America” altogether (Lincoln 1961, Shahin 2015a). Black Muslim movements such as the Nation of Islam and the Moorish Science Temple grew in the 1920s and 1930s. Influx from Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East and South/South East Asia gathered pace after the Immigration Act of 1965 did away with country-of-origin quotas, which used to favor Western European arrivals (Peek 2005). Most American-Muslims today are first- or second-generation immigrants, and large numbers of them have arrived only after 1990 (Pew 2011).

Their arrival has coincided with global geopolitical turmoil, in which relations between the United States and Muslim-majority societies have come under severe strain. Muslim terrorists have mounted attacks on American territory—most famously on 9/11—while the United States has invaded Muslim-majority nations such as Iraq and Afghanistan, causing large-scale death and destitution (Shahin 2015b). For many, this upheaval has validated the clash of civilizations thesis, which posits that the “Muslim world” and the “West” are distinct and inherently antagonistic civilizations bound to be at war with each other (Huntington 1996, Lewis 1990). Along side, there has been a sharp rise in Islamophobia within the United States, evinced in attacks on Muslims, social discrimination, and ghettoization (Kumar 2012). In mainstream American media and popular culture, the idea of “America” and what it means to be “American” is often manifestly constructed in contrast with Islam and Muslims (Shahin 2016b). Muslims have thus become the “other” to the American “self” (Aydin and Hammer 2010).

The entrenchment of this “identity boundary” (Barth 1969) complicates the performance of identity for Muslims who have been born or raised in the United States. The matter is made knottier still by the assortment of racial, ethnic, national, and geographic identities that they also live with: Arab, black, Iraqi, Kurdish, Shia, *desi* (South Asian) and so on. A number of participant observation, focus group, and interview-based studies in recent years have reported that American-Muslim identity construction is highly localized and context-specific and that 9/11 and its aftermath have had a significant impact on the process. Witteborn’s ethnography of Americans of Arab descent living in the larger Puget Sound area of the Pacific Northwest found them to be identifying as ‘American,’ ‘Palestinian,’ ‘Egyptian,’ ‘Lebanese,’ ‘Lebanese American,’ ‘Jordanian,’ ‘Muslim,’ ‘Shi’ite,’ ‘Christian,’ ‘Arab American,’ as well as ‘Druze,’ ‘Iraqi,’ ‘Saudi,’ ‘Syrian,’ ‘Libyan,’ and ‘Palestinian American.’ Identification varied “depending on the audience, the setting, and the sociopolitical scene” (2007, 562). For instance, respondents identified as ‘Muslim’ “with people who were knowledgeable about Islam,” although their motivation to self-identify as Muslim increased after 9/11. Many respondents said “the expression of a Muslim identity was not a matter of choice after September 11 but also perceived as being expected by non-Muslims” (565-566). The meaning of being Muslim also changed after 9/11. Witteborn adds, “Several speakers engaged in community events to educate people about Islam, build relationships with non-Muslims, and speak out against discrimination. In that regard, people engaged as religious Muslims and as concerned citizens of Muslim faith, which combines religious and sociopolitical identities” (566).

Schmidt notes that Muslims in the West, including American-Muslims, are highly *visible*: “Muslims are frequently visible in Western countries because of their practices that are unfamiliar to the majority population... for example when practicing Muslim women dress differently than the majority, and when Muslim communities establish houses of prayers with an ‘authentic’ Islamic architecture.” Such visibility can be viewed as an identity boundary, which often employs overt social symbols. But in his interviews,

Schmidt also found that young Muslims “stress Islamic practices as consciously and rationally chosen and not simply as aspects of their (ethnic) heritage and their tradition.” This sense of chosen rather than inherited self-identification is deeply meaningful. The choice is “affected by a contemporary Western discourse, where the processes of human life are significantly individualized.” These young Muslims view the Islam practiced by their parents as “infected by cultural misconceptions and thus stagnated, archaic and ‘dead’.” In contrast, “the Islam that they pursue is a-cultural, pure and progressive; Islam as it truly was and is supposed to be.” In other words, they believe that they practice “authentic” Islam (2004, 32-37).

Ali (2011) has discovered a similar sensibility among the young Muslims of Phoenix, Arizona: “In the ‘true Islam’ of America, individuals are held to higher religious standards; not those of Muslim majority societies, but to those of the first community—the Prophet and his Companions.” As in Schmidt’s study, however, this does not mean that American Islam is “fundamentalist”—in fact it means just the opposite. “The ‘pure/true Islam’ that American Muslims posit is both more strict and in a way different from the Islam one sees in Muslim majority countries (commonly thought of as conservative). But this conceptualization of Islam is not ‘puritanical.’ It calls for going back to the essence of the faith, but at present it is not ‘fundamentalist’ in the current understanding of the term. ‘Pure/true Islam’ is debated, contested, (re)defined” (2004, 366-369).

In these accounts, American-Muslim self-identification emerges as a complex dialectical process. Being in America brings immigrants’ “Muslim” identity into sharp relief against a non-Muslim backdrop, especially since 9/11, but it simultaneously alters this identity in a way that is critical of received notions of “Islam” and self-consciously American. This process may be viewed as an instance of the “reform” that Muslim philosopher Bilgrami has espoused. Bilgrami rued that the weight of colonial history had made Muslims too defensive about Islam, and it was therefore difficult for them to challenge the sway that absolutist interpretations of Islam held upon the community’s collective imagination. He wrote,

Their understanding of themselves as the victims of a history of Western domination constitutes the ‘third-person’ perspective that then perpetuates just these sorts of defensive actions. If this third-person point of view did not so overwhelm their vision of themselves, it would leave space for the ‘first-person’ point of view, essential to the very idea of agency. (1992, 835)

The significance of these ethnographic accounts notwithstanding, they all suffer from a common flaw: their ethnographic methods are highly obtrusive. By asking respondents identity-related questions, they make particular identities more salient for participants in the process of data collection itself. This is problematic when viewed in the light of their own findings, which stress the situational construction of identity, influenced by factors including the audience (in this case, the researchers) and the setting (in this case, the research). It is useful, therefore, to investigate identity construction in discourses that American-Muslims engage in of their own volition. That is what this study attempts to do by examining the practice and performance of identity in taqwacore songs. It is perhaps equally important that these songs are artifacts of popular culture and, as they get disseminated, they potentially influence the identity practices of the American-Muslim community at large. Just as Knight’s novel, once published, spawned the real-life subculture of taqwacore, so the identity practices in taqwacore songs

potentially bear upon how common American-Muslims perform themselves in their everyday lives.

The Performance of Identity

Over the past century or so, anthropologists, sociologists, social psychologists, and cultural studies scholars have developed a view of identity as less of an individual *essence* and more of a social practice and performance. Human beings learn about the world they are born into, and their own place within it, through symbolic interaction with others—linguistic as well as non-linguistic (Mead 1934). Such interactions produce the individual's worldview, a view in which the world is divided into an assortment of social categories—racial, ethnic, geographic, sexual, religious, sectarian, and so on—and all categories have particular customs, beliefs, values, and characteristics associated with them. It is also in such interactions that the individual learns which groups he or she “belongs” to, as well as what such belonging means: the customs, beliefs, values, and characteristics the individual must adhere to or adopt to *perform* his or her “belongingness” (Goffman 1959). Hall thus calls identity “a process of becoming rather than being” (1996, 4).

This process works because it is at once innovative and normative: individuals practice and perform identity to be able to make sense of the social world and give meaning to their own existence. Identity is thus a social construction—an ongoing interplay of the social structures one imbibes in interaction with others and one's own agency that is implicated in reproducing those structures through space and time (Bourdieu 1984, Giddens 1991). Every agent performs different identities in varying spacio-temporal contexts through practices that Foucault (1988) refers to as “technologies of the self” (see also Butler 1990).

A key insight of this way of thinking is the necessity of the “other” for the construction of the self. The self-other dialectic plays out at two interrelated levels. Agents perform their identities *qua* “individuals”—that is, as unique socio-biological entities—by differentiating themselves from all “other” individuals. But simultaneously, agents relate themselves to other individuals within their social groups to perform their identities *qua* members of those groups. The membership practices of a group, in turn, emerge in a process of differentiation from “other” social groups, especially those with which its members live in close proximity or interact regularly. Barth (1969) thus argues that ethnicities are constructed along “identity boundaries”: the cultural mores of an ethnic group result from differences among groups as manifested in overt signals of identity, such as dress, language, housing, and lifestyle; and value orientations, including views of morality and excellence.

Narrative Identity

What happens when the “other” is a part of the “self?” That is the dilemma faced by individuals belonging to groups on the two sides of an identity boundary. For them, there are no clear answers about which group's norms to imbibe and which to differentiate themselves from: what appearance to assume, which language to use, whose culture to embrace. As the dichotomies between their divergent social groups become more polarized, the difficulties for individual identity performance only become accentuated. That is the predicament young American-Muslims have found themselves

in, especially since 9/11 (Ajrouch 2004, Ali 2011, Peek 2005, Schmidt 2004, Sirin and Fine 2007, Witteborn 2007).

But in a globalizing world, this predicament is by no means unique to American-Muslims. The transcontinental flows and contra-flows of people, media, finance, technologies, and ideas, especially between formerly colonized societies and the lands of their erstwhile colonizers, have caused huge disjunctures and come to define the postmodern era (Appadurai 1990, Gilroy 1994). Belonging, or wanting to belong, to multiple social categories and celebrating “difference” has become the zeitgeist of this era, leading Bauman to suggest that “if the modern ‘problem of identity’ was how to construct an identity and keep it solid and stable, the postmodern ‘problem of identity’ is primarily how to avoid fixation and keep the options open” (1996, 18). But for the individual performing multiple identities to maintain the unity of one’s self, he or she need to weave these identities into a single narrative thread (Davenport 2012, Holler and Klepper 2013). The performance of each identity has to fit within this narrative for one to make sense of oneself as a congruent individual. The larger narrative of life becomes a collection of several smaller narratives—an anthology of short stories that must also be a novel. Appiah thus calls this *narrative identity* “the ability to tell a story of one’s life that hangs together” (2005, 23).

Ontologically, the concept of narrative identity implies that multiple identities, while contextually activated, are not entirely independent of each other. While performing the salient identity in one context, the individual does not act in a manner that is entirely at odds with his other identities. Narrative identity is the connecting thread between an individual’s multiple identities—it is what makes the sum of all these identities a coherent and meaningful self. MacIntyre suggests that every “shorter-term intention is, and can only be made, intelligible by reference to some longer-term intentions” and that “behavior is only characterized adequately when we know what the longer and longest-term intentions are and how the shorter-term intentions are related to the longer” (1984, 207-208). Narrative identity is thus “a basic condition of making sense of ourselves” (Taylor 1991, 47). Narrative identity also affords more agency to the individual: although one gains one’s multiple identities through social interaction, it is the agent who strings them together into a composite self.

The view of identities as narratives is, of course, not new to cultural and communication studies. But most scholars have used it metaphorically to emphasize the contrived, produced, or “fictional” character of identities—as opposed to the view of identities as natural and inherent. Ree notes that “[t]he concept of narrative... is not so much a justification of the idea of personal identity, as an elucidation of its structure as an inescapable piece of make-believe” (1990, 1058). In a similar vein, Hall argues, “(Identities) arise from the narrativization of the self, but the necessarily fictional nature of this process in no way undermines its discursive, material or political effectivity” (1996, 4). In contrast, my focus here is on the spatial and temporal dynamism, performativity, and the phenomenological unity that the notion of narrative identity affords to the self.

Narrative Analysis

As this paper’s theoretical framework is build on the concept of narrative identity, the method of narrative analysis is used to study identity performance in taqwacore songs. According to Bamberg, “not only is the quest for the modern self in the form of the who-am-I question deeply rooted in the history of narrative, but, in addition, the story actually becomes the very data to be analyzed when seeking answers to the who-am-I

question" (2012, 79). Hadden and Lester's (1978) discussion of how linguistic devices are used for producing mixed identities is particularly helpful in understanding the practice of narrative identity. Identity production, or "location" of identity, involves both *contexting* and *differentiating*. For contexting, "one locates (oneself) as a member, coparticipant, or in some way related to a network of 'others,' i.e., contexts self amid others. Sequentially or intermittently, ego (narrator) also differentiates self by either depicting 'unique' features that have no articulated social referent, or by distinguishing self with an explicit reference to others" (1978, 339). Both contexting and differentiating are used to produce a *good Gestalt*, or "an ensemble of particulars which are presented, modified, and perhaps recast totally as identifying work proceeds" (1978, 340). The production of the self as a good Gestalt—a self that does not wholly belong to a single social category but reflexively assumes and rejects characteristics and values from an assortment of categories—is, then, the purpose of the narrative.

Narrative analysis works with the logic that "narratives attempt to explain or 'normalize' what has occurred; they lay out why things are the way they are or have become the way they are" (Bamberg 2012, 77). The absurdities of contexting and differentiating the self with multiple and sometimes dichotomous social categories is given coherence in the narrative. Bamberg identifies three different approaches to analyzing narratives: the structural, the thematic, and the dialogic-performative. The structural approach focuses on words and sentences as linguistic phenomena. Narratives typically depict movement through space and time. Such movement is expressed as a sequence of events linked through spatial and temporal markers. "Narrators make use of linguistic devices to move characters through the spatial and temporal contiguity of what happened and, in doing so, build characters and position them in relationships with one another" (2012, 81). Identifying these markers allows the structure of the narrative to be split between the *there-and-then*, referring to the space and time of the past, and the *here-and-now*, or the space and time of the present. The narrator's identity performance can then be understood in terms of how he contexts or differentiates himself with both parts of the narrative.⁴ When narratives don't follow a temporal structure, Bamberg recommends the thematic approach, which looks at how the narrator constructs his identity by contexting or differentiating himself with various themes of the narrative. The dialogic-performative approach is used for piecing together the analysis of large chunks of "dialogic" data, in which there are more than one narrators.

This paper analyzes three songs from The Kominas' 2008 album "Wild Nights in Guantanamo Bay"—titled *Par Desi*, *9,000 Miles*, and *Rumi Was A Homo (But Wahhaj Is A Fag)*. Each song is treated as an independent narrative. The first two songs depict movement through time and are analysed structurally; the third songs lacks such a structure and is therefore analyzed thematically. Structural analysis takes place in two interlinked stages. The first stage is of lexical analysis, in which markers of space, time, and agency (as subject and object) are identified. In the second stage, the structure of the narrative is broken down into its various functional parts. The *orientation* provides the spatial and temporal setting of the narrative. The *complication* dwells upon the *central problem* taken up by the narrative, and is followed by *action* (or non-action)—or what the narrator does (or does not do) to resolve the problem—reflecting agency or its lack thereof. Together, these sequences consist of the "eventive" part of the narrative. But there is also the "evaluative" part, in which the narrator steps out of the orientation to provide an overall perspective. This is also called the *closure*, or *coda*, of the narrative (Bamberg, 2012). In thematic analysis, particular themes are extracted from the narrative and examined for cultural codes that indicate which identities are being performed.

“Par Desi” (Outsider)

- 1 *Of feedback I've had my fill*
 2 *Within a room lodged in a wall*
 3 *Somewhere in Central Square*
 4 *Where men smash 6-stringed idols*
- 5 *Where do I point to blame,*
 6 *When men scatter like moths?*
 7 *There's no time for 99 names*
 8 *'Midst the noise and clamor*
- 9 *How'd I get here,*
 10 *From a land with long monsoons?*
 11 *In Lahore it's raining water*
 12 *In Boston it rains boots.*
- Chorus:*
- 13 *They tried to snuff me out*
 14 *But they only fuelled the flame*
 15 *Boots crushing my shoulders*
 16 *where Angels chose not to remain*
- 17 *'Ab siraf yadeh*
 18 *Mein rehti mera des' [My nation now lives only in memories]*

Lexical Analysis

The subjects in the narrative are “I” (lines 1, 5, 9), “men” (4, 6), and “they” (13, 15 [implied before ‘boots’]). The objects are “me” (13) and “my” (15). The initial spatial marker is “a room lodged in a wall somewhere in Central Square, where men smash 6-stringed idols” (2-4). This alludes to Boston, where the narrator is presently located. This setting is the here-and-now of the narrative, representative of “America.” The Pakistani city of Lahore from the narrator’s past constitutes the there-and-then, representing “Islam” (9-12).

Through most of the narrative, the narrator uses lexical devices to lower his agency. One of them is the proliferation of third-person subjects and first-person objects (me, my). This implies that others (“men,” “they”) are responsible for most of the action, not the narrator. Another is the absence of agency when the narrator does become the subject: things are being done *to* him, rather than *by* him (e.g. *Of feedback I've had my fill*; *Where do I point to blame*, *How'd I get here* [rather than *come here*]). Thus, even as identity is being navigated between there-and-then and here-and-now, between Islam and America, it is also being negotiated in terms of the narrator’s degree of agency.

Another lexical device is the use of cultural references to locate identity by contexting and differentiating. Line 4 is a reference to American punk guitarists’ tendency to smash their instruments during shows, and thereby to an inherent violence in American youth culture. This is later amplified by the constant reference to boots (raining, crushing shoulders) in Boston. Lines 7 and 16 carry Islamic references. Allah has 99 names in Islam. Two angels are supposed to be on a Muslim’s two shoulders, one recording his good deeds and the other his bad deeds—to be used on the Day of Judgment. Having left the there-and-then and being unhappy in the here-and-now, the

narrator ostensibly differentiates himself from both Islam and America. But by expressing deep familiarity with such diverse cultural markers, he simultaneously contexts himself with both of them as well—thus constructing his identity as a good Gestalt.

Organizational Analysis

This song was written by Basim Usmani after he was beaten by members of Straight Edge, a white punk group, leaving him with a dislocated shoulder (Knight 2011). The *orientation* of the narrative is Boston in the present (here-and-now) and Lahore in the past (there-and-then). The *complication* is three-fold: physical, spatial and spiritual. The physical problem is that the narrator has been beaten up and there is no one in particular that he can blame for it. The spatial problem is his move from Lahore (where it is raining water, implying normality) to Boston (where it rains boots, implying abnormality). The spiritual problem is that the narrator has no time to recite Allah's 99 names ("midst the noise and clamor), and that the angels on his shoulders, crushed by boots, have decided to depart. The physical problem is thus used as a metaphor for spatial and spiritual "loss," suffering, and lack of fulfillment. As a result, the narrator's coming to Boston from Lahore dooms him not only in this lifetime but also in the hereafter—even though the narrator is not responsible for this move.

Remedial *action* is implicit in lines 13-14: "They tried to snuff me out, but they only fuelled the flame." Now the narrator has assumed some agency (as the flame has been fuelled), but there is no explicit action mentioned within the narrative toward resolving the three-fold complication. This non-action within the narrative, however, indicates that the construction of the narrative is itself the action. The "flames" are the raging, emotionally charged lines of the song being sung. This "action" is itself helping the narrator deal with the problem.

In the last two lines, the narrator explicitly steps out of the narrative to provide the *closure*. That his past lives only in memories implies helplessness—but only to an extent. It also implies that the past has not been forgotten, and can be evoked in singing, as is being done presently. Thus, after lowering his agency through most of the narrative, the narrator regains it to some extent in the coda. This is reinforced by his shift from English to his native Urdu in these lines, suggesting an ability to remain in touch with the past. The language of the past has not been forgotten and the narrator can, at any moment, stop using English and turn to Urdu.

This song is thus apparently about physical assault but implicitly about the assault of cultural change. The narrator constructs his identity as an individual with limited agency, shorn from his past and brought to a hostile environment, who is nonetheless trying to retain a link with that past—with the help of language and singing. This is how the situation is explained and normalized.

"9,000 Miles"

- 1 *"Do I strive for a hustle, when time slinks and snails it's way by"*
- 2 *ran my thoughts in Chicago, remember how we slept in parking spaces that night,*
- 3 *searching for Noble Drew, our brain synapses fried.*
- 4 *Dear heart, pound less, this rib ain't caged to confine,*

- 5 *How can I swim 9,000 miles*
- 6 *I'm 9,000 miles away from home*

7 *Lying in a ditch, I hung my eyes off the crescent*
 8 *I rubbed the bristles on my chin, where do I begin?*
 9 *Mere moments away from doomsday,*
 10 *I see the tipping of the scale,*
 11 *you knew how I would fare,*
 12 *So why did you test me, when all you really wanted,*
 13 *was to singe me*

 14 *There's almost no line,*
 15 *between fear and love,*
 16 *sometimes I'm made of fire,*
 17 *sometimes I'm made of mud*
 18 *But I, But I*
 19 *hold my own on my own here,*
 20 *still barely holding on.*

Lexical Analysis

The subjects in the narrative are “I” / “my” (in almost every line), “we” / “our” (2, 3) and “you” (11, 12). The objects are “Noble Drew” (3) and “I” / “me” / “my” (7, 8, 12, 13, 16, 17). The temporal marker “time slinks and snails its way by” (1), coupled with spatial markers such as “parking spaces” (2) and “9,000 miles away” (5, 6) show that the narrator is on a journey—a spiritual journey, the journey of life. Initially, the narrator navigates his degree of agency through two lexical devices: by asking questions of himself and doing things to himself. Questions to the Self, such as “Do I strive for a hustle?” (1), “how can I swim?” (5), and “where do I begin?” (8), lower the narrator’s agency even at times when he is in control as the subject. The same effect is produced by creating a dichotomy between “I” and “me” / “my,” such as “I hung my eyes” (7) and “I rubbed the bristles on my chin” (8), making the narrator both the subject and the object.

The subject then changes to “you,” which is god in his capacity as the judge of human action. “The tipping of the scale” (10) shows that a judgment has been made, and the reference to “singeing” (13) shows what that judgment is: the narrator is to burn in hellfire. The repetitive use of the first-person singular as the object, in lines such as “you knew how I would fare” (11), “why did you test me” (9), and “all you really wanted was to singe me” (12-13), further reduces the narrator’s agency by contrasting it with the supreme agency of the all-powerful god. It thus prompts a deeper spiritual question: what is the point of this journey of life? When god already knows who I am and how I would fare, what is the point of existence? But some agency is regained toward the end of the narrative, when the narrator says, “I hold my own on my own here...” (18-19).

The narrator uses cultural markers to context himself to “Islam.” Alongside, the narrator avows an “American” sensibility by alluding to Noble Drew (3) and 9,000 miles (5-6). Noble Drew is the name assumed by Timothy Drew, founder of the Moorish Science Temple of America, a Black American-Muslim organization. The second temple of the sect was founded in Chicago (Smith, 1999). “9,000 miles” (5-6), which is also the title of the song, alludes to *The Supreme Wisdom Lessons* taught by Fard Muhammad, founder of the Nation of Islam, another Black American-Muslim group, to his successor Elijah Muhammad. *The Lessons* preach that Blacks had always been Muslims but they had lost this knowledge. They were lured to North America by the Devil with the promise of gold. Once here, “they could not swim 9,000 miles” to return home.

Using these markers, the narrator negotiates his identity between past and present, Islam and America. Inability to find Noble Drew or swim 9,000 miles reflects his failure

to discover a home in America, his falling to sin (“lying in a ditch,” line 7) and his consequent sentencing to hell. Toward the end of the narrative, the identity negotiation becomes even more spiritual, rallying between “fear and love” (of god, 14-15), between being an angel (“made of fire,” 16) and being a human (“made of mud,” 17). Several levels of contexting and differentiating are thus in play.

Organizational Analysis

The *orientation* of this narrative is Chicago. The *complication* is the narrator’s failure to be at peace with himself in America. “9,000 miles” signifies the distance between America and the home of his ancestors, between the there-and-then and the here-and-now. Allegorically, it is also the distance between the physical and the spiritual realm. Searching for Noble Drew (3) indicates the *action* sequence, the narrator’s untiring but eventually fruitless efforts to discover a spiritual home in America, which causes him to feel hopeless and helpless (“fried brain synapses” in line 3, “pounding heart” in line 4, “lying in a ditch” in line 7). On Judgment Day, he finds the scales tipping against him. But his lack of agency over his own life makes him wonder about the meaning of all this. If agency ultimate lies with god, and if god knew what was going to happen—as is implicit in the religious concept of an all-knowing god—then why does god make him go through all this? What is the point of life, of existence, if all that happens is predetermined (9-13)?

This sort of personal conversation with god is a practice borrowed from Sufism, a mystical form of Islam in which devotees roam around, singing and dancing as they seek communion with the divine. Sufism, which preaches individualized spiritualism, is often viewed as anathema to institutionalized versions of Islam dominated by the clergy, or *ulema*. Lately, it has also emerged as the antithesis to Salafism—a literalist and puritanical interpretation of Islam believed to inspire extremists and terrorists, including those who carried out the 9/11 attacks (Arberry 1950, Knysh 2007). The style of narration thus appropriates this alternative interpretation of Islam. Identity is being negotiated not just between Islam and America, but also between two different interpretations of Islam: Islam as institutionalized religiosity versus Islam as individualized spirituality.

In the *coda*, the narrator steps out of the narrative to evaluate his identity between one who “fears” god and one who “loves” god (14-15), between being an angel (spiritually uplifted) and being a (fallen) human being (16-17). This process of simultaneous contexting and differentiating thus produces a good Gestalt. Once again, the narrative becomes an attempt to explain and thereby normalize the situation, and even provide the narrator with some degree of agency (‘hold my own on my own here’ [19]) and despite the challenges (‘still barely holding on’ [20]).

“Rumi Was A Homo (But Wahhaj Is A Fag)”

- 1 *I want to be stoned on your love*
- 2 *you give better handjob jobs than Asma Hasan*
- 3 *conventional opinion is the ruin of souls*
- 4 *‘Bhaijaan’ [brother] it’s my prose I can’t control*

- 5 *Rumi was a genius*
- 6 *Siraj, you’re an ass*
- 7 *Rumi could fuck Shams*
- 8 *Wahhaj has to wack*

- 9 *Rumi was a genius*
 10 *Siraj, you're an ass*
 11 *Rumi was a homo*
 12 *Siraj, you're a fag*
- 13 *Rumi's throat never tightened with fear*
 14 *naughty Wahhaj, don't use your teeth there.*
 15 *O Jaan, I like tinder*
 16 *O Jaan, set me ablaze with your fire*

Thematic Analysis

This is the first song that The Kominas recorded. It is much closer to the punk creed of provocative, insulting poetry as they take on the two ends of the American-Muslim political spectrum. On one end is Siraj Wahhaj, a Black American-Muslim preacher who justified the burning of a gay-friendly mosque (Knight 2011). On the other end is Asma Gull Hasan, a Pakistani American-Muslim woman and writer who supported President George W. Bush and his invasion of Iraq (Kane 2007). The narrator challenges both these stances by invoking Jalaluddin Rumi, a 13th century Persian mystic whose poetry remain popular, and who is alleged to have had a homosexual relationship with his close friend and teacher Shams-e-Tabrezi (Gamard n.d.).

The lyrics are meant to tease and affront. The song begins with the narrator professing (homosexual) love for Rumi and a sexual slur against Hasan (line 2), before denigrating her “conventional opinion” as well as her “prose” (3-4). “Bhaijaan” is the Urdu word for brother, and perhaps refers to Hasan’s cousin and Pakistani rock singer Salman Ahmad. The implication is that just as Ahmad (supposedly) can’t control his poetry, Hasan can’t control her prose—writing in support of Bush and the invasion of Iraq.⁵

The rest of the song focuses on contrasting Wahhaj and Rumi, often using sexual metaphors. Rumi, who was supposedly killed for being homosexual, is described as a genius, a man who stood up for his beliefs and never gave in to fear (Gamard n.d.). The contrasting adjectives used for Wahhaj are ass (pun intended) and fag (in the effeminate sense), implying that he is not brave like Rumi, and that his homophobia betrays his cowardice. The song ends with yet another sexual evocation: “Jaan” literally means life in Urdu and is often used to address the beloved, while “tinder” and “fire” allude to the act of lovemaking.

This song does not follow the temporal structure of there-and-then vis-à-vis here-and-now. But identity construction can be discerned thematically. By denigrating Hasan, the narrator differentiates himself from “America” insofar as it is represented by Bush and his purportedly “Islamophobic” policies. By denigrating Wahhaj, the narrator differentiates himself from “Islam” too, as reflected in the preacher’s homophobia. The narrator thus decries both these phobias and contexts himself with the “brave” Rumi, who gave his life for his beliefs. As a mystic, Rumi has long been an inspiration for Sufi Islam. The narrator is thus also negotiating his identity between different interpretations of Islam.

In this manner, the narrator locates his identity on the axes between “Islam” and “America,” and between “individualized spirituality” and “institutionalized religiosity.” Contexting his Self with Rumi, the poet, has yet another meaning. It signifies that language and poetry are powerful tools of individual agency against the structures of

society—tools that the narrator is using through the very act of writing these words and singing them. Thus, he also locates his identity along the axis of agency in this song.

Conclusion

The Kominas begin their identity negotiation with the name of their band itself. *Komina* is an Urdu word meaning “bastard”—a crossbreed without a home in civilized society. It suggests both a hyphenated identity and the sense of alienation that it causes for American-Muslims. Its usage as “The Kominas”—with the English article “the” and the anglicized pluralization with the suffix “s” (the Urdu plural would be *kominay*)—makes “The Kominas” a linguistic bastard as well. In adopting this name and through other symbolisms, the members of the band, instead of resenting their alienation, accept and revel in it.

Their insignia of the *hijab*-clad smoking girl and the name of the album from which these songs are taken, “Wild Nights in Guantanamo Bay,” continue this identity project. Guantanamo Bay is the infamous American detention camp in Cuba, where a number of Muslim prisoners captured in the post 9/11 “war on terror” have been incarcerated. These prisoners live in dire circumstances, sometimes fettered to the walls. Moreover, they are not recognized either as criminals or as prisoners of war, and thus have no recourse to any kind of law (Leigh, Ball, Cobain, and Burke 2011). In effect, they exist outside the normal purview of society. “Guantanamo Bay” thus alludes to The Kominas members’ neither-here-nor-there existence, while “Wild Nights” proclaims their adoption and celebration of such existence. It’s the normalization of the abnormal.

The songs, as the analysis shows, carry on in the same vein. In these songs, The Kominas negotiate their identity across three axes. First, they construct their identity as a good Gestalt between the extremes of “Islam” and “America” by contexting to and differentiating themselves from both these social categories. In *Par Desi*, the narrator contextes himself to Boston and America’s rock music culture in the here-and-now even as he invokes the memories of an “Islamic” there-and-then with references to Lahore and god’s 99 names. In *9,000 Miles*, references to Chicago and “being 9,000 miles away” context the Self with “America,” while the Day of Judgment and various religious allusions arrogate an “Islamic” sensibility. In *Rumi Was A Homo*, the narrator supports homosexuality to context himself with the socially liberal “America” while slurring Asma Gull Hasan and her pro-Bush writing to differentiate himself from the politically conservative “America.” Contexting with “Islam” occurs in the eulogy to Rumi.

But this is only one dimension in The Kominas’ complex project of identity construction. In the same lines, they also negotiate the meaning of Islam between the poles of individualized spirituality and institutionalized religiosity—locating themselves close to the former. In *9,000 Miles*, for instance, the narrator engages in a direct conversation with god about the meaning and purpose of life. In *Rumi Was A Homo*, the narrator’s support for homosexuality is a direct challenge to orthodox values of Islam even as a spiritually inclined unorthodox figure, Rumi, is invoked and hailed. Both these songs are also a tribute to Sufism and its message of individual search for divinity in music and poetry.

It is here that we see the two axes intersect with each other. While the second axis is about the meaning of Islam, this meaning is constructed in line with an “American” value—individuality. This implies that becoming American-Muslim is not simply becoming “American” in some situations and “Muslim” in others. The very meanings of America and Islam interact with and influence each other, producing a composite self

within which the boundary between multiple identities can never be truly drawn. Therein lies the ontological significance of narrative identity.

Degree of agency constitutes the third dimension of identity construction. *Par Desi* and *9,000 Miles* begin by the narrator lowering his agency: he is thrown across cities and nations and appears to have little control over what happens to him. But toward the end of both these songs, the narrator discovers that, after all, he can do something about it. That something is the act of narration itself, the writing and singing of songs that tell the narrator's life story and help him deal with his problems. This is also implicit in the invocation of Rumi, the poet, in *Rumi Was A Homo*.

Linguistic expression thus becomes an instrument of agency negotiation. Even though the Self cannot envisage an existence beyond social structures embodied in religious, national, and other such categories, the ability to communicate symbolically allows the Self to navigate between these categories, adopt particular characteristics and values associated with these categories and reject others. It therefore becomes possible to blend even apparently dichotomous categories such as "Islam" and "America" by narrating an identity that weaves them meaningfully across space and time. In the process, the meanings of these social categories can themselves be brought to interact with each other and recreated. Communication thus becomes an instrument of critical awareness and critical action. It makes possible the assertion of the Self against the clerical and political classes, particularly against their power to define social categories and affix their meanings for others.

Almost three decades ago, Bilgrami lamented that "it is because their commitment to Islam today is to a large extent governed by a highly defensive function that moderate Muslims find it particularly difficult to make a substantial and sustained criticism of Islamic doctrine; and this, as I said, leaves them open to be exploited by the political efforts of absolutist movements, which exploit the doctrine for their own ends. Their defensiveness inhibits them with the fear that such criticism would amount to a surrender to the forces of the West" (1992, 835). But these taqwacore songs betray no defensiveness, no paralysis of the capacity for self-criticism that Bilgrami bemoaned. In fact, they are a good example of the "silent revolution" that Ramadan talked about.

We are currently living through a veritable silent revolution in Muslim communities in the West: more and more young people and intellectuals are actively looking for a way to live in harmony with their faith while participating in the societies that are their societies, whether they like it or not. French, English, German, Canadian, and American Muslims, women as well as men, are constructing a "Muslim personality" that will soon surprise many of their fellow citizens. (2004, 4)

Ramadan wrote these words the same year that *The Taqwacores* was first published. The young American-Muslims inspired by the novel may not be quite so "silent," but as this study shows, they are deeply engaged in harmonizing their Islamic faith with American society by constructing an alternative "Muslim personality."

Notes

1. The *hijab* is the veil worn by Muslim women that typically covers their head and chest.
2. The insignia is available on the MySpace profile of The Kominas: <https://myspace.com/thekominas>.

3. Straight Edge is a white punk subculture; the *burqa* is the body veil worn by Muslim women.
4. As The Kominas are a boy band, masculine pronouns such as “he,” “his,” “him,” and “himself” are used throughout this paper to refer to the narrator.
5. Hassan later filed defamation charges against The Kominas and Knight (see Kane 2007).

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