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Intellectual Hijra: Thinking In and Out of the Burning House of the Western Academy

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Abstract

This essay, which is an amalgamation of two presentations given at roundtables held by the Constructive Muslim Thought Seminar at the American Academy of Religion in 2022 and 2023, attempts to describe "constructive Muslim thought" in contexts both classical and contemporary, but focuses on delineating the continuing colonial context of this academy in which we are attempting to conduct this work and the consequences thereof. I argue that contemporary constructive Muslim thought in the Euro-American Academy (and its outposts in other lands) has much to learn from the model of Black studies and argue for a model of intellectual hijra or fugitivity, in which we strive to make a home in but not of the "burning house" of our modern academy.

> Islam began as something strange, and it will return to be as it began, strange, so glad tidings (*Ṭūbā*) to the strangers/exiles.
>
> *-Hadith*

> Learning, children would also forget. Would what they would learn be worth as much as what they forget? I should like to ask you: can one learn this without forgetting that, and is what one learns worth what he forgets?
>
> *-Cheikh Hamidou Kane, Ambiguous Adventure*

From one point of view, "constructive Muslim thought" is nothing new, it is as old as Islam itself, but what is new is the institutional, political, and epistemic contexts that make constructive Muslim thought emerge as such. It is this new context that has created the separation between the "constructive" and the "descriptive," marked out the "Muslim" as other than the default, and defined the parameters of "thought." In the Abbasid context or that of the Mali or Ottoman empires, "Constructive Muslim Thought," in its various branches of *falsafa* (philosophy), *adab* (belles lettres), *uṣūl al-fiqh* (jurisprudence), history, *kalām* (theology), or *taṣawwuf* (Sufism) would simply be "thought," or more accurately *'ilm* ("knowledge").

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Our current discipline of religious studies tends to differentiate "descriptive" and "critical" modes of engagement from "constructive" or "theological" modes, separating "academic" studies of Islam and Muslims from "external" perspectives and disciplines like history, anthropology, literary and area studies etc. from "internal" Islamic and Muslim perspectives and disciplines. The problem however, is that, in anthropological terms, the "descriptive" *etic* perspective conveniently obscures the "fugitive truth"[1] that it is itself a "constructive" *emic* perspective, and that the *emic* perspectives it studies can themselves function as "descriptive" *etic* perspectives. So while most Religious Studies graduate students can recite a version of Smith's, Asad's, or Masuzawa's critique of the construction of religion like a *credo* or *shahāda*, the colonial and racial dynamics that produce the separation between the "descriptive" and the "constructive," between the objects of the study of religion and the subject position of its practitioners, remains more obscure. This is why as the objects of the study of religion have multiplied, the theories and methods used to conduct this study have remained remarkably parochial and almost exclusively Europhone. Scholars use Durkheim, Foucault, Fanon, Freud, or Wittgenstein to interrogate the practices and writings of ʻĀʾisha al-Baʾuniyya, al-Ghazālī, Ibn al-ʻArabī, and Ibn Sīnā, but rarely the other way around. Virtually the only critiques of the Western canon of Religious Studies that are taken seriously (such as by Edward Said, Talal Asad, and Saba Mahmood) are immanent, made within and on its own terms, so that as a whole it is *not asked about what it does, but they [the non-Western/the "religious"] are asked*. (Q. 21:23)

As Masuzawa explains, "every region of the nonmodern non-West was presumed to be thoroughly in the grip of religion, as all aspects of life were supposedly determined and dictated by an archaic metaphysics of the magical and supernatural."[2] And as Theodore Vial begins his book, "Race and Religion are conjoined twins. They are offspring of the modern world. Because they share a mutual genealogy, the category of religion is always already a racialized category, even when race is not explicitly under discussion."[3] Vincent Lloyd combines these two insights:

> Put more starkly, 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….Rather than mourn the extent of neoliberal hegemony, as contemporary "critical" scholarship has a habit of doing, remembering the religious–or the theological, as the unmanaged religious is sometimes called–points to traditions of imagining otherwise.[4]

[1] C. Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 16.

[2] T. Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 16.

[3] T. Vial, *Modern Religion, Modern Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1.

[4] V. Lloyd, "Managing Race, Managing Religion" in *Race and Secularism in America*, eds. J. Kahn and V. Lloyd (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 5.

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In other words, the notion that the "critical," "descriptive," academic theories and methods of Religious Studies transcend race and religion in a way that the "constructive" practices and ideas that form the object of the study of religion is a dangerous delusion, but one that approaches categorized as "theological" or "non-Western," such as constructive Muslim thought, can help us undo. Our current epistemic order may be hegemonic, but it is not omnipotent, and the cosmologies of the Islamic tradition provide grounds for hope and possibilities excluded from recently dominant discourses. Such "descriptive" or critical, Western academic work has its own unarticulated assumptions, dogmas, rituals, and metaphysics, and as Said and Hallaq have demonstrated, its work on Islam and Muslims serves a constructive function to build up its own intellectual tradition and answer its own questions, much as medieval Christian heresiology did.

The current iteration of constructive Muslim thought has emerged from and in a continuing colonial context, in which traditional Islamic educational institutions barely survived the attempted epistemicide of the "civilizing missions" of colonial modernity both pre- and post-independence.[5] In the African context, this dynamic is most eloquently elaborated in Cheikh Hamidou Kane's semi-autobiographical novel, *Ambiguous Adventure*, in which he famously wrote:

> On the black continent it began to be understood that their true power lay not in the cannons of the first morning, but rather in what followed the cannons…. The new school shares at the same time the characteristics of the cannon and the magnet. From the cannon it draws its efficacy as an arm of combat. Better than the cannon, it makes conquest permanent. The cannon compels the body, the school bewitches the soul. Where the cannon has made a pit of ashes and of death, in the sticky mold of which men

[5] To those who wish to view the history of modern colonialism as just another example of contact and exchange between civilizations, Aimé Césaire replies, "But then I ask the following question: has colonization really *placed civilizations in contact*? Or, if you prefer, of all the ways of *establishing contact*, was it the best? I answer no. And I say that between *colonization* and *civilization* there is an infinite distance; that out of all the colonial expeditions that have been undertaken, out of all the colonial statutes that have been drawn up, out of all the memoranda that have been dispatched by all the ministries, there could not come a single human value. First we must study how colonization works to *decivilize* the colonizer, to *brutalize* him in the true sense of the word, to degrade him, to awaken him to buried instincts, to covetousness, violence, race hatred, and moral relativism…. Between colonizer and colonized there is room only for forced labor, intimidation, pressure, the police, taxation, theft, rape, compulsory crops, contempt, mistrust, arrogance, self-complacency, swinishness, brainless elites, degraded masses. No human contact, but relations of domination and submission which turn the colonizing man into a class-room monitor, an army sergeant, a prison guard, a slave driver, and the indigenous man into an instrument of production. My turn to state an equation: colonization = "thing-ification." I hear the storm. They talk to me about progress, about "achievements," diseases cured, improved standards of living. *I* am talking about societies drained of their essence, cultures trampled underfoot, institutions undermined, lands confiscated, religions smashed, magnificent artistic creations destroyed, extraordinary *possibilities* wiped out. They throw facts at my head, statistics, mileages of roads, canals, and railroad tracks. *I* am talking about thousands of men sacrificed to the Congo-Ocean. I am talking about those who, as I write this, are digging the harbor of Abidjan by hand. I am talking about millions of men torn from their gods, their land, their habits, their life-from life, from the dance, from wisdom." A. Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 33.

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> would not have rebounded from the ruins, the new school establishes. The morning of rebirth will be a morning of benediction through the appeasing virtue of the new school.[6]

That is, the conquest is complete when the conquered are taught to see their conquest as a liberation. Or in the words of Georges Hardy, the Director of Education of French West Africa, wrote in his 1917 *Une Conquête Morale* ("A Moral Conquest"):

> In order to transform the primitive people of our colonies, in order to make them more devoted to our cause and useful to our enterprise, we have a very limited number of means at our disposal, and the safest means is to take the native from childhood, to make him assiduously frequent us and be subjected to our moral and intellectual customs…In one word, to open schools in which his mind can be formed according to our intentions.[7]

This is the history of our academy, not just in its African and Asian outposts, but in the United States and Europe as well. My own *alma mater*, Harvard College, was rechartered in 1650 in a bid to attract more funding, as a school that would also convert and educate the local Indian youth, in the hopes that they would proselytize their home communities. The elevation of a particular culture, epistemology, pedagogy, and intellectual and educational tradition to a universal (Western education is simply "education," while "Islamic education" requires an adjective), has been maintained through colonial hegemony and a ubiquity that obscures the illusory nature of this false universality. The post-Christian secular likes to think of itself as "neutral" and universal, disavowing its particular history and contours, but nonsecular Islamic (and other) literatures and thought fit rather uncomfortably in this matrix, disrupting this myth of neutrality. As I tell my students, if al-ḥājj ʻUmar Tal had laser guns or the Ottomans had machine guns, this article would probably be written in Arabic and we'd all be studying in madrasas or the Christian schools of the Orthodox Patriarchy or Yeshivas, etc. As even Samuel Huntington wrote in his otherwise regrettable *The Clash of Civilizations*, "The West won the world not by the superiority of its ideas or values or religion […] but rather by its superiority in applying organized violence. Westerners often forget this fact; non-Westerners never do."[8]

Nevertheless, in the words of one of the characters of *Ambiguous Adventure*:

> The school in which I would place our children will kill in them what today we love and rightly conserve with care. Perhaps the very memory of us will die in them. When they return from the school, there may be those who will not recognize us. What I am proposing is that we should agree to die in our children's hearts and that the foreigners who have defeated us should fill the place wholly, which we have left

[6] C.H. Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure*, trans. Katherine Woods (New York: Heinemann, 1972), 49.

[7] G. Hardy, *Une Conquête Morale: l'enseignement en AOF* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1917), 8.

[8] S. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 51.

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> free…. Remember our fields when the rainy season is approaching. We love our fields very much, but what do we do then? We plough them up and burn them: we kill them. In the same way, recall this: what do we do with our reserves of seed when the rain has fallen? We would like to eat them, but we bury them in the earth…. With the arrival of the foreigners has come the tornado which announces the great hibernation of our people. My opinion…is that our best seeds and our dearest fields—those are our children.[9]

The current iteration of constructive Muslim thought represents one such emergence of the seeds that were buried in the grave of the colonial academy. Outside of this academy, our colleagues in more traditional Islamic educational institutions have been severely marginalized by the "tornado" of coloniality, as intellectual and financial capital has been directed away from these institutions towards those of our academy.

Thus, the famous complaint of the 9th-century Andalusian Christian scholar, Alvaro of Cordoba is reflected in the condition of educated Muslims of the 21st century, if one replaces Arabic with English, Christian with Muslim, and Latin with Arabic:

> My fellow Christians delight in the poems and romances of the Arabs; they study the works of Mohammedan theologians and philosophers, not in order to refute them, but to acquire a correct and elegant Arabic style. Where today can a layman be found who reads the Latin commentaries on Holy Scriptures? Who is there that studies the Gospels, the Prophets, and the Apostles? Alas! The young Christians who are most conspicuous for their talents have no knowledge of any literature or language save the Arabic; they read and study with avidity Arabic books; they amass whole libraries of them at a vast cost and they sing everywhere the praises of Arabian lore. On the other hand, at the mention of Christian books they disdainfully protest that such works are unworthy of their notice. The pity of it! Christians have forgotten their own tongue, and scarce one in a thousand can be found able to compose in fair Latin a letter to a friend. But when it comes to writing Arabic, how many there are who can express themselves in that language with the greatest elegance, and even compose verses which surpass in formal correctness those of the Arabs themselves![10]

In many ways, the situation of many of our colleagues trying to do constructive Muslim thought in Christian or post-Christian Divinity Schools or various university departments can be likened to that of Christian or Jewish scholars at medieval Muslim courts and salons.

One important difference, however, between the Islamic tradition into which Alvaro's young Christians were immersing themselves, and the post-Christian tradition in which we are currently immersed is that while the former was a self-confident and coherent one in which each branch of knowledge was related to every other one and rooted in revelation, the latter is currently collapsing under the weight of its own intellectual, moral, and

[9] Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure*, 41-42.

[10] G. Makdisi, *The Rise of Humanism in Classical Islam and the Christian West* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), 330.

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socio-politico-economic contradictions and catatrophes. As Martin Luther King Jr. said near the end of his life, "for all the steps we've taken towards integration, I've come to believe that we're integrating into a burning house."[11] That is, for all of the hard work done to integrate Islamic perspectives into the modern, Western Academy as more than mere objects of study, the very institution into which we have been fighting for acceptance is collapsing all around us. But this strange situation presents us with opportunities as well as challenges. Because of its imbrication and active roles in intensifying and increasingly obvious disasters of climate, justice, equality, mental health, meaning, and basic morality, many within the academy are eager to find and learn from alternate approaches to knowledge and learning. We thus have more space in which to experiment and operate than ever before, but the positions and institutional spaces in which we typically operate—Divinity Schools, Religious Studies, and Area Studies departments—are under severe financial, administrative, and political strain. Nevertheless, these difficulties pale in comparison to the financial and other difficulties faced by many of our colleagues doing constructive Muslim thought in traditional Islamic institutions of madrasas, *majālis al-ʿilm*, and *maḥādir*. Moreover, these challenges are not unrelated, as numerous thinkers, such as Aimé Césaire, Hannah Arendt, and al-ḥājj Malik al-Shabazz (Malcolm X) observed, the fascist and rapacious colonial capitalist forces that first led to the devastation of institutions of classical Islamic education in the colonies and post-colonies have now come home to roost in the metropole. The arc of the colonial boomerang may seem long, but it always returns to the thrower.

As a result, it would be prudent for constructive Muslim thought taking place within this academy to learn from and work with Muslim communities and Islamic intellectual traditions situated outside of the Western academy. Just as Black Studies has fought to recognize, establish, and work from "fugitive epistemologies" – dynamic external grounds and methods rooted in Black experiences, histories, and the Black radical tradition's perpetual struggle for freedom – constructive Muslim thought should similarly engage with, learn from, and work to serve and enrich Muslim communities and Islamic intellectual and literary traditions, instead of merely replicating "constructive" Christian theology and/or critical identity studies (while not being afraid to learn from them) in a Muslim mode. I believe this kind of intellectual hijra, the flight or emigration from oppressive to liberatory epistemic grounds, is necessary for constructive Muslim thought to realize its full potential as a site to refuse, resist, and even repel the genocidal, geocidal status quo. To paraphrase Audre Lorde, we need more than the master's tools to do our work, "and this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house [the modern nation state or academy] as their only source of support."[12] Hallaq's distinction of the dissenting scholar, who works within the paradigm of the Western academy in order to critique and improve it (his example is Said) from the more radical subversive scholar, who works

[11] H. Belafonte, *My Song: A Memoir* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2011), 329.

[12] A. Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007), 111.

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outside of the paradigm of the modern, Western academy in order to subvert it (his example is Réne Guénon), is helpful in this regard, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr's pioneering work on the environmental crisis[13] is an outstanding example of such "subversive," constructive Muslim scholarship.

Conclusion: Constructive Muslim Studies in Practice

In my own teaching and writing, I try to take the dynamics described above into account, presenting the Islamic traditions and figures we study not as mere points of data, but sources of theory as well. I explain to most of my classes that when they take a chemistry class, they learn to do chemistry, when they take a mathematics class, they learn to do maths, when they take a French class, they learn French, but when they take an Islamic studies class, they learn *about* Islam without necessarily *learning* "Islam." In classes on Islamic literatures, for example, we typically teach students about *qaṣīdas* and *ghazals*, treatises and epics, rhetoric and speeches, but rarely to we teach them how to write a *qaṣīda* or a treatise or to give a *khuṭba*—to think with and within the genres and categories of the tradition, to be fluent in its conceptual and rhetorical languages. In my own academic training, I was fortunate enough to have professors who gave me such creative assignments, and I try to carry this forward. In one class, I have my students write Sufi commentaries on contemporary pop songs, demonstrating their ability to think *with* and think *through* Sufi conceptual frameworks and theories, using them to interpret Beyoncé or Ed Sheeran lyrics.

But there are hard limits on such exercises. While it has now become commonplace for universities to offer courses for credit in mindfulness meditation or yoga, and Christian colleges routinely sponsor a wide variety of Christian religious services, at state schools like my own, it would be illegal to assign litanies of *dhikr* or regimens of fasting and ethical observance, even as such regimes are understood to be an essential part of many traditional Islamic pedagogies.[14] For example, in most Sufi and Islamic philosophical epistemologies,

[13] S.H. Nasr, *The Encounter of Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1968); S.H. Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[14] For example, Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse, the most influential African Islamic scholar of the past century wrote: "The first thing required of the believing servant is to know knowledge, and reverence (*taqwā*) is the key to knowledge. God, Most High says, *Revere God and God will teach you, God is of every thing knowing* (2:282). The first thing required of man is knowledge. So whoever desires knowledge, let him revere God. As Imām Shāfiʿī has said in this regard:

I complained to Wakīʿof the weakness of my memory

And he advised me to leave aside disobedience

He told me that knowledge is a light

And God does not give light to the disobedient.

Reverence (*taqwā*) is conforming to the commands and avoiding the prohibitions outwardly and inwardly. I say reverence (*taqwā*) is avoiding leaving what God has made obligatory for you and avoiding doing what God has prohibited." Quoted in O. Ogunnaike, *Deep Knowledge: Ways of Knowing in Sufism and Ifa, Two West African Intellectual Traditions* (College Park, PA: PSU Press, 2020), 124.

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knowledge is a Divine bestowal or emanation that cannot be received or held by unprepared hearts or intellects, just as damp wood cannot hold a flame or a basket water. Such nonsecular, ritual dimensions of constructive Muslim thought and practice will have to remain in external "fugitive" or *hijrī* formations, until such time as the post-Christian secular has a serious reckoning with and repentance from the racial and colonial legacies that have created and upheld its false universalism. As Aimé Césaire wrote, "There are two paths to doom: by segregation, by walling yourself up in a particular or by dilution, by thinning off into the emptiness of the 'universal.' I have a different idea of a universal. It is of a universal rich with all that is particular, rich with all the particulars there are, the deepening of each particular, the coexistence of them all."[15] Or as Amīr Khusrau (or more likely, his friend Ḥasan Sijzī) exclaimed:

> Every community has its own right way, religion, and qibla
> My qibla is towards the one with the crooked cap [Nizamuddin Awliya]
> The whole world worships something or the other
> Some look for God in Mecca, while some go to Kashi (Banaras),
> So why can't I, Oh wise people, fall at my beloved's feet?
> Every community has its own way and qibla[16]

So while the crises of climate, capital, systemic criminal injustice, ongoing genocides, and coloniality may seem intractable from the hegemonic perspectives of the academy, constructive Muslim thought, alongside other so-called marginalized traditions, points to traditions of imagining, thinking, and living otherwise. As Hafiz reminds us:

> From horizon to horizon, the armies of oppression are arrayed, but
> From *Azal* (beginningless eternity) to *Abad* (endless eternity) is the time of the Dervishes

[15] A. Césaire, "Letter to Maurice Thorez" trans. Chike Jeffers, *Social Text* 28/2/103 (2010), 152.

[16] S.A. Hyder, *Reliving Karbala: Martyrdom in South Asian* Memory (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 118-119.

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