Home-growing Islam: 
The Role of Australian Muslim Youth in Intra- and Inter-Cultural Change

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This article explores the extraordinary creativity and resourcefulness that Australian Muslims, especially younger, second-generation ones, show in reinterpreting and mediating their cultural and spiritual inheritance. It also seeks to address some significant gaps in the recent literature on Islam and Muslims in Australia. Research on Muslim youth attitudes in this country is limited. There is a relative absence of serious regional studies that start from the ‘Australianess’ of Muslims in Australia. As such, the experiences of Muslims born and brought up in Australia as they seek to negotiate questions of faith and identity both intra- and inter-culturally in a post 9/11 environment have largely been neglected.

As these ‘homegrown’ Muslims are overwhelmingly young (under the age of 25), this article also seeks to sharpen our appreciation of the inter-generational negotiations and tensions played out in the lives of young Australian Muslims. Younger generation Muslims experience many of the structural problems new Australians face generally, but with the additional challenge of naturalising a faith that seeks, in principle at least, to transcend cultural and ethnic differences. This paper suggests that one of the more significant and original responses young Muslims make to the challenge of negotiating an Australian identity consistent with Islamic values is through a skilful use of mainstream techniques of storytelling and popular entertainment. A number of writers and performers illustrate this trend but the recent SBS success of Salam Café remains an exceptional achievement.

The enterprise of writers including Randa Abdel-Fattah, Irfan Yusuf, Nadia Jamal and Taghred Chandab, the energy and commitment of Muslim hip-hop outfit The Brothahood and, most notably, the self-aware engagement of the makers of Salam Café with the popular media represent a wide range of creative endeavour that is reflective of the diversity of Muslim youth cultures in Australia. Indeed, the term ‘youth’ needs to be understood here as a generational marker rather than as a precise indication of age. At the same time, this paper suggests that these writers and performers are collectively motivated by a recognition that the most effective way to communicate their values is entertainingly, through the effective use of narrative forms (the novel, the memoir, the rap and the panel show) that are familiar to non-Muslim Australia. As this mimetic facility can bring them into conflict with certain Qur’anic prohibitions against representation, they find that the creation of a middle ground where they can connect with broader Australia and remain true to the tenets of their faith demands a creative sensitivity towards intra- as well as inter-cultural education.

1 According to the 2006 census there are almost 130 000 Australian-born Muslims. The vast majority (82%) are under the age of 25.
This article suggests that two kinds of contextualisation are needed in order to understand these creative strategies. One, addressed in the following section, involves an understanding of the social, cultural and political obstacles to stable identity formation. Another, taken up further into the paper, entails an awareness of the symbolic function such popular discursive forms as the novel and the TV show have in Australian culture generally: by embedding the drama of identity formation in these popular forms, the artists naturalise their distinctive worldviews even when the views themselves remain ‘non-mainstream’.

Both these contexts can be paralleled from studies of other migrant cultures in Australia and it is important not to make the mistake of reducing this creative production to a purely symptomatic response to ‘being a migrant’ (or, in our case, post-migrant). In a way all the artists discussed here seek to move beyond the Muslim stereotype, to negotiate a flexible co-existence of secular and religious cultures and values. At the same time, in a post 9/11 environment, and in a community committed to a positive set of values, the socio-politics of self-identification and acceptance are unusually, and intricately, tied up with the semiotics of communication. In fact, if, as Graeme Turner argues (2007: 17-18), Muslims in Australia could slide into a chronic disaffection because of the concerted hostility of the political and media culture, then finding new ways to communicate - and thus to engineer new spaces of cross-cultural communication and trust - is not ancillary to social initiatives designed to counter disaffection: it may be the best, because most engaging, strategy of all for building broad, inter-cultural community trust and respect.

The Politics of Self-identification

Islam (the faith) and Muslims (the believers) are often represented in the media as ‘one dimensional political fictions’.

The Australian Muslim population is incredibly diverse. Data from the 2006 census indicate that more than 340 000 Muslims call Australia home (comprising nearly 1.7% of the population). More than a third are Australian-born and raised, and those born overseas hail from nearly 70 countries, speak a variety of languages and inhabit equally varied life worlds (Zwartz 2005; Lentini 2008: 16). Diversity in terms of religious practice also needs to be considered. Not every ‘Muslim’ is religious. Abdullah Saeed suggests that around 30% of Australian Muslims are practising and observant Muslims. Another third are Muslim only in name. ‘Cultural’ or ‘nominal’ Muslims might identify themselves as Muslim but may not observe the rituals or regulations. The rest fit somewhere in between (Cited in Zwartz; Saeed 2004: 28). In the words of Shahram Akbarzadeh ‘it is more accurate to talk about many Muslim communities in Australia, rather than a single Muslim community’ (2003: 234).

Notwithstanding this variation, Islam (the faith) and Muslims (the believers), are often represented in the media as ‘one-dimensional political fictions’ (Aly 2007: xvi). And in the wake of the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington in 2001, Islam and Muslims have increasingly been coupled with violence in the Western collective imagination.
Widespread usage of the media-inspired terms ‘violent jihad’ and ‘Islamic terrorist’ means that many non-Muslims now take for granted that Islam promotes terrorism and suicide-bombing. Needless to say, acts of terrorism have nothing to do with Islam, even when they are committed in its name and the vast majority of the world’s Muslims are horrified by them.

In his 2007 article, cultural studies theorist Graeme Turner argued that, as the ‘political force of the principles of cultural diversity has declined in the face of “post-war on terror” contemporary politics, this has left open the question of how … modes of belonging are now to be constructed [by Muslims in Australia]’ (2007: 17). Among the lessons of the Cronulla riots, Turner suggested that we needed seriously to consider how, in the absence of their ‘full membership to the Australian community’, Muslim Australians are to create and sustain a meaningful sense of belonging (2007: 15; Stephenson 2009: 69). Might it be through the rejection and repudiation of mainstream Australian values and society? Could it come through an identification with the fundamentalist ideologies that have inspired recent terrorist attacks? Australian Muslim youth might be the most susceptible to these temptations, but relatively little is known about their attitudes. What is known does not support Turner’s fears but it does show that young Australian Muslims are alive to them, and have consciously to differentiate themselves from these scenarios of alienation. It is here that the limited sociological data intersect with the creative production discussed in this article. There is a continuum of concern that runs across wide sections of Australian Muslim society and finds its therapeutic expression in these artists’ work.

Between March 2007 and May 2008 Rachel Woodlock was part of a Monash University research team that distributed questionnaires physically and on-line to 600 Muslims in Victoria and New South Wales. Of these, 200 participants (who self-identified as practising rather than cultural or nominal Muslims) nominated Australia as their country of birth and were asked to rank the strength of their agreement or disagreement with the statement ‘I can be a good Muslim and a good Australian’. As many as 85% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed (Woodlock 2009: 24 and table 3, p 50).

One respondent, a Victorian male of Egyptian ancestry born in 1976 had this to say:

I don’t separate the two. I am a Muslim and an Australian … and for me [they] work greatly together. I love being a Muslim Australian and an Australian Muslim (Quoted in Woodlock 2009: 25).
This is consistent with the finding that, unlike many immigrant Muslims, whose primary identification is often with their country or region of birth, the next generation is highly adept at developing fluid relations between apparently opposing cultural styles (Afshar et al. 2006: 172). In contrast with their parents, who often perceive a contradiction between being Australian and Muslim, or who feel that becoming Australian necessarily entails renouncing the culture of their country of origin, younger Muslims do not see a problem with being both Australian and Muslim. Aspirational identity formations of this kind, designed to qualify members of minority groups for ‘full membership’ of the Australian community are a familiar feature of the migrant experience. And the ease with which Woodlock and her co-researchers’ respondents assimilate themselves to this transitional process suggests that there is little support for Turner’s gloomy prognostications here.

However, behind this rather reassuring picture is another one that indicates that young Australian Muslims manage to maintain these inclusive self-identifications at a certain cost. In contrast with other outsider groups seeking to reconcile contrasting cultural norms and expectations, young Australian practising Muslims are also committed to bringing something positive, possibly ethnically-transcendent, into the definition of what it is to be Australian. In addition, they find themselves treading a fine line between intra- and inter-religio-cultural prejudices that do not afflict secular second-generation migrants. While all minority groups can sense the cultural prejudices of the dominant society, Muslim Australian communities, in particular, are often viewed as the ‘source of a dangerous cultural pathology that is at odds with the values of the rest of Australian culture’ (Turner 2007: 12).

The binary logic that underscores this perceived incompatibility exemplifies the dynamic processes through which dominant ‘social groups become established and in the process create “outsiders”’ (Sutton and Vertigans 2005: 142). Sociologists Philip Sutton and Stephen Vertigans suggest that a 1965 study carried out by British researchers Elias and Scotson provides ‘a conceptual toolkit’ to understand ‘established-outsider relations of various kinds’, including those between contemporary Muslims and non-Muslims (2005: 142). In the original study Elias and Scotson analysed the particular dynamics at play between two working-class groups in the East Midlands of England, whose social characteristics and behaviour were broadly similar, but who were in conflict with one another.

Their research revealed that dominant or established groups simultaneously create an internal sense of community and solidarity and stigmatise outsider groups through the invocation of what they call ‘group charisma’ and ‘group disgrace’. Established groups generate ‘group charisma’ based on a self-image that emphasises the best aspects of the group, ‘ignoring other elements that might contaminate such an image’ (Sutton and Vertigans 2005: 143). While exaggerating their own positive attributes, established groups emphasise the outsiders’ negative ones. Thus the ‘negative stereotypes of outsiders are one side of a coin and the established group’s own positive self-stereotype can be found on the other’ (Sutton and Vertigans 2005: 144).
This is not to say that outsider groups cannot successfully challenge externally imposed stereotypes. But the process is usually dialectical – if ironically so. Thus, while slaves or violently displaced populations such as asylum seekers, ‘find precious little space to remake themselves’, typically, ‘the construction of identities involves both the passive experience of “being made” by external forces and the active process by which a group “makes itself”’ (Goodman 2006: 57, 54). In this situation the stigma of inferiority attached to oppressed groups may be inverted to incite political mobilisation against oppression. A slogan such as ‘Black is beautiful’ (and the appropriation of pejorative terms such as ‘nigger’ in African-American music) is an example of this reclaiming and refiguring of identity (Sutton and Vertigans 2005: 145). Naturalised depictions of race, ethnicity, gender or religion can be used both for legitimating inequality and for struggle against it (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992:18).

Shifts in power balances do occur between established and outsider groups, but rarely is the fundamental structure of inequality eradicated entirely. Rather, changes in the position of excluded outsider groups, be they racial, ethnic or religious minorities, women, gays and lesbians or disabled people, ‘form part of a long-term process of social change over generations’ (Sutton and Vertigans 2005: 146). These long-term processes are subject to setbacks and reversals. The back-lash against the cultural policy of multiculturalism in Australia, and the ‘reappearance of a nostalgic, monocultural nationalism’ during the past decade are evidence of this (Turner 2007: 5). Returning to Sutton and Vertigans’ formulation of social stereotyping as two sides of a coin (with negative characterisations of outsider groups on one side and the dominant group’s positive self-definition on the other), it is unlikely that negative stereotyping ‘can be simply eliminated without some movement on the part of the established group’s view of themselves’ (2005: 144).

This is one important reason why the cultural, literary and musical production of young Muslim Australians is so significant. It serves as a means of self-identification and gestures towards a growing confidence among Muslim Australians to define themselves in their own terms. But the promotion of positive (or perhaps less-demonised) images of Muslims simultaneously performs another function. It contributes to the process of reconfiguring the way mainstream Australian society views Muslim Australians and, importantly, itself. This new body of work provides the wider Australian community with a counter-narrative to the one they read in the press, see on the television and hear on the radio.

... the valuable role Muslim youth are playing in breaking down ... ‘us and them’ rhetoric is especially vital

Muslim Australian youth are not so much combating the absence of information and images about Islam and Muslims in the media, and in public and intellectual debate, as countering their almost universally negative characterisation of the faith and its followers. In his study of the Australian press coverage of Muslims from 1950-2000 Howard Brasted notes that the mainsteam Australian press focuses on ‘a narrow segment of Muslim activity ... which is dominated by recurrent ferment and fervour’, adding, ‘very rarely has this narrow
view been balanced against the larger perspective of the normal, stable, social existence experienced by the vast majority of Muslims’ (2003: 222). Since the events of 9/11 2001 and the subsequent ‘war on terror’, the discourse on Muslims and Islam in Australia ‘has shifted from one of multiculturalism to one of risk, threat and otherness’ (Lentini 2006: 90). When we consider that one Australian in every eight interviewed for a recent University of News South Wales survey acknowledged that they are prejudiced, particularly towards Muslim Australians (Highfield and Dunn 2003), the valuable role these Muslim youth are playing in breaking down what Peter Manning (2006) labels ‘us and them’ rhetoric is especially vital. Islam as a global category can be homogenised by Orientalists and Islamists alike (Humphrey 2003: 48). Belief in the incompatibility of Australian (or Western) and Muslim values can come from Muslim quarters as well. Some conservative Muslim leaders exhort Muslims to minimise their interactions with the dominant culture, believing it to be inimical to the preservation of Islamic standards and values. They have encouraged Muslims to isolate themselves from the non-Muslim culture and community and, instead, to prioritise their connection to Islam (Woodlock 2009: 2).

As the call to isolation indicates, the struggle to negotiate an Australian Muslim identity is essentially bound up with challenges of communication. How are younger, homegrown Australian Muslims to represent themselves, both to the broader community and to their own elders? As Mustapha Kara-Ali, a 35 year old engineer who was a member of the now defunct Muslim Community Reference Group (an initiative of the Howard government), puts it:

Now the problem remains that as we speak there is a definite communication gap which is partly to do with the fact that younger people growing up in Australia have a certain cultural understanding about Australian life, which they then blend with Islamic teachings, or the Islamic understanding. And then when you merge the two, you get a concept of Islam in Australia, which is sometimes foreign to people that have not interacted much with Australian society within the migrant community, a lot of whom still find it difficult to speak English (Quoted in Background Briefing 2005).

From Social to Cultural Production

It is partly because of their success in narrowing the ‘communication gap’ that popular cultural initiatives like those undertaken by recent Muslim Australian authors, The Brothahood and Salam Café are so significant for their communities. But this is not to suggest that these writers and performers have effortlessly found strategies to entertain and reconcile. In the first instance, the value of their work resides in the fact that it directly and

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3 Representations of Muslims and Islam in the Australian press are far from static and not all media coverage has been entirely negative. Howard Brasted’s research suggests that in the late 1990s Muslim Bosnians and Kosovars were depicted in a favourable light (2003:222). Similarly, a study of recent media reporting on Muslims in two Melbourne newspapers (The Age and Herald Sun), found that they ran positive or neutral articles more frequently than negative reports (although nearly a quarter of the latter’s reports were negative) (Akbarzadeh and Smith 2005: 14; Lentini 2006: 90). For further information on the way the mainstream Australian press has reported on Islam and Muslims see Peter Manning (2004) Dog Whistle Politics and Journalism.
powerfully addresses precisely the conundrums of communication identified above by Kar-Ali. In confronting the temptation of isolationism through an accessibly written, highly entertaining and sometimes disturbing memoir, Irfan Yusuf, for example, succeeds in finding a way to communicate an intra-cultural struggle inter-culturally. His recent book not only offers a valuable insight into the inter-generational dynamics of fanaticism but also underlines the therapeutic value of writing itself - simply to command literary skills is a way of insulating oneself against dogmatism, and if these are exercised in English, they also qualify the writer to belong to the wider Australian conversation about identity.

As a teenager, Muslim Australian lawyer and social commentator Irfan Yusuf flirted with what he parodically labels (following former US president George W Bush) ‘Islamo-fascism’. In an irreverent and satirical memoir, Once were radicals: My years as a teenage Islamo-fascist (2009), Yusuf describes the sense of alienation and of deep cultural and religious conflict he felt growing up in Sydney, ‘having to swing between the cultural expectations of [his] parents and the cultural realities of Australian life’ (2009: 10). Born in Karachi, Pakistan, Yusuf grew up with his close-knit, middle-class family in ‘the leafy suburbs’ of Sydney. In 1985, at the age of 16, he was, like many ‘Muslim kids’, on the verge of being ‘sucked into fringe Islam’ (2009: 9).

For Yusuf the appeal of political Islam lay in his need to find a source of identity and certainty. He could not find it in ‘mainstream’ Australian society or the so-called ‘Muslim bureaucracy’. Yusuf describes the difficulty ‘for Muslim kids like me to always stand out in the crowd because of our skin colour and our names which no one seems to know how to pronounce’ (2009: 10). But he also recounts the sense of estrangement he felt from the older generation of Muslims. Local imams, he says, ‘were of little or no assistance, since most spoke little English … and had no understanding of [younger Muslims’] experiences and problems’ (2009: 253, 285) and ‘it was a disturbing and depressing discovery to find out just how divided and impotent our so-called Muslim leaders were’ (2009: 220). Furthermore, as he claims, ‘mosques are still run along ethnic and cultural lines of little relevance to most young Muslims’ (2009: 10).

Feeling alienated from the previous generation’s culturally-specific forms of religious practice, Yusuf was determined, in his work with the Islamic Youth Association of NSW, to rid it of the ‘cultural corruption of the elders’ (2009: 238). He sought, wherever possible, to invoke a ‘pure’, unadulterated form of Islam. He lectured women, including his mother and sisters, on the importance of wearing the hijab and, in his search for belonging, even contemplated joining the mujahideen in Afghanistan in their fight against the Soviets: ‘As a young man growing up in a spiritual and cultural pendulum - swinging between being Indian, Pakistani, Muslim, Australian - I was confused. Political Islam, in the form of the Afghan jihad, provided some certainty and direction, even if it meant potentially cutting my life short’ (2009: 8).

Yusuf’s brush with ‘fringe political Islam’ (2009: 298) did not result in acts of violence. His ‘extended flirtation’ with extremist Islamism remained at the level of ideas only, ideas that changed as he gained greater access to ‘mainstream Islamic theology’ (2009: 288, 9). Yusuf met religious leaders and mentors who taught him that the essence of Islam was public service and public engagement (with Muslims and non-Muslims). He returned from a trip to Pakistan with numerous books on Islam, Muslim history and culture; books that contrasted sharply with those to which he had been formerly exposed: ‘Until the mid-1990s, the only English-language religious books available to Aussie Muslims taught that
mainstream Australian culture was something to avoid, not something to embrace’ (2009: 294). Yusuf’s trip to Pakistan was instructive in another sense. The sickening sectarian violence he witnessed put him ‘completely off’ political Islam and he is now committed to building ‘coalitions with all kinds of people across the cultural, philosophical, religious and political spectrum’ (2009: 284, 294).

Yusuf’s account of his flirtation with radical Islam is strikingly interactive: the call for purification emerges reactively, and is strengthened through repeated rejections of other more culturally-nuanced interpretations of the Qur’an. But withdrawal from mainstream Australian society proves to be unsustainable. As the markedly vernacular style of Yusuf’s book indicates, he shares with the non-Muslim community a primary entanglement of cultural reference points and genres of cultural expression. All the creative people looked at in this article recognise that a prior and shared discursive common-ground has shaped the way they think and express themselves. The point that emerges from Yusuf’s testimony is that, whatever form it eventually takes - rejection or accommodation or something more creative - the process of self-identification involves the creation of others. Insiders and outsiders are defined in relation to each other - indeed, only exist through each other. It is this fact that links social production - the formation of hybrid identities - to cultural production - the utilisation of existing genres to say something different.

These observations are consistent with what Australian-born lawyer and award-winning author Randa Abdel-Fattah describes as the context of her decision to start writing fiction for young people:

Without demanding the right to self-definition I was a nappy head, a tea towel head, a wog, a terrorist, a camel jockey, a fundamentalist, an oppressed woman, a slave to Muslim men. The negative imagery of Islam and Muslims I saw saturating the arts provided the impetus for me to insist on my own self-definition and to take a proactive approach (2008: 2).

Two of Abdel-Fattah’s three young adult novels are set in Australia. In Does My Head Look Big In This? (2005) readers follow teenager Amal’s journey of self-discovery as she makes the decision to wear the hijab. She encounters rejection from some of her fellow non-Muslim students, but wins the admiration and respect of others. Abdel-Fattah makes strategic use of humour and satire to challenge negative characterisations of Muslims and Islam. Amal’s self-deprecating and comical outlook on life was, Abdel-Fattah explains, ‘the best way to humanise “the Other” and avoid preaching to my readers’ (2008: 3). Abdel-Fattah’s second novel Ten Things I Hate About Me (2006) depicts a Muslim teenager who, experiencing great difficulty straddling her Australian, Muslim and Lebanese identities, withdraws ‘to the safety of anonymity in order to achieve acceptance by [her] peers’ (Abdel-Fattah 2008: 3). Common to both books is a care to display the diversity of ways in which members of the Australian Muslim community approach life in a secular country. Some characters deny their Muslim heritage in an attempt to assimilate; others seek to recreate the culture of their countries of origin in petrified form in suburban Australia; yet others misuse Islamic theology in an attempt to justify the differential treatment of their sons and daughters. As Abdel-Fattah writes:

I am no apologist and I certainly do not seek to write novels which selectively present the ‘cream of the crop’ of Australian Muslims, denying the existence of Muslims who distort
Islamic teachings to subjugate women or who conflate culture with religion to exact an appalling abuse of Islamic teachings (2008: 3).

There is an interesting connection here between genre and the commitment to promoting and communicating a Muslim identity that is engaged, flexible and multidimensional. The reliance of fiction on plot and character builds relativism and contingency into the fabric of the narrative. Stereotypes quickly become transformed into comic or grotesque characters; when placed in the context of other points of view, they rapidly lose their power to terrorise. Nadia Jamal and Taghred Chandab, the young authors of *The Glory Garage: Growing up Lebanese Muslim in Australia* (2005), wanted to provide a rejoinder to the harmful stereotypes peddled about Muslims and Islam in the mainstream media, but also to expose readers to the diversity of the Muslim Australian community:

We are writing this book because there have been critical and damaging things written and said about Muslims, especially the Lebanese who follow this religion. We felt there was a need to give you an insight into the everyday dilemmas that some of us face growing up in a secular society. This book is just a slice of that life, and should not be read as the definitive book on the community (2005: 6-7).

But, again, the pair does not simply swap unfavourable characterisations of Muslims with favourable ones. Instead, they depict Muslims as real, multi-dimensional human beings. Jamal and Chandab narrate various real-life stories told by young Muslim Lebanese-Australians (some names and details were changed to maintain anonymity). They recount the various ways in which Muslim youth negotiate their identity in relation both to fellow Muslims and the broader non-Muslim community. Several accounts describe the difficulties that young women wearing the hijab have encountered in their interactions in the public sphere. While a number of young women resist the expectation that they should marry and start families at an early age, others relish the opportunity to do so.

Still other young women describe the frustration they feel at the apparent double-standards applied to girls and boys. Young men, it seems, can go out at night alone, but fathers and brothers go to great lengths to guarantee the chastity and modesty of the teenage girls in their families. In one young woman’s words:

Being born with a penis means [my brother] can go to nightclubs without being punished by my dad, and he can have sex, as long as he doesn’t advertise it. He can pretty much do whatever he wants whenever he wants, without facing the same consequences as me (2005: 45-46).

In the prologue and afterword the authors ruminate on their own upbringings, reflecting many of the themes already discussed. Chandab notes that she used to isolate herself from the Lebanese Muslim community in an attempt to assimilate to non-Muslim
Australian society. Now she attends weekly Arabic and scripture classes and is immensely proud to identify as Muslim. She takes similar pride in her nationality, declaring, ‘Nothing can compare to living in Australia and being an Australian’ (2005: 180). Similarly, Jamal insists: ‘I do not think that as an Australian-born Muslim I should be torn between my faith and patriotism. I believe I can be true to both, and I shouldn’t have to choose between the two’. She also reflects on the ‘period of soul-searching’ that many Muslims, ‘both at an individual and community level’ have undergone since the events of September 11 2001. As Jamal claims, ‘I am among a growing number of Australian Muslims who have been prompted to search for a deeper understanding of their religion’. The result is that she and many of her peers now identify ‘with their migrant parents’ religious beliefs more than their parents do’ (2005: 181).

**Mediating Islam**

In a way what these writers do is to use the diversity of Australian Muslim experience to foreground the narrowness of mainstream ideas of identity. The acknowledgement of the heterogeneity of Australian Muslim culture and the frank engagement with its internal contradictions and external pressures, sketches a community that is sufficiently self-aware to be able to foster a diversity of acceptable Islamic identifications. In contrast, the persistence of the dominant group in stereotyping Australian Muslims as uniformly un-Australian ultimately reflects their own lack of social imagination. In contrast, as The Brotherhood illustrates, an emancipated Muslim youth in Australia is relatively free to incorporate the contemporary and the international – notably the popular cultures of the United States - into the process of self-definition.

In the US hip-hop music has been ‘an active vehicle for social protest’ for many years (Alim 2005: 269). Building on a long African-American oral tradition it was developed by Black urban youth more than two decades ago who used it to express their frustration at racism, discrimination and police brutality among other social ills. In this context, The Brotherhood belongs to a new generation of local and international Muslim hip-hop activists whose tracks are ‘reflections on real life and on the struggles of real people who are deemed “outsiders” by their society’ (The Brotherhood’s Myspace page). Their music and lyrics are a way of simultaneously breaking down stereotypes and performing da’wah (calling people to Islam). Rejecting an ‘us and them’ definition of belonging, The Brotherhood uses the aura of performance to communicate calls to mutual understanding and accommodation. Their lyrics contribute to community-building, at the same time fulfilling a religious obligation to spread Islamic knowledge, values, teachings and ideas.

Not that this entirely deflects intra-cultural criticism. The members of The Brotherhood have faced criticism from Muslim scholars and others that music and singing are *haram* (forbidden) in Islam. They have adopted various means of accounting for this criticism, including approaching Islamic teachers or sheiks for advice, and posting the following on their Myspace page, under the heading ‘before you judge read our position on music in Islam’:

The subject of music’s permissibility in Islam has drawn sizable debate from all corners of the Ummah. There are some scholars that say it is haram (forbidden) in all cases, some that say
no musical instruments can be used, and some say it’s halal (permissible) as long as it doesn’t contain content which violates the principles of Islam (i.e. sex, drugs, violence, profanity). We take the latter viewpoint on this matter. While we are not scholars, we have consulted different scholars on the issue and have made an informed decision.

There is another intra-cultural issue that The Brothahood has to negotiate. Some Muslims argue that Islamic devotional songs known as *nasheed* are the only appropriate form of Islamic musical expression. From The Brothahood’s perspective, however, Muslim hip-hop is providing a faith-based soundtrack for a new generation of young Muslims who are alienated by the drug references and sexism of mainstream hip-hop music and the culturally antiquated nature of *nasheed*. In this area, where ethics and aesthetics intersect, and the duty to promote Islamic values has to dovetail with emotionally-affecting musical communication, The Brothahood may be aware that members of the international Muslim hip-hop network, especially those in the United States, observe that ‘the very means by which the Quran was revealed to the Prophet – that is, orally and, in large part, through rhymed prose – exhibits parallels to the linguistic and literary mode of delivery found in hip hop lyrical production’ (Alim 2005: 266). But whether or not one recognises a connection between hip-hop poetics and the Qur’anic text as a form of poetry, one cannot deny that Muslim hip-hop is galvanizing Muslim youth, both here and overseas, to become more engaged in social and political causes.

Borrowing a staple of US television, the SBS panel show Salam Café also embeds its message in a widely known entertainment genre. In transposing pressing questions surrounding contemporary Australian Muslim identity into a resolutely secular and populist form it encourages a re-evaluation of the very terms in which Muslims talk about themselves. The democratic nature of the exchanges on air, the comic routines, the quick-witted deflation of any view taken to be dogmatic, pretentious or discriminatory: these techniques convey to the non-Muslim viewer as well as the believer the idea that Islam can operate openly in an open society. At the same time the panellists are clear about the limits they should observe. As I discovered when I interviewed panellists Waleed Aly and Susan Carland, there is a clear and sophisticated awareness amongst the show’s makers that the question of balancing intra- and inter-cultural expectations is central to their purpose. A popular TV genre is used to build trust and respect, not to advance careers, and the participants are keenly aware that they are servants of an idea, not ‘personalities’.

The Salam Café panellists are very conscious of the democratic bias inherent in the panel show genre. This suits them because it is consistent with their double commitment to self-respect and respect for others. Within this self-aware and non-proselytising framework the conversational format of the show is adapted as a vehicle for relativising every inflexibly held prejudice – Muslim or not. Muslims who are critical of the show have accused the panellists of being too Australian, and for disregarding Islamic doctrine. As Carland says, they have been asked by many Muslim viewers ‘why are you not talking about the *deen* [religion, Islamic way of life]? Some Muslim viewers claim that it is a Muslim’s responsibility to instruct those who are ignorant of Islam about their religion. In one scene the show’s roving reporter (stand-up comedian Nazeem Hussain) asks random (Anglo) ‘Aussies’ some general knowledge questions about Islam. In response to the question ‘Do you know what Ramadan is?’ a woman asks if it’s the same as a pappadam. Another unsuspecting member of the
public thought Islam was ‘somewhere in Iraq’ (Trad 2008). The show does not supply the correct answers - a source of consternation for some Muslim viewers.

The members of Salam Café hold unapologetically to the view that theirs is a show about contemporary Australian Muslims, not Islam. In Carland’s words, ‘we’re not talking about the faith per se, we’re talking about our lived experience of the faith, and there is a distinction between the two’. It appears that there is an easy fit between a focus on ‘lived experience’ (rather than abstract dogma) and the self-reflexivity that is at the core of a program like Salam Café. The panellists entertain us because they can laugh at themselves. While respectful (ultimately) of others, they have no compunction about exposing their own contradictions and confusions.

This self-exposure, and the laughter of identification it produces in the viewer, is neither gratuitous nor cruel. It has a larger purpose - one entirely consistent with the injunction to communicate Islamic values. To those who think the program should promote dogma rather than drama, Aly proposes that humour is a more effective means of breaking down stereotypes than a religious sermon:

You can tell what some of these people want us to do, to pause the conversation, turn to the camera, and then down the barrel give some kind of dissertation, some basic Islamic knowledge. That’s what they want, but I don’t think they understand that, A, if people are curious they’ll go and find things out, and that might spark their interest and B, they’re not terribly interested in us giving basic Islamic knowledge down the camera of a national television show, unless we want to be on at 3am and pay for the space, and that’s actually quite boring television for a lot of people. You actually end up achieving more just by entertaining people.

Carland locates this act of entertaining in a religious context. She argues that any attempt to instruct viewers about the theological principles of Islam would, in the current climate of suspicion and hostility, be premature. First, she insists, the audience has to learn to see Muslims as ordinary people who are not entirely different from other members of the community. And she likens the current state of affairs to the period in Muhammad’s life prior to his reception of revelations from God. Long before he became a Prophet his good deeds helped him gain the trust and confidence of the locals. Consequently, when the Prophet Muhammad started preaching to them about Allah, they were much more receptive to his message. Carland explains the parallel with the situation in which young Australian Muslims - and the members of Salam Café in particular - find themselves:

We’ll often have Muslims who say, ‘Islamically it’s your duty to go and tell people about what we believe’. They say, ‘That’s what the Prophet Muhammad did, he went out and told people there is no God but Allah, you need to be doing that too because Muslims have to follow the sunnah’ [words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad]. I agree, but in Australia and the West at the moment we’re actually at the place before Muhammad even started preaching. In the first 40 years of his life Muhammad established himself as a trustworthy person among the tribes so that when he started preaching they believed him. As far as I’m concerned the Muslims are actually at the pre-revelation state in Australia. We need to prove to people that we’re trustworthy before they’re going to be receptive to any religious message. People think we’re going to kill them, they’re not ready. We’re at the stage where we need to prove ourselves as trustworthy, and I think Salam Café is doing that, we’re showing them that...
we’re human and we can be trustworthy, and we’re just like them, and then in the future, if people want to hear about the religion, then that’s when you do it.

This is a fascinating argument - there can be very few panel shows that have an agenda as visionary as this. One corollary of it is that Salam Café foresees its own redundancy. Greek-Australian journalist George Megalogenis contends that there are three phases of what he calls ‘Wogdom’: cowed, cocky and connected. As he says, ‘Get to the third phase and you can lose that ethnic chip on your shoulder. It doesn’t matter who calls you ‘wog’ after that because you no longer question your identity as an Australian’ (2003: 7). In our conversation Carland and Aly noted that while they personally are in the third, connected phase of ‘Aussie Muslimdom’, they self-consciously use the cocky trope in Salam Café to encourage evolutionary change: to help coax the rest of the Muslim community in Australia into the connected phase. As Aly states:

The people who do the show are probably at the connected phase where the whole Wogdom thing is kind of irrelevant to their lives, they just function. But the show itself is cocky, and it brings a community that’s in the cocky phase through to the connected phase ... So as for the community being in a kind of transition, yeah, I mean, community is constantly in transition, but I think we’re starting to see the phase where things like Salam Café, not just Salam Café, but things like it pop up, and the community kind of evolves as a result of it, or with it.

In the 1980s and ‘90s the Greek-Australian TV shows Wogs out of work and Acropolis Now parodied popular stereotypes of Greeks with skits about hotted-up cars and womanising men. They played an important role in assisting the Greek-Australian community’s transition from ‘cocky’ to ‘connected’. Today, when the Greek-Australian community is well and truly comfortable with, and confident of, its ‘Australianness’, shows that celebrate the second cocky phase of Wogdom are no longer necessary. Aly describes the process as one in which:

Eventually you reach a point where the show is entrenched, and the characters are entrenched and they become such common reference points that everyone grows to understand them and love them. Then the show becomes, it’s not entertaining anymore. This is what happened to Wogs out of Work. Suddenly they really were out of work because they were so successful.

Salam Café, as Aly and Carland acknowledge, is not commercially successful in the same way as Wogs out of work, nor does it share its mainstream appeal, but they are optimistic that it will follow a similar trajectory. Once Muslim Australians have moved into the connected phase of ‘Muslimdom’, and have passed their ‘immigration initiation’ to become ‘happily Australian’ (Megalogenis 2003: 19, 11), there will be no need for cocky send up shows like Salam Café. And this is precisely what the creators of the show hope. As Carland remarks, ‘ideally we’d like not to need to be on TV, not for people to have to get up

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4 My thanks to Waleed Aly for suggesting I read George Megalogenis’s Fault Lines (2003).
and say, “Wow, you’re really challenging stereotypes”. Hopefully – the aim is there will be no point to it’. The cast hopes that, like the Greek-Australian programs before them, theirs will eventually become redundant. There will be no need for programs that celebrate and/or denigrate their particular cultural and religious attributes because Muslim Australians will, in time, become ‘so much part of the Australian cultural landscape that you don’t need to do it anymore’ (Aly).

That scenario of intra- and inter-cultural reconciliation lies in the future. In the meantime Salam Café finds itself a litmus test for competing, conflicting and confusing views about what it is to be an Australian Muslim and, in particular, a second-generation homegrown one. If some have found the show pays insufficient attention to the tenets of Islam, others, predictably, have drawn the opposite conclusion. Some non-Muslim Australian viewers have accused the panellists of focusing disproportionately on Islam, with one exclaiming: ‘I can’t believe SBS are wasting taxpayers’ dollars on this religious propaganda’ (Cited in Trad 2008). A more interesting ‘non-Muslim complaint’, which Carland reports, is that the panel members are not representative of Australian Muslims: “You are totally unrepresentative, you are all educated and you’re all articulate and the women are outgoing and that is not the Muslim community”. Remarks like this underline the point that non-Muslim Australia is also in a ‘cocky’ phase, not yet connected when it comes to Australian Muslims. Non-Muslim viewers perceive the show’s hosts either as religious propagandists and fanatics or as failing to conform to these stereotypes. As Aly concludes: ‘what this said to me was, you want Muslims to be Australian, but you don’t want them to be so Australian that they actually feel comfortable enough to speak’.

The Politics of Performativity

An interesting feature of Salam Café is its capacity to negotiate a new identity discourse, one that does not depend on being ‘representative’ or typical. The mechanism of this is irony. In a way Salam Café excels in the invention of representative stereotypes, but the very fact that these characters and attitudes are invoked ironically allows the makers of Salam Café to display themselves, and a contemporary Australian Islam, differently. The issue is no longer one of defining core identities: it is instead a matter of cultivating performativity, the capacity to imitate and inhabit the rhetorical modes of the dominant popular culture. To be oneself in the context of performing music, presenting a show, or even writing a novel, is to display a competence in the communicational conventions through which Australian society performs itself. It is in this creative sense that, as Aly states, the normal is also odd, the representative also unrepresentative:

I’m not that interested in showing that we’re normal people really, because that’s kind of a boring point to make. I understand that there might be a need for that, but I think what people are reacting to is the fact that, in their own minds Muslims are not normal, so when they see something that seems a bit normal, they freak out and assume that we’re desperately trying to prove that we’re normal. Well that probably says more about their own preconceptions … If people find that we’re normal, that’s great, if they find that we’re a bit odd, well that’s great too. I think that we’re just actually being ourselves.
In fact, the performance of one’s faith, and the imperative to perform roles (which the panel show genre dictates) converge to a remarkable degree in Salam Café. The program does not simply represent a set of preconceived, albeit attractively packaged, views. It is itself a place of creative interrogation in which the kind of conversation the panellists would like to see played out in the Muslim community at large are rehearsed. It is this sense of discovery that makes the program appealing to non-Muslims as well. Thus we learn that, while doctrinal considerations are taken into account in the way the team approaches the weekly subject matter, they are not the only concern. Each cast member has his or her own personal and political lines they would prefer not to cross. In coming up each week with a loosely scripted panel show that discusses current Australian events, they are aware of each other’s sensitivities. But during their lengthy and sometimes difficult negotiations they each compromise until some kind of consensus or rapprochement is reached. It is out of the negotiations involved in producing the show that the team mobilises humour in the form of irony to break down stereotypes.

Salam Café, in its conception, preparation and performance, exemplifies the proposition that second-generation Australian Muslim identities are not simply homegrown in a passive or sociological sense. They are actively grown, the expression of an innovative approach to the possibilities of mainstream media and non-Islamic modes of address to create new images of themselves and their faith. Aly recalls that one non-Muslim viewer, in particular, was very distressed by a skit in which ‘Uncle Sam’ pokes fun at both Muslims and Anglo-Australians:

He wrote us a really long email. It was like an analysis about how Uncle Sam is a contradiction. You know, is he making fun of white racism, or is he making fun of Muslim extremism? Well, he’s actually doing both. That’s the point. He wanted us to come out and say that either that sort of racism or the extremists are right, choose your side. But why do we have to take a side?

The sending up of both the Muslim and wider non-Muslim communities is a strategic ploy. In making jokes about double parking, being late and having ‘heaps of kids’, Carland says they are ‘quite happy to laugh and make fun of the stereotypes about Muslims’. But the show’s hosts also want the wider community to view themselves objectively, and perhaps less seriously. As she says, ‘it’s okay to sit here and laugh at the stereotypes about Muslims, but you need to be able to laugh at yourselves too, you know, why should you just be able to sit there and laugh at Muslims’? She continues, ‘You need to be challenged as well as entertained, just like you challenge us every day’.

Occasionally this approach means upsetting those who feel that Muslims, as outsiders, do not have the right to poke fun at or ridicule the dominant community. While

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many Anglo-Australians are accustomed to hearing migrants as victims, preferring ‘multiculturals’ to be ‘grateful’ and humble (or at least prepared to appear as such), they are less tolerant of migrant or minority voices that criticise Australian people, governments and culture. As Aly wryly comments, ‘So we are designated a role, which is to be meek supplicants in this country, just sort of, thank you boss for accepting us’. These sentiments are also reflected by Carland:

It’s ok for, you know, white Joe Smith on the corner to criticise the Howard government, but not your Muslims, you’re lucky to be here. If you were in your own country, you wouldn’t even be allowed to criticise the government. Never mind how many years we’ve all lived here and been born here and our kids are here, and our grandparents are here, that doesn’t matter. We want gratitude, and we want your nice food, but we don’t want anything else from you.

The hosts of Salam Café use the instrument open to them – the media – in a highly creative way. They find and then manipulate and satirise media-inspired stereotypes through processes of play-acting and role-playing. They are not so much attacking objects or people that actually exist in the real world, but utilising ideas, images and symbols that exist in the media. In order to facilitate this process the Salam Café team strategically chose to present the show in a panel-style format. This is one with which many Australian audiences are familiar. From weekly sport-themed panel shows The Fat and The Footy Show to comedy panel programs including Good News Week and The Panel, it has proven to be an immensely popular and enduring genre. Furthermore, this style of presentation is a way of staging intimacy, something which is very important in disarming people who have prejudices. Format is important, but a sense of familiarity is also dependent on the style in which the cast members ‘stage’ their ‘Muslimness’. Salam Café includes the characters Uncle Sam, a tunic-wearing Muslim ‘extremist’ who is running to be the Mayor of the Sydney suburb of Camden, or Islamden as he likes to call it; Fatima or Teemz, a teenybopper who regularly clashes with her overly protective father; and Bro G, who wants to sell his ‘fully legit’ goods for a ‘steal’. The program’s irreverent, self-deprecating and almost slapstick brand of humour is immediately recognisable to most viewers, as are Uncle Sam, Teemz and Bro G because, as Aly says, ‘these are characters that we’ve seen before in world comedy’. The members of Salam Café are astutely aware that to challenge stereotypes, they also need to engage in the politics of performativity.

Conclusion

These young Muslims, whether writing and staging a panel show, authoring a novel or memoir, or performing as hip-hop artists are motivated, not by money, fame or their egos, but by a desire to encourage societal education and change. They want mainstream Australia to see Muslims as fully socialised human beings, and to recognise them as fellow Australians. They also want the Muslim Australian community to show leadership, to engage confidently in both public debate and with non-Muslim Australians in their daily lives. To this end a growing number of young Muslims are adopting a community leadership role. They are using the media, which so often stereotypes and maligns Muslims, to their own ends. These Muslim youth are highly literate in a variety of media and technologies and are very
aware of the power of the visual medium in getting their point across. Using the media to serve and engage the community, they not only negotiate their place in ‘the West’, they are fulfilling their Islamic duty to work for the betterment of their fellow human beings and the society in which they live.

The Muslim youth profiled here are not seeking to effect change at any cost. In staging what Pete Lentini dubs ‘Muslim media interventions’ (2008), their aim is always to remain true to the religious principles and ethical values of Islam. A member of The Brothahood insists that even though ‘it is very hard to push down the temptations of letting the fame get to our heads … we do this purely for the sake of Allah’ (Quoted in Rowe 2008). It is a sentiment reflected in the lyrics of their track ‘Takin’ Charge’: ‘No hesitation, my occupation ain’t money-chasing, my morals [are] based in the realms of Islam … I’m telling ya now we’re the next generation, we’re gonna rise up and reform the nation’. It is still early days, but it does appear that these young Muslim ambassadors are helping to do just that. The positive community-building strategies they have employed are especially important in an environment that of late has not been receptive to the call of difference.

We began this paper by considering two recent (and seemingly oppositional) studies. Graeme Turner’s analysis considers the modes of belonging available to Muslim-Australians who do not have a positive affective relation with the nation state. He hypothesises that first and second-generation citizens from Middle Eastern countries might find new discourses of belonging in ‘definitively alienated forms of citizenship or cultural identity’ (2007: 18). In other words, their sense of belonging might come from a shared sense that they do not belong. Turner’s musings were prompted by the 2005 Cronulla riots and the results of a 2002 study which found that only 30 percent of the second-generation Australians surveyed (that is, those born and raised locally but whose ethnic origins were non-English-speaking) saw themselves as ‘Australian’ (2007: 13). Respondents of Lebanese descent, and those who identified as Muslim, in particular, reported even ‘less satisfaction with their experience of Australian society’ (2007: 14). These findings seem to contradict those of Woodlock and her co-researchers at Monash University whose analysis of questionnaires completed by Australian-born practising Muslims found that the vast majority considered themselves, as one respondent noted, ‘true blue’ Aussies; only very few indicating that preserving their Australian identity was ‘not at all important’ to them (Woodlock, 2009: 30).

How are we to understand the apparent tension between Turner’s and Woodlock’s findings? Or between Woodlock’s and those of Erich Kolig and Nahid Kabir who found that, notwithstanding the pluralist language of multicultural policy expressions, an undeclared hierarchy, at which Muslims are placed at the bottom, exists: ‘Among a variety of cultural and ethnic groupings, Muslims as a “cultural” category … face the largest difficulty meeting the criteria of acceptable citizenship’ (Kolig and Kabir, 2008: 270; Woodlock, 2009: 23)? Perhaps there is no need to attempt to iron out or explain these apparent differences. The young Muslim Australians in Woodlock’s survey, and those discussed in this paper, spoke very openly about the tension between feeling both part and not part of the wider Australian community. This was, for good or ill, their experience of being Muslim in contemporary Australia. Randa Abdel-Fattah, for example, reports that ‘growing up, and sometimes even now, I have felt both marginalized and included. I have felt that I belong and I have felt like an outsider’ (2). And those of Woodlock’s participants who demonstrated a positive valuation of their connection to Australia did so while acknowledging the barriers to full acceptance and inclusion in Australian life (2009: 26).
Turner’s warnings, and Irfan Yusuf’s experiences, remind us that the difficulties of being both an in and outsider can lead young Muslims to support so-called ‘Islamo-fascist’ ideologies and regimes. But the significant finding of this paper is that cultural production, whether in the form of fiction, autobiography, performance or TV programming, offers a third way to negotiate the complexities of intra- and inter-cultural identity and belonging. In the hands of creative young Muslims, vernacular genres allow the presentation and performance of a far more self-reflexive, ironic and contextual Muslim identity. The communication of core values in forms that are inherently multi-voiced, reflective and susceptible to ironic self-distancing offers a powerful, and self-empowering, alternative to dogmatic assertions of difference. Utilising and reinventing expressive genres that originate outside the Islamic fold, these creative practitioners are also, paradoxically, able to disentangle themselves from the double stereotyping that comes from within their own communities of faith and from outside in the broader Australian media. They can reconnect to international, non-nationally defined communities of faith. They can also assert membership of a mediatised community that reserves to itself greater freedom of expression and diversity of views than is usual in more formally educational contexts.
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