

## 8. Embodying Black Islam: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Afro-Diasporic Muslim Hip-Hop in Britain

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Over the past fifteen years, hip-hop has grown slowly but steadily within the British Islamic cultural sphere, a trend spearheaded mainly by British Muslims of African descent. In a religious scene that, when it came to music, was long dominated by Islamic devotional music (*nasheed*), hip-hop has struggled with a legitimacy problem. For Muslim hip-hop artists, however, this music genre justifies itself for its significant contribution to forging a Black Muslim identity and the specific ethical commitments that are germane to this project.

For the artists in question, hip-hop's potential Islamic legitimacy is rooted in the ethics and politics of "original" hip-hop (connected to contesting racism and neocolonialism and promoting Black consciousness). It is this commitment that Muslim hip-hop artists generally seek to uphold. Much has been written about the *ethicopolitical* commitments of "Muslim" hip-hop, especially in the United States but also in parts of western Europe, Africa, and the Middle East.<sup>1</sup> However, little attention has been paid to another dimension of Muslim hip-hop that is central to the artists' efforts to authenticate hip-hop as Islamic—the particular *aesthetic* styles that Muslim hip-hop culture has adopted and that are intrinsically linked to the ethics of hip-hop.<sup>2</sup>

In this essay I attend to the central role of the body within the ethics and aesthetics of Islamic hip-hop as conceived by Afro-descendant British Muslim hip-hop practitioners.<sup>3</sup> I use the term *Islamic hip-hop*—a term that is endorsed by some practitioners but rejected or used only with caution by others—to talk about hip-hop music made by Muslim performers who regularly perform

at Muslim community events and consciously aspire to produce hip-hop that enjoys a certain Islamic legitimacy. And I argue, more particularly, that the body—its performance, portrayal, and agency, whether onstage or in its lyrical representation—is pivotal for rendering the genre a legitimate form of Islamic expression and, in turn, for fashioning an *authentic* Black Muslim cultural space. In this context, body representation and performance cannot be reduced to mere symbolism, a politics of authenticity (thus representing something that is already there), or a politics of identity flattened by liberal multicultural politics (McNay 2008). Rather, the body, with its attending ethical potentialities, serves as a *conduit* for cultivating pious Muslim subjectivities and shaping ethical communities. Muslim piety, according to my interlocutors, is understood as already incorporating, next to a deep God-consciousness, an ethicopolitical sensibility that commits to combating all forms of oppression, including (anti-Black) racism, in order to promote the Islamic virtue of justice (*‘adl*). This commitment, I illustrate here, is grounded within a broader ethics of intersubjectivity, defined by responsibility, compassion, and care.

After briefly situating British Muslim hip-hop artists within the Muslim music scene in Britain, I describe the discursive strategies through which Muslim hip-hop performers authenticate hip-hop as a Black Islamic art form. The arguments in this authentication narrative have important consequences for (en)sounding and performing Islamic hip-hop and thus impact its sensory and corporeal experience; I discuss here more particularly the sartorial styles and forms of bodily comportment onstage. In the last section, I consider the case of Poetic Pilgrimage, a Muslim female hip-hop duo, which is an interesting example for studying the (embodied) ethics and aesthetics of Black British Muslim hip-hop in its distinct female articulation. Embedded in a rich tradition of Black diasporic women’s expression through literature and music as well as in Islamic spiritual traditions, these two female hip-hop artists center the body, not only within their performances but also within their lyrics, in ways that push forward the reflection on intersubjective ethics as an embodied endeavor.

### Shaping Black British Islam through Hip-Hop

Until quite recently Islamic hip-hop has been among the most contested music genres within the Islamic culture scene in Britain. While the legitimacy of music and more particularly of musical instruments is a subject of Islamic theological debates, which reverberate especially in Islamic revival circles (see, for instance, Otterbeck 2008), debates among British Muslims have often crystallized around hip-hop, a secular music culture conceived by many pious

practitioners as most opposed to an Islamic ethos. According to many hip-hop musicians themselves, this is mainly due to hip-hop culture's general notoriety (associated with sexual promiscuity, drugs, and violence) but also to what Su'ad Abdul Khabeer (2016, 3), who writes for the US Muslim context, calls the "ethnoreligious hegemonies of Arab and South Asian communities," which determine that one could not "engage Black expressive cultures as Muslims." This certainly holds true for the ethnically diverse British Muslim community, which is numerically and institutionally dominated by Muslims of South Asian and, to a lesser extent, Middle Eastern background (South Asian Muslims constitute more than two-thirds of the British Muslim population). African-descendant Muslims in Britain, whether hailing from sub-Saharan African countries or from the Caribbean (usually converts), are a quickly growing community but still make up a relatively small proportion of the overall population, and they have generally been overlooked in discussions on British Islam (see Curtis 2014).<sup>4</sup>

In a context where "authentic" Muslim culture is, especially among the older generations, presumed to be located within Middle Eastern and South Asian traditions, Islamic hip-hop in Britain explicitly challenges these ethno-religious-based understandings of religious authenticity.<sup>5</sup> As several Muslim hip-hop artists of Afro-Caribbean background told me, just as Muslims all over the world had initially adapted their pre-Islamic local cultural traditions to the requirements of the new religion, they today claim the right to do so as well. This point was powerfully brought home to me during a conversation in July 2011 with Tanya Muneera Williams and Sukina Douglas, two women of Jamaican descent who make up the hip-hop duo Poetic Pilgrimage, at Sukina's home in North West London. Muneera said, "The culture should not override Islam. If there is something in your culture that is adverse to Islam, of course, we won't practice it, but if it is healthy and something . . . that helps us to breathe Islam, then this is definitely necessary. There have been problems with people's identity; they think they have to act like they are of South Asian culture or that they have to act as if they are from Saudi Arabia, all these things. But actually our culture is fine, we just need to find ways to make it compatible." Sukina here intervened and added, "Muneera hit the nail on the head. It's like, until we have an identity which is native, from where we are, it will be someone else's interpretation, someone else's commentary. It will never be real, it won't be us."

Becoming Muslim, for these artists, consisted not in adopting anything Arabic or Indo-Pakistani as the authentic Islamic way but in maintaining and furthering those elements from their own cultural background that they considered to be aligned with the ethics of their new faith, while at the same time

also resituating themselves within a global Muslim heritage. This ambition, translated into an artistic/musical project, has in turn given rise to a variety of styles under the umbrella of Islamic hip-hop. Each of the African-descendant performers or bands I met throughout my fieldwork in London and other British cities drew in a unique way on what they understood to be their own “musical heritage.” In recent years, these artists have succeeded in gaining greater access to stages in mainstream Muslim spaces. Nonetheless, events in these spaces rarely give hip-hop a dominant place, and thus these artists continue to have something of an underground status. Unlike some nasheed artists, they do not work with the known “Islamic” record labels but are completely independent, promoting their music on social media and, if they produce CDs, self-distributing them. In spite of a certain feeling of marginalization, many of the artists also appreciate this situation. True to their ideal of authentic hip-hop, being underground artists is a status they do not necessarily seek to escape, even if they simultaneously struggle for acceptance of their art form within mainstream British Muslim scenes.

### Authenticating Hip-Hop

To fully comprehend my interlocutors’ particular engagement with the hip-hop tradition, one has to take into account how Islamic traditions have engaged with practices of *listening* as a mode of “ethical attunement” (Hirschkind 2015, 168), thereby delineating something like a specific Islamic acoustemology. This acoustemology (as for other religious traditions) is embedded in a broader sensory epistemology that acknowledges the role of embodied and perceptual experiences in the shaping and “molding of the human senses in accord with a religious tradition” (166). Consequently, Islamic scholars throughout the ages have reflected extensively on how to discipline the ear (and the gaze) so as to hone specific ethical dispositions. While these scholars have never succeeded in circumscribing the multifarious music traditions produced in Muslim contexts throughout the ages, the traditions of ethical cultivation have been reworked within contemporary Islamic revival circles across the globe. Popular culture, and especially music, has been hesitantly but gradually included in the realm of pious activities, with the acknowledgment of art’s and music’s potential to strengthen Muslim subjectivities (see, for instance, Winegar 2009).

In this sense, my interlocutors were all, without exception, conscious that, in addition to their own aspiration to piety and virtuous conduct, they as musicians are in a position to promote, through their music but also through their accompanying conduct, pious dispositions within their audience. These con-

siderations that acknowledged a strong ethical relation between performers and listeners infused my interlocutors' efforts to redefine hip-hop in terms of being simultaneously an explicitly claimed Black art form and an authentic Islamic music genre.

Throughout my fieldwork I have encountered two distinct but intertwined tropes that the artists articulated to authenticate hip-hop, both establishing a hip-hop genealogy leading back to a certain Muslim identity—which also had important consequences for dovetailing Islamic hip-hop to earlier Islamic acoustemologies. The first trope created a link between African American music traditions and African Muslim culture by stressing the influence of West African (Muslim) griot music that enslaved West African Muslims had brought along to the Americas.<sup>6</sup> Connecting hip-hop to griot music as an important oral or storytelling tradition enabled these practitioners to define the genre as a *spoken-word art* that is about transmitting social commentary and memory. In their discussions of hip-hop, they thereby clearly downgraded danceability, one of the prime objectives of mainstream hip-hop, while foregrounding listening practices. To my interlocutors, beats then seemed secondary, understood to be merely supportive, allowing the message to better enter the listener's ear. In other words, they considered the spoken-word art, not the beats, to prove hip-hop's correspondence with the sonic-linguistic practices of Islam's pronounced oral tradition. For this reason, many artists often switched easily between instrumental hip-hop/rap and spoken-poetry pieces, which points to the proximity they perceived between these two performance styles.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, this focus on hip-hop as a spoken-word genre has triggered a thriving spoken-poetry scene in the larger British Muslim community.

The second trope that my interlocutors employed to authenticate hip-hop was related to an effort to disconnect “authentic” hip-hop from commercial mainstream hip-hop in order to emphasize the genre as a tool for transmitting ethical messages.<sup>8</sup> In this regard, British Muslim hip-hop artists regularly pointed out that hip-hop's origins were grounded in a Black political consciousness with an aspiration toward *social justice*. They directly linked this awareness to the fact that many of the hip-hop pioneers either were Muslims or were inspired by Islam-derived philosophies (see also Abdul Khabeer 2016; Aidi 2004; McLarney 2019).<sup>9</sup> Consequently, according to the artists I talked to, Islamic hip-hop had to stay committed to producing messages in line with hip-hop's original ethics, thereby also staying true to Islamic ethical principles. Mohammed Yahya, a Mozambican-British Muslim rapper based in London, explained this to me when describing his own transition from mainstream to Islamic hip-hop during one of our first conversations, in late July 2008: “A lot

of [contemporary] hip-hop is very egotistical, is very like, I'm the greatest rapper . . . very braggin', you know; and Islam came to strip away your ego. . . . So I had to constantly look at my lyrics, to make sure the sincerity was there, and I was writing from the heart and always tried to propagate a positive message." Because of this pronounced message-based tradition inherent in hip-hop, pious performers and listeners frequently stressed hip-hop's unique potential to convey ethical content. In this context, I found it particularly interesting that performers and event organizers valued the genre for its ability to reach out to urban Muslim youth who are alienated from the conventional spaces of Muslim piety.

The articulation of these two tropes, of hip-hop as a spoken-word art form in the tradition of West African Muslim griot musical storytelling and of African American Muslim hip-hop pioneers concerned with an ethics of social justice, proved for my interlocutors not just hip-hop's compatibility with Islam but even its inherent Islamic character. A comment Sukina made during an early conversation I had with her in 2008 summarizes this twofold argument well and reflects my interlocutors' general take: "I don't regard hip-hop as that contemporary art form that you see on tv. I look at it as coming from West African griots, right through the plantation, and that social commentary, and that is what hip-hop is to me. . . . Within the history of hip-hop you will always find, like in the US, people who are Muslim or who are strongly influenced by Islam, because I think Islam always played a role. It wasn't just a faith; it was about Black consciousness. The faith is affiliated with African American history, African American identity."

These different arguments all point to my interlocutors' particular understanding of Islamic hip-hop in terms of an ethical endeavor, where the aspirational cultivation of piety, political consciousness, and community building interweaves considerations of content (messages) with considerations of sound (spoken words surpassing beats).

### Performing Islamic Hip-Hop

The narratives that foreground hip-hop as an ethical spoken-word art also bear crucially on the performance style of the Muslim hip-hop artists I studied. As I address in this section, it is by *embodying* the ethics of hip-hop that the artists seek to fully actualize the authenticity and legitimacy of hip-hop within pious Muslim spaces—relatively small-scale live shows at Muslim community events being generally the main venue for this art form.<sup>10</sup> What I found striking when attending these events was how the hip-hop performers brought a body

politics reflective of conscious (that is, “authentic”) hip-hop together with one reflective of Islamic ethical traditions, in an apparently natural way. These performers employed styles that simultaneously expressed an urban, cosmopolitan understanding of Black or African dignity and also Muslim etiquette and piety. Performing conscious hip-hop entailed, for my interlocutors, enacting political consciousness and Black awareness rather than sexualized identities. And these performance styles seemed to cohere well with their understanding of Islamic etiquette, which demands a certain bodily restraint. Such embodied restraint was furthermore facilitated by foregrounding hip-hop as a spoken-word art rather than as dance music. Many performers spoke to me openly about how they monitored their own body movements and gestures in line with these considerations. Such a reflexive approach sought to uphold embodied modesty, ensuring that sexuality was not displayed publicly. But it also meant expressing humility, something that—as the artists recognized (exposed in Mohammed Yahya’s comment quoted earlier)—was often opposed to understandings of mainstream hip-hop.

The British-Nigerian spoken-word poet Rakin Fetuga, a former member of the now-defunct Mecca II Medina, the pioneering group of Islamic hip-hop in the United Kingdom, related his own perspective about embodied restraint and rap during one of our more recent conversations, in the summer of 2016. He himself had made the transition from mainstream rap—he was an up-and-coming artist in the UK hip-hop scene in the 1990s—to Islamic hip-hop:

As a Muslim male rapper, you still have to be modest. For example, we could not behave like how the mainstream rappers behave, they are rating their private parts, you wouldn’t be doing that. . . . Also, the way to behave with women in the mainstream . . . , but as a Muslim artist, you keep far away from that. You are just [*with a smile and changes into a very soft, melodic voice*], *Salam alaykum, masha’ Allah* [*puts his hand on his heart, as in a greeting*]; perhaps sign a thing for them, *Jazak Allah kheir*, that’s it.<sup>11</sup>

Rakin’s overly soft, melodic voice and his adoption of a different body posture as he talked to me indicated how he consciously *performed* for his female listeners a different kind of masculinity, and thereby also his adherence to an Islamic code of modest conduct, in order to avoid any possibility of misunderstanding and inappropriate interaction. Indeed, I have seen him many times at Muslim events interacting with female audience members in exactly this way. For many of my female interlocutors who wear hijab, the hijab itself becomes a crucial bodily technique that promotes particular types of bodily conduct, as Sukina made clear in the following statement: “In regard to conducting

ourselves onstage, I think these things . . . come naturally, in a way. . . . You know, it's like if you dress a certain way, your body kind of follows you. . . . If you are dressed modestly, you just do conduct yourself in a certain way." Suki-na's comment clearly exposes how dress, as a material object, is an important part of many body techniques, as it contributes to what Jean-Pierre Warnier calls a "sensory-motor experience" (2001, 7).<sup>12</sup> Another strategy to guarantee modesty was to perform in a seated position. Pearls of Islam, for instance, a band consisting of two sisters of Afro-Caribbean descent who call their music *rhythm and nasheed* rather than *hip-hop* (adapting the name from R&B), usually performed this way, especially in front of mixed-gender audiences, so to avoid, they explained to me, any dance movements the music might incline them to do.

In a context where Black people have often been represented as oversexualized, with unruly bodies and a pathological sexuality (see, for instance, Hammonds 1999; Jackson 2006), one could argue that these forms of conduct enact a "politics of pious respectability" (Abdul Khabeer 2016, 144). However, given that these artists, as pious Muslims, adhere to a normative understanding of virtuous conduct (which may vary from stricter to less strict interpretations, as there is no doctrinal unanimity in this respect) and aspire to embody it, I do not want to view the adoption of an embodied pious habitus in hip-hop exclusively through this lens. Black respectability politics is usually understood to stand in tension with ideas of Black authenticity, because this politics aspires to prove Black people's conformity with (white) mainstream values and thus downplays its own difference (see, for instance, White 2001). My interlocutors, on the contrary, unabashedly promoted a Black Muslim authenticity that did not shy away from Afrocentric aesthetics and Black-power symbols. Through their music and their performances, they introduced this message as well as the ensuing critique of anti-Black racism into the larger British Muslim community. Simultaneously, they claimed, against many Afrocentric arguments, that Islam has a central and legitimate space in a Black cultural-political space.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, at Islamic hip-hop events, I witnessed a performance style being forged with a specific set of gestures and phrases combining, again seamlessly, hip-hop and Islamic elements. Key in the repertoire of hip-hop gestures I observed regularly were hand movements, which help communicate the lyrics, provide emphasis to the words (such as waving hands in the air or waving the hands, palms down, from side to side, in the rhythm of the rap), and facilitate maintaining the flow. A basic bouncing movement highly characteristic of hip-hop—produced by stepping back and forth with bended knees, with the torso bending slightly to each step—was adopted by many performers as well. Apart from that, I rarely saw hip-hop artists engaging in more extensive dance



movements.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the corporeality espoused onstage seemed to me much more in line with early political hip-hop, in which the performance of sexuality was not central and which instead involved an embodiment of the social narrative of emancipation, and resistance. Therefore, during Muslim hip-hop performances, a raised, clenched fist was a prominent gesture onstage (also invoked in many lyrics). The fist, interestingly, was frequently interchanged with another hand gesture, the raised right-hand index finger, which, within an Islamic context, signifies *tawhid* (oneness of God). Onstage, this principle of oneness was often explained to the audience—in an allusion to Islamic mystical teachings on *tawhid* in terms of unity of being—as connoting unity among all people.<sup>15</sup> Call-and-response routines included shout-outs to various local identities (for instance, East London, West London, and so on) or “Takbir,” with the crowd answering “Allahu akbar” (God is the greatest), which could alternate with pious invocations such as “Wave your hand if you love Allah”; performances started with the obligatory “Salam alaykum” (Peace be upon you) and “bismillah” (in the name of God).<sup>16</sup>

My interlocutors’ performative mode, which enacted this specific fusion of Muslim and hip-hop elements in order to embody an Afro-Islamic authenticity, was, of course, most immediately apparent through their sartorial styles onstage. The hip-hop artists I worked with have all developed over the years their own quite distinct ways of dressing that produce and display a Black Muslim aesthetic. As some explained to me, it took them much reflection and experimentation to figure out their own styles. Muneera and Sukina from Poetic Pilgrimage talked to me extensively about the matter of dress, on- and offstage. During our first conversation in 2008, Sukina related to me her initial difficulties in acquiring an ensemble of clothes that reflected not only Muslim principles of modesty but also her own personal tastes: “So, there was a long period where we would perform, and we have clothes on, and we are like, this is not anything about us. . . . We cringe when we see pictures, oh, what the hell are we wearing? But you know, *hamdulillah*, it takes time to start to build up a wardrobe, and you start to get different pieces from places you are traveling to.” During our conversation at her apartment in 2011, she returned to that topic. Interestingly, here she pointed to the communal relevance of individual dress choices: “It’s another big thing I am interested to work on, how we as Black Muslims relate to our community as well. When we walk through neighborhoods like Harlesden or Willesden and they see Black women covering their heads, they are Muslims, but they still wear African colors, African hijabs.”

During Islamic hip-hop performances, I usually noticed urban wear, sweatpants, hoodies, and sneakers alternating or combined with *thobes*, African

blouses (wax-printed or embroidered), and Moroccan slippers; also popular were T-shirts and baseball hats with self-designed themes or slogans that reflected a Muslim or Afro-Muslim identity (often in Arabic script).<sup>17</sup> For women, skirts in various ethnic designs, whether African, Indian, or Middle Eastern, were combined with fashion items bought in London's high streets, often worn in layers. Accessories, in general, were key in these outfits: kufis for men and hijab for women, often (but not always) made out of African textiles, along with chains of prayer beads (*tasbeih*) in the West African style (large wooden beads) wrapped around the wrist or worn as necklaces. Shawls, again out of African textiles but also Palestinian keffiyeh scarves and shawls from Yemen, were very popular among men and women alike. For the women, heavy bangles and chunky earrings in wood or silver, often with Afrocentric symbolism or other accessories coming from different regions of Africa (very popular, too, was Tuareg silver craft) completed the wardrobe.

Dress in this performance context therefore became an interesting technology of the self, where individuality was created and performed through fashion but clearly embedded within a *communal* perspective. As Sukina made clear in her statement, it was about maintaining old ties with the Black community, about creating new communities around a Black Muslim identity and transforming the broader Muslim community by making space for a Black narrative. The embodied practices I discuss here rendered the body a crucial tool to produce community by inculcating communal ethical dispositions based on an Islamic piety infused with Black awareness and confidence. As I show in the remainder of the chapter, the central role accorded the body in producing particular kinds of dispositions could also resonate within hip-hop lyrics.

### Writing the Body of the Black Muslim Woman

As mentioned earlier, Poetic Pilgrimage is a female Muslim hip-hop and spoken-word duo, consisting of Sukina and Muneera. They are today the most well-known Muslim female rappers from the United Kingdom. They have been featured in a widely seen *Al-Jazeera* documentary and have performed extensively in Europe and overseas. Poetic Pilgrimage offers an interesting example for discussing Muslim hip-hop and embodied ethics, not only in performance but also with regard to the lyrics.

Their lyrics span from spiritual and very pious to socially engaged, with no clear dividing line between these topics; many artists fuse both elements, given that they are so much part of their understanding of what their Muslimness entails in terms of Islamic ethics—ethics that my interlocutors perceived not



FIGURE 8.1. Poetic Pilgrimage at the Dishoom Eid Festival, King's Cross, London, July 17, 2017. Photograph by author.

only as commensurable with Black consciousness but even as requiring it. Poetic Pilgrimage's lyrics capture well their personal experiences as Black Muslim women in Britain having to navigate historical misrepresentations of Black and Muslim female bodies as well as the spiritual struggles of converts, believers, seekers, and politically conscious beings.

Within all their lyrics, there is a consistent concern with spiritual flourishing, female agency, female restorative power, and self-worth, themes that situate them within a broader Black feminist tradition articulated through music and writing (see, for instance, Bennett and Dickerson 2001). In line with this tradition, which has claimed the right to define and represent the Black female body on its own terms, Poetic Pilgrimage unapologetically set out to define and represent the Black Muslim *hijabi* female body. They moreover lay claim to their own voices, here especially in response to more conservative (often labeled as Salafi) interpretations of Islam that prohibit women from singing in mixed-gender public spaces. Poetic Pilgrimage has received much condemnation from some conservative Muslim circles for this reason. Their lyrics

consequently respond to multiple forms of marginalization: as Muslim women in an increasingly Islamophobic Europe, as Black women in a white-majority society defined by racial hegemonies that have historically misrepresented and devalored the Black body, as Black Muslims in a Muslim community with “ethnoreligious hegemonies” that favor South Asians and Middle Easterners, and finally as women in a heterogeneous Muslim community where certain currents endorse strict gendered norms that exclude women from public spaces and the performing arts.

Against these multiple forms of exclusion, Poetic Pilgrimage celebrates through their words and their stage presence the proud Black and devout Muslim woman. The following lines from the track “Star Women” (2010) exemplify this key message, with a language that situates the body at the center of this message:

We female MC avant-gardes  
refuse to flaunt our body parts,  
pump your fist, this world is ours. (Sukina)

In these hard days  
you’re amazed  
how my tongue stays ablaze,  
the x in my DNA  
that makes me rhyme for better days,  
inspired by women who are victims  
of corrupted systems,  
channeling this energy  
that is pimped up inside of me,  
from victims to victors to victorious  
how glorious  
you can see in my stride,  
in the way that I ride.<sup>18</sup> (Muneera)

In what follows, I discuss two spoken-word pieces written and performed by Muneera and Sukina respectively: “White Lilies” and “I Carry.” These pieces epitomize Poetic Pilgrimage’s effort to reclaim and represent the Black female body in ways that integrate Black body politics into Islamic understandings of the body. I demonstrate how both pieces powerfully put the performers’ bodies at the service of cultivating among their listeners an intersubjective ethics grounded in care, responsibility, and compassion.

I first saw Sukina and Muneera perform these two pieces in February 2009 when attending the “I Am Malcolm X” tour organized by the Muslim organization Radical Middle Way at the Drum in Birmingham, a major Black cultural venue.<sup>19</sup> The hall was fully packed; the majority of attendees were Muslims from a range of different ethnic and racial backgrounds. Unlike in Poetic Pilgrimage’s highly energetic hip-hop performances, here both performers adopted the more collected body postures of spoken-word poets. Both arrived silently onstage, and each situated herself in front of a microphone. While Muneera got ready to speak, Sukina clasped her arms together and closed her eyes, adopting a still posture.

*Muneera: “White Lilies”*

Muneera recited with a powerful and passionate voice her poem “White Lilies,” which affirms the importance of denouncing the systemic violence inflicted on Black bodies. The importance of speaking out is framed within a context where being silenced is a real possibility:

The thought of a butterfly wingless or a bee honeyless  
Is like me not being able to express  
Lungs expanding allowing me to get things off my chest.

In “White Lilies” the desire to speak out is not merely a matter of individual self-expression. It is a physical, bodily need. But this need, as Muneera makes clear immediately afterward, is linked to a primordial condition of humanness, which for her refers to the innate knowledge of God’s existence and the social responsibilities that issue from that knowledge:

I must confess I do get some form of satisfaction from the request of my  
Lord  
.....  
You see, before I was born I took two oaths  
One to testify in the name of He  
And the other to write in the name of He the most righteous  
Until the souls of the voiceless can be set free.

The duty to speak in order to set free the “souls of the voiceless” requires talking about hard and painful truths, about the evil that exists, which is so much connected to humans’ moral fragility and thus to the potential to commit evil. The objective is a shock effect that rouses in the listener a reaction, compassion or dread:

Not just beyond yellow meadows and blue streams  
But into the deepest, darkest depths of your heart  
Until you choke on the horrors that I've seen  
That I've been.

Muneera's frank speech does not stop at exposing personal experiences of (sexual) violence inflicted on her own body, which she related that evening in an increasingly emotional voice:

I've shared alleys with crack fiends, slept in backstreets  
As rats and rodents rode all over me  
Cold and exposed to vulnerability  
.....  
Welcome to the birth of the death of my chastity  
Desperately seeking to fill my once womb, now tomb, with love.

"White Lilies" does not foreground or isolate her personal pain but immediately and explicitly connects it to a collective condition, juxtaposing her own bodily suffering with a broader experience of social and physical violence that affects her community. In this sense, perpetrators and victims are both casualties of the same structural conditions that affect Black communities. But "White Lilies" makes clear that the effects of violence are gendered, particularly impacting women, who are often left behind in the vicious circle of violence and the carceral system:

So I use these words to mediate  
Yet still they can't alleviate  
Mother's tears when her son has just been gunned down by his own  
peers  
Or a mother's tears  
When her son has just pulled the trigger, end another's years

While recognizing the gender-specific effects of violence within her community, Muneera nonetheless mitigates these differences by highlighting a relational self, thereby cutting short any notion of the individual(ist) poet. In the following lines, her body transforms into the body of the young man, the perpetrator of the killing, adopting his body postures that signify allegiance to his locality—and Muneera performs these gestures onstage:

So he being me, we, to transferably react  
And every action can be my last breath  
My last nothing left

Banging on my warrior chest with no valour in my heart  
Repping my manor on my parts  
With my swagger or street smarts

Then, assuming once again a silent posture and reducing the volume of her voice, she steps out of his body in the lyrics, just before he, too, finds a brutal end:

Cross' my path now he's marked  
As a chalky white figure

Here the (feminine) “I” has transmuted into a “he” and then melts into a “we.” The poem thereby highlights the collective vulnerability of the “we” within a context of structural violence. In spite of this vulnerability and the omnipresence of death, Muneera celebrates her own strength, her resilient body that survives and continues to speak out, depicting—in the tradition of Black feminist writing—the woman’s body as a source of power, restorative, maternal, nurturing, and therefore uncomfortable, even menacing, to the status quo:

But there will be no white lilies left  
There will be no white lilies left  
Because I still have a fire in my chest  
Substance in my breath  
Like babies’ milk in a mother’s breast  
Yes, they call us end-time women

And, again, she insists on the necessity of speaking out, even in the face of efforts to silence her, speaking out about taboo topics such as sexual violence against women. Muneera now turns her gaze from her immediate environment of urban Britain to a more global perspective:

And others say that we should be forbidden  
From speaking about the rape of Sudanese women  
And remind people of the responsibility of this world that we live in  
But the blood keeps dripping  
And as their blood keeps dripping they want me to stop singing  
As their blood keeps dripping they want us to erase the lines that we’ve  
written

As the poem draws to a close and her voice begins to slow, she reiterates her determination to denounce injustice and suffering, with an understanding that

her passionate commitment to do so itself results from an ontological condition that leads back to an ultimate divine agency. Thus, speaking out is a commitment, her mission, a promise:

So until He fancies me and leaves my white lilies to rest  
Or physically and emotionally removes the pain that I feel deep inside  
my chest  
Until my lord leaves my white lilies to rest  
I pray my last words would sound and feel something similar to this,  
Amin.

*Sukina: "I Carry"*

In contrast to Muneera's poem, which was performed with strong gestures, reflecting the personal and emotional involvement of the poet, Sukina employed mostly a minimalist performance style, with a calm, collected body posture. She began in a slow cadence, carefully articulating each word and using only a few hand gestures. Now it was Muneera's turn to settle into a silent pose, eyes closed, to let Sukina take center stage:

I carry the decrepit legacy of the wretched casualties  
Who lost the faculty to fathom what it means to be free  
I carry the weight like mothers dashing desperately across borders  
becoming refugees  
With their blessed seeds tied to their backs  
Under attack from bombs dropped, limbs hacked, by devils on horseback  
I inhale the scent of mutilated corpses tossed in a mass grave  
I am a slave awaiting emancipation day  
I am a believer preparing my soul for judgment day.

Sukina speaks in a slow, quiet, and even voice. Her first verses set the stage for a poem that uses Sukina's body as the locus for remembering and feeling with the "wretched of the earth" across time and space. It is a piece of remembrance and resistance to a history and ongoing present of oppression, suffered by Black and brown bodies, enslaved, colonized bodies, and by those bodies who today have inherited this history and who continue to endure the ongoing structural neo-imperialist conditions. Throughout her poem Sukina names the destinies of Africans in the Western Hemisphere, in sub-Saharan Africa (Sierra Leone, Sudan/Darfur) and of people in the Middle East (Iraq, Iran, Palestine), with their histories of enslavement, colonialism, and war. At the same time,



“I Carry” is, like “White Lilies,” attentive to how these conditions play out in gendered ways, and denounces all forms of patriarchy:

The tears of war widows roll down my cheek, and when another bomb  
drops  
That could be me wrapped in a white sheet  
I’m an Iranian woman marching for equality  
I rather die standing up than live on my knees  
It seems they didn’t get the memo that my soul was born free.

Sukina explicitly puts her capacity to write and perform in the service of these forgotten victims, whose memory she wants to perpetuate:

Lyricist slash activist is my vision of viewpoint  
The ink of my (ball) point turns from blue to red  
I write with the blood of the *shuhada* [martyrs]  
So that they can use my breath to sing freedom lullabies  
To those who sleep in warm beds  
And they, please, can be heard beyond death.

At the same time, and similar to “White Lilies,” in “I Carry” Sukina’s body does not merely stand for suffering but also personifies resilience, resistance, and ultimately redemption. At this point, Sukina’s body posture changes; she becomes more expressive, raising her fist, standing tall:

You see me, hijab tied tight, black-gloved fist raised high  
Chanting the war cry, no justice no peace, no justice no peace  
To the day I lose life . . .

In the next verses, Sukina regrets the passivity of a society where listeners are exposed to mass-mediatised news but desensitized to human suffering that does not affect them directly. This is a society that prefers to be distracted by amusement, fantasy worlds, rather than confronting the hard reality of life around us:

We suffer the tragedy of apathy, no time even for sympathy  
See, we prefer the fallacy of fantasy  
To the morning light we call reality

Sukina concludes her poem with a pious invocation for the resurrection of all those deceased victims at the end of times, ending, like Muneera, as one does a prayer, with “Amin” (amen).

## Writing Embodied Ethics, Relational Selves, and the Body as a Conduit

Both of Poetic Pilgrimage's pieces espouse a poetics of embodiment, where references to corporeality are recurrently employed in ways that render the human body a crucial site for producing connectivity and relationality. Embodied language here is meant to enable the listener to directly experience relations to an Other who is geographically or socially distant and to render present and immediate—through involving the senses—the Other's personal or collective (embodied) suffering.

"White Lilies" is especially concerned with Black suffering related to structural racism and war. Through her regular Islamic references, Muneera solidly integrates an Islamic identity into a collective Black imaginary (local and global) that often excludes this particular identity from its core. "I Carry," by contrast, significantly enlarges the space of the Islamic *umma* (community) as it is often imagined in British Muslim circles. In her critique of imperial and neo-imperial wars and postcolonial violence, Sukina connects the "centers" of the Muslim world to the "peripheries" not conventionally imagined to be relevant to its center, such as sub-Saharan Africa (Sierra Leone, Sudan). She thereby challenges the hierarchies of suffering often established in non-Black Muslim discourses based on these (racialized) geographies. But she also incorporates into this space what one might call the "Islamic Black Atlantic" and invokes the suffering of those who are understood to have been lost to the *umma*. Together, these two pieces present interesting reconfigurations of the commonly imagined geography of the Islamic *umma*. The *umma*, as a "collective moral project" (Hirschkind 2006, 118), is here reimagined through new types of spatial connections, thus also expanding the ethical obligations that are germane to these connections.

The suffering addressed in these poems—the denunciation of suffering and the call for compassion and ultimately resistance against the structures that produce suffering—becomes the ultimate reason for Sukina's and Muneera's desire to write, sing, and perform. Suffering in both poems is captured repeatedly through the terms *blood* and *tears*, the two bodily fluids that evoke physical and emotional pain. And the shed blood makes their work a moral obligation: "as their blood keeps dripping they want me to stop singing" ("White Lilies") and "I write with the blood of the *shuhada*" ("I Carry"). At the same time, both poets identify within their own bodies the (specifically feminine) force that allows them to use their lyrics as an act of and call to resistance. Muneera's violated body is resuscitated through the "fire in [her] chest" and the "substance

in [her] breath like babies' milk in a mother's breast," while Sukina's body, "hijab tied tight, black-gloved fist raised high," is "chanting the war cry."

Both poets explicitly want to rouse us from our "apathy" that allows us to sleep calmly ("in warm beds" ["I Carry"]) and want to physically disturb us ("until you choke on the horrors that I've seen" ["White Lilies"]). By doing so, they seek to tear down what Allen Feldman (2015) calls the "political apertception" or "anesthesia" induced by sovereign state power and its media apparatus in blanking out and/or banalizing the violence of contemporary warfare. Through these poems, then, they aim to reactivate our numbed sensory skills to perceive and react to violence. In "I Carry," Sukina makes us experience the distant suffering by experiencing phenomenologically the agony of those she invokes. We feel with Sukina, who makes directly accessible to us the otherwise-invisible and forgotten suffering. In "I Carry," compassion—not pity but cosuffering—is produced and mediated by the performer's body, which "carries," "inhales," "bleeds," and "weeps" for the victims who are rarely publicly mourned, so that we can feel via her body. Muneera, through her experiences of growing up in impoverished neighborhoods in urban Britain, reveals to us from the most personal vantage point possible the effects of structural and endemic racism but also of a still-patriarchal society (Britain) where sexual violence against women is too often normalized: her own body turns, through rape, from "womb" to "tomb." Yet, as already noted, she immediately grounds her own painful experiences within a collective experience. Like Sukina, she wants to use lyrics to mediate the suffering of Others for her listeners. This is most powerfully expressed in her poem when her violated female body switches into a male body from her neighborhood who ultimately finds a violent end.

In their lyrics, the performers' bodies—Black Muslim female bodies that are the locus of multiple forms of oppression—transgress boundaries of gender and race, locality and time, and become conduits for relating to Others, for producing compassion for all the forgotten histories of suffering endured by Black and brown bodies. Hence, their bodies come to transcend their own particularity in order to denote a broader *moral geography*. By doing so, both poets expose an understanding of bodies as elastic and nonbounded, able to connect to and fuse with others, endowed with a sort of transcorporeal perceptivity. Such understandings have also been richly utilized within Islamic spiritual traditions (see Kugle 2007; Mittermaier 2011; Ware 2014) and nourish these poets as well. Both poems, then, present a form of embodied epistemology where the body produces a knowledge that allows the listener to make the suffering of the Other accessible to the self.

Judith Butler, in a piece where she reflects on the possibilities of feeling moved and acted upon by events outside of one's own immediate surroundings,

argues, “If I am only bound to those who are close to me, already familiar, then my ethics are invariably parochial, communitarian, and exclusionary. If I am only bound to those who are ‘human’ in the abstract, then I avert every effort to translate culturally between my own situation and that of others. . . . But ethical relations are mediated . . . and this means that questions of location are confounded such that what is happening ‘there’ also happens in some sense ‘here’” (2012, 104).

“I Carry” and “White Lilies” are two examples where the poets employ their bodies and bodily perception to *mediate* these ethical relations, creating the “here” to which everyone can relate. Both “summon the other” to themselves by making “the flesh . . . word” (Dickerson 2001, 196) and turn their bodies into a “site of love, compassion, understanding” (Bennett and Dickerson 2001, 11). The poems depend on bodies’ capacities to produce affect, to affect and be affected through “intensities that pass body to body, . . . resonances that circulate about [and] between bodies and worlds” (Seigworth and Gregg 2010, 1). Thereby, they strive to overcome the limitations of a reductive physical existence, enclosed in individual material bodies, so as to enable us to reach out to the other over time, space, and difference (Hamington 2004). Gail Weiss (1999) describes this capacity of bodies to produce connections with others as “intercorporeality,” which, she insists, has important ethical entailments. Thus, Weiss urges recognition of “the body’s role in calling us to respond ethically to one another” (Weiss 1999, 5) and to “attribute moral significance not merely to intellectual but also to concomitant physical and emotional responses that arise out of our complex, concrete relationships with other bodies” (5).

More specifically, the emotional responses these poems seek to elicit stem from relations that are established through an invitation to *cosuffer*, a capacity that relies centrally on recognizing our shared sense of embodied vulnerability. In this sense, these poems acknowledge the ethical obligations that are produced by the ontological vulnerability of the human body. While this resonates in certain ways with Butler’s (2009, 2) call for a “new bodily ontology,” which invites us to rethink notions around “precariousness, vulnerability, injurability” in conjunction with the importance of “interdependency,” these poems also point to the fact that the “current distribution of precariousness on a global scale is wildly out of balance” (Murphy 2011, 582), with the “wretched of the earth” (Fanon 2004) bearing the brunt. Indeed, these poets expose a pronounced awareness of the workings of the “racial ontologies” that Frantz Fanon (2008) has extensively critiqued, which postulate an “ontological order of value” (Wynter 1984, 42).<sup>20</sup> Echoing these decolonial critiques, these poems implore an understanding of the ethical obligations that connect the promotion

of an ontological embodied interdependence with a radical undoing of racial ontologies (Maldonado-Torres 2007; Wynter 1984).

At the same time, however, Muneera's and Sukina's understanding of the ethical obligations produced by embodied connectivity and intersubjectivity is not merely social, humanist, or materialist. It is also metaphysical, because it is intrinsically connected to the divine, from which, according to their understanding, all originates—therefore embedded in a quite different episteme. The care that they perceive and that is cultivated through these bodily perceived relations derives from the ultimate covenant with God and triggers a fundamental, existential responsibility. And as Sukina furthermore makes clear, this struggle on earth for social and political justice is embedded within an eschatological perspective; if she offers herself to become the spokesperson of the oppressed, this also partakes in an eschatological striving. And, similarly, it explains these performers' understanding that the oppressed, whose suffering must arouse a reaction in us in order to correct injustice in this world, will find absolute justice only in the *akhira*, the afterlife.

## Conclusion

I have argued in this chapter that Islamic hip-hop, as my interlocutors defined it, was a deep and multilayered ethical endeavor. It was committed not only to promoting a vibrant and thriving Black Muslim community in Britain but also to contributing to reshaping and educating the broader British Muslim community. By doing so, it aimed to fully participate in the subject-fashioning projects of Islamic ethical traditions, to instill piety that includes a central commitment to social values, especially social justice. It was in this latter sense that the hip-hop practitioners of my research saw hip-hop as a particularly apt tool. The body, as I showed in this chapter, took center stage in the ethical labor these practitioners engaged in and thus became a key site for these community-shaping efforts. The body, its deportment and its stylization, was not just a tool for proving hip-hop's Islamic legitimacy but a conduit through which a Black Muslim habitus was shaped and cultivated. These particular body politics made Islamic hip-hop look a certain way and shaped its particular aesthetic styles. Especially intriguing for me was how this potential of the body to build community—through its simultaneous potential for cultivating interior dispositions—was actively harnessed within certain hip-hop lyrics. Building on the example of lyrics by Poetic Pilgrimage, I showed the possibility of writing the body in a way that produces affective responses with the objective of establishing ethical connections defined by compassion, care, and obligation.

Most central here was the exposure of bodily vulnerability—an ontological condition that does not affect everyone in similar ways but is connected to broader structural conditions. Building on this recognition of embodied vulnerability, these lyrics not only appealed to communal ethics but opened up possibilities for ethical attachments that transcend particular group identities in a quest for broader justice.

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#### NOTES

1. See, for instance, Abdul Khabeer (2016), Aidi (2014), Hill (2017), and Swedenburg (2002).
2. A notable exception here is the recent work by Su'ad Abdul Khabeer (2016), who has paid meticulous attention to Muslim hip-hop culture as a sartorial phenomenon.
3. Between 2007 and 2018, I conducted fieldwork with pious British Muslim culture and arts practitioners, mainly in London and to a lesser extent in other British cities. Among these practitioners, who came from a variety of different ethnic and racial backgrounds, were a substantial number who were of African descent. In this chapter I focus specifically on this group.
4. Scholarship on Black Muslim communities in the United Kingdom is almost completely absent, with the exception of recent studies on British Somali communities (see especially Liberatore 2017). An interesting monograph has been written by Richard Reddie (2009), a Black British pastor interested in understanding the growing phenomenon of Black British Christians converting to Islam.
5. Elsewhere (Jouili 2019), I have discussed the complicated articulations of the relationship between religion and culture among British Muslim art practitioners.
6. An Afro-Atlantic space that unites Black American and African aesthetic and musical experiences has been proposed by some music scholars but criticized by others as “romantic Afro-Atlanticism” (Perry 2004, 17). I am not so much interested in the historical veracity of this argument as in the ethical possibilities that this argument opens up for the artists who engage in it.
7. Furthermore, there are those who proclaim themselves “no-music” rappers, who follow the more restrictive theological interpretations that proclaim the illegitimacy of musical instruments (with the exception of drums).
8. The trope of the opposition between authentic and corrupted hip-hop has been debated among scholars; some view the distinction between a “golden age” and a “cor-

rupted” hip-hop as a too-normative vision that does not take seriously the aesthetic as an independent category (Perry 2004).

9. On the strong Muslim identity (whether Sunni Islam, Nation of Islam, or Five Percenters) of early hip-hop, see Abdul Khabeer (2016), Perry (2004), and Winters (2011). Ellen McLarney (2019) furthermore points to the broader significance of the “Black Muslim language” for giving voice to the Black experience and critiquing white supremacy, a language that has become central in Black cultural production.

10. The question of choice of performance venue is another interesting aspect that I cannot address here.

11. *Salam alaykum* is the traditional Muslim greeting, which translates as “Peace be upon you.” *Masha’ Allah* is used when someone is being complimented and translates as “God has willed.” *Jazak Allah* is an expression of gratitude, meaning “May God reward you.”

12. I have elaborated more on the role of the hijab as a material object with inherent sensory effects in the cultivation of embodied modesty in Jouili (2015).

13. Abdul Khabeer (2016) refers to this way of being as “Muslim cool,” where piety intertwines with a self-conscious Blackness.

14. There are, of course, different understandings of modesty, and at times any hip-hop gestures might be seen as lacking modesty. It is in this sense that Abdul Khabeer argues, “Black music stands in for Black lack/excess” (2016, 84).

15. In Sufi metaphysics, the principle of tawhid is expanded into the doctrine of the “unity of being” (*wahda al-wujud*), which postulates that God and the entire creation are one. See, for instance, Chittick (2010).

16. *Takbir* is an exclamation that invites others to call out “Allahu akbar” (God is the greatest).

17. *Thobes* (an anglicized version of the Arabic term *thawb*) are ankle-length garments for men, worn in a variety of styles in many parts of the Muslim world.

18. “Poetic Pilgrimage—Star Women (R.I.P. J-Dilla),” *pilgrimgrace*, October 27, 2010, YouTube video, 2:22, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JrHturd8mOo>.

19. The two performances during the “I Am Malcolm X” tour can be watched on YouTube: for “White Lilies,” go to “Poetic Pilgrimage Spoken Word: I Am Malcolm X Tour,” *GlobalFaction*, March 15, 2009, YouTube video, 3:55, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i-PEG-VRlNM>. For “I Carry,” go to “Poetic Pilgrimage Spoken Word 2: I Am Malcolm X Tour,” *GlobalFaction*, March 17, 2009, YouTube video, 3:44, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uFgI5xcDQpE&t=11s>.

20. These racialized orders of value go from negating being Black life to declaring it disposable (see, for instance, Marriott 2018; Rana 2016).

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