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## Islam, Muslims and the wages of racial agnosia in America

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### Introduction

Without the clue [of race, American] history [i]s a nursery tale.

(Henry Adams)

To get beyond race we must first take account of race.

(US Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackman)

An increasingly common feature of contemporary discourses within Islam, especially in the West, is the so-called “*fiqh al-wāqī*.”<sup>1</sup> At bottom, *fiqh al-wāqī*, literally, “the study and understanding of quotidian reality,” refers to the critical, concrete, and comprehensive assessment of the socio-political, historical, cultural, economic, and other aspects of the prevailing order, as a prerequisite for concretizing and pursuing the broader aims and objectives (*maqāṣid*), as opposed to the simple letter, of Islam as a way of life. Of course, pre-modern jurists also recognized the importance of properly assessing reality.<sup>2</sup> As such, *fiqh al-wāqī* can make no credible claims to novelty. Yet, Muslims today appear to nurse a sense that Modernity is so unique and totalizing a context that it compels a wholesale reorientation to accommodate the profoundly shifted frame of existence that capitalism, modern science, the nation-state,

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<sup>1</sup>The concept itself seems to be far more diffused throughout various writings than it is treated in works devoted specifically to its explication; however, see A Bū‘ūd, *Fiqh al-wāqī: uṣūl wa dawābiṭ* (Dār al-Salām li al-Ṭibā‘ah wa al-Nashr wa al-Tawzī‘ wa al-Tarjamah, Cairo 1426/2006). See also Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī, *Awlawiyyāt al-ḥarakah al-islāmīyah fī al-marḥalah al-qādimah* (Maktabat Wahbah, Cairo 1411/1991) 26, where “*fiqh wāqī‘i*” is said to be “based on a comprehensive, precise study of lived reality.” Meanwhile, *fiqh al-wāqī* has another, much more politicized, meaning unrelated to what has been described here. On this version, see, for example, Ṣāliḥ b. Fawzān, *al-Ajwibah al-mufīdah ‘an as’ilat al-manāḥij al-jadīdah* (Dār al-Salaf, Riyadh 1418/1998) 5–6, where he criticizes what some label as “*fiqh al-wāqī*” as “a preoccupation with politics, political agitation and directing all of one’s time and concern towards this.” He singles out Sayyid Quṭb as the progenitor and “*imām*” of this approach.

<sup>2</sup>For example, *istiḥṣān* (equity), *maṣlaḥah mursalah* (public interest), *sadd al-dharā‘i* (blocking the legal means to illicit ends) all entail explicitly *factual* assessments as opposed to an exclusive reliance upon scriptural deduction. To borrow the phraseology of the seventh/thirteenth century Mālikī, Shihāb al-Dīn al-Qarāfī (d. 684/1285), they involve an ontological determination of the “*wuqū‘ al-sabab*” (i.e., the actual occurrence of a legal cause) as opposed simply to identifying the scripturally determined identity of a legal cause, i.e., “*sababīyat al-sabab*.”; Shihāb al-Dīn al-Qarāfī, *al-Furūq* (4 vols, ‘Ālam al-Kitāb, Beirut n.d.) 1: 11.

consumerism, modern technology, Enlightenment rationalism, and their multiple derivatives have all ushered in. At bottom, this is what much of the talk about “reform” in modern Islam is all about.

Of course, there is a certain uneasiness in many Muslim quarters about the idea of reform, much of this residing not so much in any refusal to recognize the fact of Modernity as a new *wâqi*’ as it does in a certain resentment towards the notion of the latter’s unassailable normativeness. Why, so the sentiment goes, should Muslims prostrate to this reality as if it were substantively beyond reproach and the very act of contemplating, let alone seeking to establish an alternative mode of being<sup>3</sup> constituted some sort of “sacrisecular” blasphemy? Of course, contemplating, not to mention producing, an alternative *wâqi*’ is a tall order, indeed. And privately, it must appear to many that much of the publicly directed violence displayed by Muslims around the world is but a shorthand expression of despair. Among the alternatives, however, both to establishing an alternative *wâqi*’, on the one hand, and to violence as a means of defying the prevailing one, on the other, is to master the latter’s putative theoretical underpinnings and material signatures – its culture, ideology, technology, accumulation of wealth, and “development.”<sup>4</sup> For herein lie avenues to validation and redemption that are predicated neither upon violence nor socio-political risk but on a valorized debunking of the notion that some people are inherently “more modern” than others. This appears to be increasingly the choice of Muslims in America, especially, even if not exclusively, those who immigrated to this country from parts of the world where Muslims predominate or enjoy a long-standing communal presence.

There are, of course, numerous liabilities attending this enterprise. For starters, to take America’s stated ideological commitments to freedom, justice, equality, and the like as the sole or even most operative determinants of socio-political status and advancement is to mistake the menu for the meal. Equally important, such an approach risks crowding out valuable counter-narratives and even “counter-criteria” that must be recognized, on some level at least, as equally American.<sup>5</sup> Beyond theory, however, and the demonstration of intellectual, financial or technological worth and acumen, the practical pursuit of validation on material grounds jeopardizes, if not undermines, all substantive critique of the actual criteria that motivate and

<sup>3</sup>As occurred, in fact, in the centuries following the death of the Prophet, when all kinds of ideas and artifacts from the pre-Islamic Egyptian, Syrian, Iraqi and Persian *wâqi*’ were appropriated and parlayed into a new “Islamic” order. The difference there, however, was that rather than seeing themselves as being forced to acquiesce and adjust to impositions of non-Muslim origin, the early Muslims freely appropriated theretofore novel elements as a matter of choice and from a position of power. Indeed, their marginal power greatly assisted them in maintaining the distinction between “non-Muslim” and “un-Islamic.”

<sup>4</sup>As Faye Harrison put it, “racism is characterized by an international hierarchy in which wealth, power and advanced development are associated with whiteness or ‘honorary whiteness’”; cited in A Jamal and Nadine Naber, *Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11* (Syracuse University Press, New York, NY 2008) 27.

<sup>5</sup>One thinks, for example, of some of the early twentieth-century writers, such as the Anglo-American Randolph Bourne or the Jewish-American Horace Kalen, who challenged what they depicted as the predatory attempts by Anglo-Americans to homogenize American culture and national identity; e.g. R Bourne, ‘Trans-National America’ in DA Hollinger and C Capper (eds) *The American Intellectual Tradition* (Oxford University Press, New York, NY 1997) 171. Meanwhile, Matthew Frye Jacobson describes a similar movement among “Ellis Island whites,” in the second half of the twentieth century, in resisting the cultural dominance of ‘Plymouth Rock whites’; Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 2006) 1–10.

ultimately sit in judgment over one's "accomplishments," as the applause of approval crescendo to stupefying decibels as one approaches redemption. In the end, this leaves little ground upon which to engage in principled, constructive analysis or critique, either of oneself (or one's community) or of the prevailing order. At the end of the day, if one is not careful, whatever successes one realizes can end up enslaving as much as they appear to liberate.

This paper will argue that, despite the growing popularity of the concept of *fiqh al-wāqī'* and perhaps partly because of their individual success in various aspects of American life, Muslims in America have misapprehended a critical feature of the American *wāqī'*, namely the centrality of race to the American narrative(s), American identity-formation, American psychological history, and, ultimately, American redemption. This "racial agnosia," as it will be called here, not only complicates, if not frustrates, the enterprise of securing inalienable belongingness in America but also exacerbates the phenomenon of Islamophobia, even as it denies Muslims the benefit of useful analytical and strategic tools and a certain socio-political insulation that goes along with any explicitly racialized identity in America. This misreading of America also complicates the enterprise of imagining alternative American *wāqī'*s and blocks from view avenues to alternative modalities of being authentically American. Ultimately, this not only threatens the practice and doctrinal integrity of Islam – by forcing Muslims into a posture of perpetual apology and obsequious adjustment to both Modernity and a presumed or imagined American norm – but also it effectively disqualifies Muslims from meaningful participation in national debates over the soul, identity, character, and future of America.

Having said this much, I must rush to clarify a point that is crucial to a proper understanding of my thesis and must not be crowded out by the semantic weight and many negative connotations that have accrued to the concept of "race" over the past number of decades. In recognizing the centrality of race, I am not attributing the same role or status to racism or racial hierarchy. Of course, racism and racial hierarchy have played and continue to play a palpable role in American socio-political reality. But racism is no longer an American ideal, as it was, for example, in the Jim Crow south, apartheid South Africa or Nazi Germany. Nor is it, for that reason, any longer an inextricable element of America's socio-political order. In other words, American efforts to eradicate racism could succeed, and such a non-racist America would still be America. Race, on the other hand, is central to the very meaning of America itself, and without it America would simply not be America.<sup>6</sup> For, as Nobel laureate Toni Morrison observed as late as the 1990s, "Deep within the word 'American' lies its association with race."<sup>7</sup>

In sum, even a non-racist America, unlike, say, a non-racist Egypt or Cameroon, would ultimately implicate race, as this designation would simply underscore a changed relationship between the races. This is another way of saying that race is to America what tribe, clan and *'aṣabīyah* (in-group cohesion) were to the Prophet Muhammad's seventh-century Arabia. And while the Prophet may have been successful

<sup>6</sup>To my mind, the jury is still out on whether an America denuded of racial hierarchy would still be America. In contemplating this question it might noted, however, that racial hierarchy may be grounded in sheer numbers, chronological precedent or historical accident and does not necessarily have to entail racism, at least not as a consciously indulged attempt to subjugate.

<sup>7</sup>Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Vintage, New York, NY 1993) 47.

at redirecting, taming, and redefining the proper limits of these commitments, his success overall would have been inconceivable had he not understood, acknowledged, and purposely engaged these realities as organic constituents of the Arabian *wâqi*.<sup>8</sup>

### Race: from legal prerequisite to socio-psychological metric

On March 26, 1790, during the second session of the first congress of the United States of America, the US House of Representatives passed The United States Naturalization Act. Statute II, Chapter 3, Section 1 of this act read, *inter alia*:

any alien, being a free white person, who shall have resided within the limits and under the jurisdiction of the United States for the term of two years, may be admitted to become a citizen thereof, on application to any common law court of record, in any one of the states wherein he shall have resided for the term of one year at least, and making proof to the satisfaction of such court, that he is a person of good character, and taking the oath of affirmation prescribed by law, to support the constitution of the United States."<sup>9</sup>

These requirements would be amended, of course, several times over the history of the nation. In 1866, for example, native-born blacks became citizens by birth and by 1877 "persons of African nativity or African descent" were awarded the right to naturalize.<sup>10</sup> In 1924, Congress passed the (in)famous National Origins Act, which aimed at ensuring the perpetuation of the numerical and thus the socio-political dominance of Northwest Europeans, thereby implicitly recognizing non-Europeans as eligible for citizenship.<sup>11</sup> In 1952, race was explicitly outlawed as a consideration for citizenship. But, the National Origins Act remained in effect, and immigration from the Muslim world remained under severe restriction. It was not until 1965, at the height of the Civil Rights movement and the Cold War, that the Johnson administration rescinded the National Origins Act and explicitly abolished those provisions that had minimized immigration from the Muslim world.<sup>12</sup> The settling of critical masses of Arab and

<sup>8</sup>Indeed, throughout his mission in Mecca, it was the ties and sentiments of *'aṣabīyah*, first of his largely non-Muslim clan of Banû Hâshim, led by his pagan uncle Abû Tâlib, and then of the likes of the Banû Nawfal represented by Muṭ'im b. 'Adī, that enabled him to survive. In Medina, recognition of the prevailing tribal order, as reflected, for example, in the so-called "Constitution of Medina," clearly informed the success of his mission there. In fact, when Abû Haytham b. al-Tayyihân of the Medinese tribe of Aws explained at the second meeting at 'Aqabah that, in order to fulfill their commitment to the Prophet, they might have to sever ties with certain Jewish tribes of Medina, the Prophet is reported to have responded, "Your blood is my blood, and your destruction is my destruction" (*al-damu al-dam wa al-hadmu al-hadm*), clearly indicating his recognition of the tribal calculus of his new home. See for example, Ibn Hishâm, *al-Sīrah al-Nabawīyah* (3rd edn, eds M al-Saqâ, I al-Abyârî and 'A Shalabî, Dâr Ibn Kathîr, Damascus 1426/2005) 382–3.

<sup>9</sup>*A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation: U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates, 1774–1875* <<http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llsl&fileName=001/llsl001.db&recNum=226>> 103. Emphasis added.

<sup>10</sup>IF Haney Lopez, *White By Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York University Press, New York, NY 1998).

<sup>11</sup>The National Origins Act was promulgated in 1924; Haney Lopez (n 10) 38. Similar in intent was the Asiatic Barred Zone, which rendered all applicants from within a certain geographical longitude and latitude ineligible for American citizenship.

<sup>12</sup>Indeed, in his remarks at the signing of the Immigration Act of 1965 (which prorogued the National Origins Quota System) President Johnson lamented that up until that point "Only three countries were allowed to supply seventy percent of all the immigrants"; JJ Huthmacher,

Asian Muslims in the United States as citizens is thus a late twentieth-century phenomenon.

Going back to the beginning, however, it is clear that race, first whiteness, then blackness, played a key role in American identity-formation. Indeed, the only objective features in the first Congress's criterion for American citizenship was essentially that applicants be "free," "resident," and "white."<sup>13</sup> By contrast, the first French constitution of 1791 condensed several parliamentary decrees from the previous year into a provision that granted citizenship to

those who were born in France to a French father; those who, born in France to a foreign father, have established their domicile in the kingdom; those who born in a foreign country to a French father, have returned to establish residency in France and have sworn the civic oath.<sup>14</sup>

Of course, the French might have dispensed with explicit references to race because, unlike the early Americans, they could assume the race of their vast majority.<sup>15</sup> Be that as it may, America's Founding Fathers' explicit naming of whiteness as a legal prerequisite would have far-reaching socio-cultural, political, economic, and even psychological effects. On the one hand, as Matthew Frye Jacobson points out, America would embrace "the distinctly racial understanding of difference."<sup>16</sup> At the same time, as Richard Dyer observes, the very existence of a racialized criterion laden not only with legal, but also with powerful socio-cultural, economic, and psychological advantages would engender in every newcomer to this "land of immigrants" an inexorably positive phototaxis towards American whiteness. To quote Dyer:

Because whiteness carries such rewards and privileges, the sense of a border that might be crossed and a hierarchy that might be climbed has produced a dynamic that has enthralled people who have had any chance of participating in it.<sup>17</sup>

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*A Nation of Newcomers: Ethnic Minority Groups in American History* (Dell, New York, NY 1967) 120.

<sup>13</sup>This would go a long way, of course, to establishing whiteness as the prototype for "American." Again, Morrison: "To identify someone as South African is to say very little; we need the adjective 'white' or 'black' or 'colored' to make our meaning clear. In this country it is quite the reverse. American means white . . ."; Morrison (n 7) 47.

<sup>14</sup>P Weil, *How to Be French: Nationality in the Making Since 1789* (trans C Porter, Duke University Press, Durham, NC 2008) 14 (emphasis added). Of course, French citizenship debates have also developed over the past two centuries, with what some have even termed racist definitions being promulgated during the regimes of Vichy (1940–44) and Valéry Giscard d'Estaing (1974–81); *ibid.*, 5.

<sup>15</sup>Of course, the case of French slaves and if and how they were integrated into the newly established French republic in the eighteenth century raises questions here. But, as Charles Taylor recently observes, while white Europeans have successfully integrated into French society as bona fide French, Moroccans (and other peoples of color) have not. "[O]ne French person in four today has at least one grandparent born outside the country. France in this century has been an immigrant country without thinking of itself as such. The policy of assimilation has hit a barrier with recent waves of *Maghrébains*, but it worked totally with Italians, Poles, Czechs, who came between the wars"; Charles Taylor, 'No Community, No Democracy' in A Etzioni, A Volmert and E Rothschild (eds) *The Communitarian Reader: Beyond the Essentials* (Rowman & Little, New York, NY 2004) 35.

<sup>16</sup>Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1998) 143 (emphasis original).

<sup>17</sup>Richard Dyer, *White* (Routledge, London 1997) 19–20.

Meanwhile, as mentioned, by 1870, blackness, or “African descent,” would also be identified as a qualifying characteristic for formal entry into American-ness. But blackness by this time (and henceforth) would be recognized as carrying few if any of the “fringe benefits” of whiteness. Thus, between 1878 and 1952 (when race was dropped as a formal consideration), almost no immigrant aspirants to American citizenship – including those from North Africa – based their claims to eligibility on alleged African descent.<sup>18</sup> Rather, all but one of the 52 applicants whose cases were heard in American courts argued and sought to prove that they were white.<sup>19</sup> Even those who had already succeeded in gaining recognition as white feared the possibility of losing it. Thus, in response to a court’s initial refusal to recognize Syrians as white, a prominent Jewish leader expressed his fear that if the Japanese and Syrians were definitively declared Asians, “it will not be a very far step to declare the Jews Asiatic.”<sup>20</sup> As Sarah Gualtieri demonstrates in an excellent study of early twentieth-century Syrian immigrants, Old World conceptions of difference that had been rooted primarily in religion were quickly Americanized and “gave way to a new racial awareness and became increasingly invested in whiteness.”<sup>21</sup>

### The imperceptible advance of racial agnosia

Rather than any racial agnosia, the foregoing would seem to indicate that those who came to America from Muslim lands understood well the power and importance of race.<sup>22</sup> Three considerations, however – one chronological, one demographic, and one thematic – should help to vindicate my argument that Muslims have traditionally been dubious about recognizing race as a feature of the American socio-political landscape.

Chronologically, what I am referring to as Muslim racial agnosia is a post-1965 phenomenon. Given the new mood spawned by the Civil Rights movement, alongside the clearly more open attitude towards naturalizing immigrants from the Muslim world,

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<sup>18</sup>On this point, see Haney Lopez (n 10) 49. Note that this was not limited to Arabs and sub-continent Asians but included Japanese, Chinese, Italians, East European Jews, Armenians, Afghans, and others, none of whom at the time was considered white. On another note, Naber may reflect an element of the kind agnosia I have in mind when she buys into the complete marginalization of the fact that “African descent” was recognized as rendering one eligible for citizenship as far back as 1870; Nadine Naber, ‘Arab Americans and U.S. Racial Formations’ in A Jamal and Nadine Naber (eds) *Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11* (Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, NY 2008) 14: “The United States passed its first nationalization law in 1790, granting naturalization to aliens who were classified as ‘free white persons’. This ‘racial prerequisite to citizenship endured for over a century and a half – remaining in force until 1952’ ”

<sup>19</sup>Haney Lopez (n 10) 49.

<sup>20</sup>Sarah MA Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White: Race and Ethnicity in the Early Syrian American Diaspora* (University of California Press, Berkeley, CA 2009) 68. To this end, Jewish attorneys even went so far as to write *amicus curiae* briefs in support of Syrian bids for citizenship.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.* 53.

<sup>22</sup>Arabs, i.e., Syrian Christians, doggedly pursue and gain recognition as legally white during the first two decades of the twentieth century. After several cases in which they were denied on grounds of non-whiteness, a number of seminal reversals ensued. Among the most famous was that of George S. Dow, who was finally classed white and granted citizenship in 1915; Haney Lopez (n 10) 74–7. Gualtieri, however, points to the case of George Shimshi, another Syrian, who was finally recognized as white and granted citizenship in Los Angeles in 1909; Gualtieri (n 20) 65–9. As for “Arabians,” they were denied in re Ahmad Hassan in Michigan in 1942 but deemed white in re Mohriez in Massachusetts in 1944.

much of the racial politics of the past two centuries would be lost on the Muslim newcomers. Indeed, by this time, American whiteness had become a sanitized, compressed, and undifferentiated construct. As such, few Muslim immigrants recognized such “racial” epithets as “hymie,” “mick,” “wop” and “diego,” or “polock,” which had been hurled at Jews, Irish, Italians and Poles. By contrast, virtually all of them understood the term “nigger.” Race, in this context, comes to be seen as both a problem and an obsession that is unique to blacks! America’s entire racialized substructure, along with the system of meanings and unspoken valorizations that prompted pre-1952 Muslim Arab and Asian immigrants to suffer such humiliations and tortuous bouts of logic in pursuit of whiteness, would fall almost entirely outside the recognition of their late twentieth-century heirs. American whiteness, in this context, comes to be seen and experienced not as a political reality, but as a purely “natural” one. To “accept” or identify with it, comes to be experienced not as being co-opted into an explicitly political cause but as simply assuming one’s “natural” place in the American socio-political hierarchy.<sup>23</sup>

This agnostic tendency vis-à-vis the political-cum-negotiated underpinnings of American whiteness is perhaps further obscured by what I have identified as my second consideration: demographics. Simply stated, the fact that scientists, anthropologists, and even the Supreme Court might confer legal whiteness upon Muslim immigrants tends to obstruct from view an equally operative element in the long history of racial negotiation: “common knowledge,” or what the average white person thinks.<sup>24</sup> Although whiteness ceased to be a legal requirement in 1952, it remains a legal classification applied to Arab and Asian immigrants to this day. What the present iteration of this designation conceals, however, is that while law (or science) may conclude one thing, the generality of “lay” white persons may perceive another. On this divergence, it is possible to be legally white but, at least from the perspective of the majority of whites themselves, socially non-white. Given their comparatively high levels of education and wealth (i.e., compared with other recent immigrant groups), Muslim immigrants tend to be removed from the perspectives and sensibilities of poor and working-class whites.<sup>25</sup> The latter, meanwhile, while generally removed from both Muslims and the sophisticated rationalizations of courts and academics, are not immune to the ploys and promises of ambitious, vote-courting, fear-mongering politicians. American politicians, of course, are keenly aware of the latent power and utility of racialized “common perceptions” and how these can be manipulated and parlayed into identity

<sup>23</sup>On the induction into and acceptance of American whiteness as a consciously political move, see T Allen, *The Invention of the White Race* (2 vols, Verso, New York, NY 1994) 1: 1–29.

<sup>24</sup>Courts tended to rely on four considerations, in no particular order and with various degrees of consistency: (1) legal precedent; (2) congressional intent; (3) scientific evidence; and (4) common knowledge; Haney Lopez (n 10) 63.

<sup>25</sup>One might note in this context that it is widely estimated that only about 28% of Americans have a four-year bachelor’s degree, about 9% have master’s degrees and only about 3% hold doctorates. Thus the majority of Americans are non-degree holders and the vast majority is devoid of advanced degrees that are routinely found among Muslim immigrants in many if not most parts of the country. On the other hand, a recent Pew survey suggests that Muslims are similar to the rest of the population in terms of higher educational achievements. While this may be true on a national level, in many areas outside greater Detroit and greater New York City, concentrations of Muslim doctors and other degree-holders would seem to be significantly higher than the national average, which tends to place Muslims outside the residential spheres of working-class white Americans.



politics.<sup>26</sup> This, I think, goes a long way in explaining both the racially tinged Islamophobic mobilizations displayed in the aftermath of 9/11 and the “Ground-Zero mosque.” It also provides insight into why American Muslims have been so thoroughly shocked and caught off-guard by this perduring, albeit often dormant, dimension of the American socio-political *wāqī*.

My third consideration is what I have referred to as a thematic one. Thematically, American whiteness has long entailed an inscrutable act of erasure, namely of its own status as a race. As Dyer notes, “To say that one is interested in race has come to mean that one is interested in any racial imagery other than that of white people.”<sup>27</sup> This habitual failure to see whiteness as a race with the same immediacy with which we see blackness or any other non-whiteness not only transcendentalizes whites as “just people” or “prototypically human,” it authorizes them as such to speak for humanity as a whole. In this capacity, American whiteness functions essentially as an “invisible race,” especially to whites themselves. As Dyer observes, “White people claim and achieve authority for what they say by not admitting, indeed not realizing, that for much of the time they speak only for whiteness.”<sup>28</sup> By contrast, non-whites can speak only for and from the idiosyncratic, historically informed perspective of their race,<sup>29</sup> their normalness being largely negotiated and measured in relation to white people. To the extent that Muslim immigrants would actually assimilate the whiteness conferred upon them as newly minted Americans, the tendency to see race as a “defect,” stigma or marker of qualified rather than absolute humanity would clearly promote the parallel tendency to see themselves as both white and as unraced, i.e., just normal. Here, however, I should perhaps take a moment to register what I suspect to be an interpretive difference with a number of Arab-American scholars and intellectuals who have weighed in on this issue.

In a book she co-authored, *Race and Arab-Americans Before and After 9/11*, Nadine Naber<sup>30</sup> describes Arab-Americans as going from “invisible citizens” to “visible subjects.” This description parallels the general consensus that Arabs before 9/11 were white, however problematically (as Helen Samhan put it, “white but not quite”) and that this status precipitously atrophied after 9/11, presumably as a result of spontaneously changing American attitudes towards Arabs. My hesitation here is not with whether Arabs were either white or invisible prior to 9/11. It begins, rather,

<sup>26</sup>Indeed, George Lakoff forcefully explains that people often vote their identity over their interests. Republicans recognize this and are willing to capitalize on it. Thus, regarding the 2003 recall election in California, where the (theretofore) white majority had grown embattled in its identity, Lakoff writes: “In focus groups, they asked union members, ‘Which is better for you, this Davis position or that Schwarzenegger position?’ Most would say, ‘The Davis one.’ ‘Davis, Davis, Davis.’ Then they would ask, ‘Who you [sic] voting for?’ ‘Schwarzenegger’”; George Lakoff, *Don’t Think of an Elephant: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate* (Chelsea Green, White River Junction, VT 2004) 19.

<sup>27</sup>Dyer (n 17) i.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid. xiv. Dyer, who is careful to note that he is white, has as his stated goal to bring people to see how white authority is achieved and maintained, in order to empower them to challenge, expose and domesticate it.

<sup>29</sup>The point is not to impugn the notion that non-whites can only speak from a particular, historically embedded perspective. The point is, rather, that the same applies to whites and that the universal judgments they espouse are in fact typically “false universals.”

<sup>30</sup>Nadine Naber, ‘Introduction: Arab Americans and U.S. Racial Formations’ in A Jamal and Nadine Naber (eds) *Race and Arab Americans* (Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, NY 2008) 2.

with the question of whether Arabs could or can be white, invisible and Arab all at the same time and whether their newfound “visibility” is a function of a unilaterally changed attitude among white Americans. If Americans of Arab descent, e.g., Ralph Nader, Danny Thomas or Dianne Reem (or if one likes, Phillip Hittie, Thomas Naff or Charles Essawi), were accepted as white, my question is how much of this was by virtue of what Blackamericans traditionally refer to as “passing.” Passing, of course, is a quintessentially non-European enterprise that requires that non-Europeans be nothing other than white. One can be Italian and white, Irish and white, even Jewish and white; but one cannot be African and white or perhaps not even explicitly Hispanic and white. Can one, then, be explicitly Arab and white? Or does uncontested whiteness require that Arabs (or any other non-Europeans) give up their Arabness, in the same way that blacks who “pass” can never divulge their true African genealogy? To my mind, the assertion that Arabs were white and invisible (i.e., perceived as white) could only mean that their Arabness was invisible, an invisibility significantly and intentionally enhanced by such moves as abandoning or disguising explicitly Arabic names. In this light, what seems more likely to have rendered Arabs more “visible [as] subjects” is their more explicit assertion of their own Arabness, as they begin to settle in critical masses in the period after 1965, in which Muslims begin to exert a more palpable influence on the communal reality and make-up of the Arab-American community.<sup>31</sup> This is later joined by the tendency on the part of other Americans to mark them more explicitly as Arabs as part of the fallout from 9/11. In other words, while earlier, pre-1965 Arab immigrants were more consciously (or perhaps intuitively) aware of what was involved in the trade-off between visibility and invisibility, i.e., between conspicuously asserting one’s Arabness (risking non-whiteness) and consciously suppressing it (potentially qualifying for whiteness), this was largely lost on post-1965 generations, whose sheer numbers rendered them far less dependent on the dominant culture for a sense of communal identity and belongingness. The change, thus – and this is the crux of the matter – from “invisible” to “visible” may have less to do with any unilateral change in America regarding the price it traditionally charged for admission to American whiteness than it did with the difference between an earlier generation of Arabs that understood and accepted the rules and tradeoffs involved in “passing” and a later generation that simply did not.<sup>32</sup>

Today, “passing” appears to be less and less the choice of (and perhaps even an option open to) Arab and Asian Muslims. This reduced premium on passing solidifies in turn the bifurcation between legal and social whiteness. Indeed, unlike the more organic, invisible whiteness of the dominant group, the mere legal whiteness conferred upon Arab and Asian Muslims is not likely to empower them – qua Arab and Asian Muslims – to speak for American whiteness or humanity as a whole. In fact, the real question might be whether this particular species of legal whiteness joined by an

<sup>31</sup>One might consider as well in this context the impact of the changed realities in the Arab lands from which post-1965 immigrants came. Between the germination of early Arab nationalism followed by Nasserism, the Arab–Israeli conflict, and Islamic resurgence, the new generation of Arab immigrants may have simply come to America with a much stronger sense of Arab identity.

<sup>32</sup>In other words, unlike their predecessors, post-1965 immigrants from the Muslim world may not have questioned whether they could be simultaneously Arab and white, but simply assumed that they could. This assumption, however, has been called into serious question by the realities of the post-9/11 world.

increasingly palpable and explicitly recognized social non-whiteness will allow most Arab and Asian Muslims to speak effectively at all, either as practicing or even “cultural” Muslims or as authentic Americans.

### Racial agnosia, blackness and the American *wâqi*<sup>33</sup>

It is here that we come to the outer precincts of an understanding of the wages of what I have termed “racial agnosia” in America. Simply stated, Muslim immigrants in the United States, especially post-9/11, are not only socially non-white; they are legally and socially non-black! On this reality, they are, in effect, socially unraced, at least in the sense of carrying any explicitly recognizable American racial identity. For many, especially practicing, Muslims this is not only unproblematic, but also actually normative, signaling, in fact, the moral superiority of Islam over the West: “*lâ fadla li ‘arabîyi ‘alâ a‘jamî wa lâ li a‘jamî ‘alâ ‘arabî . . .*” (“there is no superiority of an Arab over a non-Arab nor of a non-Arab over an Arab”). Race, on this understanding, remains the peculiar, odd and thoroughly “un-Islamic” obsession of a few bigoted redneck whites and a majority of hypersensitive blacks.<sup>33</sup> From this perspective, not only can race be safely ignored, but it should or perhaps even *must* be ignored, as a form of consciousness thoroughly and irreversibly at odds with Islam.

But if Jacobson is right and America invariably operates on the basis of a distinctly racial understanding of difference, then race must, at least as a matter of fact, be recognized as an operative aspect of the American *wâqi*. Muslim immigrants may be unraced in the sense that they remain diffident towards any explicitly racial, i.e., non-white, commitments. But this does not mean that Americans as a whole will not, willy-nilly, racialize them, i.e., as non-whites, or, worse yet, alienate them as unraced, “alien” “others.” To the extent that such racialization is inevitable and its concomitant alienation a threat, Muslims may be remiss in failing or refusing to explore the implications, liabilities, and opportunities attending American racialization. And yet, an exploration that limits itself to the role, power, and functionality of American whiteness is bound to fall short, given what I have described as the myopic racial self-perception that whiteness tends to promote. In this context, Muslims might want to look beyond whiteness to the role and impact of American blackness in American socio-political and psychological history and identity formation in order to arrive at a real appreciation of the wages of racial agnosia in America.<sup>34</sup>

As with race in general, however, I must pause, again, for another explanatory note. My point in highlighting the function of American blackness is in no way an attempt to elevate Blackamericans above any other people, certainly not in terms of any inherent quality they might be presumed to possess as a biological race. In fact, my focus here is not on blackness as a biological fact but as an historical fact, an American socio-political experience.<sup>35</sup> As an American phenomenon, blackness has been part of the

<sup>33</sup>Of course, the racial, ethnic or tribal forms of discrimination practiced by Muslims themselves, especially though not exclusively vis-à-vis Blackamericans, are routinely overlooked or simply excused as “cultural differences.”

<sup>34</sup>I suspect that Hispanicism, certainly in several parts of the country, might provide similarly rewarding insights. Given my ignorance, however, of the Latino experience, that analysis is better left to those more versed in that historical narrative.

<sup>35</sup>Indeed, as Haney Lopez points out, even Chinese immigrants in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were classed as “blacks.” For example, in the 1854 case, *People v. Hall*, a California court ruled that the testimony of a Chinese person, per an 1850 statute barring “blacks”

unique and cumulative experience of this country from the very beginning. In fact, more than any other non-whiteness, it has contributed to the very meaning and functionality of whiteness itself. In this capacity, American blackness not only informs America's self-understanding, it underwrites a number of immovable American realities, sensitivities, tendencies, norms, and possibilities, all of which are summarily blocked from view by a single-minded focus on American whiteness. Given the limitations of space, I will limit myself here to a brief adumbration of five such implications of American blackness.

First, American blackness represents not simply the possibility but the actual fact of multiple American authenticities and that one can be authentically American without being included in whiteness.<sup>36</sup> Here, in fact, the utility of lumping America with Europe as collectively "the West" reaches, to my mind, its point of diminishing return. For while whiteness may remain the primary racial connotation of "American," it is not the only racial identity connoting America. Martin Luther King, Jr., Snoop Dogg, and Muhammad Ali are all equally connotative of America. In fact, not only do these personalities connote America, but they connote *only* America – not "the West," and not even Africa at first blush. Indeed, one is reminded in this context of the powerful insight of James Baldwin: "Negroes do not ... exist in any other [country]."<sup>37</sup> All of this is another way of saying that, unlike their presence in Europe, blacks in America thoroughly frustrate the attempt to limit America to a single racial authenticity. Instead, they represent the fact that there are at least two racially authentic Americans. And this is perhaps why it is primarily white people and black people who are not routinely asked the question: "Where are you (or your parents) from?"<sup>38</sup>

Second, American blackness represents the possibility of inalienable American belongingness tied to a socially (i.e., not just legally) recognized right and expectation to dissent. Simply stated, Blackamericans boast a publicly recognized identity-in-difference that was fired out of a centuries-long experience in America. While Arabs and Indo-Pakistanis also have hyphenated American identities-in-difference, the perception is that the discordant or differential element in these identities were largely brought to America from without. On this perception, the more Arab- or Pakistani-Americans indulge their native cultural idiosyncrasies (e.g., speaking Arabic or Urdu, eating couscous or biryani), the less American they are likely to be perceived to be. By contrast, the more Blackamericans speak Ebonics ("Black English") or savor fried chicken, the more American (as opposed to African) they are perceived to be. In sum, whereas American belongingness and authenticity for Blackamericans

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from testifying against whites, was inadmissible in court; Haney Lopez (n 10) 51. Meanwhile, a 1925 Supreme Court ruling in Mississippi held that "segregation laws targeting the 'colored race' barred children of Chinese descent from attending schools with White children"; *ibid.* 52.

<sup>36</sup>Cf. S. Abdulrahim, summarizing the perspective of an Arab-American from Dearborn, Michigan: "He is subjectively identifying with 'whiteness' for 'rational' reasons: America belongs to whites and one has to become white in order to become American"; S. Abdulrahim, 'Whiteness and the Arab Immigrant Experience' in A. Jamal and Nadine Naber (eds) *Race and Arab Americans* (Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, NY 2008) 142.

<sup>37</sup>James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (Dell, New York, NY 1963) 40.

<sup>38</sup>Speaking in the context of the Asian-American experience, Frank Wu notes that "'Where are you from' is a question we all routinely ask one another upon meeting a new person. 'Where are you *really* from?' is a question some of us tend to ask others of us very selectively"; Frank H. Wu, *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White* (Basic, New York, NY 2002) 79.

is easily reconciled with a degree of divergence from the American cultural “norm,” it is precisely their acumen at conforming to that norm that confers belongingness and authenticity upon Arabs and Indo-Pakistanis.

Third, even as it represents the reality of non-white American authenticity, American blackness provides an entrée into the live possibility of non-white Western-ness. This is a controversial issue, and many Blackamericans themselves remain resistant to this notion. Much of this resistance fades, however, I think, once it is pointed out, to borrow and extend an insight from Paul Gilroy, that black routes through America are as informative of Blackamerican-ness as are black roots in Africa. Equally if not more vindicating, moreover, is the recognition that, as Westerners, Blackamericans are not mere consumers of some prefabricated Western civilization but actual co-producers of Western – or at least American – civilization itself, certainly as the masses around the world have come to know and appreciate it. Specifically, American pop-culture (in the view of some her most seductive export) would be unimaginable absent the contributions of Blackamericans. Thus, Ali Mazrui once referred to Blackamericans as “Afro-Saxons.”<sup>39</sup> And Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) would speak of the transformation of black Africans into a “Western people.”<sup>40</sup> None of this is to argue, of course, that black Western-ness is identical to white Western-ness. But this is precisely the point: Blackamerican Western-ness constitutes an alternative modality of Western-ness, ultimately a different way and understanding of being, feeling and thinking Western. As Charles Long so eloquently summed up the matter:

It would be difficult, if not impossible, to make the case for the non-Western identity of the black community in America, though several make this claim. The element of truth in this claim is that though we [Blackamericans] are Westerners, we are not Westerners in the same way as our compatriots, and thus we afford within America an entrée to the otherness of humankind.<sup>41</sup>

Fourth, American blackness fundamentally informs the national conscience of America. In this capacity, it contributes in a major way to denying Americans the kind of innocence required to create and exploit “problem peoples,” who are deemed to possess such incontrovertibly negative qualities that those who despise and demand change of them enjoy the luxury of seeing themselves as wholly justified and motivated neither by prejudice, interest nor ignorance but by unspoiled conscience alone. On this perspective, all of the labor falls upon the problem people, i.e., to change what is wrong about them, while their critics are called upon to do nothing but monitor the efforts of their presumed inferiors. To be sure, America has produced problem peoples in the past. And it is blackness more than anything else that reminds her of this unlovely fact. To deny race in this context, especially blackness, is thus to afford America the luxury of innocence born of historical amnesia, thus facilitating the creation of new problem peoples. In fact, shorn of the reminder of blackness, it will likely be easier to shift the blame for any new bigotry to the new problem

<sup>39</sup>Ali Mazrui, *World Culture and the Black Experience* (University of Washington Press, Seattle, WA 1974) 92, 94, *passim*.

<sup>40</sup>Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (repr. Quill, New York, NY 1963/1999) x.

<sup>41</sup>Charles H Long, ‘Interpretations of Black Religion in America’ in Charles H Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Davies Group, Aurora, CO 1995) 152–3 (emphasis original).

people themselves. For, whereas every negative stereotype hurled at the Negro could be turned, with a modicum of effort, into an indictment of what America herself had created, no such stigma is likely to attach to warning Americans about “terrorists,” “violent extremists,” “Islamofascists,” “threats to national security,” and “sharia-wielding Islamic supremacists.”<sup>42</sup>

Finally, American blackness is at the heart of an inexorable American quest for redemption, as the liberal, Enlightenment principles that have come to define her moral universe have cast a haunting indictment over her racist past.<sup>43</sup> This must be understood, however, in light of an important corollary to a previously cited fact. If whiteness is invisible as essentially a non-race, blackness is the quintessential American race. Racism in America is thus, first and foremost, an anti-black affair. It is precisely in this capacity, however, that blackness bears the potential of ultimately humbling America, of pricking her conscience and reminding her that even when she is most sure of herself, proudest of her achievements, and most certain of the righteousness of her cause, she remains capable of great evil and lapses of moral judgment. To deny, in this context, or ignore race is to give short shrift to blackness and in so doing weaken historically grounded fortifications and reflexes against the more vile and predatory expressions of certain strains of American nativism.

Again, none of this should be understood as having anything to do with any inherent quality in Blackamericans or American blackness. This is all a function, fact and feature of American history.

### The wages of racial agnosia for American Muslims

Having been reinstated to its proper place in an American context, it is now clear, I hope, that race is an inextricable part of the American *wāqiʿ*. In the limited space remaining, I would like to explore in more specific terms some of the implications of the Muslim misapprehension of this reality. In so doing, my point is neither to encourage immigrant Muslims to reposition themselves as blacks nor to imply or suggest that they actually could. My point is, rather, to suggest two things: first, that an understanding of American reality through the prism and example of American blackness may generate meaningful insights, possibilities, and alternatives hitherto overlooked or blocked from consideration; and second, that the socio-political margin in America might be understood not solely as a site of alienation, exclusion, weakness, and second-class citizenship but as a possible location of a certain power, insulation,

<sup>42</sup>Indeed, were a Blackamerican Muslim to storm into the local KKK headquarters and kill everyone inside, no one would believe that his actions were based on the fact that he is a Muslim and they are Christians, even were he to quote chapter and verse from the Qurʾān to validate his actions. On the contrary, most Americans would see a greater relationship between his status as a Blackamerican and their activities as KKK members than they would between his actions and Islam! Compare this, however, with how the actions of non-Blackamerican Muslims, domestically and internationally, are routinely explained today.

<sup>43</sup>For example, Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity* (Simon & Schuster, New York, NY 2004) xv–xvi, where the founding “American Creed” is said to include the duty and ability to build a “heaven on earth,” a Puritan “city on the hill.” And yet, to take just one example, when in 1664 the Maryland legislature decreed that “all Negroes then in the colony were to be servants for life by virtue of their color,” this provision endured all the way up to the Civil War! On the Maryland provision, see Huthmacher (n 12) 78.

self-definition, and alternative modes of both belongingness and inclusion as bona fide Americans.

Beginning with the possibility of multiple American authenticities, clearly this should be of interest to Muslim immigrants, who, on the one hand, want to be included as part of America but who also, as Muslims, or perhaps even just as Arabs or Indo-Pakistanis, want to be free to dissent from America without being resented as “racial,” cultural or socio-political apostates or suspected of being as fifth-column plants. Here, in fact, we come face to face with one of the more problematic aspects of Muslim inclusion in American whiteness. For this whiteness provides both limited inclusion and an even more limited right to dissent. In fact, the very threat of exclusion can serve as a powerful incentive for compromising one’s principles, including the integrity of Islam. In other words, one may find oneself in the position of being able to prove one’s loyalty and commitment to a white cultural orthodoxy and world-view (to which one is supposed to belong by virtue of one’s “whiteness”) only by relaxing one’s public commitments to Islam or forfeiting one’s right to dissent. By contrast, American blackness not only negates the exclusive authority of a white world-view or American cultural orthodoxy, it suggests both the possibility of reconciling dissent with belongingness and the theoretical possibility of generating American authenticities that lie beyond both blackness and whiteness.

On the matter of American national conscience, one need only consider the kinds of vitriol that can be spewed about Arabs, Islam, and Muslims with impunity and compare this with what can be said about blacks qua blacks. Again, my point here is not to extol blackness but to point to what is forfeited by the racial agnosia embraced by the majority of America’s Muslims. By allowing America to feign color-blindness, one allows her the advantage of assuming innocence as her point of departure. From here, it is only Islam, Muslims or “those people” that are in need of “adjustment,” while anti-Muslim bigotry, informed as it may be by racism, political interest or the sheer pursuit of domination, is effectively placed beyond critique. By contrast, when House Majority Leader, Senator Trent Lott, remarked in 2002 that “we” would have avoided many problems had we listened to the suggestions of famed segregationist Strom Thurmond, he was relieved of his post. Imagine what would have happened had Lott simply stated that “we” would have avoided many problems had we listened to those who opposed proroguing the National Origins Act.<sup>44</sup> Or imagine what would have happened had the 2002 black DC snipers, John Allen Muhammad and Lee Boyd Malvo, turned out to be Arab or Indo-Pakistani! Clearly, inclusion in American whiteness does not provide Muslims with this kind of insulation. The question, therefore, is where do American Muslims go from here, and how can American non-Muslims be most effectively brought to face the fact and nature of their anti-Muslim bigotry and made to feel ashamed of it?<sup>45</sup>

<sup>44</sup>Or imagine if, instead of connoting brown-skinned Muslims from the Middle East, Newt Gingrich’s snipes at *shari’a* were perceived to be veiled references to blacks, as was “crime and welfare” in the 1980s, whether he would long remain a contender for the presidency.

<sup>45</sup>In addition to the kinds of things that others can say and or insinuate about non-Blackamerican Muslims, I would suggest that American blackness is far less restricted in terms of what Blackamericans can say in more overtly religious terms, though as Muslims they must still contend with a degree of restriction that does not apply to non-Muslims. For example, Stephen L. Carter, a Blackamerican Episcopalian and Yale law professor, writes: “I write not only as a Christian but as one who is far more devoted to the survival of my faith – and of religion generally – than to the survival of any state in particular, including the United States of America. I

Regarding the issue of the possibility of alternative modalities of Western-ness, this is a huge matter for which space will not allow a full treatment. Three quick points, however, may begin to light the way. First, without the possibility of non-white Western authenticity, the alienation that continues to haunt so many immigrant Muslim youth will continue unabated, such alienation being fertile ground for seeds of radical extremism and violence. Second, without the possibility of genuine non-white Western-ness, there can be no real, credible, effective internal Muslim critique of Western thought, culture and institutions. External critique will continue, to be sure. But given the imbalance in cultural and intellectual authority between the Muslim and Western worlds, this is not likely to go very far. Third, without the possibility of non-white Western-ness, one can only wonder about the possibility of genuine, pre-rational affinities and group alliances between Muslims and non-Muslims in America. Blackamerican Muslims have their “Banû Hâshim” in the form of the Black-american community at large.<sup>46</sup> Who will play this role for immigrant Muslims in America?

Finally, on the question of American redemption, racial agnosia allows Americans to conduct themselves in essentially racist ways while being able to deny such racism and thus the propriety of any redress. Racial agnosia adds credence, in other words, to the claim that there is nothing in their treatment of Islam or Muslims for which Islamophobic Americans need to redeem themselves. Part of the key to all of this is the wholesale denial of race as a contributor to the prism through which events and actors are viewed, evaluated or interpreted. And to this end, one of the arguments adduced to deny that Islamophobia is connected with racism is to insist that Islam is not a race! Once race is removed, so too is the need for any vigilance, discipline or redemption. Anti-Muslim bigots are simply able to relocate the problem in the despised. Given their status today as the global representatives of Islam, Arabs are particularly vulnerable to the kinds of stereotype and demagogic vilification that flows from this. In fact, at the risk of wearing out my welcome at this late stage, let me just share here a brief example to demonstrate my point.

On September 22, 2008, fewer than two months before the presidential election, conservative pundit, Rush Limbaugh, delivered a message designed to turn white voters away from Barack Obama. Limbaugh noted that many, particularly blue-collar whites, could not bring themselves to vote for Obama because he was black.

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love this nation, with all its weaknesses and occasional horrors, and I cannot imagine living in another one. But my mind is not so clouded with the vapors of patriotism that I place my country before my God. If the country were to force me to a choice – and increasingly, this nation tends to do that to many religious people – I would unhesitatingly, if not without some sadness for my country, choose my God”; Stephen L Carter, *God’s Name in Vain: The Wrongs and Rights of Religion in Politics* (Basic, New York, NY 2000) 3. Their legal whiteness notwithstanding, one cannot not imagine an Arab, Indo-Pakistani or any other immigrant Muslim writing – or even whispering – such words in America today. Yet, the legacy of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr. and others makes this far more feasible for Blackamerican Muslims, albeit more as Blackamericans than as Muslims.

<sup>46</sup>Shortly after 9/11, in February 2002, radio and television host Tavis Smiley held his “State of the Black Union” conference at a church in Philadelphia. At one point, Charles Ogletree of Harvard Law School posed the question of how “we” could make Muslims feel more welcomed among “us.” Almost before he could get the question out completely, the Revd Al Sharpton interjected that Muslims are *already* a part of “us,” as there is not a person in that church who did not have a brother, sister, uncle, cousin, mother, father or someone close to their family who is not a Muslim. On the reference to Banû Hâshim, see n 8 above.



He also sensed, however, that the number of whites who were alienated by Obama's blackness might not be enough to ensure a McCain victory. So he set out to find a more secure basis for turning white voters away from Obama. During the course of his radio broadcast, he declared the following:

These polls on how one-third of blue-collar white Democrats won't vote for Obama because he's black – but he's not black! Do you know he has not one shred of African-American blood? He doesn't have any African – that's why when they asked whether he was authentic, whether he's down for the struggle. He's Arab! You know, he's from Africa. He's from Arab parts of Africa. He's not – his father was – he's not African-American. The last thing he is is African American.<sup>47</sup>

To be sure, Limbaugh is a shrewd propagandist who knows his audience well. In order to augment the number of whites who would not vote for Obama, he deemed it necessary not only to negate Obama's blackness, but also to affirm that Obama was an Arab! Of course, Limbaugh knew he was misrepresenting Obama. In an earlier broadcast, on August 19, 2008, he complained that no democrat "had the guts to stand up and say no to a black guy."<sup>48</sup> By late September, however, he realized that America was serious about seizing this historical opportunity for redemption. He also recognized, however, that the "redemption vote" could be undermined if he could find a way to negate the basis of any need for redemption. By insisting that Obama was not black, in other words, Limbaugh was implying that there would be no redemption in voting for him. Then, in order to reinforce this negation, he set out to place Obama in a category he deemed least likely to elicit American empathy. From here, not only could the most ridiculous things be said, believed and feared about Obama, this could all be executed with total impunity.<sup>49</sup>

Were the legal whiteness of Arab and Asian Muslims in America genuine and the inclusion it implied real, or if the "unraced" status of immigrant Muslims were enough to place them beyond the reach of American racial politics, surely an activist as astute, accomplished and influential as Limbaugh would have never dreamed of proceeding in such a manner. Equally important, however, Arab (and Asian) Muslims who wrap themselves in what so often proves to be a counterfeit whiteness or who take to the sidelines and seek refuge in an either lofty or crassly pragmatic racial agnosia are likely to render themselves less rather than more capable of mounting effective counters. In fact, racial agnosia, intentionally or not, only facilitates this kind of demagoguery and helps raise it beyond critique.

### **Conclusion: race, Islam and America**

To conclude, from 1790 until 1952, race remained an explicit constituent of the definition of an American. Inasmuch as the 1924 National Origins Act was essentially an implicit or informal extension of this very policy, race in effect continued to play

<sup>47</sup>There are several websites that carry the written transcript of this statement along with an audio clip of Limbaugh's actual broadcast, e.g. <<http://www.mediamatters.org/items/200809220015>>.

<sup>48</sup>For the written transcript and audio clip of the actual broadcast, see <<http://www.mediamatters.org/items/200808200002>> (added emphasis).

<sup>49</sup>Other examples include the case of a woman in Minnesota, Gail Minnow, who during a campaign stop by then presidential candidate John McCain also stated that Obama was not trustworthy, not because he was black but because he was an Arab.

an official or quasi-official role in American identity formation all the up until 1965. Given this trajectory, I have argued that race remains integral to the overall American *wâqi*.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, I have implied, there can be no effective or responsible thinking about Islam or Muslims in America without coming to terms with, engaging and assessing not only the liabilities and dangers but also the practical utility attending this fact. Of course, this is not likely to sit well with Muslims who hold that, as a universal religion for all peoples, times and places, Islam simply does not and cannot “do race.” In response, I would submit that, beyond the fundamentals and concrete consensuses concluded in real space and time, Islam as a wholly undifferentiated and uniform entity is but a falsely imagined abstraction. In America, Islam will have to engage race, just as it finds itself in many parts of the world forced to engage the reality of tribe. And here I might add that I do not see any functional difference between the two, especially if we separate race from racism.

But even beyond the significance of race for Muslims in America, I believe that race is important for America as a whole, as the most likely and efficient instrumentality for keeping America honest, humble, vibrantly pluralistic, and necessarily committed to a negotiated over a superimposed national identity. Indeed, just as tribe and *‘aşabîyah* could be channeled to positive ends in the Prophet Muhammad’s Arabia, so might race in modern America. In fact, on this understanding and deployment, race may ultimately prove to be America’s unwitting gift to herself. For, on the one hand, power, wealth and influence shorn of conscience naturally court disaster for any nation. Race, meanwhile, and most especially American blackness, is a major preservative of American historical memory and national conscience. On the other hand, the natural order of society is diversity. How much, when, why and how long diversity must yield to the practical advantages of homogeneity is among the defining challenges of modernity. In America, at any rate, the nativistic and often tyrannically homogenizing ambitions of the traditional majority, along with its promises of false (or disempowering) inclusion, will ever smack up against the nagging nemesis of American blackness.<sup>50</sup> Surely, it must behoove American Muslims to think seriously about whether and how to invest in or continue to divest from such valiant yet plainly precarious fortifications.

<sup>50</sup>Near the beginning of the nineteenth century, the French intellectual Alexis de Tocqueville, who actually visited America, had this to say: “The Indians will perish in the same isolated condition in which they have lived, but the destiny of the Negroes is in some measure interwoven with that of the Europeans. These two races are fastened to each other without intermingling; and they are alike unable to separate entirely or to combine”; DJ Boorstin (ed) *Democracy in America* (2 vols, Vintage Classics, New York, NY 1990) 1: 356. Meanwhile, at the end of the twentieth century, Yale’s Jacobson would capture the reality described by de Tocqueville in his contrasting the American myth of *E pluribus unum* (from the many one) with the American reality of *E pluribus duo* (from the many two); Jacobson (n 16) 109–35.