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Far from Mecca is an expansive story about Muslims in the Caribbean that folds together temporality and space through a careful reading of literature and music. Aliyah Khan begins the book by noting that the legacy of Africa in the Caribbean includes Islam (p. 2), despite the fact that Caribbean Muslims are commonly assumed to all be descendants of South Asian Indian indentured labourers; to me this is where much of the importance of this work lies. Between 1838 and 1917, 543,700 Indian indentured labourers were brought to the Caribbean following the end of slavery in the Caribbean colonies, and only 6–14 per cent were Muslim. Alongside this, however, there has also been a strong presence of Muslims of African descent, producing a different picture of what Muslimness means in the space of the Caribbean. Khan notes that the understanding of Caribbean Islam as both hybrid and migrant – but ultimately still Indian – does not account for the history of enslaved Africans’ Islam in the New World, Caribbean Islam’s relationship to Hinduism, the place of the Caribbean Muslim in contemporary global narratives of terrorism and religious citizenship, and a global Muslim religious identity that is disaggregating from race and place (p. 3). It is these particular subjects that the book sets out to explore, reading the history of Muslims of both Indian and African descent in the Caribbean together.

Given the temporal scope, this is a book that is very much about travels and entanglements – of people, ideas, literatures, poetry and more.
From Sufism and the writings of Muhammad Kabā Saghanughu and Abū Bakr al-Siddīq in Jamaica to Muhammad Abdur-Rahman Slade Hopkinson in Guyana (chapter 1), to the political effects and reverberations of the US-led War on Terror against ‘radical Islam’ as felt in the Caribbean (chapter 5), the book is a book of movement. Through these travels we see the influence of West African Sufi traditions on Caribbean literary discourse, the effects of the media-mediated figure of the ‘Muslim terrorist’ and the shifting of gendered understandings of Islam as people move to new places (chapter 2). All of this highlights her argument that we should think carefully about analysing both the national and the transnational when it comes to Islam.

Drawing on Derek Walcott, who frames Asia as an ‘unfolding temporal, material, and historic space not in the Caribbean but of the Caribbean’, Khan invokes the landscape and soundscape of Islam in particular, from the domed mosque to the call to prayer, to argue that Islam is constantly writing itself onto the islands. Indeed the soundscape and landscape of Islam are central to the book, as it makes use of literary texts and music by and about Caribbean Muslims, bringing to life complex debates about diaspora, identity, migration, religion and racialisation. This is connected to the classical problem of the archive, namely the missing subaltern figure. In this case, this figure can be said to be the Muslim figure within the archive of the Caribbean, or what she calls the ‘elided Muslim in Caribbean history and literature’, while simultaneously adding that ‘the missing Muslim in the archive cannot be produced simply by desire’ (p. 9). This is especially the case for the Muslim woman, who appears even less in what we might call traditional archives. In a fascinating podcast interview on the New Books Network, Khan says she found herself ‘cobbling together a history of Muslim women from a hodgepodge of sources’. Khan joins a host of many other scholars who have turned to literature and sound to map out the contours of identity when more traditional archives are not available or seen as vectors of colonial and racialised power in and of themselves.
I am engaging with this book from the perspective of someone who is not from the Caribbean, but rather part of a global Muslim imaginary that is often referenced in the book. I also engage with it from the perspective of someone who grew up in Lusaka, Zambia, where the debates around race, belonging and diaspora that Aliyah Khan touches on seem eerily familiar. Indeed, histories of South Asian migration to other parts of the world join together spaces such as Zambia and the Caribbean in important ways, and these connections – with all of the fraughtness and violence they entailed – are exceedingly important to unpack and think with in our present. Moreover, studies of the global Muslim imaginary also serve to draw out the clear distinctions among different spaces of Islam. Khan notes, for instance, that this book partly aims to centre the US in studies of Islam in the Americas and in parts of the book such as the fourth chapter on the Muslimeen coup in Trinidad, we see a different event – rather than 9/11 – come to define what it means to be part of the Muslim community. In what follows, I touch on the particular theme of this global Muslim imaginary, and how it intersects with the colonial and racial histories and presents of the Caribbean, and what this might mean for scholarship on race, diaspora and migration.

The book is an important intervention in debates about the global Muslim world, and how we might think more carefully about the idea of the *ummah*, or Muslim community. As I read, I thought quite a bit about Cemil Aydin’s book, *The Idea of the Muslim World*. Aydin asks us to think about where the idea of a global Muslim world comes from, and argues that it was created as a racialised category during European empire. On this topic of racialisation, Khan writes:

*Islam has been racialised from medieval European crusader imaginings of the Saracen, to the colonial Arab and Turkish harems of orientalist fantasies, to stereotypes of Salafi European immigrant men radicalised into the Islamic State on the Internet, to its Indo-Caribbean minarets against the Antillean sky.* (p. 4)
For Aydin, Muslims stretching back in time did not think of themselves as a global community, nor as making up ‘the Muslim world’. There is much to be said about this, but to me Khan’s work asks us to move down from the ‘large scale’ – at which it is very difficult to make statements about how Muslims think or feel across generations – and instead unpack the everyday intimate and political contestations around belonging. Here, we see that a sense of Muslim community comes across in various ways, contradictory in their appeals to liberation and superiority. It is this fine-grain analysis that, among other things, makes the book so valuable to debates around race, diaspora and belonging today.

Khan writes early on that Caribbean Muslims have always had a sense of themselves as part of the global ummah, despite shifts in what this has meant over time (p. 4). One of the central arguments of the book is that the Caribbean Muslim is a temporal figure that brings together the premodern, non-European native, the modern African plantation enslaved subject and late colonialism’s Asian indentured labourer. Here we see a crucial connection between Europe pre-1492 and the expulsion of Muslims and Jews from Andalusia, and the Americas post-1492 and the start of European empire, settler colonialism and enslavement. Reading through the figure of the Muslim creates the temporal connection between pre- and post-1492, underlining how the expulsion of Muslims and Jews from Spain and the defeat of the Andalusian project was very much connected to the Spanish Empire’s invasion of the Americas. Indeed, throughout the book, Khan draws our attention to how this point of origin of Caribbean Muslims – as the Arab or North African morisco – always comes back, even in the contemporary moment during which he or she is able to transgress colonial racialised Caribbean labour categories through ‘a shifting engagement with global Islamic modernity and the worldwide ummah’ (p. 5).

This performs an important break with tendencies in Islamic Studies to focus on the Middle East and North Africa, or, when the
diaspora is the subject of study, to focus on the United States or Western Europe. By connecting 1492 to events in Andalusia, Khan expands our imagination of what a global Muslim imaginary is, and why that matters. We can no longer understand Muslim communities outside of the Middle East and North Africa as peripheral to what Islam may mean, but rather as constitutive of a global ummah that plays a role in the formation of the many Muslim subjectivities everywhere. In relation to Sufism, I was reminded of *Poetry in Praise of Prophetic Tradition: A Study of West African Madih Poetry and Its Precedents* by Oludamini Ogunnaike (2020), focusing on histories of Sufism and Sufi poetics in West Africa. Indeed Khan reminds us, following Rudolph Ware, that Islam is as historically African as it is Arab or Asian (p. 37). At the same time, Khan highlights that Islam as a religion, and North Africa as a geographical space, were both involved in slavery, and identifies at least three systems of trans-African slave trading involving Arab and African Muslims, each spanning over 1,000 years (p. 49). This leads to a discussion of racism and Islam, which is a subject that needs far more scholarly attention than it has received. These varying lineages and legacies of slavery within the Afro-Arab world seem to me central to the global Muslim imaginary itself, and while there are important classic texts within this genre, such as Eve Troutt Powell’s *Tell This in My Memory: Stories of Enslavement from Egypt, Sudan, and the Ottoman Empire* (2012), more work is needed.

Connected to these legacies of enslavement is the question of exploitation and political economy more broadly. The book centres the histories of indentureship and the afterlives of this particular form of racial capitalist exploitation. On the one hand, this draws our attention to the political economy of racialisation and migration, and the various migration pathways that opened up between spaces to allow for capitalism to expand through primitive accumulation and settler colonialism. On the other hand, these afterlives of indentureship also have much to tell us about migration and migrant histories, and the specific ways in
which movement has produced forms of togetherness – as fractured as these forms can be and are – in literally every corner of the world. Here I was reminded of Iyko Day’s *Alien Capital: Asian Racialisation and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capitalism* (2016) that similarly traces the entanglements of indentureship, enslavement and settler colonialism, albeit in the context of Canada. The history of indentureship is very much a global history, and its afterlives are global too, even if they have particular effects in particular places, as Khan shows us in this book.

Coming back to the temporal link between Andalusia and post-1492 settler colonialism, drawing this connection also raises the question of indigeneity in the Caribbean. Khan argues that the Caribbean Muslim is ‘interpellated into Caribbean postcolonial citizenship through the same indigenous signification that produces settlers and the Afro-Caribbean, as native’ (p. 5). She expands on this further on when she discusses how both Afro and Indo Caribbean people ‘must become native’ and what this means to what she calls the problem of the Caribbean elision of the indigenous (p. 18). Khan argues that in Indian Caribbean literature we see that Muslims ‘made use of indigenous people to establish their own belonging’ (p. 18) and throughout the book she alludes to the erasure of the indigenous in the formation of the identities she focuses on. I was reminded of crucial work that explores the tensions around indigenous struggle and settler colonialism in relation to migration, such as Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang’s piece ‘Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor’, as well as the newly released Duke University Press edited volume *Otherwise Worlds: Against Settler Colonialism and Anti-Blackness.*

The analysis of a global Muslim imaginary and its connections to what she calls colonial and racialised categories in the Caribbean raise another crucial tension: that of racism. As she notes, ‘Indianness’ is posed in opposition to both ‘Africanness’ and ‘mixed-race Creoleness’ (p. 17). Khan discusses the colonial labour economy as one space in which Afro and Indian Caribbean people were pitted
against one another, in distinction to Muslim religious festivals such as Hosay during which all parts of the Caribbean join together in celebration. At these moments, we see a careful unpicking of both the togetherness and the coming apart of Afro and Indian Caribbean communities, and the fractures that underpin these two opposed movements. It is precisely here that the book speaks to contemporary discussions around global anti-Blackness, the legacies of indentured labour, the complicity in settler colonialism and the layers of belonging and unbelonging that migration and diaspora have produced. Here, however, I believe there was more space for the lived experiences of different communities in the Caribbean. While literary and music analysis has much to tell us, we can often remain in the realm of representation. It seems to me that the space of the political – which she touches on in more depth in the fourth chapter – would greatly enrich the themes of the book. For instance, in the second chapter she highlights how Indian and African women were ‘pitted against each other in articulating the ideal models of the colonial woman and the postcolonial woman-to-be’ (p. 77) – it is precisely here in the glimpses of ‘real life’ that crucial fractures have much to tell us in our contemporary moment.

To conclude, the global stakes of her analysis, and the importance of conceptualising the Caribbean Muslim as connected to global landscapes of not only Islam but global settler colonialism, are thus clear. This is connected to one of her other central arguments, namely that the Caribbean Muslim is a fluid, performative identity. Thinking with Saba Mahmood and Talal Asad, she notes that Muslimness is somewhat always performative. What this means in this context, according to Khan, is that these fluid performances of Muslim religiosity contradict the common view of the Caribbean people as racialised, static or religiously saturated (p. 6). The Caribbean Muslim exists ‘between the global and the local, the Caribbean and the Islamic’ (p. 277). This emphasis on fluidity means there is space to trace contradictions too, and in
the third chapter, Khan explores the question of what it means to be Indo-Guyanese, between India/Pakistan and Guyana on the one hand, and Hindu/Muslim, Afro/indigenous communities on the other. This is what makes up the postcolonial space of the Caribbean: a process of both fluidity and becoming that is characterised by connectivity and by fractures.

Early in the book, Khan writes that this is not a project of nostalgia or traumatic loss (p. 10). The Caribbean Muslim, for her, is both Caribbean and Muslim. I found it productive to think with Khan’s careful unpacking of the vicissitudes of racism in the Caribbean, and what this might mean for the future. Khan ends the book with a careful discussion of 9/11, noting that the histories of Muslims in the Americas is much longer than the temporal marker of pre- and post-9/11 suggests, and that we need to recover these multiple lineages if we are to make sense of a global Muslim imaginary that does not simply privilege the Middle East or the US. It is these connected calls to examine the complexities of identity in the Caribbean as well as the complexities of the global more broadly that speak to our current predicaments. We are in a moment where we cannot ignore these historical legacies and what they have produced, nor the way many of us reproduce them – and of course, this moment has always been present for some. As Khan writes, ‘the Caribbean capacity to encompass difference elides and flattens particularity, but the repressed returns in myriad ways’ (p. 25).

REFERENCES


