

Forum

The Alchemy of Domination, 2.0?¹ A Response to Professor Kecia Ali

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In her critical essay, “The Omnipresent Male Scholar,”² Professor Kecia Ali sets out to call attention to what she sees as the hegemonic privileging of the male scholarly perspective and the need to replace this with an academic landscape more reflective and accommodating of the experiences and scholarly vantage points of women. To this end, she profiles the works of several (Muslim) men in Islamic Studies (myself included) and highlights the various ways in which they omit, overlook, undervalue, or dismiss the topic of women or the scholarly views and interventions of female scholars. Her arguments are reiterated and expanded (this time without naming her targets) in her Ismail R. al-Faruqi Memorial Lecture delivered at the 2017 annual conference of the American Academy of Religion.³ The present essay aims to respond to Professor Ali’s assessment of *my* work, most specifically *Islam and the Blackamerican* (and to a lesser extent, *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering*) alongside some of the broader issues she raises as part of her general critique. I will leave it to the other male scholars she profiles to respond to what she has to say about their work.

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I would like to thank two friends, one male and one female—they know who they are—for their invaluable comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

The main thrust of my response to Professor Ali revolves around what I see as the tendency in her critique to substitute one ostensible regime of domination for another. I define domination here as the attempt to disabuse a person or group of their story and assign them a supporting role in one's own, in which capacity their story effectively disappears and their efforts are appropriated to the enhancement of the imposed substitute. This is essentially what Professor Ali sees male scholars doing when their works exclude women and or female scholars, while purporting to speak with general authority. The result is a counterfeit consensus where women are ostensibly spoken for but neither speak for themselves or anyone else. As part of her effort to expose and rectify this imbalance, however, Professor Ali sets up an interpretive prism that distorts my work by casting it as having *failed* to do what *she* insists *all* works must do: include women as a significant voice or focus. This 'failure', in turn, underwrites and sustains the propriety and urgency of her campaign. And with this, *my* work is effectively coopted into the service of *her* project, even as she consistently ignores, misapprehends or fails to take seriously my explicit descriptions and vindications of the aims of my scholarship, not to mention its actual substance.

Beyond this substantive critique, there are practical problems with Professor Ali's methodology (a fact she partly acknowledges⁴). More importantly, she leaves unresolved the critical question of the very point of women's inclusion as she argues it. Is it to promote or gain a space for a concretely identifiable woman's perspective, such that the male and female perspectives are assigned equal value? If so, is there some standard independent of either the male or female vantage point by which such equality of value might be measured? Or is the aim, perhaps, to elevate the female over the male perspective? If so, is this explicitly acknowledged or effectively camouflaged? Or might the goal be simply to do away with perspective altogether? If so, what can be the point of insisting on the inclusion of perspectives grounded in a female epistemology or experience? If not, is not the male perspective as legitimate as the female perspective qua perspective? I will return to these and related issues later. For now, let me turn to her more direct critique of my work.

Professor Ali makes it a rhetorical point to distance herself from bad faith readings of others' work. As she put it, "Let me acknowledge that it's bad form to criticise someone for writing the book they actually wrote rather than the one you wish they had written."⁵ In point of fact, however, this is exactly what she does. Her *Grundnorm* is the assumption that a male schol-

ar's attitude towards the value of female scholarship can be measured by the number or percentage of female scholars he includes in his index and bibliography. But bibliographies and indices are not always reliable indicators of a scholar's sources, interests or influences.⁶ In the index to Charles Taylor's massive *A Secular Age*, for example, there is no mention of "religion," "faith" or "belief." Yet, these topics appear abundantly throughout the book. In fact, Ch. 2 is entitled, "The Bulwark of Belief" and Ch. 14 "Religion Today." This asymmetry likely reflects a widespread (if little advertised) reality of academic publishing, namely that authors do not always construct their own indices or bibliographies.⁷ I can't imagine that Professor Ali would be unaware of this fact, and I'm not sure why this would not prompt her to devise a methodology less likely to distort the meaning and aims of a scholar's work by subjecting it to readings that are more indebted to *her* ideological commitments than they are to the actual aims and objectives of the scholarship in question.

But even if an author constructs his own index or bibliography, counting citations may still not be a reliable indicator of his actual commitments. As the legal scholar Deborah Rhode points out, female scholars are often deployed as little more than "footnote fodder," where the aim is not actually to engage them but merely to cite them for the purpose of appearing to be in step with the latest intellectual fashions, or in order to confer an air of universality or impartiality upon views that don't deserve this recognition.⁸ One might ask in this context how much misrecognition Professor Ali's mechanical criterion visits upon statements in *Islam and the Blackamerican* that refer to Islam's "opposition to white supremacy—or for that matter, any supremacy, *including male supremacy*."⁹ Would this have been more immediately recognized had it been accompanied by a footnote citing a woman? Or would the book itself have been assessed more favorably had it omitted this sentiment but padded the notes with references to female or female-sounding names? Clearly, the possibility of footnote tokenism suggests how misleading mechanical metrics of inclusion can be. Similarly, there may be any number of explanations other than bias, prejudice or a lack of respect for why a work excludes a scholar or scholars. Let me try to give a concrete example of what I am talking about here.

In 2013, I was invited to lecture in the H.A.R Gibb Arabic and Islamic Studies Lecture Series at Harvard. Over dinner, the late Shahab Ahmed made a point to come over and sit beside me, whereupon he proceeded to thank me for my book, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam: Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī's Fayṣal al-Tafriqa*, explaining that it had provided

him with insights that proved valuable to his on-going project. Not entirely sure about what he meant at the time, I later concluded that he was referring to my argument (following al-Ghazālī) that a theologian's interpretive prism, which consists in a universe of values, meanings and presuppositions that are often exogenous to the interpreted text itself, can be just as important in determining what he concludes to be the text's meaning as is the actual text.¹⁰ As such, theological disagreement need not reflect different levels of commitment or allegiance to the text but may simply result from commitments to different interpretive prisms. This understanding of Ahmed's intent was confirmed by his 2016 book, *What is Islam?* For there he invests heavily in the importance of extra-scriptural interpretive prisms, to which he refers as "Pre-Text" and "Con-Text," pointing precisely to the "under-appreciated *contingency* of Textual interpretation on *extra-Textual* values."¹¹ Ultimately, he sees parity between the authority of the Pre-Text or Con-Text and that of the Text, as a result of which meaning arrived at through assiduous engagement of the Pre-Text or Con-Text can be "Islamic" even if it violates the plain-sense meaning of the Text (i.e., Qur'ān). Thus he speaks of "the categorical higher Truth-value of the Pre-Text as trumping Text."

Despite the centrality of the Pre-Text and Con-Text to Ahmed's overall thesis, however, and despite its obvious overlap with what I assume he thanked me for in *Boundaries*, nowhere in *What is Islam?*, including the index and the bibliography, does he cite *Boundaries* or al-Ghazālī's *Fayṣal al-Tafriqa*. Yet, there are clear alternatives to bias or prejudice as a possible explanation. Perhaps Ahmed arrived at this insight on his own only to find it later confirmed, in whole or in part, by something he found in *Boundaries*. As such, to his mind, it would misrepresent things to cite me or al-Ghazālī as his *source*. Or perhaps, he was actually led to this conclusion by something he read in *Boundaries*, but over time he came to identify with it so intimately that he unconsciously (and innocently) assimilated it as his own. Or perhaps so much time passed between the time he read *Boundaries* (which appeared in 2002) and the time he sat down to write *What is Islam?* that he simply forgot about this influence. Or maybe he remembered that he was led to this insight by something he read in *Boundaries* but sensed that he and I would put this understanding to such vastly different uses that any association with me might blunt or distort the clarity, thrust or strength of his argument. Of course, one may take issue with any of these would-be explanations or even dismiss them all as facile excuses. But does it really

break the back of credulity that something along these lines might explain why he or any other academic omits a scholar or scholars from his work?

For Professor Ali, however, the fact that I do not include the requisite number or percentage of female scholars in my index and bibliography is enough to suggest a negative attitude on my part towards female scholars qua *female* scholars.¹² This, in turn, brings an interpretive lens to her reading of *Islam and the Blackamerican*¹³ that distorts major aspects of its fundamental meaning and thrust. For example, Ali criticizes the fact that the cover of *Islam and the Blackamerican* pictures a sea of Nation of Islam women decked out in formal religious garb, while the book itself does not focus on the topic of Muslim women. As she put it, “The fact that the cover photo is of ‘Nation Sisters’ might lead a reader to expect that gender issues would get a significant airing.”¹⁴ For the record, it was *my* decision to use this picture. I discovered it, I suggested it to Oxford University Press and I helped track down the permissions to use it. Now, the subtitle of the book is *Looking Towards the Third Resurrection*, a trope clearly connotative of the Nation of Islam. And these women are deployed as a synecdochic representation of the proto-Islamic beginnings of Blackamericans’ “appropriation” of Islam over the course of the twentieth century. But Professor Ali deems this a misappropriation of the female image, which apparently should only be used to represent predominantly female issues. My use of the image, in other words, is held up as confirming the poor and exclusionary treatment of women at the hands of male scholars. In the end, one is quietly ushered to the conclusion that it is ‘objective’ and non-ideological to see these women as simply women but biased and exploitative to see them as simply black.

And yet, *Islam and the Blackamerican* is about the ideological evolution of the Blackamerican Muslim *collective*, first in its relationship with Black Religion, then in its relationship with “Immigrant Islam,” then in its relationship with the dominant culture and history of the white American community and power structure. It is predicated upon the recognition that Blackamerican Muslim men *and* women jointly confront challenges and opportunities that transcend gender. Professor Ali apparently sees this, however, as little more than an accommodationist apology for the male-dominated status quo. Because *Islam and the Blackamerican* does not directly address the plight of Blackamerican Muslim women, the book is effectively cast as prioritizing the cause of Blackamerican Muslim men. But are these really the only options: men *or* women? If I deployed the image of “Nation Sisters” while not treating Blackamerican Muslim women’s issues specifically, does this not suggest that I saw the female image as being capa-

ble of representing not just women but the community as a whole? In such light, I am not sure why it is me rather than Professor Ali who minimizes the representative capacities of Blackamerican Muslim women.

Let me be clear. The male-dominated Blackamerican Muslim status quo is an undeniable fact, as is the tendency to deploy gender in that community as a false or misplaced criterion that marginalizes Blackamerican Muslim women, their interests, specific genius, experience, perspective and contributions, not to mention their pain, often in ways that are not only objectionable to women but offensive if not deleterious to Islam. In such light, the predicament of Blackamerican Muslim women can clearly be seen to be an important topic. Yet, it should not take much to see beyond this to the reality of what is common to both Blackamerican Muslim women *and* men. The fact, for example, that olive skin has been routinely deployed or taken as a substitute for bona fide Islamic knowledge and authority affects them *both*. So do the political, social, intellectual and economic implications of white supremacy. So does the “American Question,” “Black Orientalism,” the spiritual challenge and so on. To address these and related issues in general is not to deny that they might have more specific concretions inflected by distinctions of age, class, education, skin tone or gender. It is simply to say, as does Lorraine Hansberry in response to the question of how their dual identity as Negroes and writers affects Blackamerican authors: “To destroy the abstraction for the sake of the specific is in this case an error.”¹⁵ Professor Ali may be suspicious or even contemptuous of such constructs as “the Blackamerican Muslim community as a whole” or “in the abstract”. But it hardly seems justified for her to deny others the right to take such ‘transcendent’ categories as the focus of their scholarship.

Nor does it seem justified to assume or imply that a focus on the Blackamerican Muslim community beyond issues of gender can only be a male subterfuge for perpetuating a male-dominated status quo. Even Blackamerican female feminists who have no intention of abandoning their feminist agenda recognize that blackness must often be isolated and held up as the focal point if the dominant culture is to be denied the luxury of racial agnosia and the resulting misrecognition of just how operative race is in American life. As Audre Lorde put it: “Some problems we share as women, some we do not. You fear your children will grow up to join the patriarchy and testify against you, we fear our children will be dragged from a car and shot down in the street, and you will turn your backs upon the reasons they are dying.”¹⁶

None of this is to impute any racist impulses or commitments to Professor Ali. But the sheer singlemindedness and ferocity with which she prosecutes her campaign, not to mention the bluntness of her instruments, clearly obfuscate her vision beyond considerations of gender. And this comes at the unfair expense of scholars such as myself who do not share her feminist agenda. Despite her caveats regarding the limitations of her methodology and how it is “bad form” to hold others to false criteria, these infelicities do real work in her invective, promoting precisely the kind of devaluation of scholarship that she claims men visit upon the work of women. Once she establishes the inclusion of women / female scholars as the sole or primary criterion for scholarly worth, works that fail to meet this standard are effectively recast as misguided, naïve, bigoted, hypocritical or bad scholarship, no matter how brilliantly they treat the actual subject they set out to treat. And this kind of adjudicative license can provide handy excuses for ignoring or perverting the meaning and value of works with which one disagrees, or whose agenda one finds threatening, or whose content one does not want to engage. ‘I do not agree with the substance of so and so’s work, or I fear its popularity or broader implications, or I resent its not speaking to issues I hold dear. So, rather than engage his actual thesis and arguments, let me run to his index and bibliography and fashion a reason to dismiss or impugn his effort: Aye, he didn’t include enough Shiites, Sufis, Kharijites, Salafis, post-modernists or modern Persian intellectuals.’ A female scholar I encountered in Chicago was almost bubbly in her enthusiasm for Professor Ali’s critique of *Islam and the Blackamerican*, as its mechanical approach provided her with a handy sieve through which to filter out all the would-be authority of a male scholar whose work, now read through the prism of “The Omnipresent Male Scholar,” could be defanged and discredited as insufficiently woke and inclusive. The idea that my choice of sources might have been informed by my explicit investment in the pre-modern Muslim intellectual tradition received no consideration at all.

Such personal narratives aside, we should be far more concerned about how such an approach might affect the careers of young, up-and-coming scholars seeking jobs or already on tenure tracks. Should Professor Ali’s method and criterion gain a following among mid-career and senior scholars who are called upon to write recommendations and tenure reviews for their younger colleagues, one can imagine the cloud under which the latter’s cases will likely be judged. Brilliant scholarship meticulously researched and convincingly argued with envious displays of language skills

and specialized knowledge of the disciplines will be thoroughly misread, misjudged and undervalued by dint of an interpretive prism entirely alien to the stated enterprise. And this will not only affect male scholars. Female scholars whose primary focus happens not to be gender or who have an alternative assessment of patriarchy or who do not see fit to include the 'right' or 'required number' of female scholars in their work, even if for plausible reasons such as those outlined above with Shahab Ahmed, will come under the same dark, (mis)leading assessment. This is in addition to the silencing effect that has already invaded the psychological space of numerous junior scholars and graduate students, male and female. In a word, Professor Ali's approach is not only flawed; it is dangerous. And in such light, the field at large should proceed with all due alacrity to retire it before it's too late. If "mansplaining" threatens to force us to pay an undue price for men's inability to detect and come to terms with the limits and subjective arbitrariness of their interpretive points of departure, "femigoguary" can certainly be expected to bring us no less peril.

But let us not allow our critical zeal here to drive us to the extreme of modeling what we claim to reject, responding only to Professor Ali's foibles and conveniently ignoring everything else. And let me state here openly and unequivocally: *Professor Ali is correct* to see a male perspective in *Islam and the Blackamerican* (as well as in *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering*). The book neither speaks *nor pretends to speak* from nowhere and thus everywhere; it consistently employs male language ("he," "his"); and the experiences casually adduced to flesh out various abstract assertions are generally male. Yet, there is a difference between speaking from a male (or female) perspective and seeking to privilege that perspective as a universal norm. And there is a difference between speaking from a male (or female) perspective and taking that perspective as the focal point of one's work. To the charge of playing down the female relative to the male perspective or experience *in terms of my casual references*, I plead guilty. But this hardly amounts to an attempt to assign men's experience or perspective a superior role in defining the normative parameters of Islam. And the latter was clearly and emphatically the abiding focus of *Islam and the Blackamerican*.

Critical among my concerns in that work was the problem of religious *authority* in American Islam. This is clear from the opening paragraph. And this was the whole point behind the idea of the "Third Resurrection," where Blackamerican Muslims become self-authenticating interpretive authorities capable of defining a properly constituted Islamic life in America

for themselves, in *conversation* and *cooperation* with their immigrant and overseas co-religionists, as opposed to living in abject deference to them. The authority through whose acquisition and deployment they would execute this task was *not* the “authority of experience”¹⁷ but the authority conferred by attachment to the Sunni religio-intellectual Tradition. Otherwise, it was feared, Blackamerican Muslims stood to lose their sense of agency in American Islam, moving “from the back of the bus to the back of the camel,” as it was sometimes expressed. And this would threaten if not undermine the remarkable progress they had made at harmonizing black and Muslim identity in America, with all that that implied for the future of Islam in the broader Blackamerican community and the US as a whole. Professor Ali’s commitment to, “taking women’s experiences as foundational,”¹⁸ makes sense in the context of her own agenda. But, as a prism through which to read *Islam and the Blackamerican*, it sets up a false competition between the authority of men’s and the authority of women’s *experiences*. For the book clearly invokes the ‘transcendent’ authority of Sunni Tradition precisely as a check on the attempt to turn *any* contemporary “Is” into the Islamic “Ought,” especially given the hegemonic pretensions of “immigrant experience” at the time.

Of course, Professor Ali would likely respond that such explanations smack precisely of the kind of convenient naiveté that normalizes unrecognized obliviousness to the experiences and perspectives of women. The very idea, in other words, that “experience” (or perspective) could somehow be ‘transcended’ or removed from interpretive processes is exactly what enables Muslim men to present their articulations as objective truth, leaving Muslim women to labor with “texts” and other synthetic “proofs,” as if these were the sole and actual basis of men’s ‘interpretations’. While it has become fashionable to celebrate these kinds of insights, they actually do little to dispose of the problem. For beyond the question of the concrete definition of individual experience,¹⁹ both its value and its implications remain ambiguous. An act or value is equally subject to being judged acceptable or unacceptable precisely because it is based in individual experience. Similarly, individual experience is just as likely to be the actual source of a false generalization as it is to deliver us from one.²⁰ This is why, certainly in our attempt to negotiate our communal existence, we typically turn to some broader standard of judgment, i.e., either ‘theory’ (e.g., theology, modern science, “public reason,” feminism, ethics, *uṣūl al-fiqh*, etc.) or some recognized communal standard, to adjudicate claims based on experience and to

help us mediate the relationship between the real and the ideal, between the ontologically factual and the morally, religiously or prudentially preferred. Recognizing that all such ‘theories’ or standards are historically/socio-culturally embedded may signal our critical acumen as moderns; but this merely relocates rather than actually solves the problem. For, while it may alert us to the subjective element in theory-based assessments, it does not provide the wholly objective alternative. Rather, the question of whether a behavior, value or perspective that is grounded in this, that or all individual experience should be accepted or rejected remains outstanding.

The appeal in *Islam and the Blackamerican* to Sunni Tradition was not based in any denial or naïve misrecognition of theory’s historical/socio-cultural embeddedness. It merely recognized that without such an adjudicative authority, it would be nearly impossible to mount principled critiques of the claims or deployments of *any* experience. If Professor Ali wishes to dismiss all theory as hopelessly tainted by experience or perspective, one might ask how she would adjudicate attempts by Blackamerican Muslim husbands to turn their *experience* of unemployment or revulsion at “working for the man” into a justification for flouting their Islamically mandated financial responsibilities, or their experience of social castration as men into a justification for adopting a hyper-masculinity that conflates itself with the moral and prudential teachings of Islam. Would her efforts to invalidate the ends to which such experiences are put entail the claim that the theory on which she bases this is free of perspective? Or would she persist in impugning theory as hopelessly subjective and simply privilege her female over these male experiences by dint of some unnamed authority? Would she then recognize the right of Blackamerican Muslim men to do the same in reverse?

Personally, I do not believe that the problem of theory’s embeddedness can be definitively resolved. And I suspect that the real naiveté here resides in the uncritical extension of the standard of scientific objectivity to the realm of quotidian human endeavor, what Stephen Toulmin referred to as the replacement of “reasonableness” with “certainty”.²¹ For its part, Sunni Tradition quite plainly recognized the potential impact of individual experience, perspective and other socio-psychological dispositions on interpretive processes. Al-Ghazālī, for example, speaks openly of the impact of character-traits, such as anger or kindness, on the conclusions of jurists.²² And the 3rd-4th/9th-10th century scholar al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī spoke of those who simply *called* their undisciplined passions (*hawā*) “reason”

(*‘aql*) in order to insulate their commitments from critique.²³ Meanwhile, the “sternness” (*tashaddud*) of Ibn ‘Umar versus the “facilitation” (*taysir*) of Ibn ‘Abbās is referenced in juristic circles right down to the present. The challenge in the face of all of this was (and is) not how to conceal, deny or apologize for these influences but how to devise ways to detect and minimize as much unwarranted experience / perspective as possible, even on the recognition that it may not be possible or even necessarily desirable to eliminate experience or perspective altogether.²⁴ The choice, in other words, was (and is) not between a theory that is wholly impervious to eisegetic breaches and one that is not but between theories that facilitate the detection and negotiation of such breaches and theories that do not.

I saw (and see) Sunni Tradition as amply providing for such detection and negotiation. And my aim in invoking it was precisely to domesticate the authority of *all* individual experience—male, female, immigrant, Black-american, or what have you. Meanwhile, my casual citing of more male than female experiences merely reflected the perspective from which I *wrote*, not the perspective I *advocated*. Of course, Professor Ali might object that, my *intentions* notwithstanding, my actual exclusions exerted a prejudicial *effect* on women. Fair enough. But then to what extent does her speaking from a female perspective and privileging the cause of women *not* have a prejudicial effect on blacks, men, Shiites, working class whites, women who don’t have college-degrees or anyone else who falls outside the purview of her primary focus? Is not every book limited in terms of the topics and constituencies it can effectively address or even meaningfully touch upon?²⁵

This was actually the backdrop against which I stated explicitly in *Islam and the Blackamerican* that the topic of women would have to be postponed because “it required more extensive backgrounding, theorizing, and nuancing than I felt possible in a work of this length.”²⁶ My invocation of Sunni Tradition in this context was as not an attempt to marginalize or overwhelm female experience. For Sunni Tradition clearly recognized experience as the basis of such theoretically gender-neutral considerations as legally probative customs, empirical determinations of legally relevant facts and the probative status of narrators of hadith. In fact, experience often set the agenda for what the religious law saw fit to contemplate as law; and it could alter the status of a school’s “going opinion” (*mashhūr* or *rājiḥ*) or the substance of the *fatwā* issued in its name.²⁷ Clearly, on such recognition, deliberately banning women’s experience would not only disadvantage Black-american Muslim women but betray Sunni Tradition itself. But Professor Ali basically dismisses this explanation for postponing the discussion of

women and apparently sees me as hiding behind Sunni Tradition and talk about making the book too long as excuses for simply excluding them.

Part of my decision to postpone the treatment of women, however, related to how out of place I thought it would be to try to articulate a number of preliminaries to such a discussion. Key among these was a long-standing thesis of mine that goes back to my work on the 7th/13th century Mālikī jurist Shihāb al-Dīn al-Qarāfī, regarding the jurisdictional boundaries of Islamic law.²⁸ In a word, Islamic law traffics exclusively in *aḥkām*/sing. *ḥukm*, or “legal judgments,” which are limited in terms of the range of substantive realities they can authoritatively address. The substantive content of mathematics, geometry, sense perception, prevailing customs and the like all fall outside the jurisdiction of the legal judgment qua legal judgment. As al-Qarāfī put it, “knowledge of none of these things reverts to scriptural sources.”²⁹ Meanwhile, al-Qarāfī explicitly separates *legal* jurisdiction from *factual* jurisdiction and limits the authority of the jurists to the determination of *law*. Because jurists qua jurists are only experts in interpreting the sources of law (i.e., Qur’ān, Sunna, *ijmā’*, etc.), it is only legitimate to follow them on questions of law. On questions of fact (or substantive questions outside the boundaries of the legal judgment per se, e.g., mathematics, public administration, nursing, art, military science, community-organizing and a whole host of other pursuits) jurists have no jurisdiction *qua jurists*, and the views of other experts or finders of fact become authoritative.³⁰

One can imagine how technical a full explication of such legal and jurisprudential matters might get and how inappropriate this might have been for the audience imagined for *Islam and the Blackamerican*. The upshot of all of this, however, even assuming that Islamic law is dominated by men (as an *is* not an *ought*) is that the limits of *sharī’ah*’s jurisdiction leaves a massive area of concerns regarding which Muslim women’s perspective and experience could be just as probative as men’s and in which women could negotiate on an equal footing with the latter or even function with *more* authority than men, assuming their superior experience or expertise. Yet—and this is the critical point here—women’s “experience” qua experience, like men’s “experience,” would only enjoy the authority assigned to it by the law itself, as opposed to constituting a self-authenticating, independent authority capable of unilaterally defining the Islamic *ideal*.

Islam and the Blackamerican sought to isolate Sunni Tradition as the ultimate authority for refereeing attempts to define the theoretical contours of a properly constituted Islamic life in America. Rather than denying or seeking to suppress the reality of the female experience, this was more in-

debted to the recognition that the female was not the only experience. In other words, if the presumably liberating capacities of Blackamerican Muslim women's experience could independently determine the parameters of the Islamic ideal, so could the 'liberating' capacities of Blackamerican Muslim men's experience; and so could the hegemonic pretensions of immigrant-experience, the latter being emphatically what the book set out to challenge. Professor Ali might deplore my approach to experience (i.e., my postponement of gender) as a wasted opportunity to make a significant contribution to the cause of Blackamerican Muslim women. But, given the overpowering influence of 'Immigrant Islam' at the time, the book *I* saw fit to write deemed it too great a liability to risk allowing *any* contemporary "experience" to become *the* independent, authoritative, unassailable determinant of *the* Islamic norm.³¹

Beyond the matter of Blackamerican Muslim women's experience, however, if the goal of *Islam and the Blackamerican* was to isolate and invoke Muslim Tradition as the basis of interpretive authority and the definition of the Islamic ideal, Professor Ali would like to know how the book could possibly justify excluding the one Blackamerican female Muslim scholar she deems to be among the most eminently qualified interpretive authorities in contemporary Islam. Enter Amina Wadud.

In both "The Omnipresent Male Scholar" and her AAR address, Professor Ali sees it as something of an outrage that I do not engage or even mention Amina Wadud in either *Islam and the Blackamerican* or *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering*. In fact, her case against me seems to revolve almost entirely around my exclusion of Professor Wadud. Unlike the case with the other male scholars she profiles, Wadud is the *only* female scholar mentioned by name in her critique of me. She describes Wadud as an "American theologian and gender-justice advocate"³² and "one of the few figures semi-regularly mentioned when Muslim thinkers are brought up."³³ Yet, she continues, "Jackson, despite his focus on African-American Islam, does not discuss her."³⁴ Beyond these general descriptions, Professor Ali does not tell us *how* Wadud is directly relevant to Jackson's project or what her inclusion might have contributed to it. In fact, one is left with the impression that Jackson should have included Wadud because this would have advanced Professor Ali's agenda, regardless of how it might have affected Jackson's.

Let me state clearly that Professor Wadud is not the target of my response but only the way that Professor Ali deploys her in her invective against me. To begin with, if Wadud is so relevant to my work that

omitting her can only be explained in terms of a “pervasive, consistent, insistent failure to take women’s ideas seriously,”³⁵ the reverse must also be true: Jackson’s work must be relevant to Wadud’s, and her exclusion of him must mean something similar. Wadud’s *Qur’an and Women* was published in 1992 before Jackson had any publications of note. But even *Inside the Gender Jihad* makes no mention of him, despite the fact that I know of no scholar, male or female, who has done *more* than Jackson to highlight the ways in which the factual and interpretive presuppositions enshrined in Muslim Tradition can be ‘processed’ and challenged in favor of modern Muslims’ assessment of their own reality, an insight one would think to be of great utility in addressing topics relating to modern Muslim women. And yet, as in the aforementioned case of Shahab Ahmed, I (and apparently Professor Ali) can think of a number of reasons other than rank misandry for why Professor Wadud might have chosen to proceed in the manner she did.

Perhaps Professor Wadud simply recognized that all scholars have their particular academic focus and Jackson’s is not Muslim women. On this understanding, she may have simply assumed that his work would be of little relevance to hers. And even where his work appeared to be relevant, she may have been put off by or not interested in the explicitly pre-modern legal, jurisprudential or theological thrust and aspects of his scholarship. As such, she may have seen little point in engaging him. Or, Professor Wadud may have simply felt that the basic thrust of Jackson’s work moved in a direction quite different from that of her own, such that to include him might risk obfuscating the clarity and forcefulness of her thesis, not to mention lending credence to an orientation with which she deemed herself to be at odds. Of course, we do not know any of this to be her actual motivation. But these explanations are clearly plausible. And to the extent that they would serve to vindicate Professor Wadud’s exclusion of Jackson, they should also serve to vindicate his exclusion of her.

This logic takes on more concrete meaning when we turn to Professor Ali’s substantive characterizations of Wadud’s work. For example, she makes it a point to note that “the interpretive monopoly of the *ulama* has been broken”³⁶ and that Wadud represents a trend or style that capitalizes on and seeks to preserve this development as fact. “Wadud’s intervention is a deliberate move away from the tradition.”³⁷ Indeed, Wadud refuses to cede to tradition any authority that might impede or undermine her project. As Professor Ali put it, “Wadud was not playing insider baseball.”³⁸ Yet, Wadud is still supposed to be relevant to Jackson’s work, such that his fail-

ure to engage her is biased and unjustified. But Jackson was explicit in both *Islam and the Blackamerican* and *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering* that his project not only recognized the authority of Muslim Tradition but openly sought to harness that very authority as a means of leveling the playing field between Blackamerican and immigrant Muslims. Whereas Wadud sees Muslim Tradition as part of the problem, “master’s tools,” as it were, Jackson sees it as a fundamental part of the solution.

Speaking more concretely, *Qur’an and Woman* (the one of Professor Wadud’s two books that had been published by the time *Islam and the Blackamerican* appeared) quite deliberately circumvents Muslim Tradition and basically employs a *sola scriptura* approach. Meanwhile, *Inside the Gender Jihad* (which appeared after *Islam and the Blackamerican* but before *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering*) makes general allusions to Muslim Tradition but does not critically engage any specific classical authors or their doctrines. From their disparate manners of proceeding, especially the vastly different role Arabic sources play in their respective articulations, one might conclude that Wadud and Jackson envision two very different audiences. Certainly, in such light, something other than bias, dereliction or veiled misogyny should be able to explain Jackson’s decision not to engage Professor Wadud, unless, of course, Jackson is being called upon to serve a thesis or agenda other than his own.

Perhaps because she does not see it as *her* problem, Professor Ali consistently misrecognizes the centrality of the challenge of immigrant supremacy, privilege and domination. Thus, in the face of my suggestion that gaining facility in Muslim Tradition confers upon Blackamerican Muslims requisite recognition as playing by the rules of the interpretive game, she asks, “Recognized by whom?”³⁹ implying that this is somehow connected to gender. But even on the most casual reading of *Islam and the Blackamerican*, the answer to this question is clear: immigrant Muslims whose understanding and practice of Islam was *assumed* to be grounded in Muslim Tradition such that they could deploy the authority that went along with this assumption as a silencing mechanism against those perceived not to have mastered it. At one point, doubling down on an assertion attributed to Professor Wadud, Ali laments, “the normative Muslim is male.”⁴⁰ To the extent that this was supposed to apply to Jackson, it reflects a profound misrecognition of the fact that he was operating out of an entirely different framework: ‘the normative Muslim is *immigrant*.’⁴¹ As such, Blackamerican Muslims, female or male, are rarely relied upon or authorized to tell America what Islam is or should be. In sum, it is clear that Wadud and

Jackson are motivated by two identifiably different academic concerns with two diametrically opposed assessments of the value and utility of Muslim Tradition. Why should their projects automatically be assumed to be so relevant to each other?

Of course, the most obvious feature that Jackson and Wadud share is race, specifically blackness. And one wonders if this is enough for Professor Ali to assume that their *scholarly* agendas must also converge. For her part, while Professor Wadud proudly locates herself within the broader Black-american community, she is clear that Blackamerican Islam per se has never been her primary academic focus. “I have never been a Muslim except as an African-American. Despite this fact, I have done very little academic work on the complex realities of African-Americans as Muslims.”⁴² If Jackson’s primary focus was the Blackamerican Muslim community “as a whole” and Wadud was clearly *not* focused on the Blackamerican Muslim community “as a whole,” how can Jackson’s decision not to engage her be justifiably parlayed into a general charge of “pervasive, consistent, insistent failure to take women’s ideas seriously”? More important, if Wadud can treat Muslim women without a focus on the broader Blackamerican Muslim community and she can even be lauded for “not playing insider baseball” (which justifies her circumvention of Muslim Tradition), by what authority does Professor Ali deem it appropriate to hold Jackson to academic commitments that fall outside the circumference of *his* primary interests?

Professor Wadud’s assertion that she has not focused on the Black-american Muslim community as a whole is interesting. Indeed, given the reverberations of her work throughout segments of that community, one almost wonders if this dissociation is not a strategic move on her part. Personally, I would not blame her if it was. For there is a price to be paid by Blackamerican scholars outside Black Studies/African-American Studies who see fit to focus on or even include Blackamericans as a significant concern in their scholarship. One need but ponder the likely fate of *Qur’an and Woman* had it been entitled *Qur’an and the Black Woman* or of *Inside the Gender Jihad* had it been entitled *Inside the African-American Gender Jihad*. As Richard Dyer notes, black people are not assumed to be qualified to speak for humanity as a whole but only for their particular group.⁴³ In this light, the black experience is routinely the only topic on which they are *assumed* to be qualified to speak. At the same time, non-blacks routinely assume that they know what Blackamericans qua Blackamericans want: a world—*any world*—that is free of anti-black racism. Little else really matters.

In fairness, some of this may be due to how ominously loud Black-americans have been known to rattle their chains as they rise to protest. But much of it is simply a matter of the dominant culture's indomitable fear and moral laziness that manifest themselves in the tendency to process engaged Blackamerican scholarship in ways that are simply psychologically safe and convenient. Non-blacks know the bottom line of this scholarship even before it is fully articulated, and this habitual reversion to the psychologically safe and convenient can overshadow the importance of almost everything engaged Blackamerican scholars have to say beyond issues of race. Professor Ali depicts *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering*, for example, as, "interweaving Sunni theological ideas and African-American religious thought to construct a viable Black-friendly Sunni theology in the face of ongoing racial harms."⁴⁴ In reality, however, the book was not about racial harms or being "Black-friendly" per se but about how Sunni Islam would respond *theologically* to the *theological* challenge posed by William R. Jones's provocative book, *Is God A White Racist?*⁴⁵ Meanwhile, outside my two books that speak to race specifically, *none* of Professor Ali's books—since we are judging scholars based on their books—cite *anything* I have written on law, theology, history, Sufism, modern Islam, or jurisprudence. "Men, Men, Everywhere"?⁴⁶ Which men?

Thematically, this would be the place to engage Professor Ali on her thoroughly homogenized construct of "men," as if Nietzsche, Kant, Donald Trump and Mike Tyson exercise the same historical agency. *Islam and the Blackamerican* goes on for pages about the challenge of immigrant domination; but, through Professor Ali's gendered prism, I and my male Arab and South-Asian co-religionists can simply be lumped together as "men."⁴⁷ I will yield to this compression for the moment, though I do not agree with it. After all, maleness never seemed to be enough to bring Ash'arites and Traditionalists together, or Shiites and Sunnis for that matter. But given the limitations of space, I would like to move on to the broader point of Professor Ali's critique, namely the inclusion of the female experience and perspective (this time with the accent on the latter) when it comes to scholarship on or articulations of Islam.

I have long recognized the power of the margin, i.e., the critical advantage of a position outside the mainstream that empowers one to see the emperor's nakedness even when he cannot. I have referred to this on occasion as "the blessed curse of blackness."⁴⁸ At the same time, however, I have been willing to accept the cost of this advantage, namely the acknowledgement of my perspective as perspective, in contradistinction to the approach of

those who try to camouflage their storied embeddedness and raise their views beyond critique via association with “universal reason” and other such modern myths. To this end, both *Islam and the Blackamerican* and *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering* are explicit in their indictment of “the false universal.” In this context, the aim of inclusion has never been equality per se, in the sense of a seat at someone else’s pre-set table, or the mere re-articulation of the dominant view in some hip pentatonic key, as if the Enlightenment were right in affirming that, while there are *many* false answers to every serious human question, there is ultimately only *one* correct one. It has been more about exposing the dominant perspective as perspective, such that my view might be duly engaged free from distortion by exogenous prisms cunningly (or unwittingly) deployed and uncritically indulged as common sense. For this stands to heighten the degree to which my view is likely to be indulged on its own terms rather than as a failed, pubescent attempt to think like the big boys—and girls. And this may actually open the latter to the possibility of genuine human encounter and thus increased self-knowledge, instead of always having some projection or imitation of themselves reflected back to them. In the end, the aim is not to win the game but to change the rules. And the margin is not a haven to which one retreats but a point of departure from which one pursues what Gramsci might call “reverse hegemony” (as opposed to domination). Again, however, all of this entails a willingness to allow my perspective to stand there, naked, alone and fully exposed *as perspective*.⁴⁹

I suspect that Professor Ali would identify with much of this. But I also think that the commonalities we share in this regard break down at a critical juncture. For, while she is obviously interested in exposing the male perspective as perspective, it is not clear that she is equally willing to allow the female perspective to “stand there, naked, alone and fully exposed *as perspective*.” Instead, the implication seems to be that the female perspective, as a *corrective* to the hegemony of the male, is barely a perspective at all but is closer to “common sense” or “universal reason,” carrying none of the unearned privilege, biased perceptions or domination routinely smuggled in with men’s point of view. In this light, one is almost left with the impression that the female ‘perspective’ is to be *preferred* to the male, as a ‘better,’ ‘fairer,’ or ‘more neutral’ vantage point from which to view reality.⁵⁰ Indeed, this seems to be the whole point behind the stigma of “mansplaining.” Professor Ali might object that I am exaggerating here and that what she really wants is simply to challenge the male perspective’s hegemonic posturing as normal and thus normative. Fair enough. But the question remains wheth-

er this is executed in a manner that leaves the female perspective no *less* exposed as perspective.⁵¹

Of course, as Judith Plaskow suggests, the fact that one represents, speaks from or is committed to a particular perspective does not mean that one cannot transcend it, at least provisionally in the interest of effective analysis and communication.⁵² This, in fact, appears to be what Professor Ali is calling upon men to do. Yet, it remains unclear whether she herself is willing or able to transcend the perspective she champions, which first requires that it be recognized and treated as a perspective. We get a glimpse of the problem here in her treatment of the late Egyptian thinker, Nasr Abu Zayd. While Abu Zayd is praised for including women and taking them seriously, this is promptly offset by his “failure to recognise the real-world objectives female scholars have attempted to meet.”⁵³ The corrective is supplied, tellingly, by a woman, Aysha Hidayatullah, who is able to provide a “critical but sympathetic, contextualized and ultimately constructive account of women’s encounter with scripture.”⁵⁴ The notion of Abu Zayd’s “failure” to recognize women’s objectives implies, of course, that they are so obviously normative that he would have necessarily agreed with them had he been able to discern them. Similarly, had he been *as* sympathetic, contextual and constructive as Hidayatullah, he would have come to more appropriate conclusions. But how far is all of this, really, from simply holding Abu Zayd to a woman’s point of view? Does not *this* charge against him ultimately imply that we can only judge the extent to which women are *sufficiently* included, taken seriously, appreciated and assigned equal value if we approach this assessment from a female perspective? And, instead of being treated as some neutral standard of judgment, is this effective privileging of the female vantage point to be acknowledged as such? Or is one regime of domination surreptitiously to replace another?

This is not a challenge uniquely relevant to Professor Ali or Muslim feminists in general. Non-Muslim feminists have recognized it for some time and sought to grapple with it. As Martha Minow, now dean of Harvard Law School, observes:

Feminists make the mistake we identify in others – the tendency to treat our own perspective as the single truth – because we share the cultural assumptions about what counts as knowledge, what prevails as a claim, and what kinds of intellectual order we need to make sense of the world. Like the systems of politics, law and empiricism feminists criticize for

enthroning an unstated male norm, feminist critiques tend to establish a new norm that seeks to fix experience and deny its multiplicity.⁵⁵

My point here is not to sabotage Professor Ali's call for inclusion by throwing up sophomoric roadblocks to the effect that she (and Muslim women in general) must either speak from some Archimedean point or not speak at all. Women, like men, *can* speak from a female or male perspective without necessarily betraying what Weber termed "ideal interests" that are generated (in this case) by religious commitments that modify, challenge or even displace specifically male or female material interests. Moreover, I find something not only powerful but intuitively valuable in Professor Ali's project of inclusion. Indeed, I have toyed on occasion with the idea that, rather than each other, God might be the object of the Qur'anic verse, "*We have created you from a male and female and made you into peoples and tribes that together you may come to know...*" [49:13], i.e., know God more concretely and richly via the multitude of perspectives and experiences you bring together. Similarly, I have long suspected that powerlessness can corrupt no less than does power. But Professor Ali seems to speak in a manner that not only blurs the distinction between including women and displacing men but that also conceals, intentionally or not, the fact that women are no less subject to the human condition than are men and that the 'female perspective' is thus no less susceptible to the seductions of power, glory, ego, self-love, undisciplined passion or the will to dominate. Not only does she seem to equate the *female* with the *feminist* perspective, she implies that there is no need to be concerned about the latter, unlike the case with the male perspective. This leaves me as a male reader of her critique with the uneasy feeling of being led down a stained-glass corridor that ends in a kangaroo court. One does not have to be a fan of Nietzsche's critique of slave-morality, or *ressentiment*, to ask the obvious question here: What's in Professor Ali's project for religiously committed Muslim men – or, for that matter, religiously committed non-feminist Muslim women, or the Black-american Muslim community "as a whole"? Should we accept the critique embedded in her proposal because it is *right* or because it is purportedly *female*? And how much difference is she willing to allow us to identify between the two?

If constructs such as *qiwāmah*, *wilāyah*, *fitna*, *bid'a*, or *ṣabr* are deployed to silence Muslim women in the face of abuse and deprivation, the silencing properties of such terms as "patriarchy," "oppression" or "mansplaining" cannot be simply ignored or dismissed as epiphenomena of male paranoia.

Neither can the silencing effects of the tendency to conflate ideology with gender and from there limit the possibilities of critique. Take, for example, the issue of justice. “Justice” is often invoked in a manner reminiscent of the realism of early Mu‘tazilite moral ontology, being portrayed as an objective or *dhātī* reality in the sense of being ‘physically’ and identifiably ‘out there’ inhering in things in the world, directly apprehended by right reason. This is what makes such claims to justice so powerful and the position of those who challenge them so ‘preposterous’. But from an Ash‘arite perspective, outside what scripture identifies or points to as such, justice is *not* objective but either relative (*iḍāfi*) or conventional (*iṣṭlāhī*). In short, it is a matter of perspective. This does not mean that every extra-scriptural claim to justice is categorically ‘wrong’ or ‘invalid’. What it does mean, however, is that such claims have no *objective* or *universal* validity whose authority can be assumed to inhere in the acts they describe. Rather, any such authority as might accrue to such claims must be negotiated. And on this understanding, an Ash‘arite, *male or female*, might reject or refuse to go along with a particular claim to “justice” purely as a matter of theological commitment that has nothing to do with gender. Yet, if the original claim to justice is presented as a female point of view, any attack on it is likely to be perceived as an attack on women. This will almost certainly silence would-be dissenters. And this will likely lure us into the trap of mistaking acquiescence for agreement, thereby exposing us to the boomerang effects of false progress.

Sometimes male (or female) dissenters, especially traditionalists,⁵⁶ may find themselves reacting strategically rather than concretely. In other words, it is not the specific issue at hand at which they balk (e.g., female leadership), but the *basis* upon which this issue is argued. It was none other than Rosemary Ruether, for example, who observed that, “Only with the Enlightenment is there a shift to an egalitarian concept of ‘original nature’ that challenges the ‘naturalness’ of hierarchical social orders.”⁵⁷ Meanwhile, Ivan Illich suggests that it was essentially capitalism that destroyed the naturalness of gender-specific roles through its self-serving imposition of, “the assumptions that both sexes are made for the same work, perceive the same reality, and have, with some minor cosmetic variations, the same needs.”⁵⁸ To the extent that Muslim women are perceived as grounding their arguments in principles and categories bequeathed to them by capitalism or the Enlightenment and its ideological offspring, liberalism, they may be seen as imputing intellectual and perhaps even religious *authority* to these epistemologies. And given the dislocation these ways of knowing have visited upon revealed religion in general, any position that reclines upon

them may be greeted with resistance as part of an effort to prevent even more authority from accruing to them. Like the ring on my finger whose movement cannot be stopped without stopping my finger's movement, it may be deemed necessary to refuse to assent to positions that are indebted to capitalism, liberalism or the Enlightenment, in order to resist, reduce or domesticate the *authority* of these imperial regimes of sense.⁵⁹ But it is ultimately capitalism, liberalism and the Enlightenment that are the targets of this resistance, not the positions of Muslim women per se. This is neither to deny nor paste over the fact that women's interests are affected in this process. And this will certainly prompt many critics of this approach to condemn it is callous, selfish, myopic or irresponsible, as it chooses to place the abstract integrity of religion cum-Islam over the concrete interests of Muslim women.⁶⁰ Traditionalists, on the other hand, again, male or female, would likely respond by simply turning the tables.

In the end, whether one agrees with these positions or not, they are clearly *no more* and *no less* grounded in interests than are those of their opponents. As such, the two groups' respective charges or insinuations of misogyny or misandry may be little more than attempts to conceal this fact. And here we come to the great impasse. For, if viewing a matter from a female perspective is the only way of getting it the hearing Muslim women believe it deserves, simple logic would seem to dictate that this also requires that such matters *not* be viewed from a male perspective. And yet, given all that has been said, we can hardly expect men to be any less suspicious of the female perspective than women are of the male. In such light, one wonders if we are doomed to a perpetual gender-jihad, where each side seeks perforce to dominate the other by raising its perspective to the status of unassailable, objective truth. There are two considerations, however, that I would like to register in this regard as I prepare to close. The first is that the search for a "final solution" may be as futile – and as disastrous – as final solutions have proved to be historically. The second is that, while the male and female perspective may at points be incompatible, this does not mean that they are necessarily incommensurable. Together, these considerations might empower us to begin to think of alternatives to a gendered version of Hobbes' dreaded "state of nature".

The Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe speaks of what she terms an "agonistic" approach to socio-political conflict. Recognizing liberalism's failure to accept antagonism as a socio-political reality, she insists on a distinction between "enemies" and "adversaries". Whereas the enemy, who refuses to accept the terms of engagement, must be destroyed as a mortal

threat, one should contend with and engage the adversary as a challenge that increases one's awareness of one's own commitments, primary and secondary, as well as the limits, especially regarding the latter, of their pretensions to absolute truth. In this way, totalitarianisms that prey on the fearful logic of "us" versus "them" can be avoided.⁶¹ This is reminiscent of the Islamic jurisprudential institution of *khilāf* or "recognized disagreement," on the basis of which mutually contradictory views can enjoy equal claims to orthodoxy and thus equal recognition within the community at large, outside the circles of those who directly endorse these views per se. Of course, this does not imply that everything goes. But even the rules of engagement are negotiated, with no single party being able to impose its terms unilaterally. In sum, perhaps we should be looking for ways of effectively *managing* the gender divide rather than trying to *solve* it. And this might direct us to the possibility that there may be more in the Sunni jurisprudential tradition than meets the disinterested eye. This takes me to my second consideration.

While Muslim men and women may hold mutually incompatible interpretations, this does not necessarily doom them to the status of enemies. For, there is a distinction between incompatibility, on the one hand, and incommensurability, on the other. While we may not be able to reconcile "X" with "Y" (because they are incompatible), we may be able to reconcile them with a common source or standard of judgment (which means that they are not incommensurable). The Mālikī position on the ritual purity of dog-saliva, e.g., cannot be reconciled with the Ḥanafī, Shāfi'ī and Ḥanbalī positions that hold dog saliva to be ritually impure (*najis*). Yet both positions can be reconciled with the sources and agreed-upon tradition of *sharī'ah*-interpretation. In short, agreement on the rules of engagement offsets or overshadows disagreement on substantive conclusions, or at least renders disagreement over the latter manageable. Indeed, perhaps *only* agreement on the rules of interpretive engagement can forestall the zero-sum implications of gender-based disagreements.

Of course, for many Muslim women, the "agreed-upon tradition of *sharī'ah*-interpretation" represents a male-dominated, hegemonic discourse that threatens to entrap them precisely in those modes of thinking and being that underwrite their oppression and from which they seek to escape. For many Muslim men, meanwhile, especially traditionalists, the alternative, represented by "progressive," "reform" or "feminist" approaches, threaten their sense of self if not, from their perspective at least, the very integrity of Islam. In the face of this entrenched disagreement, both

parties are likely to return to their respective corners to gear up for the next round. But perhaps deeper *self*-reflection on both sides might pay higher dividends. For as Professor Ali points out, following the insight of the Jewish feminist Judith Plaskow,

‘the right question is theological’. It is not merely a matter...of patriarchal or misogynist men’s textual interventions or social restrictions. Rather, it is a fundamental question about the nature of God, and God’s relationship to humanity. Legal and liturgical tweaking can only go so far. As the problem is deeply rooted so must be the solutions.⁶²

As Muslim men and women embark upon the enterprise of engaging the Qur’ān, Sunna and Muslim Tradition in pursuit of a proper relationship with God, their greatest challenge may reside within rather than without. For the distinction between exegesis and eisegesis remains among the most subtle and treacherous known to humankind. In such light, Muslim men and women might do well to redouble their efforts to remain open to *being transformed* by the texts as opposed to always *seeking to transform* the latter into instruments to be deployed in the service of their will. And they might begin in this regard by looking upon the relationship between themselves and the Text(s) as a *mutually* investigatory relationship. As one gifted scholar has observed (in another context):

The reader [i]s assigned the task of interpreting the text, but also ha[s] to discover, in and through his or her reading of those texts, that they in turn interpret the reader. What the reader, as thus interpreted by the texts, has to learn about him or herself is that it is only the self as transformed through and by the reading of the texts which will be capable of reading the texts aright.⁶³

We are all socially, historically, culturally and even politically informed; and we are all prompted by hidden prods and whisperings the depths and provenance of which we could never hope to apprehend fully. And yet, to the extent that there remains some essential “we” to be so informed and prompted to begin with, “the possibility that an interpretation of a text such as the Qur’an could emerge that moves beyond an existing sociological reality should not be precluded a priori.”⁶⁴ As Hans-Georg Gadamer suggests, “We have the ability to open ourselves to the superior claim the text makes and to respond to what it has to tell us.”⁶⁵ As such, “To interpret the law’s will or the promises of God is clearly not a form of domination but of service.”⁶⁶ Or at least it should be. And in such light, perhaps we should not

rule out the possibility that Muslim men and women can come together through ties of commensurable commitments, where truth and untruth transcend gender and what remains is neither conflated nor confused with either. Let us certainly hope this to be the case. Otherwise, there may be little to save us from ourselves or to frustrate the torturous arrival of the alchemy of domination 3.0.

Endnotes

1. The reference here is to my article, "The Alchemy of Domination? Some Ash'arite Responses to Mu'tazilite Ethics," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 31 (1999): 185-201.
2. *Critical Muslim* 8 (October-December, 2013): 61-73.
3. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ai5XF-bP3KE>.
4. In an online reply, dated November 27, 2013, to a 'comment' on "The Omnipresent Male Scholar," Professor Ali notes that, "Index-entry counting is an imperfect tool but numbers sometimes make the point in a way qualitative evidence does not." See <https://feminismandreligion.com/2013/11/26/men-men-everywhere-by-kecia-ali/>.
5. Ali, "Omnipresent," 62.
6. Thus we often encounter the "Select Bibliography."
7. If memory serves me correctly, I did the index for *Islam and the Blackamerican* but not for *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering*.
8. See D.L. Rhode, "The 'Woman's Point of View,'" in *Feminist Legal Theory II: Positioning Feminist Theory Within the Law*, ed. F. E. Olsen, 2 vols. (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 2: 68. While Professor Ali seems to recognize this liability in the case of Tariq Ramadan ("Omnipresent," 70, 73), this insight does not appear to inform her critique of me.
9. *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking Towards the Third Resurrection* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 182; emphasis added.
10. See my *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam: Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī's Fayṣal al-Tafriqa* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 51-4 and passim.
11. *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 513; emphasis original. Ahmed continues: "that is to say, in any given historical context where Muslims search for the Pre-Textual meaning of the form of the Text of Revelation, their hermeneutical engagement is embedded in a larger array of extra-Textual values present as the Con-Text of Revelation."

12. Actually, in my case, the argument seems to revolve primarily around my omission of one female scholar, Amina Wadud. I will treat this matter in some detail below.
13. We could say something similar about *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering*, but this work figures much more marginally into her critique.
14. Ali, "Omnipresent," 65.
15. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jNpitiJ5XWY>. This was part of an interview conducted in 1961 that included James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, Emile Capouya, Alfred Kazin and Lorraine Hansberry. Hansberry's point was that protest is part of the mindset of all writers, which is why they write. As such, at some remove, protest unites all writers, Negro and white alike.
16. Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 119. She also notes: "[I]n a patriarchal power system where whiteness privilege is a major prop, the entrapments used to neutralize Black women and white women are not the same. For example, it is easy for Black women to be used by the power structure against Black men, not because they are men, but because they are Black. Therefore, for Black women, it is necessary at all times to separate the needs of the oppressor from our own legitimate conflicts within our communities. This same problem does not exist for white women. Black women and men have shared racist oppression and still share it, although in different ways. Out of that shared oppression we have developed joint defenses and joint vulnerabilities to each other that are not duplicated in the white community, with the exception of the relationship between Jewish women and Jewish men" (118).
17. See, e.g., Debra Majeed, *Polygyny: What It Means When African American Muslim Women Share Their Husbands* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2015), 9.
18. Ali, "Omnipresent," 73.
19. It is not my intention to downplay "experience" or cast it in a negative light or deny its connection to knowing. But it is not always clear in Professor Ali's usage exactly what experience is, whether it is "the enduring residue of moments lived" or simply "desire," "feeling" or "individual choice." As Hans-Georg Gadamer notes, "However paradoxical it may seem, the concept of experience seems to me one of the most obscure we have." See H.G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. J. Weinscheimer and D.G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004 [1975]), 341. Meanwhile, by "individual experience," I simply mean all experience that falls short of being recognized as a communal standard, however large or small the community in question might be.

20. Highlighting the wages of taking individual experience as an independent, infallible source of judgment, al-Ghazālī points to the example of a man who is bitten by a multi-colored snake and develops a phobia of multi-colored ropes, or a person who abandons a delicious dish (*khabīs*) upon the experience of being reminded that it looks like human excrement. See his *al-Iqtisād fī al-i'tiqād* (Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī and Sons, n.d.), 83. Between Blackamerican Muslim men and women, the challenge is often how to acknowledge the other's experience, especially a painful experience, without this acknowledgment turning that experience into an unassailable source of knowledge or value. Lapses in either effort can complicate if not frustrate communication.
21. See his *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 5-44, esp. 20-32.
22. See, e.g., his *al-Mustaṣfā min 'ilm al-uṣūl*, 2 vols. (Būlāq: al-Maṭba'ah al-Amīriyah, 1324/1943), 2: 365-66 ; 2: 376-77.
23. See *Bayān al-farq bayna al-ṣadr wa al-qalb wa al-fu'ād wa al-lubb*, ed. Y.W. Mar'ī (Ammān: Mu'assasat Āl al-Bayt al-Malakīyah li al-Fikr al-Islāmī, 2009), 39.
24. In other words, not every "man-made" interjection is necessarily a violation of Prophetic or scriptural authority. For example, when a man praying behind the Prophet coming out of the bowing position unilaterally added the words, "*ḥamdan kathīran ṭayyiban mubārakan fih*" (bounteous, felicitous, blessed praises), the Prophet is reported to have lauded his action, despite the man's receiving no prior instruction from the Prophet to utter these words as part of the prayer. See Muḥammad b. Ismā'il al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 8 vols. ed. Q. S. al-Rifā'ī (Beirut: Dār al-Arqam b. Abī al-Arqam, N.d.), 1: 375.
25. In fact, I stated explicitly en route to explaining my treatment (or non-treatment) of women: "Every book has its limitations, and I would like to say a word in closing about three conspicuous limitations of the present work." *Islam and the Blackamerican*, 19.
26. *Islam and the Blackamerican*, 20. In light of this explicit admission, I am at a loss to understand Professor Ali's meaning when she writes, "Even without putting women in the narrative, simply registering women's absence as noteworthy would mean that maleness would cease to be an unmarked category. "Omnipresent," 73. Does not this explanation of mine explicitly register women's absence as noteworthy?
27. Ibn 'Ābidīn's *Nashr al-'arf fī binā' ba'd al-aḥkām 'alā al-'urf*, for example, is replete with examples of this. See his *Majmū'at rasā'il Ibn 'Ābidīn*, 2 vols. (N.p., 1970), 2: 114-47.
28. I was also daunted by what I saw as the near-complete conflation of "women" with "the liberal gaze," which would have to be recognized and unpacked as a prerequisite to a balanced discussion on gender.

29. See his *Sharḥ tanqīḥ al-fuṣūl fī ikhtisār al-maḥṣūl fī al-uṣūl*, ed. A.F. al-Mazīdī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmīyah, 2007), 109. Incidentally, this perspective is not limited to al-Qarāfī. See my “The Islamic Secular,” *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 34, no. 2 (2017): 1-31.
30. All of this can be traced back to my dissertation on al-Qarāfī, “In Defense of Two-Tiered Orthodoxy: A Study of Shihāb al-Dīn al-Qarāfī’s *Kitāb al-Iḥkām fī Tamyīz al-Fatāwā ‘an al-Aḥkām wa Taṣarrufāt al-Qāḍī wa al-Imām*,” which I completed in 1991.
31. This is not to say that I would write the exact same book today. Today I would be more sensitive to the need to avoid the kind of Muslim scripturalism that replaces “reason” with scripture, seemingly as a result of both embracing and reacting to the Kantian notion that religion is all about morality and morality can only be known through reason. Especially assuming scripture’s infinite scope, this leaves little room for concerns beyond morality and almost no room for modes of knowing beyond reasoning on scripture. This was part of the point of my recent article, “The Islamic Secular.”
32. Ali, “Omnipresent,” 62.
33. *Ibid.*, 66.
34. *Ibid.* In her AAR address, this contempt for this omission comes through even more clearly.
35. *Ibid.*, 73.
36. *Ibid.*, 63.
37. *Ibid.*, 65.
38. *Ibid.*
39. *Ibid.*, 66.
40. *Ibid.*, 71.
41. In fact, more recently, in their quest to get around First Amendment problems associated with attempts to ban *sharī‘ah*, non-Muslim anti-*sharī‘ah* groups, e.g., the American Public Policy Alliance (APPA) through its so-called ALAC bills (American Laws for American Courts), have turned to pursuing this goal through a call to ban all “foreign laws,” as if Islam were a “foreign religion” and Muslims a “foreign people” in America. See, e.g., B.J. Kelley, “Bad Moon Rising: The Sharia Law Bans,” *Louisiana Law Review* 73, no. 2 (Winter 2013): 601-31, esp. 612-15 and 624-31; R. Johnson, “A Monolithic Threat: The Anti-Sharia Movement and America’s Counter Subversive Tradition,” *Washington and Lee Journal of Civil Rights and Social Justice* 19, no. 1 (2012): 193-99.
42. Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women’s Reform in Islam* (Oxford: One-world, 2006), 102.
43. Richard Dyer, *White* (New York: Routledge Press, 1997), 2.
44. Ali, “Omnipresent,” 65. Ali also notes in this context that, “theological questions have got short shrift in Muslim feminist thinking.” But this is appar-

- ently not enough to justify my omissions in *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering*. See “Omnipresent,” 72.
45. “This book brings the classical Sunni theological tradition to bear on the modern debate over black theodicy, most specifically as instigated by the classic and controversial work of William R. Jones, *Is God a White Racist?* While Jones’s work was explicitly directed to Blackamerican Christian theologians, and more specifically the proponents of black theology, his critique and proposal bear the presumption of being applicable to any theistic religion that holds God to be all-powerful and all-good. Islam, in all its classical theological articulations, is such a religion.” *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering*, 4.
 46. “Men, Men, Everywhere” was the title of an online commentary by Professor Ali on “The Omnipresent Male Scholar.” See <https://feminismandreligion.com/2013/11/26/men-men-everywhere-by-kecia-ali/>.
 47. We could say something similar, of course, about her use of the category “women”.
 48. *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering*, 124.
 49. Where none exists, in other words, I am willing to live without false pretensions to unanimous consensus, immanent or transcendent. This is not a negation of absolute truth or a retreat therefrom. It is simply an admission that I may not be able to convince you of the absolute truth I know. See *Islam and the Blackamerican*, 8, for more on this point.
 50. In fact, Ali approvingly cites the view of “feminist historians” to the effect that, “taking women’s experiences as foundational both requires and makes possible historical scholarship that better reflects many facets of human experience.” See, “Omnipresent,” 73, emphasis added.
 51. As suggested above (note 47) there is also the problem of identifying in substantive terms exactly what the “female perspective” is. Drawing on the work of Carol Gilligan and others, Deborah Rhode, for example, speaks of “relational feminists” who stress the importance of relationships and care-taking attributes historically linked with women, identifying the female voice as speaking more to concrete responsibilities and relationships than to abstract principles of rights and justice. This body of work, “insists that values associated with women be valued and stresses the need for altering existing structures, not just assimilating women within them.” See D. Rhode, “The ‘Woman’s Point of View,’” 68. Meanwhile, Judith Plaskow refers to “women’s experience” as “never [being] free from cultural role definitions.” See her *Sex, Sin and Grace: Women’s Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1980), 11.
 52. Plaskow, *Sex, Sin*, 5. “Otherwise,” she continues, “this book would be pointless.”
 53. Ali, “Omnipresent,” 70.

54. Ibid.
55. M. Minow, "Feminist Reason: Getting It and Losing It," *Feminist Legal Theory*, 2:56. Minow continues in a footnote, drawing a quote from one of my former teachers, Drucilla Cornell: "In short, feminist work risks the danger of a new certainty, and the danger of certainty 'is that it turns against the generous impulse to open oneself up to the other, and truly listen, to risk the chance that we might be wrong.'" Needless to say, men are no less prone.
56. I employ the term here as adumbrated by William A. Graham: "I use 'traditionalism' and 'traditionalist' to refer to a person's or a group's strong preference for recourse to tradition (genuine or imagined) as the primary source of authority.... [T]raditionalism does not necessarily involve conservatism or opposition to change in political, social, or religious life; traditions may serve equally well as the basis of reform and innovation or as the grounds for defense of the status quo." See his "Traditionalism in Islam: An Essay in Interpretation," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 23, no. 3 (Winter 1993): 498-99.
57. See R.R. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (New York: Beacon Press, 1993 [1983]), 214. I should add here, lest I be misunderstood, as I suspect I will, the insight of the Hawaiian scholar Haunani-Kay Trask to the effect that hierarchy is not necessarily synonymous with domination: "And when they said that our chiefs were despotic they were telling of their own society, where hierarchy always resulted in domination. Thus, any authority or elder was automatically suspected of tyranny." See her *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai'i*, rev. ed. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), 117.
58. I. Illich, *Gender* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 9.
59. As Ashis Nandy put it, "Defeat ... is a disaster and so are the imposed ways of the victor. But worse is the loss of one's 'soul' and the internalization of one's victor, because it forces one to fight the victor according to the victor's values, within his model of dissent. Better to be a comical dissenter than to be a powerful, serious but acceptable opponent." See his *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), 111. Meanwhile, the challenge for Traditionalists is to separate values that are purportedly recognized in Islam from their Enlightenment-liberal definitions and justifications by presenting Traditionalist articulations and justifications thereof.
60. We might note that female scholars who refuse, for example, to attend or participate in all-male panels employ a similar logic with similar effects. It is not the individual male scholars or the ideas they express or even the sponsoring organization that is necessarily the target of their refusal. It is the legitimacy they fear that their attendance or participation will lend to women's

exclusion, the direct or indirect effects of their boycott on the male scholars or professional organizations in question notwithstanding.

61. See C. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (London: Verso, 1993), esp. the Introduction, 1-8.
62. Ali, "Omnipresent," 72. See also my *Islam and the Blackamerican*, 180-83; and my *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering*.
63. See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy and Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 82.
64. Mohammad Fadel, "Two Women, One Man: Knowledge, Power, and Gender in Medieval Sunni Legal Thought," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 29 (1997): 186.
65. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 310.
66. *Ibid.*