

## **Reading Muslims through the Culture Wars**

A public lecture by Prof. Zareena Grewal, Yale University

Introduction by Prof. Marie Griffith, Washington University in St. Louis

Zoom

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6:00 - 7:15 p.m.

### **Griffith:**

Greetings and welcome to all of you who are joining us via Zoom and YouTube for joining us for tonight's event "Reading Muslims Through the Culture Wars: A public lecture by Zareena Grewal". My name is Marie Griffith and I am the Director of the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics here at Washington University in Saint Louis, and I am delighted that you have chosen to spend some time with us this evening, which comes auspiciously at the dawn of the holy month of Ramadan. Before I introduce tonight's speaker and her interlocutor, let me note the Center's next upcoming event. On April 26<sup>th</sup> at 6 o'clock central time, we will host a panel discussion between Professor David Kertzer and Father John Pawlikowski titled "Reckoning with History: Pope Pius XII and the Holocaust". This event is co-sponsored with the Jewish Community Relations Council of Saint Louis, Catholic Theological Union and it's based on the screening of the film "Holy Silence". Our panelists will the discuss the Vatican's reaction to the rise of Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany and how the Pope responded to the horrors of the Holocaust. Details on how to view the film will be emailed out to all who register for this event, so please stay tuned for that information and we'll get it out on our email list very soon. And now to our very distinguished speaker this evening, Zareena Grewal is widely known as a prominent scholar, documentary filmmaker, and influential public intellectual who speaks to a broad array of issues that are urgent in both the United States and the world. As a scholar, she is an Associate Professor of American Studies, Religious Studies, Anthropology, and Ethnicity, Race, and Migration at Yale University. Her first book, *Islam is a Foreign Country: American Muslims and the Global Crisis of Authority*, is a historical ethnography of transnational Muslim intellectual networks that link U.S. mosques to Islamic movements in post-colonial Middle East through debates about the reform of Islam, and this project is based on fieldwork that she did in Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. She is currently working on the reform of... on the book titled "Is the Quran a Good Book?", which explores the range of meanings the Quran has for Americans has in relation to national debates about religious tolerance, racism, and the culture wars. As a documentary filmmaker, she is best known for her film titled, *By the Dawn's Early Light: Chris Jackson's Journey to Islam*. The film examines Islamophobia before September 11, 2001 through the story of the NBA player who has been dubbed "the Kaepernick of the '90s". It was nationally broadcast on the Documentary Channel and featured on ESPN, and she has worked now on a new film titled *Muslim in America*. Finally, as a public intellectual, she is highly sought after by both print and electronic media outlets of diverse kinds. Her writing appears in The Washington Post, The New York Times, The Atlantic, and many other such mainstream media publications. In covering all of this ground so beautifully and so brilliantly she is an inspiration to scholars who want their work to make an immediate concrete difference in the world, and I admire her very much for that. After Professor Grewal presents her lecture, our own Professor Tazeen Ali will engage her in a Q & A period, before opening up to questions from the audience. Professor Ali is Assistant Professor of Religion and Politics here at Washington University,

based in the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics. Professor Ali's research and teaching focus on Islam in America, women's religious authority, and Islam, Gender, and Race. Her book in progress, *Authorizing Women: Islamic at the Women's Mosque of America*, analyzes how American Muslim women negotiate the Islamic tradition to cultivate religious authority and build gender-equitable worship communities. Professor Ali earned her PhD in Religious Studies from Boston University and also served as a visiting Post-Graduate student in Islamic Studies at the University of Edinburgh. And prior to that, she earned a Master's Degree in Islamic Studies from Washington University in Saint Louis. Now, audience members are free to use the Q & A feature on Zoom throughout this event to ask questions to our speaker, which I will be reviewing and we will get to as many audience questions as we can before we conclude this event at approximately 7:15 central time. And, so now, let me present our renowned speaker, Professor Zareena Grewal.

### **Grewal**

Well, thanks so much. I am such a fan of Dr. Marie Griffith and I am so honored to be invited by her and the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics. I also wanted to thank Sandy Jones for making everything run so smoothly, and I am very excited to be in conversation after this talk with my wonderful colleague, Tazeen Ali. And so, I just wanted to say, um, I have to say that I really wish that we could be together, of course, as we have been saying over and over again all year through this pandemic. You know, this is in particular a moment where I think we're all really missing that communion that happens in real life. I'm happy, still grateful, to be able to come to you from my home in New Haven, which I wanted to just mark sits on the traditional lands of the Quinnipiac people. What I'm sharing today is work that thinks about race in the U.S. empire and religion, and it is very much a work in progress and I am so appreciative to have so many friends in the audience, colleagues who have supported me for so many years. And also, any of you who are taking the time to go through one more Zoom session, you know I really appreciate it. So, let me just jump in. You'll see there in the photograph there, you may recognize this viral photo of Lokota scholar/activist Nick Estes and Navajo scholar/activist Melanie Yazzie, who in response to what was called "the Muslim Ban" started the hashtag #nobanonstolenland as part of the Nationwide protest at airports. So, when he was interviewed by CBC, Estes said that people were singing things like "This Land is Your Land" or "The Star Spangled Banner", and it was a very jarring experience for a lot of Native folks that were there [because] it didn't accurately tell the story of exclusion and banning people and whose land it actually belongs to. Explaining why he joined the protest and took in a few Muslim refugee families from Syria to an indigenous welcoming ceremony, he said "it's not that we have to say we're pro-immigration for people to come and steal our lands, it means that if people are going to come here and co-exist peacefully it has to be on the terms of the people whose land it is to begin with. We recognize the Muslim refugee's humanity in distinction to the U.S. who claims exclusive ownership over who and what counts as human". The welcoming ceremony was also a way to reclaim indigenous sovereignty; he went on to say "It means something different... much different... if you're being welcomed by the original peoples versus a colonial government. It means that the United States as a settler nation does not have the final say on who or what comes into the country because it is not theirs to own. When we do that as indigenous people it is reclaiming our sovereignty, our citizenship, and more importantly our kinship." So, of course, the executive order ended under Biden, but we know that the conditions that produced it remain intact, and those conditions are of course not new. My friend and colleague, Junaid Rana,

reminds us “the figure of the Muslim as a religious and racialized other can be traced back to 1492” and other scholars have also written about this. The history of the very idea of race developed out of religious sentiment in which the Muslim moor and the Indian in the so-called “New World” were racialized against one another in a triangulation with the White European. And, as my colleague [REDACTED] demonstrates, sodomy had considerable power as a racializing figure; she argues that the criminalization of sodomy may have derived from its association with Muslims. So, we’re thinking about the ways in which the category of the Muslim is both loaded racially and sexually in the American imagination. So, the historical movement towards a modern conception of race formed the emergent racial capitalism that was a springboard for European expansion, settler colonialism, and “New World” slavery. And, I’m sure many of you know that roughly 30% of the enslaved Africans brought to the Americas were Muslims. So, I want to talk a little bit, just for a moment, about one of those enslaved Africans, Omar ibn Said: son of a wealthy farmer, spent over 25 years as a prolific scholar and Muslim religious leader in Senegal before he was captured and sold into slavery. Forcibly converted to Christianity, Said would write Quranic verses and pass them off as the Lord’s prayer in Arabic as [REDACTED] for devout Christian settlers. Now, out of all of his Arab manuscripts he’s best known for his autobiographical essay. Written in 1831, it is the only known Arabic autobiography penned by an enslaved African in the U.S. and it reflects his lifelong devotion to Islam. He begins it actually with a chapter called [REDACTED], a chapter from the Quran which states that only God has sovereignty over human beings. So, as I said, I’m going to talk today, he figures in the project although he won’t be the focus of my project today, I’m going to be talking mostly about artwork. But, the project is in relation to a lot of conversations I’m going to be having over several years, including this initiative that I’m a part of at the University of Toronto named “Reading Muslims”. The name is coined by my friend and colleague [REDACTED], and I borrow the title with his permission today. So, in the contemporary context we talk about the racialization of Islam as the reading of Muslim bodies or those who presume to be Muslim, such as Sikhs. In the context of the global war on terror, we could talk about the anxieties and political stakes of modern local states around also how Muslims read their texts. My colleague John [REDACTED] also writes about this... that’s what my first book is partly about, and I’m sure many of you know [REDACTED]’s wonderful article where she analyzes how when right-wing thinktanks are troubled not only by Jihadis but by “moderate Muslims” theologically invested in the truth of their scripture, the kinds of people who will be and fasting this Ramadan. And so, although that first book foregrounded Muslim debates about authority and then the Western discourses about Islam or the reform of Islam or the crisis of Islam were kind of the backdrop, this book flips it where I really am thinking about, you know, these discourses that are described as Islamophobic or anti-Muslim racist discourses, orientalist. And so, I just wanted to say a little bit about authority kind of signaling the questions around periodization that I’m thinking through but also about terminology, and so that’s why I want to say I’m thinking out loud with you. I have, for many years, been with a cohort of scholars who really have been critiquing the use of the category Islamophobia because it frames discrimination against Muslims as a “phobia”, which suggests that it is a problem of individual bias or individual fear. And so, we’ve been recommending that people shift to talking about anti-Muslim racism because it highlights how it’s interrelated with other forms of racism; there’s anti-Arab, anti-Black, anti-immigrant, anti-Latinx, anti-Indigenous racisms. And we’re trying to think intersectionally about this, and of course when you think about anti-Muslim racism as a product of settler societies and states engaged in imperial warfare across the globes but also within the U.S.’s own borders as well, but I’m at the point in the project now where I’m starting

to rethink my aversion to “Islamophobia” and its antonym “Islamophilia”. So, these terms do something which “anti-Muslim racism”, which I think is a bit clunky, doesn’t quite do which is that they center the idea of religious excess, which I think is a key component to discourses about Islam. In other words, and particularly in the American Culture Wars, so depending on the particular flavor of one’s orientalist longings or fears, the Quran could be a book that is excessive in its cruel punishments, or too much law, or its excessively misogynistic, or it could be excessively beautiful, or excessively musical, or there’s other ways, and you’ll see this in the cases I’m going to talk about today. And so, you know, I guess whatever the relevant ideological program demands of it, the Quran can be that. In other words, the Quran is a kind of cultural football that’s being kicked back and forth in these Culture Wars, and that’s what I’m arguing. And whether that be the religion is false religion, bad religion, in the sense that all religion is bad or a religion of peace. And all of these invocations, whether they’re by Christians, Atheists, and what Professor Leigh Schmidt calls “religious liberals,” respectively the idea is this excess is there, and I do think that Islamophobia or Islamophilia, or maybe Quranophobia and Quranophilia, are categories that are capturing those orientalist projections and the idea of excess, of too much. One way of thinking about it, you know, is the story of how Islam became the most “religion-y” of all the religions, or the same way the Quran becomes like the ultimate scripture. So like, if all scriptures have, you know, are filled with punishments or have elements of misogyny or other things, the Quran is conceived as being the most of ... the one that has the most. And so, along with that, there’s also this idea of the Quran being not merely a book but a great book, a scripture and part of this universal heritage but also that itself is a kind of confused discourse which I’m going to talk about in a moment: is it a legal book? Is the Quran full of law? So, I’m going to be kind of wrestling with the use of these terms over the course of this presentation and I really look forward to your reactions and thoughts about these questions too because I am still very much thinking out loud with you here. I just wanted to take a step back for a moment and say something about the scholarship on religion and the scholarship on race and the ways in which I situate myself in anthropology, the anthropology of Islam, anthropology of the secular but also in ethnic studies and American studies and then also in religious studies and so when I read across these different interdisciplinary formations on work on religion and work on race, I have found this kind of convergence that others have too where they’re kind of moving in the same direction from different positions. The scholarship on race has moved away from adjudicating the biological and socially constructed nature of race to focus on racialization, in other words the how people and, as I’m gonna argue, objects, become racialized. And... in the study of religion we’ve moved from adjudicating the biological and socially constructed nature of race... to the study of... I’m sorry... we move from documenting beliefs and communities and practices identified as religion to studying secularism, how the very possibilities of what religion can be are historically contingent and are managed by power externally and internally. And... one of the thinkers that I’m thinking with... you know, to kind of think through the ways in which secularism operates as this force or presence that clears the space for the absence of religion but also sets the racial terms by which religion can be spoken and heard, is Vincent Lloyd, he who writes “[In the US] whiteness is secular, and the secular is white. The unmarked racial category and the unmarked religious category jointly mark their others. Or, put another way, the desire to stand outside religion and the desire to stand outside race are complementary delusions, for the seemingly outside is in fact the hegemonic.” So, that’s the kind of analytical frame which I want to be a foreground as we go through the different cases that we’re going to talk about today. So, I’m just going to go back, um, so when we talk about the Culture Wars, uh, you know, there’s

different periodizations. One is really starting in the 60s and I am still toying with how to periodize this, but I don't want it to be a post-9/11 story because it certainly is not. And so I want to begin today with the 1997 case of when a coalition of 16 American organizations petitioned the U.S. Supreme Court to have the image of Prophet Muhammad with a Quran in one hand and a curved sword in the other sandblasted off a freeze on the North wall overlooking the nation's central legal chamber. So this freeze was designed in the 1930s by a German-American artist, uh, Adaf Weinman, and features 18 of the world's great lawmakers including Charlemagne and Moses and others, and in his rendering the Quran here is presented as a great book of law and the story of human civilization. So there's actually been a lot of art historical criticism of this piece and, um, that's generally reading why Weinman's freeze in masonic fraternal terms, arguing it both deployed orientalist tropes but also expressed sympathetic religious political and moral meanings which challenge the Christian demonization of Muhammad as a... [audio cuts out]... oops, are you... did you lose me there? Can you hear me? Uh, okay, um anyways, this idea that Muhammad is this kind of false prophet or quintessential infidel. And so the freeze is read, or Weinman's argument is read as a kind of argument from Weinman about American civil religion, um, and um, and so the freeze offers a kind of ??? (18:47) model for civilization in which American justice is the culmination of a progressive ancient heritage symbolized by a horizontal multicultural procession of historic figures of great men and their great books, um, you know, united by the providential idea that God is the ultimate sovereign lawgiver. So, of course this landed in a very particular way in the '90s during the Culture Wars in that period and American Muslim Organization's objection was not over Weinman's depiction of the Quran but of Muhammad. So, the Muslim Americans protested that having a freeze in an official location was insensitive to the Islamic prohibition, which of course is not shared by all Muslims, against displaying images of the prophet. And then they also mentioned that the prophet was wielding a sword. I'm not sure that I would call that wielding but, in any case, they did feel that it perpetuated the stereotype that Muslims were intolerant conquerors and orientalist ? (19:40) that the religion of Islam was spread by the sword. I should also say that Muhammad is not the only, uh, person in the freeze holding a sword. So American Muslim litigants had precedent and they were being led by care in this moment, but even in 1955 a diplomatic from Egypt, (20:00), and Indonesia resulted in the removal of a 50-year-old free-standing statue of Muhammad as lawgiver made by a sculptor, Charles Albert Lopez, and that was removed from the roof of the Federal Appellate court in Madison Square in Manhattan. So, in any case what happens with this is that the judge makes a ruling against the Muslim plaintiffs, explaining that the figure represented an honor rather than a form of idol worship and the sword was a general symbol of justice. He also noted that any alterations in the freeze would not only destroy the artistic integrity of the whole but it would also violate a 1949 statute against the removal of statues from the court's property. However, the ruling was riddled with a contradiction; in his letter, the judge insisted that the figure was "a well-intentioned attempt by the sculptor to honor Muhammad," but then in a separate part of it he has a kind of a concession to the Muslim litigants and there was a brochure that was passed out to the tourists and visitors which reworded the figure to say that the figure in fact "bears no resemblance to Muhammad," and it explains that Muslims have a generally strong aversion to pictured representations of their prophet. So, I should have to say there were no riots, there was no big protest after this came down, nothing happened. No flag burnings, not even an appeal. Aside from the fact that the case proves that, once again, which we have to keep proving over and over again, I guess, that violence associated with the Danish cartoons and other depictions Muhammad can't be naturalized as spontaneous or explained by a

so-called “Muslim taboo”. What I’m interested [in] today is the contradictory statements here as to whether or not the sculpture was an authentic representation, and a negative one; you know, was it honoring Muhammad or not? And is the Quran a great book of law? And it seems to me that the judge and the people that wrote the brochure are not quite sure that Muhammad deserves the honor that the artist presumably bestowed upon him. And so this kind of confusion is the kind of stuff that I’m really looking at. So the failed lawsuit did elicit a fatwa, which is a non-binding legal opinion from a prominent Iraqi American Sunni cleric, Imam Tahajud Alwani (👤), who was at that time the chairman of the Islamic Fiqh Council of North America, this is a kind of umbrella organization charged with handling legal and ethical issues that come up in Muslim life in North America. So his fatwa echoed the ruling from the judge defending the spirit of the freeze as respectful in contrast to so many negative representations of the prophet. The phrase, he argued, situated Islam within a “common universal heritage of law and justice.” Alawani said nothing about the fact that the Quran was not compiled as a book in Muhammad’s lifetime, as the freeze depicts, nor does he clarify that the Quran is not really a book of law. And this has become an important talking point for Muslim apologists in the wake of the, uh, wave of sharia bans that we had since 2009. And so then sort of jumping now forward to a different set of culture war debates where the idea of the Quran as a book of law figures very differently, right, now that sharia is actually a household word. Uh, so in a CNN interview in 2016 Kayleigh McEnany, who’s a Trump surrogate and political commentator, quoted Andrew McCarthy, a *National Review* columnist, as a source for her statement that “90% of the Quran is a legal document and is sharia.” Now, McCarthy, by the way, denies making this claim. So, in response to that another American-Muslim religious leader, Joe Bradford, argued that, according to his calculations, out of the 6,236 verses of the Quran, less than 9% (he said about 500) are about law or legal issues. Um, so I think Bradford’s point is generally undisputed by his peers and I have not counted the verses myself, but I’m most interested in the transformation of these tactics of rehabilitating the Quran among American Muslims in the past twenty years. You know, from Alwani insisting and affirming the Quran *is* as great book of law precisely because it’s *not* a book of law. And in that is part of what I’m trying to track. This is why I wanted to start with Vincent Lloyd’s quote; so we see the ways in which figures who, you know... the ways in which these Western discourses are shaping American Muslim debates. Okay, let me just move a little bit. So, most of today’s talk is about the things I’m talking about today are about the Culture Wars, but I also don’t want us to forget the actual wars that are happening in the War on Terror. So over the course of doing research in my book I’ve been collecting an archive of protests featuring highly ritualized Quran burnings, such as the one that happens on every 9/11 or this one at the White House in the wake of the San Bernadino shootings. And I just wanted to mark for you that, without fail, there’s always a counterprotest that draws a larger crowd and who’s there to burn the Quran and often the Quran, you know, doused in gasoline is kind of rescued by someone before it’s actually burned, and this even became a club track by somebody named Jacob Isam in 2010 so you can actually hear the song on the radio. I won’t share it for you; it’s not very good. Another thing that happens, and this is another kind of incident way of making this larger point that the Quran is, I would argue, one of the most iconic objects in contemporary US Culture Wars. As far as Islamic objects I think only second to the hijab. So one of the things that you see happening is people buying Qurans at Barnes and Noble or other places and taking them home and shooting them. So these videos, invariably always featuring white men, almost always, were on YouTube and were last year moved from YouTube to Pornhub. So we might all also think about this idea of shooting the Quran for sport, why those videos moved to Pornhub,

and again I'm thinking about this category of access, right, in other words, what's happening there? To go back to what I was saying before about the actual Wars. So I want to remind you again of a relatively minor controversy in 2008, which maybe some of you will remember; a US military sniper's desecration of the Quran and use of the book for target practice in Baghdad led to widespread protests within and beyond the city, threatening the US military's fragile alliance with Sunni forces at the time. And so you had this former college quarterback and Christian Major General, Jeffrey Hammond, who made a very public apology to the Iraqi protesters, and then Colonel Ted Martin deferentially kissed the Quran before this crowd, before handing it to the local **sheikh** who actually was quite nervously accepting the Quran and the apology. And so at that moment on CNN, the b-roll and these other two starkly opposed images of the shredded Quran pierced by American soldiers' bullets and the video of a uniform-clad decorated Colonel kissing the Quran, you know, are circulating together on CNN and other mainstream media and it sparked a debate about whether the General's conciliatory gesture was evidence of American characteristic tolerance of all faiths, right, going back to the freeze for a second, or merely a pragmatic military tactic intended to stave off a violent backlash from Sunni insurgents. And so the debate turned on whether American efforts to promote tolerance confused respectful behavior with reverent behavior, and there was a lot of anxiety about whether American values and ideals and even secularism itself were being compromised in the service of the promotion of tolerance and the promotion of democracy.

I'm gonna focus mostly on a series of artists in the next part of the talk, but I just wanted to signal that I am trying to think through policy as another kind of cultural object in this... this project is so unwieldy but it's such a huge and diverse archive... so the kinds of things that I'm thinking about are different policies like, you know, the Quran and prisons – what's the policy around that, there's a lot of controversy, and I can talk about this in the Q&A, but really what I see in these debates around tolerance, around the Quran, or on these kinds of Quran controversies that I'm tracking [is that] they really sort of pivot around two ideas. The first set of debates is about how much we as Americans should tolerate Muslims in the U.S. These are the kind of domestic debates, and then the second set of debates, which are happening simultaneously, are about how the U.S. government should be making the so-called "Muslim World" more tolerant. I also want to think about that relationship between the violence of the state and then how that gets enacted, so, in other words, the desecration of the Quran at Guantanamo, where it's being ripped, dropped in toilets, et cetera, the shooting of the Quran in Iraq, and then to the people on Reddit who are confessing "I just bought a Quran to shit on it," or other kinds of things for these people that are posting the videos on YouTube or on Pornhub. And so what I'm trying to think with here is sort of drawing on spillers, like the kind of fleshiness of the Quran. And so what I'm hoping is that this book will deepen our understanding of the complexity and diversity of Americans' political and cultural interests over time and to show that they're complex and they're neither uniformly negative nor always in the service of U.S. empire. And so that requires me to actually kind of do like an **?? 29:48** of things where I'm actually tracking particular Qurans, Thomas Jefferson's Quran, Malcolm X's Quran, etcetera but also trying to kind of just track it as a discursive trope that comes up in all of these different debates. And so that fleshiness of the Quran has brought me to think and read more carefully in performance studies and culture studies. And so one of the thinkers that I'm thinking with is Ann Chang, who writes in her fantastic book *Ornamentalism* that "Those of us invested in the critique of power have long been alert to the crisis of persons who have turned into things, but we should

also attend to the ways in which things have been taken for persons and how this impacts our ideas about human ontology and aliveness.” And so it is chilling to just absorb that those shot up Qurans, of course, stand in for black and brown bodies the shooters desire to kill. But what I want us to also remember, and this is what I’m deeply interested in, [is] the mirroring that happens. In other words, the text object the Quran often stands in for Muslim bodies in both islamophobic and islamophilic registers. So, the focus on the Quran as a racial object that Americans who are not Muslim need is being supplemented by an analysis of the racial experiences of American Muslims vis-a-vis their racialized scripture. Again, I’m not going to talk about this today, but I just wanted to signal that as something that I’m happy to take up in the Q&A.

So one of the things that happened 20 years ago on 9/11 was that there was a public rush to buy the Quran with bookstores backordered for weeks and, even though President Bush was sort of saying the 9/11 hijackers don’t represent *real* Islam, many Americans felt an urgent need to read the Quran themselves. So on the one hand people were arguing well this is natural and it’s a reflection of American tolerance of different faiths and curiosity, but on the other hand critics, and I agree with these critics, argued it’s not a natural reflex but a cultural reflex to turn to the Quran to understand terrorism and to search for the verses that made this bad thing happen rather than to consider a modern historical account of al-Qaeda. And I’m thinking of Mamdani and others who’ve made this argument really well, and I want to take it further and say that this phenomenon reflects a characteristically American scriptureless tendency towards religion as well as a racist logic that depends on two very different understandings of culture. And here’s where Mamdani’s “good Muslim/bad Muslim” and culture talk comes in; you know, the idea that we culture and their culture has them, right. So in order to explore why so many Americans were drawn to essentialist cultural explanations of the attacks rather than political ones, we have to look at what I think we call Americans determined in comprehension, to borrow Melanie McAlister’s term. And I think that’s what this artist Mounir Fatmi’s installation is doing. I hope this will be the cover of the book. And it just makes me think about that Barnes and Noble aisle that I invoked earlier that you could have an American trying to buy a Quran to understand 9/11 in the same aisle and reaching at the same time as someone who wants to buy the Quran so that he can go and shoot it in his backyard and post the video on YouTube or Pornhub. And I guess this desire to read the Quran myself, I’m arguing, has become a kind of pervasive liberal form of political witnessing after 9/11, and to this day I have a very long list of celebrities who’ve claimed to have read the Quran and then they go on to say something defending it or not. And so I think the idea of reading the Quran myself operates as a kind of racial alibi and a deflection from accusations of bigotry in much the same way that the invocation of having black friends or a black friend is simultaneously used as a license to make a racist claim while being presumably insulated from scrutiny as well as a claim to the objective authorities. This goes back to Vincent Lloyd’s idea of the role of outsider, or the white outsider, and it’s also a form of cosmopolitan social capital which positions the reader to be able to recognize the essential value, or its lack. In other words it’s non-Muslim Americans’ claims to have read the Quran that are the scaffolding for arguments both for and against tolerating Muslim minorities, both for demonizing and defending Islam, and the fact that such claims to intimate knowledge of Islam and Muslims centered the scripture, rather than the people, is typically left uninterrogated.



And so for the rest of the talk I'm just going to quickly move through some artists. I have a chapter that goes through different kinds of translations of the Quran. So like the "how to read the Quran," "Quran for Dummies," the Islamophobic version, the complete infidel's guide to the Quran, but then these Islamophilic or **Quranaphilic** visual artists by white American atheists. Those are the people that I'm going to talk about today, who I'm arguing have created sympathetic representations or translations of the Quran. And so the three people I'm going to talk about are Sandel Burke

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