



# Piety, transgression, and the feminist debate on Muslim women: Resituating the victim-subject of honor-related violence from a transnational lens

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Article abstract

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## **PIETY, TRANSGRESSION, AND THE FEMINIST DEBATE ON MUSLIM WOMEN: RESITUATING THE VICTIM-SUBJECT OF HONOR-RELATED VIOLENCE FROM A TRANSNATIONAL LENS**

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**Amina Jamal**

**Abstract:** While I strongly endorse anti-imperialist feminist attempts to uphold devout Muslim women’s gendered agency, I am concerned that these arguments fail to disrupt the intransigent association of freedom, particularly individual freedom, with secularism, and communitarian restraint with Islam. It is not surprising, therefore, that victim-subjects of honor-related violence, whether in a secular state such as Canada or an Islamic state like Pakistan, are discursively installed within the universal secular sphere and reevicted from the religious and cultural community. I propose the notion of transgressive piety rather than the dichotomy of secular society versus pious community within which to problematize gendered Muslim subjects. The transgression of ritualistic and institutionalized practices is associated with practices termed Sufism. Muslim feminists may use the idea of transgressive piety to offer faith-based support to those gendered subjects whose transgressive acts, appearance, or practices define them as legitimate targets of family, community, or state-based violence. In so doing, we may also challenge doctrinaire and narrow definitions of the Muslim Ummah, the all-encompassing and transcendent community of Muslims.

**Keywords:** Muslim women, feminism, piety, secularism, honor violence

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Situated at the representational nexus of Islam, secularism, and feminism, the victim-subject of the “honor crime” embodies the power to mediate the relationship between state and community, secular and religious, local and global as well as issues of individual freedom versus communitarian constraint. Critical race scholar Sherene Razack (2007) emphasizes the signifiatory potential of the racialized and gendered victim of honor-related violence in recounting a lecture by Norwegian anthropologist Unni Wikan. While the primarily white Western academic audience seemed suffused with anger and tears by Wikan’s visually eloquent presentation of the body of a beautiful young Kurdish woman murdered by her Muslim immigrant father, Razack was alerted to “the productive power of . . . ideas that install the civilized European and enable the practices of surveillance and regulation” (p. 4) of Muslims in a post-9/11 world.

Like many postcolonial Muslim feminists concerned with challenging violence at the multiple levels of family, community, civil society, and state, Razack (2007) has struggled with the question of how to confront violence against racialized women without further deepening what she theorizes as “the colour line between modern white subjects and pre-modern non-white subjects” (p. 5). Cognizant of the imperialist gesture underlying Wikan’s activism, Razack questions the effectiveness of Canadian Muslim women’s feminist struggles for their gender and sexual rights when these struggles deploy the secular language of women’s rights as human rights or invoke the secular state. She concludes: “When the war on terror in the West requires imperilled Muslim women and dangerous Muslim men as a central part of its conceptual apparatus, as anti-imperial feminists we become obligated to pursue anti-patriarchal strategies within rather than outside our communities, the difficulties of doing so notwithstanding” (p. 29).

Razack’s concerns are relevant to discussions of honor-related violence against Muslim women whether in a secular state such as Canada or in a self-identified Islamic state like Pakistan. Mainstream feminist movements in both societies rely on state-directed and legalistic strategies to eliminate violence against women. Postcolonial scholars, especially feminists of Muslim background, challenge mainstream feminism by offering community-based instead of state-oriented responses.<sup>1</sup> An emergent strategy is to reinstate alternative modes of subjectivity and agency for Muslim women, thereby questioning the secular trajectory of transgression/resistance as self-determination by contrasting it with the self-affirming potential of the communitarian and the religious. Muslim women’s devotion to their families, community, and Islam; their willing adoption of practices such as the hijab and niqab; and their self-defined ideas about honor, freedom, and respect are proffered to challenge imperialist narratives of their victimization.

While strongly endorsing such anti-imperialist sentiment and attempts to construct alternate accounts of Muslim women’s gendered agency, I am concerned that these arguments fail to disrupt

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<sup>1</sup>Critical queer scholars express similar concerns about global LGBT activism that ignores the interrelations of imperialism, racism, and Islamophobia in the justified concern for gay Muslims (see Massad, 2002; Puar, 2005).

the intransigent association of freedom, particularly individual freedom, with secularism and communitarian restraint with Islam, particularly in the context of honor-related violence. The complexly textured balance of individual rights versus community rights that is integral to Islamic tradition is subsumed within the communitarian framing of honor that undergirds both hegemonic and oppositional discourses. Once embraced by the secular state and rights-based feminism as martyrs for individualized freedoms, victim-subjects of honor crimes are discursively installed within the universal/secular and are figuratively reevicted from the religious/cultural community.<sup>2</sup> Otherwise useful, the framework of secular individual-feminism-state versus pious woman-community offers no space for the adequate representation of the victim-subject of honor killing. Indeed, it becomes conceptually constitutive of the gendered subject who is deemed to be sexually transgressive because of a perceived failure to live up to the standards of honor, chastity, and moral responsibility that critical Muslim scholars have found to be empowering for the majority of women in their case studies.

My understanding of honor/shame-related violence or honor crime draws on the work of Lynn Welchman and Sara Hossain (2005), who refer to

a variety of manifestations of violence against women including ‘honor killings,’ assault, confinement or imprisonment and interference with choice in marriage where the publicly articulated ‘justification’ is attributed to a social order claimed to require the preservation of a concept of ‘honor’ vested in male family and/or conjugal control over women and specifically women’s sexual conduct: actual, suspected or potential. (p. 4)

It is worthwhile to emphasize that the majority of feminists and male Muslim religious leaders in both Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority contexts concur that honor-related violence has no religious sanction within Islam (Ali, 2001; Globe and Mail, 2012), but the honor discourse lurks in all projects that construct the gendered Muslim body as the preeminent signifier of religious purity or decline. To recognize and resituate victim-subjects in hegemonic constructions of honor and to speak the truth of individual transgression to politico-religious power is a cultural and political project. As a way to recenter the victim-subject of honor/shame-related violence who is punished for her putative transgressive subjectivity, I call for a faith-based embrace of the idea of women’s transgressive agency as a possibility of action within rather than against Islamic tradition.

Transgression, as I will discuss below, is an important notion for poststructuralist theory’s attempts to challenge the inherent heteronormativity of modern culture. Contemporary scholars have theorized transgression in deeply reflexive ways that extend its possibilities beyond conventional understanding of exceeding “the limits set by a commandment, or law or convention” (Jenks, 2003, p. 2). Here I invoke this notion in its uniquely specific association with the tradition

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<sup>2</sup>Of course, as Talal Asad (2003) has argued, what constitutes secularism and the secular as epistemic categories or political projects may differ from context to context.

of Islam that has pervaded South Asian Muslim subjectivities since at least the thirteenth century, especially those associated with the practices termed Sufism.<sup>3</sup> This tradition affirms the importance of the Quran and the prophetic tradition, and it encompasses multifarious modes of embodiment, bodily practices, dress, and so on. Yet Sufism is ultimately devoted to spiritual cultivation and eschews any straightforward association of piety with ritualistic practices, bodily expression, or sartorial appearance. For my discussion, some important aspects of this tradition are its insistence on unsettling the seemingly evident epistemological duality of piety and sinfulness and replacing it with an ontologically ethical notion of human perfection that is defined primarily by the experience of earthly or divine love; its disdain for all projects of self-formation that seek to discriminate between pious self and sinful other; its skepticism toward self-proclaimed religious and moral leaders; and, stemming from all these, its potential for an intimate and private notion of morality that may not be subject to public surveillance or penalty. Although there are significant divergences within the doctrines and practices associated with Sufism, a fundamentally shared idea is the rejection of all binaries such as creator/created, divine/human, self/other, good/evil, and sacred/profane. This has often led to charges of transgression being leveled against prominent Sufis by proponents of doctrinaire and legalistic Islam.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the desire to surpass the worldly limits of the social, the religious, class, gender, and so on has a long and entrenched standing in Islamic traditions of Sufism, and many saints' hagiographies and Islamic mystical poetry approvingly recount such attempts by highly revered and intensely loved saints and mystics (Kugle, 2007; Kadri, 2012). Recently, some scholars have theorized the gender-transgressive and feminine-affective potential of Sufi narratives and poetry as well as women's religious performances at shrines and Sufi ceremonies.<sup>5</sup> This scholarship adds further gloss to the more expansive work on South Asian women's cultural and ritual performances, which highlights transgressive sexuality as a common trope of songs and ditties sung by women or enacted through dance and performances at weddings, childbirth, and other life passages (Raheja & Gold, 1994; Narayan, 1997; Naheed, 2009). Also, queer Muslim scholars in South Asia seek to retrieve the homoerotic aspects of Sufi poetry from elite attempts to sanitize and desexualize this Islamic heritage.<sup>6</sup>

Drawing on Sufi-oriented Islamic understandings of the body as the site of divine immanence and the conduit for divine blessing, it is possible to imagine a pious subjectivity even where

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<sup>3</sup>On Sufism, see Jalal (2002), Metcalf (2005), Schimmel (2006), Kugle (2007), and Shaikh (2012). I use the term "Sufism" with caution, as I am aware of the great diversity that it flattens out among those associated with this tradition. For a good discussion of the difference between Sufism as an orientalist concept/construct and as a practice of Muslims, see Ernst (2006).

<sup>4</sup>For example, see the discussion of the killing of Sarmad, one of the well-known Sufi Martyrs of Love, in Azad (1910/2006).

<sup>5</sup>See Abbas (2002), Hegland (2003), Werbner (2003), Kugle (2007), Shaikh (2012), and Yaghoobi (2012).

<sup>6</sup>For a good discussion of Sufism's unique approach to the body and its difference from other Muslim traditions in this respect, see Kugle (2007). For some interesting efforts on the part of queer scholars and activists to reclaim South Asian Sufi traditions, see Kidwai (2001), Vanita and Kidwai (2001), and Shaukat (2013).

agentive acts or practices appear to be contrary to theological or doctrinal accounts of the Islamic or pious. Thus, I argue that gendered Muslim subjects may engage in actions that are often read as secular or un-Islamic, but these transgressive acts cannot unthinkingly be assumed to signify a disengagement from Islam or the Muslim community, just as no given act or outward practice can be construed as a verification of religious purity.

The notion of transgression as Muslim women's pious agency not only disrupts the conceptual secular/religious divide but is a strategy for interrogating narrowly defined Muslim subjects that are being produced within the *Ummah* (religious community) due to contemporary reworking of Islam's founding discourses.<sup>7</sup> "Although they appear to make reference to clearcut distinctions, transgressions are manifestly situation-specific and vary considerably across social space and through time," according to Chris Jenks (2003, p. 2). Broadening Jenks's argument, we may similarly trace the mutability and context-specific character of the concept of honor and bring to light contemporary performances of honor-related violence that are appearing in response to newly contrived notions of transgression in specific cultural and national situations. Like many Muslim societies, Pakistan and Pakistani diasporic communities have become conflicted sites for a variety of cultural, political, and military struggles, most notably doctrinal struggles over authentic/religious and inauthentic/cultural practices, an intense proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia for leadership of the Muslim world, and the US-led War on Terror in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. The entanglement of these conflicts with secular and religious patriarchies, media consumerism, globalized capitalism, and intensified economic and cultural disparities in both first- and third-world contexts is facilitating the spread of Wahhabism — a set of narrow and doctrinaire interpretations and practices of Islam — that has created new categories of religious minorities and produced new kinds of blasphemers, sinners, adulterers, and deviants.<sup>8</sup> Deepening the insights afforded by substantial feminist critiques of the complicated interrelation of gender, bodies, and nationalisms and the propensity of such hegemonic projects to engender various forms of violence against women, the idea of transgressive piety offers Muslim feminists a strategy to dislodge the concept of honor that underlies discourses of cultural authenticity and religious consistency in patriarchal projects.<sup>9</sup> Muslim feminists may offer faith-based accounts of those gendered subjects whose transgressive acts, appearance, or practices define them as legitimate targets of family, community, or nation-related violence.

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<sup>7</sup>See Barlas (2002), Hasan (2002), Abbas (2005), Ernst (2006), and Hoodbhoy (2009).

<sup>8</sup>Wahhabism is associated with the ideology of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Its founding ideologue, Muhammed Ibn Abdul Wahhab, considered Muslims who believe in the intercessionary power of the Prophet Muhammed or who seek saintly mediation, as do most South Asians, to be idolaters and thus guilty of apostasy (see, e.g., Nasr, 2006, pp. 81–117; Kugle, 2007, pp. 282–284).

<sup>9</sup>The literature on gender, sexuality, and nation is too extensive to cite. However, some founding texts that are particularly relevant to my discussion include Ahmed (1992), YuvalDavis (1997), Haddad and Esposito (1998), and Rouse (2004).



Since I am not a scholar of Islamic studies or theology, it is important to emphasize that I advocate the idea of transgressive piety not as a fatwa or as a theological resolution of a political social problem. Rather, I propose this as a discursive tool that critical transnational feminists may draw upon to open a space within the religious and the Islamic — not in opposition to it — whereby we could problematize (Bacchi, 2012) though not construct gendered subjects, even those who appear to be engaged in “dishonorable” quests for cultural, social, or sexual freedom.<sup>10</sup>

In the following sections, I will first review some instances of “honor crimes” that initiated public discourses of secularism versus Islam in seemingly disparate but culturally and politically intertwined societies, Canada and Pakistan; I will then examine some postcolonial feminists’ attempts to challenge dominant discourses and representations of the honor crime. While maintaining the anti-imperialist and postcolonial impulse, I will problematize the erasure of the victimized Muslim woman in the current interaction of hegemonic and oppositional discourses. Finally, as a discursive and political strategy out of this conundrum, I will present the idea of transgressive piety as a constitutive element of Muslim subjectivity that has been undermined due to the ascendance of reformulated notions of piety and sinfulness, the worldly and the divine, by contemporary modernist movements often referred to as Islamist.<sup>11</sup>

### *Always Already Secular: Victim-Subjects in Canada and Pakistan*

The convoluted interlinking of gender and sexuality, subject and nation, and secularism and Islam became evident in Canada in response to two recent events that were widely characterized as honor crimes.

On December 10, 2007, Aqsa Parvez, a sixteen-year-old schoolgirl, was murdered in her family home in Mississauga, Ontario. According to the Agreed Statement of Facts, Aqsa was choked to death by her brother Waqas and her father, Muhammed Parvez. On the day of the murder, Aqsa’s distraught mother, Anwar Jan, told police that Aqsa was killed because she “did not listen” to her father. Anwar Jan reported that her husband had told her that Aqsa had shamed him in the eyes of his community: “My community will say you have not been able to control your daughter. This is my insult. She is making me naked.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Noteworthy Muslim scholars who have challenged imperialist representations of Islam and also patriarchal interpretations of Islamic texts include Amina Wadud (1999) and Asma Barlas (2002). I make a different argument here, since these scholars call for a redefinition of piety and sinfulness rather than an erasure of their constitutive boundaries.

<sup>11</sup>I use the term *Islamist*, as do many other scholars of contemporary Islam, to refer to movements for reform and revival that emerged in many Muslim societies during the later colonial era in the twentieth century. In Pakistan, these movements tend to offer ideological support to extremist and militant groups even though they themselves engage in democratic political processes.

<sup>12</sup>R. v. Muhammad Manzour Parvez (father) and Waqas Parvez (son), Agreed Statement of Facts. Published by the Globe and Mail, June 16, 2001. <http://www.scribd.com/doc/33096133/Parvez-case-Agreed-Statement-of-Facts>

As indicated by the plethora of news reports, articles, and academic papers as well as court records, Aqsa had been experiencing conflict and violence in her family over her style of dressing, her desire to stop wearing hijab, her lack of privacy at home, constraints on leaving the house, and surveillance by family members at school. There were a number of meetings mediated by the school, and on occasion Aqsa had stayed in a shelter, as arranged by the school counselor. In the days leading to the murder, Aqsa had spent some time at the home of a friend, whose mother had also tried to negotiate a truce between her and her parents. Eventually, Aqsa was picked up by her brother while waiting for the school bus and taken home, where she was killed by her father and brother. Aqsa's father placed a 911 call to police, telling them he had killed his daughter using his hands (Haque, 2010).<sup>13</sup>

In a more recent event, on June 30, 2009, three Montreal-based teenage Afghan-Canadian sisters — Zainab, 19; Sahar, 17; and Geeti, 13 — along with their stepmother, Rona Amir Mohammad, 52, were found dead in a car, drowned in a canal during a family outing to Kingston, Ontario. They were deemed to have been murdered by the girls' father, Mohammad Shafia, 58; his second wife, Tooba Yahya, 42; and their son Hamed, 21. Each was found guilty of four counts of first-degree murder. Prosecutors deemed the murders to be honor killings based on witness testimonies, wiretapped family conversations, and circumstantial evidence, including recorded cell phone calls, intercepted communications, Internet searches, and computer records. The trial revealed a history of conflict, and at times violence, between the older girls and their father over clothes, boyfriends, schoolwork, and social behavior, leading to occasional intervention by school authorities and social workers. According to the evidence, angered and frustrated by his inability to control his daughters, Mohammed Shafia, along with Tooba and Hamed, had engineered the drowning of the Nissan car driven by Zainab with the others as passengers. Throughout the trial, the Shafia parents maintained their innocence, insisting that the deaths were due to inexperienced driving on the part of Zainab, who was alleged to have commandeered the car while the parents slept in their motel room. Mohammed insisted that the deaths were accidental and a punishment from God for the girls' own bad behavior (CTV News, 2012).

As in previous matters related to Muslim women in the West, the representations of these events in national media, popular culture, and social media websites were overwhelmingly cast in the familiar trope that Razack (2007) has encapsulated and expounded as “the imperilled Muslim woman, the barbaric Muslim man and the civilized European” (p. 29). The victims were represented as rebellious Muslim women brutally thwarted in their desire for secular freedom. Even though a group of imams issued an important public condemnation of honor killing as un-Islamic, the perpetrators and their families were represented as Muslims who were determined to conform to religious and cultural dictates. Yasmin Jiwani and Homa Hoodfar (2012) point out that the media persistently referred to the family's Afghan cultural background and made connections with their religious affiliation, “suggesting that the murders were motivated by cultural and

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<sup>13</sup>See <http://www.scribd.com/doc/33096133/Parvez-case-Agreed-Statement-of-Facts>



religious beliefs” (p. A15). In contrast to the Pervez family, who were low-income immigrants mostly alienated from dominant Canadian culture, the Shafia family defied the conventional representation of economically or culturally stressed immigrants since they were prosperous, Westernized in appearance, not ostensibly religious, and well integrated into Canadian society. Yet the media continued to uphold the clash of secular civilization against Islamic medievalism (Jiwani & Hoodfar, 2012).<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the media coverage of the Shafia trial could easily be described in the same terms in which critical race scholar Eve Haque (2010) deplores the representation of Aqsa Pervez’s murder — that it “contained all the elements of an increasingly familiar narrative about gender, religion and multiculturalism in the West” (p. 79).

In placing these narratives and representations against my work in Pakistan, I am struck by the mirroring of these representations in some recent spectacular instances of violence against women, which though not “classic” cases of honor killing were nevertheless publicly justified in a manner that rehearsed the conventional arguments related to honor and the preservation of a social order as theorized by Welchman and Hossain (2005).<sup>15</sup>

One of the cases that mobilized the most contentious discussions of Islamic versus secular and feminism versus national community in Pakistan recently was the case of Mukhtar Mai. Mukhtar Mai, a poor rural woman from southern Punjab province, was gang-raped in 2002 on the orders of a village council acting at the behest of a powerful tribe, the Mastois, to avenge their sense of dishonor due to her brother’s overtures to a Mastoi woman (BBC News, 2005a, 2005b). Her decision to publicize the incident and seek justice from the state, instead of committing suicide as expected after this retaliatory dishonourment, became an international news story, forcing the provincial government to respond. In 2011, after nine years of legal battles, five out of the six men she accused were acquitted by the Supreme Court of Pakistan — a decision that shocked and disappointed many Pakistanis, especially human rights activists (Daily Times, 2011). Fearing for Mukhtar Mai’s life, Pakistan’s human rights forces and feminist groups protested the Supreme Court decision and appealed to the government to protect Mukhtar against her powerful opponents. The public discourse, as evinced in the press, television, and online social media, manifested the usual dichotomization of individualistic progressives versus communitarian religious conservatives.

A more recent event related to community or national honor in Pakistan was the attempted killing of sixteen-year-old schoolgirl Malala Yusufzai. Deemed to be an act of terrorism, the attack on Malala was condemned in Pakistan as contrary to Islamic injunctions; however, the Taliban drew upon a puritanical interpretation of cultural and religious tradition to justify their attack,

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<sup>14</sup>See <http://www.scribd.com/doc/33096133/Parvez-case-Agreed-Statement-of-Facts>

<sup>15</sup>Sadly, honor crimes of the “classic” type (i.e., killing, mutilation, burning, or maiming of women) are too numerous to recount and may be examined by a casual monitoring of Urdu and English-language newspapers; the daily news bulletin of the Urdu-language television channel GEOTV, which is available in Canada; and reports printed regularly by Aurat Foundation, Shirkat Gah, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, and other NGOs.

accusing Malala of dishonoring Pashtun culture, the national interest, and Islam (Ehsan, 2012; Dawn, 2013).

Initially eliciting public sympathy in Pakistan, both Mukhtar Mai and Malala were accused by patriarchal and misogynist forces, mostly affiliated with politico-religious groups but also some representatives of self-identified liberal political parties, of trying to solicit Western sympathy and money through freedom- or justice-seeking behavior (Maqbool, 2013; Shah, 2013). Both women have since been repositioned in contemporary Pakistani media and in some first-world-based postcolonial accounts as agents and tools of Western imperialism.<sup>16</sup> Their willingness to accept lifesaving support from imperialist and liberal sources has compromised their victim status. Indeed, emergent critiques of Malala, including some postcolonial feminist discussions and liberal nationalist ones, resonate uncomfortably with the advice of Syed Munnawar Hussein (2011), the leader of Pakistan's major politico-Islamist party, Jamaat-e-Islami, who has declared that when there is no honorable means of vindication, Islam enjoins "dishonored" females — such as rape victims — to accept their victimization silently and await justice in the hereafter.

It is of course futile to suggest that Islamist politics have produced honor-related violence in Pakistan, since many forms of violence against women have existed in South Asia for a long time, as they have in all societies. However, women's groups and feminist scholars have recorded the close link between state and nonstate violence against women, cultural groups, and religious minorities and the rise of puritanical versions of Islam.<sup>17</sup> It is particularly noteworthy that notions of honor and shame have substantially been transformed in Pakistan due to intensifying class, sectarian/ national, rural/urban, tribal/civilized, Western/Islamic, and other differences that, as Inderpal Grewal (2013) notes, tend to inhere in the construct of honor everywhere. These changes are widely traced to the top-down policy of Islamization of law and society imposed by General Zia ul Haq, military dictator of Pakistan from 1977 to 1988. General Zia and his politico-religious allies were economically and ideologically supported by Saudi Arabia and the United States in exchange for Pakistan's role in the US–Soviet proxy war fought from 1979 to 1989 in Afghanistan.<sup>18</sup> Zia's Islamization program resonated with the Saudi state's version of Islam and systematically undermined more fluid South Asian cultural and religious traditions. Indeed, feminist scholars Khawar Mumtaz and Farida Shaheed (1987) pointed out that a noticeable social change for women was the pervasive idea that not only male members of one's own family but any man was now obliged to reprimand a woman for her public appearance or behavior. After three decades of the systematic promotion of such attitudes and policies, it is not difficult to understand that in Pakistan, very diverse acts of violence are now being enacted in the name of honor of the family, the community, the nation, or simply "Islam." The attack on Malala, a body-

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<sup>16</sup>For some of this debate, see Hirschkind and Mahmood (2002), BBC News (2005b), Manchanda (2012), Zia (2012), Guardian (2013), and Shah (2013).

<sup>17</sup>See Mumtaz and Shaheed (1987), Saigol (2011), Zaidi (2011), and Zakaria (2012).

<sup>18</sup>See Asghar Khan (1985), Weiss (1986), Mumtaz and Shaheed (1987), and Ahmed (2002).

covering schoolgirl; the killing of Western-educated Punjab governor Salman Taseer in January 2011; and the murder of Pakistan's only Christian parliamentary minister, Shahbaz Bhatti, in March 2011, were all justified by the perpetrators, by many community members, and by mainstream politico-Islamist parties and sections of the media as violence related to the honor and the shame of the community.<sup>19</sup> Sayed Zaidi (2011) relates contemporary notions of honor and religious extremism in Pakistan to colonialism, nationalist politics, modernization and development, regional issues, and US-Saudi-Pakistani politics in Afghanistan. He points out:

Everyone who is a member of the group which perceives that it has had its collective honor violated closes ranks, and anyone not adhering to the philosophies of the group is considered an outsider, apostate, *murtid* [renegade], *kafir* [disbeliever] or infidel. (Zaidi, 2011, p. 9)

Thus, even though Islam does not tolerate honor killing, some Muslim groups muddle the already diffuse lines between faith, community, and nation to secure their ideological interest. In their analysis of politico-Islamists and militant groups, first-world-based postcolonial feminists sometimes conflate these groups' political anti-Americanism with anti-imperialism, though in fact forces such as the Jamaat-e-Islami and the Taliban seek to replace imperialist or Western hegemony not with social justice but with other kinds of oppressive hegemonies (Abou Zahab, 2002; Nasr, 2002; Saigol, 2011).

In the following section, I will examine some postcolonial feminist challenges to dominant representations of honor crimes. I propose that in our quest to dismantle the hegemony of Western secular thought, postcolonial feminist scholars may inadvertently legitimate other hegemonies within Islamic and Muslim societies that may be socially and politically detrimental to the most vulnerable groups in these societies. They have done this due largely to their singular engagement with Western scholars' and media's unitary focus on mainstream politico-Islamist projects, thereby creating a counterdiscourse that may be overly communitarian.

### ***Secular Exclusions and Religious Inclusions***

In a groundbreaking essay on honor, shame, and violence against young Muslim women, "Seductions of the Honor Crime," Lila Abu-Lughod (2011) decries the prominence given to the honor crime in the West since the late 1990s, when women's rights became part of the United Nations agenda. She undertakes an exhaustive review of texts, including fiction, popular literature, scholarly work, and reports of NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) in many contexts, and traces the ubiquity of representations that relate honor killing to primordial notions of honor deemed to be prevalent in some societies, especially Muslim ones (p. 33). Like many other postcolonial scholars, Abu-Lughod rightly draws attention to the violence of poverty, migration, state secularism, Western cultural dominance, racism, and other aspects that are ignored when

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<sup>19</sup>Malala now lives and studies in the United Kingdom, where she was sent for treatment by the government of Pakistan. The Taliban have publicly renewed their intention to kill her (Crilly, 2013).

Muslim women's victimhood is blamed solely on Muslim men, the Muslim community, Islamic texts, and Muslim culture.<sup>20</sup> She attributes the dominant discourse on honor-related violence to liberal critics of the honor crime in Western contexts and the Westernized elite in non-Western contexts. She laments that these pose a problem for feminists: "Defined as the killing of a woman by her relatives for violation of a sexual code in the name of restoring family honor, the honor crime poses perhaps more starkly than any other contemporary category the dilemmas of feminist scholarship and rights activism in a transnational world" (Abu-Lughod, 2011, p. 17).

Abu-Lughod points out that Muslim women's agency is undermined and their collective experiences of family and community are simplified in dominant representations of the honor crime in Western societies and among Westernized elite, including feminists, the state, and NGOs. To counter these representations Abu-Lughod describes the understanding of honor that she developed through her ethnographic work among women in the Egyptian Awlad 'Ali Bedouin tribe in the late 1970s. Abu-Lughod (2011) argues that rather than patriarchal restrictions, women's regulated behavior may be understood as part of "systems of morality, secular or religious, [that] are constraining; the idea is that they make people better than they would otherwise be" (p. 21). As evidence, she draws attention to studies that reinstate Muslim women as subjects who are proud to bear Muslim identity and piety, even if the burdens of embodying these identities are painful or constraining (Mahmood, 2005; Asad, 2011).

In situations where young Muslim women's actions point to a clear and wilful rejection of the norms of piety and modesty imposed by their cultural or religious communities — Asqa Pervez, the Shafia sisters, and, one may add, Malala — anti-imperialist feminists posit their transgressions against the seductive effects of a racist secularism. Thus, Muslim schoolgirls in Canada, France, and the United States who resist adopting the hijab or who, like Malala, desire to pursue secular education are implicitly cast as agency-lacking subjects who have succumbed to the hegemonic Western culture or who are unable to resist the racist oppression of the society in which they must live (Zine, 2008; Haque, 2010; Ehsan, 2012).

While these strategies certainly clear a discursive space for the "pious" Muslim woman, they construct normative boundaries that restrict and undermine expressions of those practices, desires, and clothing that stray outside these bounds. Indeed, such discursive practices may foster a dichotomy of pious and transgressive that the gendered agent is able to successfully master only through the persona that Jasmin Zine (2008) has described as the "Pious Muslim Girl" (p. 40). In her study of schoolgirls in an Islamic girls school in Toronto, Zine found a variety of discourses about Islam, the role of schooling, and Muslim femininity among the students, teachers, administrators, parents, and community members (p. 40). However, Zine was concerned to find "a salient archetype for young Muslim women to model themselves upon" that she terms the "Pious Muslim Girl as Guardian of Public Honour" (pp. 40–41). She points out that this image prioritizes

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<sup>20</sup>See Mahmood (2008), Haque (2010), Abu-Lughod (2011), Asad (2011), and Bakht (2012).

and promotes a set of cultural expectations regarding behavior, dress, and activities for young Muslim girls that are deemed to be in accordance with Islamic norms and religious requirements. She explains, “the issue of izzat, or honour, is a salient component of the discourse of piety” (p. 41), according to which young Muslim girls must abide in order to uphold the honor and reputation of their families and the school. Although Zine notes important instances of girls’ subversion of the established order, she emphasizes that dominant expectations of behavior become normative and regulate Muslim women in what she describes as the “public performance of piety” (p. 41) at school, in public places, on buses, and so on. Zine notes that a similar regime of regulation has been observed in studies conducted among Muslim schoolgirls in the United Kingdom, where young women’s behavior, attitudes, and clothing were deemed to signify the honor of family and community. Zine concludes, “The regulation of Muslim girls through this paradigm of honour and piety occurs as the result of puritan beliefs that women’s bodies create fitnah, or discord, as the result of sexual enticement” (p. 41).

Zine’s insightful analysis suggests that attempts to uphold Muslim women’s pious normative femininity against secular normative femininity, while politically commendable, dodge the relationship of desire, sexuality, violence, and transgression with piety and community; this interrelationship is integral to any serious attempt to conceptualize family, community, society, and state-based violence against Muslim women, indeed all women. It is important to bring to light other performative aspects of Muslim women’s religious subjectivity — moral or immoral — that are obscured both in secular/hegemonic notions of primordial honor and in postsecular, postcolonial affirmations of community.

### ***Transgressive Piety: Alternative Relationships of Individual and Community***

The close relationship between transgression and religion has been explicated by Michael Taussig, and its potential to disrupt repressive social and cultural boundaries, especially those between normative and deviant sexuality, has been amply explored and asserted by postmodern scholars, notably Georges Bataille and Michel Foucault (Taussig, 1998; Jenks, 2003). Taussig (1998) argues that while mainstream religions today seek to eliminate it, transgression animates religion emotionally and intellectually by opening a “charged” space (p. 350) of bodily, visual, musical, narrative experience that may be unrepresentable yet awe-inspiring, empowering, stimulating, and sacred. For Taussig, Bataille and Foucault signal such a space in their engagement with the notion of transgression. Indeed, transgression is a compelling motif of much poststructuralist thought and, according to Jenks (2003), is closely tied to a claim of ontological sovereignty that is neither depersonalized nor universalized but that muddles epistemological binaries (e.g., good and evil) and enables transcendence of existing power structures. Transgression therefore carries cultural, social, and political significance not only for abstract social subjects but also for concrete physical bodies, though not all of these bodies, according to an important insight from Flavia Monceri (2012), may be similarly motivated by the Nietzschean will to transgress that animates poststructuralist discussions. In its political usage, Monceri further differentiates transgression from dissent in that the latter seeks legitimacy and recognition within



the existing order (i.e., those who conform) while to transgress is an “individual exercise of power to construct rules and establish them as norms, a power having no need to be recognized by those who conform in order to be legitimated” (p. 31). Indeed, for Monceri, transgression is “an unintended outcome emerging from reproducing practices differently” for a variety of reasons and therefore it is a feature of our everyday interactions as each of us, in individualized ways, use our received knowledge and information to achieve our purposes (p. 38). Monceri presents the example of the disabled body or the intersex body, which must alter existing norms because of its uniquely concrete physical form. We may make a similar case for a disabled Muslim body’s inability to perform ritual prayer in the prescribed way (p. 34). Monceri’s insights allow us to see transgression in unintentional dissent and individualized acts such as Aqsa’s teenage bodily rebellions, Malala’s determination to study, or Mukhtar Mai’s rejection of the suicide “option.” In diverse contexts and for different purposes, all these individualized acts subvert patterned ways of acting, and in doing so “they also let transgressive practices emerge, as possible and viable alternatives to codified ways of doing things in everyday life” (Monceri, 2012, p. 38).

Within the Sufi tradition, and the Islamic tradition generally, it is possible to argue for dissent and transgression as a mode of acting that contains exoteric and esoteric meanings. Many of the nondiscursive or postdiscursive dimensions that link transgression with the sacred are familiar to Muslims through Islam’s mystical traditions, or Sufism: mystery; ecstasy; the sensory; secrecy and unveiling; illumination; the importance of sound, music, and poetry over speech; and above all its ability to disrupt the binary relationship of self and other, power and resistance. In some of Islam’s more esoteric but widely popular mystical orders we may also find some nondiscursive and postdiscursive aspects of excess explored by Foucault (1997) in “A Preface to Transgression”: body-changing rituals, the use of drugs and alcohol to aid stimulation, and spectral performances, all of which have been the target of puritanical groups.<sup>21</sup> It is pertinent to point out that South Asian Muslim history is replete with examples of Sufi saints who relinquished temporal aspects of the shariah “to discover in this abandonment an expression of love and passion through the physicality of the body” (Kugle, 2007, p. 221). Pious Muslims may act not in dissent of the divine but to disrupt the boundary between human and divine, exposing a dispersion of the divine in every being, including the erotically represented earthly beloved. Such acts always include a potential to alter the existing worldly social or political order.

Islamic mystics, saints, scholars, poets, and writers have conceptualized the emancipating potential of the transgressive act from a spiritual perspective drawing on several mystical traditions, above all the idea of *Wahdat ul Wujud* (oneness of being) associated with the twelfth-century Andalusian mystic Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi (1165–1240) and the tradition of *Ishq/Eshq* (love) associated with the thirteenth-century Turko-Persian mystic poets Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi

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<sup>21</sup>See, e.g., Mumtaz and Shaheed (1987), Saigol (2011), Zaidi (2011), Kadri (2012), and Zakaria (2012). For a good discussion of Sufi approaches to the body in South Asia, see Kugle (2007, pp. 181–264).



(1207–1273) and Farid ad-Din abu Hamid Muhammad Attar (d. 1190).<sup>22</sup> The subjectivity associated with these interlinked traditions is eloquently described by Claudia Yaghoobi (2012):

Oftentimes, the Sufi's profane love, representing the heavenly, guides him/her to transgress the earthly boundaries and to reject the status quo. This is the moment when the Sufi faces the Kristevan zenith of subjectivity; that is the Sufi wayfarer de- and reconstructs her/his self, emerging as a new subject able to cross earthly boundaries with the means of divine love. (p. 90)

Yaghoobi uses poststructuralist feminist ideas, especially Julia Kristeva's (1987) ideas about gendered subjectivity and Judith Butler's (1996) theories of gender and performativity, to critically revisit the poetry of the Persian mystic Fariduddin Attar, wherein she locates a persistent theme of human diversity, inclusiveness, and justice. In relation to Islamic mysticism, it is important to underscore, as Yaghoobi does, that whereas for Foucault sexual transgression is important for its potential to mark a nondiscursive space of liberating profanity in a world devoid of all limits, this is different from the Islamic mystic's breaching of limits. Foucault's aim is ultimately to find a postsecular and postreligious sexual subject that does not need the constitutive binary of self/other, mind/body; Islamic mystics seek to transcend body and soul (annihilation/*fanaa*) in the imperative to reach final immersion (resurrection/*baqaa*) in the spiritual oneness of being. Where the poststructuralist and the Islamic overlap in the worldly sense is in the search for justice beyond the normative boundaries of a given secular or religious episteme.

Regardless of the historical and geographical context, the notion of transgressive love invoked in esoteric or popular Islamic mystical poetry presents a challenge to the truth claims and power of institutionalized religious and political authority that interjects between the believer/lover and the divine/beloved. Indeed, South African Islamic feminist Sadiyya Shaikh (2012) upholds the ideas of Ibn Arabi as imbued with "possibilities for engaging fundamental questions of human value and existence in a manner that has profound implications for understandings of gender difference and equality" (p. 217). In particular Shaikh finds "radical alternatives" to dominant images of patriarchal theology when she approaches Ibn Arabi with the help of post-Enlightenment feminist intellectual theories and her own "embodied twenty-first-century understandings of Islam" (p. 119). Shaikh sees Ibn Arabi's Sufism as brimming with possibilities not only for individual, privatized experiences of spirituality but for larger collective invocations that might be imbued with contemporary ideas and issues of social justice and gender equity (pp. 217–228).

The emancipatory impulses of Sufism, while never fully implemented in social, political, or cultural life in Muslim societies, nevertheless kept alive the virtues of tolerance, nonviolence, and pluralism. They also helped to restrain the punitive impulse of Islamist legalist and doctrinaire

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<sup>22</sup>Some idea of Rumi's embrace of Wahdatul Wujud and his effect on South Asian mysticism can be gauged from William Chittick (2007). Martin Lings's (1975) classic text *What Is Sufism?* remains one of the best expositions of the seemingly transgressive but esoteric spirituality of divine oneness, or Wahdat-ul-Wujud.

forces, which sometimes impounded Muslim identity from groups that did not share the dominant Sunni scriptural interpretation or prescribed punishment for those they deemed transgressive, such as homosexuals, musicians, dancers, and ordinary sexual subjects. These emancipatory impulses were the ground for activist invocations of transgressive subjectivity on the part of the Muslim philosopher Muhammed Iqbal (1877–1938) in the anticolonial nationalist struggle and the South Asian poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz (1911–1984) in a disempowering postcolonial social and political order.<sup>23</sup> In Pakistan, at least until the 1980s, the force of saints’ teachings and Sufi ideas upon the majority Sunni Hanafi tradition of Islam (Metcalf, 2005; Schimmel, 2006; Kugle, 2007) allowed a degree of ambiguity in matters of the pious and the sinful, enabled tolerance of liminal spaces for transgression, and, most important, deferred the question of who is to identify and punish the sinful acts of fellow Muslims.<sup>24</sup>

These traditions are threatened by the ascendance of rigid and legalistic practices termed Salafism (emulation of pious ancestors) or Wahabbism in the agendas of politico-religious parties and Islamist movements.<sup>25</sup> Salafism, inspired by the doctrines of the thirteenth-century Islamic scholar Taqi ad-Din Ahmad ibn Taymiyyah, is also the inspiration for many types of Islamic feminism and piety movements that have been observed in societies as widespread as Canada (Zine, 2008), Egypt (Mahmood, 2005), Indonesia (Rinaldo, 2008), and Pakistan (Ahmad, 2009; Jamal, 2013). Deploring the veneration of Ibn Taymiyya among many self-proclaimed antiimperialist Muslims, Muslim legal historian Sadaqat Kadri (2012) describes Ibn Taymiyya’s ideas as “quasi-totalitarian” (p. 143). Kadri considers Ibn Taymiyya’s ideas as central to the struggles among Muslims that eventually transformed the shariah from a set of divine guidelines for the self-cultivation of the believer into an institutionalized code for discriminating pious self and sinful other.<sup>26</sup> This departs from the individual/community relationship modeled on an intimate, empathic interrelationship of individual believer and immanent divine rooted in Quranic tradition. Kadri illustrates this through an anecdote passed down by Sufis in Iraq that recounts a witty exchange between an eleventh-century mystic and the divine: “‘Oh, Abu al-Hasan!’ God had boomed. ‘Do you want me to tell people what I know about your sins, so that they may stone you to death?’ ‘Oh, Lord,’ he had whispered back. ‘Do you want me to tell people what I know about your mercy, so that none will ever feel obliged to bow down to you again?’ ‘Keep your secret,’ came God’s conspiratorial reply. ‘And I will keep mine’” (p. 128).

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<sup>23</sup>In his poem “Doa,” Faiz (1986) uses the idea of *kufr* (disbelief/dissent/transgression) as a possibility for revitalizing Muslim agency against an oppressive order.

<sup>24</sup>For a solid discussion of the Islamic injunctions on reforming and reprimanding errant Muslims by fellow believers, see Cook (2000). I have discussed this relation of individual, community, and state relationship in my own recent book (Jamal, 2013).

<sup>25</sup>See Cook (2000), Nasr (2002), Ernst (2006), Kugle (2007), Kadri (2012), and Shaikh (2012).

<sup>26</sup>Kadri (2012) states that five hundred years of Islamic legal documentation can prove that Ottoman courts imposed a stoning to death only once in their history (p. 142).

A similarly nuanced Muslim subjectivity oriented toward divine mercy rather than apocalyptic wrathfulness is reflected in the extensive work of South Asian historian Ayesha Jalal, who stresses that Islam indeed provides for personal faith. According to Jalal (2001, 2002), unlike the dualistic relationship of individual and society in Western humanism, Muslims emphasize the maintenance of a just balance between individual and community, and this has been subject to multiple and diverse interpretations over time. Rejecting a purely doctrinal approach that would highlight the communitarian aspect at the expense of the individual, Jalal (2001) demonstrates the existence of a strong individual self-consciousness in outstanding Muslim figures of pre-1857 India. Such a subjectivity, according to Jalal, is subsumed in wide-ranging assumptions about a collective Islamic ethos — assumptions that, I propose, are evident in both imperialist representations of Muslims and contemporary projects aimed at moral reform of the Islamic community. Jalal’s insights militate against normative accounts of pious Muslim women’s agency based on communitarian understanding alone, since these can delegitimize other practices and traditions of Islam.<sup>27</sup>

From the lens of transgression as a mode of Islamic piety rather than in opposition to it, feminists may construct different narratives about imperialism, gendered violence, and Islam. We could begin by rejecting the singular construction of Muslim women that is integral to hegemonic projects and agree with Shaikh (2012) that despite many common elements, the unity of Islam is “mostly accompanied by myriad diversities” (p. 5). Arguing that Muslim women are multiply positioned and multiply interpellated subjects who live their faith in complex and heterogeneous ways, we could uphold seemingly transgressive acts of temporal subjects while not automatically rendering them as devout or spiritual. Instead of judging Muslim women through community-imposed notions of honor and respectability, we could argue that while many women may willingly embrace normative modes of dressing and acting, others may disdain authoritative prescriptions without forfeiting community or Islam. While drawing attention to the civilizational discourse that undergirds many instances of “saving Muslim women” (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 785), Muslim feminists may refuse to exonerate the Taliban on the basis of their sociopolitical conditions of possibility and instead offer unstinted support to Malala for continuing a long-held tradition of flouting authoritative prescriptions for gender- or class-specific performance (Ehsan, 2012). Following the lead of Canadian Muslim leaders in vociferously condemning honor killing as un-Islamic, postcolonial Canadian feminists could embrace Aqsa and the Shafia sisters as victims of bad faith on the part of family and society. Such a narrative would situate their girlish indiscretions not within a discourse of secular versus religious and Western society versus Muslim family but as the enactment of desires that may lead a teenage girl to breach customary boundaries whether

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<sup>27</sup>Islam in South Asia is profoundly shaped by Chishti Sufism, which was introduced to the subcontinent by the Muslim mystic Moinuddin Chishti in the twelfth century CE. The Chishti order, which originated in Afghanistan, is distinguished by its emphasis on beauty, love, and tolerance and its disdain for all forms of arrogance in matters of faith. Millions of South Asians of all genders, classes, and creeds visit the shrine of Moinuddin Chishti in Ajmer, India, each year to participate in music, singing, and bodily performances that mark the *urs*, or the celebration of the death anniversary of the mystic saint. For an account of the Sufi Chisti tradition, see Ernst and Lawrence (2002).

by wearing bangles and makeup in a small village in Pakistan or by defying family dress codes in Toronto.<sup>28</sup> In addition to accounts of Muslim girls' and women's loyalty, their sense of propriety, and their painstaking efforts to live up to a shared moral code with their paternal families, we could also provide evidence of the multitude of instances recorded by feminists when parents, families, and community members act to protect the honor and reputation of sexually transgressive individuals. For example, Nafisa Shah (1997) demonstrates that not all elements of tribal communities are vindictive against "dishonorable" women but that tribal, spiritual, and local government functionaries may play an important role in protecting victims (p. 255). Indeed, the published memoirs of Mukhtar Mai indicate that against the cast of powerful warlords, corrupt policemen, and complicit local authorities she was supported by her parents, especially her father, in rejecting the customary "honorable" option of suicide in the face of gang-rape and in challenging her abusers (Mukhtar Mai & Cuny, 2006). She also recounts the role of the local mullah, who publicly condemned the incident in a Friday prayer sermon (pp. 23–28), and the judge who gave her a fair and supportive hearing (pp. 41–42). While offering insights into the circumstances of immigration, underemployment, and exploitative class, race, and cultural contexts of migrant Muslim families, feminists need not present extenuating circumstances for the violent behavior of some Muslim men, since nothing can truly extenuate violence against women. We can be critical of imperialist feminist gestures that appropriate the bodies of dead Muslim women to consolidate the Western civilized subject, as ably problematized by Razack, while also being vocal about politico-religious appropriations of the bodies of living Muslim women who want to be both individual subjects and members of family and community.

### Conclusion

As a linguistic construct, transgressive piety may sound near-blasphemous to ordinary Muslims in today's Pakistan, but very few, elite or poor, would fail to respond to its appeal when couched in the poetry of the sixteenth century iconoclastic mystic Bulleh Shah: *Tere Ishq nachayan kar ke thaiyan thainyan re* [Your love stirs me to dance in wild abandon].<sup>29</sup>

In one of the dense ironies of transnational capitalism, the relationship of Salafism and Sufism is being reworked in contradictory ways due to the complex interactions of Islamophobia, Salafism, and Islamic mysticism with the imperatives of the War on Terror, economic and cultural consumerism, and multinational corporatism.<sup>30</sup> In Pakistan, the timeless poetry, music, and

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<sup>28</sup>See <http://www.scribd.com/doc/33096133/Parvez-case-Agreed-Statement-of-Facts>.

<sup>29</sup>Bulleh Shah is renowned for rejecting the ritualistic piety of local religious leaders. This lyric refers to an incident when he put on ankle bells and danced to appease his beloved male mentor (translation mine). In so doing, Bulleh Shah crossed all the boundaries of gender, piety, class, and caste. Some of the most popular poems and songs of Sufi masters are part of the normal oral repertoire of their admirers, as is the case with Bulleh Shah in Pakistan. For some renderings easily accessible in North America, see Khan (2012). See also <https://sufipoetry.wordpress.com/2009/11/19/tere-ishq-nachaya-bulleh-shah/>

<sup>30</sup>See Ernst (2006), Kugle (2007), Shaikh (2012), and Shaukat (2013).

dancing that are constitutive aspects of transgressive mysticism are being recovered from their traditional settings — shrines and saints’ tombs — and reworked into musical hits that are circulated by transnationally available private TV channels on shows sponsored by multinational companies such as Coca-Cola. In the background of daily suicide bombing attacks, insidious Talibanization, and multiplying fatwas about morality and piety, the popular TV program CokeStudio enables young Pakistani artists to invoke transgressive Islamic experiences that continue to be affectively familiar to Muslims despite the spectacular emergence of Salafism.<sup>31</sup>

Islam and Muslims, like all social collectivities, are diversely constituted, complexly textured, multiply understood ways of being in the world, ways of being that are imbued with manifold possibilities for both liberation and oppression rather than a unitary and homogenous “community” or “identity” to be defended and upheld. The significance of transgressive piety for Muslim social, political, and perhaps legal scholars is that it keeps open the question of what is sinful and what is devout by emphasizing the pitfalls of righteous arrogance that entails moral disciplining by one another, by religious vigilantes, and by the theocratic state. By taking the onus of disciplining and punishment of “morally deviant” or “sinful” subjects away from the individual, the juridico-religious apparatus, and the state, it offers the possibility for a more egalitarian basis for community. There is a need for all Muslim subjects to be able to claim a more empathic relationship with their communities and their faith than allowed by patriarchal and punitive notions of self, community, and divine.

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<sup>31</sup>See <http://www.cokestudio.com.pk>

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