

Media Perceptions and Misperceptions: A Western Perspective

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Images of Islam matter a great deal in US culture and in US–Middle East relations. Unquestionably, modern film, television, news media, literature and visual culture all offer perceptions of the Middle East. The images they produce are varied although it is clear that the history of representing Islam is hardly salutary. After 9/11 the intensity of American fascination with Islam increased dramatically, as did the number – and the diversity – of US representations. One simple but fundamental argument of this essay is that these media images do not operate in simple or one-dimensional fashion. We cannot understand the impact of the media by cataloguing stereotypes or by assessing how many “negative” or “positive” images appear in the media. Instead, we can learn more about the role of culture when we ask how perceptions of Islam *work* in the United States, for whom and to what end.

There is not, of course, just one “Western” culture, just as there is no one Islam and no single set of images that can capture the diversity of the Muslim World. Even if we just focus on the United States, as I will in this essay, we are immediately confronted with the reality that there are multiple communities with quite different investments—from Hollywood filmmakers to small town preachers to news show pundits to undergraduate majors in Middle Eastern studies. In recent years Muslim Americans have become self-consciously involved in attempting to shape perceptions, producing literature and scholarship and commenting in the news media.

To unpack the diversity of US images I will trace three different kinds of “moral geographies.” Michael Shapiro describes moral geographies as the cognitive maps that mark areas of affective connection as well as zones of separation.¹ All of us work with moral geographies of some sort or another: our worlds are mapped via hot zones, news stories, the locations of family or friends, the hours in the day. Almost inevitably the maps we make are not as clear, not as coherent or consistent as the ones that get posted on school walls with neatly defined borders of states and continents. These moral geographies often go beyond the nation and challenge pre-existing spaces; they reshape borders of all kinds.

Consider, for example, one particular kind of map that is available online today. If you have a Facebook account it is possible to use a program to map your “Facebook friends.” The program takes the basic information about each friend – Facebook, after all, has a great deal of information about all of its users – and offers you a map of your online social network. For many people those maps are miracles of global interconnectedness; a girl from Iowa may have many close-by links and many friends around the United States, but her map could show a former roommate who is now in Sri Lanka, a brother in the Peace Corps in Nigeria, a friend doing a semester abroad in London and a cousin who works for a business in Lebanon. If the student has herself studied for a semester abroad – say in the United Arab Emirates – then her social geography is likely to be even more interconnected and transnational. For such a person, national identities are likely to be less central and a sense of global flows may be as strong as state borders.²

This certainly does not mean that the nation does not matter any longer or that geographical categories like “East” and “West” have no meaning. Nor does it mean that it is possible to connect equally to everyone or to avoid the process of boundary marking. Even those of us who might want to claim universal solidarity with all beings – “my map has no enemies” – will necessarily find many limits in practice: we mark humankind as different from animal life, for example; or we cry over images of starving children but pass by images of adults killed in war; or we love everyone in theory but find that, amidst the necessities of daily

life, our attention is limited.³ Moral geographies are the world-makings that people live by. Analyzing them shows the complex ways that culture interacts with politics in shaping global encounters.

Orientalism

Orientalism describes a moral geography. Edward Said's field-defining book, first published in 1978, gave us an understanding of the profound impact of exoticizing and racist representations of "the East." Orientalism is a certain type of lens; through it, Europeans and Americans have "seen" an Orient that is the stuff of children's books and popular movies: a world of harems and magic lamps, mystery and decadence, irrationality and backwardness. Orientalism provides a detailed history of such images as well as an understanding of the cognitive mapping of spaces (East versus West). Said argues that Orientalism as a set of scholarly and cultural practices worked to distribute a certain kind of geopolitical awareness—"the world is made up of two unequal halves, Occident and Orient." Orientalism accompanied and in some sense laid the groundwork for European imperialism. As Etienne Balibar has argued, Europeans developed an "imperialist superiority complex" through which the project of imperialist expansion was able to transform itself in the minds of its practitioners, "from a mere entertainment into an enterprise of universal domination, the founding of a 'civilization.'"⁴ It is clear, then, that the stereotyping of peoples and the drawing of moral geographies are both intimately connected with economics, politics and state power.

Useful as this formulation is, there are limits to its explanatory power. In the last decades of the 20th century it became almost formulaic to analyze almost every US or European representation of the Middle East as Orientalist. "Orientalism" developed into a catch-all; if a representation was stereotyped, problematic or unflattering, it was inevitably understood as a version of what Said has described. In my own work I have described what I believe to be the "post-Orientalist" nature of US representations of the Middle East in the post-WWII period, when American film, news media and literature produced an image of the United States as separate

from the old European imperial powers and was friendly to self-determination and yet (often) deeply in opposition to Islam. These cultural products are not “good”; sometimes they are far more nefarious than the simplistic model of “us” vs. “them” precisely because they seem to be so liberal-minded. Although some Americans, notably African-American cultural radicals in the 1960s, did produce genuine narratives of affiliation, the study of US images of Islam requires that we expand our conceptual models beyond Orientalism without leaving it entirely behind.

I am interested, then, not only in the question of how Islam is represented but more generally in the ambivalence and ambiguity inherent in how “enemies,” “friends” and “others” are defined.⁵ The moral geographies that represent Islam for Americans are contested and conflicted; they do not represent one view and they are far from stable. If we aim to challenge the negative power of culture we must see the ways that culture actually works, and we must not forget the power of culture to rewrite and revise Orientalism and its legacies.

Moral Geography I: Hostile Views of Islam

In the ten years since the attacks of 9/11, there have been many examples of Orientalism. Actually, the hostile end of the spectrum of US representations is far more hostile and far less scholarly than the complex forms of knowledge that Said described. The stories of the days after 9/11 are familiar, as when Reverend Franklin Graham called Islam an “evil and wicked religion.”⁶ More recently, anti-Muslim sentiment emerged as a central factor in the 2008 US election campaign in the remarkable but persistent “accusation” that Barack Obama is a Muslim. In February 2008, the Republican Party of Tennessee put out a press release with the provocative headline “Anti-Semites for Obama.” Supposedly an analysis of the candidate’s Middle East policy views, the release argued that Israel’s security would be endangered if “Barack Hussein Obama” were elected president. The none-too-subtle use of the candidate’s middle name, along with a photo of Obama on a visit to Somalia wearing what the release described as “Muslim garb” (it was in fact traditional Somali

clothing), clearly insinuated that Obama had dangerous ties to Islam and was therefore opposed to Israel. But insinuation was not enough. The article also insisted that, if elected, Obama planned to hold a “Muslim summit” that would “determine [US] Middle East policy.” The document was so outrageous that it was immediately disavowed by the Republican National Committee and the McCain campaign.⁷

However, if the Tennessee Republican leaders were unscrupulous they were not stupid; their aim was clearly to build on the viral (and virulent) e-mail campaign from late 2007 that claimed that Obama was in fact a Muslim, that he refused to swear allegiance to the flag, and that, in the words of one widely circulated e-mail, when he had been sworn in as a senator, “he DID NOT use the Holy Bible but instead the Koran.” After all, the e-mail argued, “the Muslims have said they want to destroy America from the inside out, what better way to start than at the highest level.”⁸ The e-mails were obviously a compilation of misinformation and ridiculousness and they were quickly denounced by several evangelicals, by the Republican leadership and by prominent leaders in the Jewish community where the campaign had also made inroads. But the rumors had a fairly profound and lasting impact, one that neither Obama’s denials nor mainstream media debunking could undo. In September 2008 a Pew poll showed that only 46 percent of people in the United States could identify Obama as a Christian. Although most of the other 54 percent were uncertain about his religion, 13 percent of respondents declared him to be a Muslim, a misperception held almost equally by Democrats and Republicans.⁹

This moral geography is clearly one that defines “Muslim” as not-American, which maps the US nation as a space off limits to Islam. Tellingly, even mainstream media outlets that debunked the misconceptions about Obama often unselfconsciously referred to the Obama-as-Muslim claims as “smears” rather than “errors.”¹⁰ But there were other layers as well; the “rumors” about Obama conveniently combined anti-Muslim sentiment with anti-black racism. If they presumed that to be a Muslim was to be traitorous and unworthy of the presidency, they also made the statement – implicitly but clearly – that a black man with an Arab name

was inherently untrustworthy. Busy establishing the candidate's Christian credentials, the Obama campaign left it to Colin Powell to point out that Muslim children should also be able to dream the American dream.¹¹

Another important example of the moral geography of hate was the controversy that began in the summer of 2010 over the Park 51 Islamic Cultural Center, which was proposed for a location near the former World Trade Center site. The Cultural Center had the support of almost every New York City leader and politician as well as Christian and Jewish leaders.¹² But the grassroots response was visceral and remarkably virulent. Protestors showed up en masse at the proposed site, which was not at Ground Zero but rather two blocks away. Their signs said it all: "A Mosque at Ground Zero Spits on the Graves of 9/11 victims"; or "No Mosque at a War Memorial", with the "o" as a crescent. The Crescent appeared with a mark diagonally across it—in the shorthand of public signs it means "forbidden."¹³ The protestors came from many different backgrounds but a number of them were organized by two groups: "9/11 Families for a Safe and Strong America," which represents a group of conservative families, firefighters and others; and "Stop Islamization of America," run by right-wing blogger Pamela Geller and Robert Spencer, a pseudo-expert who writes about Islam.¹⁴

Virtually everyone, even those who supported the protestors, recognized that the planners had a *right* to build a mosque or an Islamic cultural center at the site. The establishment clause of the US Bill of Rights means that the government cannot prohibit the free exercise of religion by any group. The protests were not about what was legal; they were designed to bring so much public pressure to bear that it would become emotionally impossible and/or fiscally impossible to continue the project. They did succeed in reinvigorating anti-Muslim sentiment in America but they did not stop the mosque. In July 2011 Park 51 organizers cleared the final legal obstacle, which was over whether the current building at the area was an historic landmark. The New York State Supreme Court dismissed the case and the organizers are now legally free to build. Whether they will successfully raise the funds and finally build the Center is still unclear.¹⁵

At one level, the mosque controversy clearly illustrates the ways in which Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" argument has been mobilized in popular politics.¹⁶ Huntington's basic argument was that with the end of the Cold War, "civilization" would replace the Cold War bloc as the primary organizing site for identity and as the nexus of conflict. Civilizations, he argued, are coherent, generally large-scale cultures that have distinct values and worldviews. They are long lived and relatively unified based on fundamental ties of "blood, language, religion, and way of life" Members of any given civilization tend to define their identity through the articulation of an "other", an "outside." Thus, Huntington argued the prospects for peaceful intercivilizational integration were not good: "Relations between groups from different civilizations ... will be almost never close, usually cool, and often hostile."

Huntington's moral geography was as stark as that of any Orientalist. His work has been roundly criticized by scholars from almost every conceivable discipline; experts on Islam challenge his careless and generally hostile characterizations of the Muslim world (and China and Africa); anthropologists and others have unpacked his tendentious determination to resurrect the idea of "civilization" as an analytical category against the more complex and nuanced models that show how groups and individuals construct themselves in multiple ways that do not fit within "civilization." (I once had a student come up to me after we discussed Huntington in my class and said "I am a Sufi Muslim from Bali." The student was genuinely confused. While Muslims are a majority in Indonesia overall they are a small minority in the Hindu-majority Island of Bali. Sunnis are the majority of the Muslims in Bali and Sufism is uncommon. "Plus," the student continued, "I have family in the United States and a brother in Latin America. I am a minority everywhere I turn. What civilization does Huntington think I belong to?") The very concept of geographically-bounded and internally unified civilizations is one of Huntington's enabling fictions.

Huntington's argument remains significant, however, not because it is analytically correct but because it has had such political power. Commentators in the United States have increasingly referred to the

“clash of civilizations” as an existential reality, as something that we all understand to be the case. Protestors at Ground Zero or those who passed on rumors about Obama-as-Muslim probably had not read Huntington but his catchy title was well known. If relations between civilizations are “almost never close, usually cool, and often hostile,” then the objections of someone from “the West” to the presence of a “different civilization” are understandable. The work of this moral geography is not just to produce and reinforce global hostility, it also erases the very possibility of a truly American-Muslim identity.

Moral Geography II: Keep it Private

The second moral geography is more complicated. It involves drawing *connections* between Americans and the Middle East but does so in very particular terms: by dividing public and private and insisting that connections be made only in personal terms. Hollywood has been masterful at producing narratives that turn what might be meditations on US policies in the Middle East into stories of personal relationships that stand in for any larger political understanding. Hollywood has its own ugly history of hostility, of course. Since its beginnings, the film industry for years has trotted out one stereotype after another: conflating Arabs and Muslims; presenting Muslims as terrorists; and Islam as oppressive to women, etc.

However, since 9/11 the role of Hollywood has altered. While it hasn't given up stereotyping it has moved toward a more self-conscious practice of representing Islam and/or Arabs positively. In very many of the films or television shows that deal with the Middle East there is, at some point, a meditation on Islam that insists that Islam is *not* inherently violent and some “good Muslim” character is introduced. In the cable show *Sleeper Cell*, for example, an African American FBI agent is working undercover in a Muslim terrorist cell in Los Angeles. The “sleeper cell” is a Muslim terrorist network of people from Bosnia, England, Palestine and Egypt—a virtual United Nations of terrorists. The African-American lead character, however, repeatedly insists that “my

religion is a religion of peace” and “these people do not represent my religion.” He is the good Muslim, the one who provides the alibi for the TV show, proof of its liberalist tolerance, even as it perpetuates stereotypes.

In part, this determination by Hollywood to represent at least some positive images of Muslims comes from an awareness of a transformation in the US population. The US Muslim population is 2.6 million and growing; by 2030 the number of Muslims in the United States will more than double. The percentage of Muslims is still small, less than 1 percent, but that too will increase, to 1.7 percent of the country by 2020. Muslims are the most racially and culturally diverse religious group in the country: approximately one-third are African American, one-third of South Asian background, and one-third Arab or other heritage.¹⁷ As Evelyn Alsultany has shown, Muslim Americans have been anxious to present themselves to their neighbors as “good Americans” and some mainstream non-profit organizations have also joined in the effort. A central part of this project is showing that Muslims are “just people” too, presenting school teachers, doctors and Cub Scout moms as exemplary Muslim representatives. Audiences are invited to see the basic humanity of American Muslims—surely a salutary effort. But such advertisements assiduously avoid politics: Muslims have no particular complaints and are represented as essentially apolitical.¹⁸

To make an argument about the limits of that kind of representation I will examine the film *The Kingdom* starring Jamie Foxx. In that film, Foxx is an FBI agent who goes to Saudi Arabia to investigate a terrorist attack on an American compound. The story is something of a typical action movie plot: they search for clues, they search for bad guys, they get into firefights and car chases, they succeed in the end. The film also has a great deal to say about Saudi Arabia and Islam, however, and what it says is decidedly mixed. On the one hand Saudi Arabia overall is represented quite negatively. The country’s government and military are shown as rife with corruption and danger. More relevant to the plot of the film the Saudis are not versed in the most fundamental components of police

investigation; in that sense, they are posited as rather stupid and the streets of Riyadh are a source of constant danger: violent terrorists are everywhere, seething with rage and armed with AK47s. At the same time, Foxx and his team work closely with one Saudi officer, Colonel Faris Al Ghazi, played by actor Asraf Barhom, a Palestinian from Israel. Al Ghazi is presented very positively as a smart, kind and devout man, somebody who works very well with Jamie Foxx's character, Fleury.

In that context, the character of Al Ghazi is obviously the "good Muslim." This is not new in Hollywood: movies often make the gesture of including one "good" Arab or Muslim but *The Kingdom* goes further. The "good Muslim" is a *main* character, not a secondary one. And, unlike shows like *Sleeper Cell*, the film does more than simply announce that Islam is a fine religion. The film takes time to show Islam in quite a positive light. In one scene, for example, as Fleury and his team close in on the terrorist mastermind the film turns to Al Ghazi in his home. He is at prayer with his wife and his children, a son and two daughters. Shot in a soft haze of yellow light, backed by beautiful, evocative music, the scene shows the quiet dignity of the prayer. Al Ghazi holds his son joyfully in his lap; he also goes in to pray with his bedridden father whom he is caring for in his home. Here the film is determined to present Al Ghazi as a committed believer in a religion worthy of respect. The terms of this respect, however, are based on a prohibition: the personal must not become political. Islam is presented as "good" by being linked to family life, to children and parents. Al Ghazi's practice of Islam is never shown in a mosque. It does not lead to any visions of public good or ideas about politics. It is private, personal faith, shown in relation to his home and family.

The anthropologist Talal Asad has argued that scholars of religion have distorted our understanding of religion's role by defining "real" religion in precisely these private terms. Drawing implicitly on the practices of Protestantism, Asad argues that scholars describe "religion" as a matter of *individual* belief, rather than, for example, the shared practices of a community. In this model religions "count" only when they

can be defined as something that is private to the person, a set of individual beliefs and not part of a generalized set of communal values; the premise of modern Western culture is that politics are secular and public and religion is individual and private.¹⁹

Asad points out that this way of thinking adds credence to arguments about what “modern” religion should look like. Religions like Islam or Judaism, in particular, are marginalized as being “politics, not religion” whenever they make claims about how public life should be organized or how the state should be structured. Of course, many Christians also make claims on the public and the state but they do so while also *saying* that religion and the state should be fundamentally separate. Secularism, in the sense of defining religion as separate from the state, has been imported into the very definition of “modern religion.” To be welcomed into the supposedly modern, supposedly secular world community, Islam must define itself in Protestant terms: my religion is a *belief*, not a set of community practices; it is a belief *I hold* as an individual, not a way of structuring the public world.

Asad is *not* saying that Muslims do not have individual and private beliefs about God; he understands that very well. What he *is* saying is that Western scholars and politicians generally insist that religious claims must *not* go beyond the limited role that Western secularism has established for religion. In the United States most of the public is deeply opposed to the very idea of Shari’a law—whether it be in the United States or elsewhere. The presumption is that religion should not define the laws of the state. Again, this presumption remains strong even when in practice Christianity is often supported by state action. (One example is the practice of having people who are about to testify in the court swear on the Bible that they will tell the truth.) *The Kingdom* organizes its embrace of Islam precisely in these terms. Islam is made “good” by being shown as a private matter, a family affair. Al Ghazi’s religion happens at home. When he is in public his “Muslim-ness” is unimportant to his behavior; his role is simply to get the bad guys.

Private Terrorism

This privatizing move is particularly striking in a movie that *seems* to be about politics and public life. *The Kingdom* opens with a history of Saudi Arabia—a short two-minute documentary that describes the discovery of oil, the rise of Aramco, the Gulf War in 1990–91, etc. This is a film that promises to be relevant and politically sophisticated, to speak to the realities of the Middle East in some fashion. In practice, such a truncated history hardly counts as providing real knowledge to the audience. Unless s/he already knows a good deal about the Middle East, the viewer will understand little about the US presence in Saudi Arabia or US policy in the Middle East. In fact, despite its opening and its plot, which takes the “war against terror” as a starting point, the film is fundamentally apolitical. It is symptomatic that the most annoying people in the movie are government officials: a US embassy representative, on the one hand, and a Saudi general who has political clout, on the other. Political people are the problem because the bombing that Jamie Foxx and his team of Americans come to investigate is presented as something fundamentally outside of history and politics altogether.

In fact, our beloved Al Ghazi actually makes this point for the movie. Sitting in a car with Fleury as they begin their hunt for the terrorist in earnest, Al Ghazi explains a bit about himself to his American colleague.

“I am 42 years old. I have two daughters and a son ... a beautiful son,” he says, smiling proudly. “And I have come to the point where I no longer care about why we are attacked [by terrorists]. I only care that one hundred people woke up a few mornings ago, and had no idea it was their last. When we catch the man who murdered these people, I don’t care to ask him even one question. I want to kill him.”

The fact that he is a father and a family man is what underlines Al Ghazi’s sense of connection with the Americans who died. They are human, as he is human. The terrorist has broken that human connection and Al Ghazi has not the slightest interest in his motives. Al Ghazi refuses

to think about the politics of terrorism. He wants to ask “not even one question.” They have committed a crime and he wants to kill them.

We can notice several key issues here. First, there is the very problematic logic that when people have committed horrific crimes the correct response is to kill them. Although the US rules of engagement would (theoretically) prevent outright assassination of a suspect, the assumption is that a longed for vigilante justice is only natural. Second, and more crucially for my argument here, there is also the sense that in the case of terrorism there is *nothing at all to understand*, nothing about political and social context or US relationships with the Middle East or even debates about the best way to prevent or respond to terrorism. Many people have argued that, for the most part, the number of violent attacks on civilians can be significantly lowered when political and social grievances are addressed. In Palestine/Israel or Iraq, the political context is fundamental and no strategy can lower violence without changing the political conditions. Terrorism is like individual crime and is seen as deriving from individual pathology. In this view crime does not have to be understood or addressed as a social problem. It is a matter of individual evil and it must simply be punished. The irony, then, is that a movie which wants to say very clearly that not all Muslims are terrorists, nonetheless presents terrorism in the same individualistic terms that it presents Islam. Both are entirely privatized and individualized. Terrorism, like religion, has nothing to do with history or politics. It is all about the acts or beliefs of individuals.

The moral geography of private acceptance looks something like this. On the one side is a personal world of shared commitments to family and a privatized faith, and an understanding of political violence, like terrorism, as an issue of individual evil. On the other side is a public world where politics or politicized religion or bureaucrats get in the way of these fundamentals. This moral geography crosses national boundaries; it is not Americans vs. Islam or East vs. West. Instead it posits a transnational community of good guys connected by their love of family and their battle against evil. The “bad guys” are similarly transnational; they are not just Saudi extremists but also American bureaucrats who care more for politics

than crime-fighting. The geography imagines an inside and an outside but which do not follow political boundaries.

Moral Geography III: Solidarity

There is another vision of US–Middle East relations and a moral geography that leaves me a great deal more hopeful. This model links people via their commitments to social justice and their determination to understand the political and historical contexts in which other people live. There are many examples of projects that try to make these links. For example, one group of three hip-hop artists – two Arab and one Latino – have formed the Human Writes Project, producing a set of spoken word performances that link US struggles against racism and immigration debates with calls for justice and critiques of US policies in the Middle East.²⁰

There are also scholarly connections where academics in the United States and scholars from the Middle East connect on areas of mutual interest. The Palestine American Research Center (PARC) organizes trips to Palestine for US faculty who do not have significant experience in the Middle East.²¹ There they meet Palestinian scholars who share their interests, be that in English literature or agricultural economics. The goal is not to ignore the politics of the Palestinian situation but rather to have people meet across mutual lines of interest. Once there, US academics are also introduced to the realities of daily life for their colleagues. Academic ties are not abstract; they are forged in the cafés of Ramallah or on the campus of Hebron University and they cannot be separated from political knowledge and substantive awareness of the ongoing struggles of Palestinians.

One of the most exciting of these connecting projects is the International Hip Hop Academy in Beirut. In 2008 the US-based performance group “Lo Frequency” went to Beirut to work with local hip hop artists, including the renowned Lebanese performer Malikah. While there, Lo Frequency taught some courses to aspiring artists and also worked collaboratively with Lebanese performers to write and perform

the music video *Traditions*. The video features Americans and Lebanese each performing in English or Arabic, rapping about hip hop and the struggle to find a voice. It opens with traditional Arabic music showing scenes of Beirut along with shots of the international group who will be performing. The first rap is by the African-American performer DJ Scan, one of the founders of The Lo Frequency, who links himself to the “golden era” (the political era) of rap and describes how we are connected: “It’s the Brooklyn city streets to the blocks of the Middle East; it’s the way we all walk and the language we all speak.” DJ Scan then symbolically hands over the microphone to a Lebanese rapper who talks about the impact of the death of the US rappers Tupac and Biggie Smalls. Rap is the way his people define their community whether they are “home boy or saladi.” The third rapper marks himself as the person who crosses all worlds: Arabic, Lebanese, Syrian, American. He raps in English and Arabic, insisting that he can’t be pinned down by those labels. Everyone in the group sings the chorus: “All Across the world you’ll see, people making history. Living in every city; people struggling just like me.”

The Lo Frequency tour to the Middle East was sponsored by the US State Department. That, I believe, should give us some pause, since so much of US-government sponsored public diplomacy is designed to minimize any conflict, real or potential. And, indeed, this video does not have much to say about foreign policy or international politics directly. Yet there is a political vision here built on the original impetus of hip hop from the 1980s. That early music often spoke politically merely by describing the lives the performers lived where injustice, racial violence and poverty were daily realities.

There is every reason to believe that the collaboration that produced *Traditions* is authentic and that these artists would have refused any overt meddling with their message by the State department. Perhaps Lo Frequency and Malikah and the others were invited because of their “positive” message, but in the process of their work together they produced an alternative moral geography—one based on solidarity. It defines links between some Americans and some people in the Middle East in terms of shared passions, shared goals and – in this case – shared

commitment to the original vision of hip hop as something more than just songs about girls and riches.

Human Connections As Politically Meaningful

The chance to share stories is also the chance to explore differences and debates, to have honest discussions and to recognize that something meaningful is at stake in these connections—something that goes beyond the personal. We can see this possibility in the unlikeliest of places. Before the Park 51 controversy in the summer of 2010 there had been several similar, if far less visible, struggles over mosque building. Earlier in the year, for example, there had been a struggle in the tiny town of Wilson, Wisconsin (population 3,200). According to *Time* magazine a local physician, Dr. Mansoor Mirza, had asked the town planning council for zoning permission to open a small mosque on a piece of property he owned.²² There were less than 200 Muslim families in the areas, only 40 or 50 who actively practiced their religion, but those families needed a place to worship. Mirza worked at the county hospital and until he made his request he said that he had never really felt any discrimination.

However, when the proposal came before the planning meeting suddenly people were outspoken and angry. Islam is a religion of hate, they said. The mosque will encourage terrorism. Muslims want to wipe out Christianity. One woman told the *Time* reporter: “I don’t want it [a mosque] in my backyard. I just think it’s not America.” The doctor was shocked. Some of his fellow believers told him he should have known better, that he should have kept his head down, and soon it got worse as, hearing about the mosque, local pastors began a campaign to stop it. Then there occurred a different kind of tragedy. A nine-year old Muslim girl was visiting the area with her family when she disappeared while playing by Lake Michigan. As rescuers combed the lake and the girl’s family gathered in fear and mourning, one of the women who had opposed the mosque reached out to the local imam to ask him to minister to the family. Soon it became clear that there would be no rescue. Local families opened their home to the girls’ extended family as they arrived in town. When the

girl's body was eventually found, a man who had also opposed the mosque and whose land was next to the proposed site offered the use of his land for mourners to gather. In the wake of this communal mourning and the coming together that it brought about, 30 local religious leaders signed a petition in support of the mosque. The town planning council approved it unanimously.

One would hope that it would not take a human tragedy to bring about recognitions of our shared humanity, but sometimes it does. After 9/11 people around the world joined with the United States in mourning because they recognized the human suffering and could see themselves in the tears of those who carried signs asking for word of their loved ones. In the case of Wilson, Wisconsin, that kind of crucial human recognition did not remain merely personal. It instigated a rethinking of people's previous public statements and it opened up space—not just for a mosque but for a community. This is the kind of human connection that leads to transformation. When the love of family and embrace of our shared humanity does not stay at home it goes beyond the private to create new models of a shared public sphere and new moral geographies of social recognition.

We cannot understand US images of the Middle East or non-Muslim perceptions of Islam if we look at only one aspect of those images, be it the horrific or the hopeful. The moral geographies at work are complicated, overlapping and fluid. Our task as scholars and teachers is to recognize the diversity of these and to promote in our writings and our teachings the kinds of maps that might reshape our world.