

Dangerous Intersection

Combating Stereotypes from a Queer Muslim Perspective

By Jackson Jones

"Everyone get out of pulse and keep running"¹ reads a haunting 2:09AM post from June 16, 2016, on the Facebook page of Orlando queer nightclub Pulse. With the nightclub now turned into a museum, those eight words are the only concrete evidence left from the shooting, in which a Muslim man killed 49 people and injured roughly four dozen others.² The psychological impact, however, is still well-defined within the minds of those affected by the shooting, and, in the wake of media coverage of the shooting, it is easy to think that the only ones affected were the queer community. However, missing in most reporting about the shooting is its impact on America's Muslim community. More specifically, those that find themselves at the intersection of the Muslim and queer communities faced huge impacts from the shooting with little to no platform through which to be vocal. The Muslim and queer communities in America are subject to an array of negative stereotypes firmly ingrained in the societal conscious, and, while some queer Muslims were provided brief platforms

¹ Pulse Orlando. "Everyone get out of pulse and keep running" Facebook, June 16, 2016.

² Michael Ray, "Orlando Shooting of 2016," Encyclopædia Britannica (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., June 5, 2020).

in the days following the shooting to speak about their intersectional community, those stereotypes have remained in place. Leading scholars in queer Muslim theory have argued that some form of outlet³ is necessary to simultaneously maintain both identities and fight against the falsely-held societal belief that the identities are exclusive to each other. While these outlets may have physical by-products such as art, food, or apparel, the most crucial products of these creative outlets are platforms of validation and communities of support through which exclusivity is disproven, which will be proven through the exploration of the activist outlets of faith leader Tynan Power, artists Parisa Parnian, Yas Ahmed and Zulfi Bhutto, and the Instagram account @thequeermuslimproject.

In the wake of the 9/11 attack, American Muslims saw societal stereotypes held against them evolve. Scholar Jane Smith writes in *Islam in America Post-9/11* that stereotypes against American Muslims became increasingly detached from reality and even found some proponents within the American government. Included among these stereotypes are the beliefs that Islam is equated with Nazism under the ideology of “Islamofascism,”⁴ and that Islam is an intolerant religion grounded in extreme social conservatism. These stereotypes, while not wholeheartedly espoused by the American government, found some degree of a foothold with then-President George W. Bush. Hamna Tariq writes that Bush gave “vitriolic speeches, defining terrorism as ‘Islamic’ in nature, [that] developed an Islamophobic discourse that constructed

³ Kugle, “Conclusion,” in *Living out Islam: Voices of Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims*, 220.

⁴ Jane I. Smith, “Islam in America Post-9/11,” in *Major Problems in American Religious History*, ed. Patrick Allitt, 2nd ed., 504.

and equated ‘terrorists’ to Muslims.”⁵ This political support led to the manifestation of a legal trend which resulted in the, “abandonment of those [human] rights and the subjection of Muslims and Arabs to humiliation, deportation, and in some cases forms of torture...,”⁶ leading many American Muslims to question their religious identity. These stereotypes have led to the racialization of American Muslims, a process which has entailed otherizing and discrimination based on physicality, cultural features, and racial undertones.⁷ This process has resulted in the continued grounding of these stereotypes in the American societal conscious, eventually leading many American Muslims to shun their Muslim identity altogether. In *Contemporary Islam*, Ibrahim Abraham modifies the motif of “the closet,” traditionally used in queer contexts, and uses it to explain those in Western countries, specifically the United States, who shun their Muslim identity.⁸ Thus, we see a pattern of Muslims in America shedding their Muslim identity, believing it was incompatible with an American identity.⁹

The Muslim community in America is not alone in dealing with stereotypes ingrained within the American conscious. The queer community has also dealt with societal stereotypes making them feel unwelcome in America. Among these stereotypes is the belief that queer people are inherently

⁵ Hamna Tariq, “The Racialization of Muslim-Americans Post 9/11: Causes, Themes, and Effects,” Trinity College Digital Repository (Trinity College, 2020), The Racialization of Muslim-Americans Post 9/11: Causes, Themes, and Effects, 4.

⁶ Smith, 503.

⁷ Tariq, 2-3.

⁸ Ibrahim Abraham, “‘Out to Get Us’: Queer Muslims and the Clash of Sexual Civilisations in Australia,” *Contemporary Islam* 3, no. 1 (2009), 86.

⁹ Tariq, 1.

hypersexual.¹⁰ Also prevalent is the idea that being queer is a choice made by those who identify as queer.¹¹ While these stereotypes have gradually diminished in the wake of the queer community being afforded more rights, they still frequently appear in everyday conversations, with many queer people being familiar with phrases like “don’t shove it down my throat” and “I’m not gonna have a gay wedding.”

These stereotypes of intolerance via conservatism and hypersexuality regarding the American Muslim and queer communities, respectively, are juxtaposed in the American conscious, thus leading to the false belief that queerness and being Muslim rarely intersect. Abraham also writes about stereotypes and the simultaneous otherizing of the queer and Muslim communities in Western societies,¹² leading to a belief of exclusivity among the two communities. However, this belief is also found within the two communities, with some in the communities also believing that their communities are exclusive, signifying how pervasive stereotypes are. Islamic faith leader and transgender activist Tynan Power wrote about these experiences in a Washington Post op-ed published shortly after the Pulse shooting, noting that he often felt isolated in his Muslim community for being queer and vice versa.¹³ Power writes that, “finding other LGBTQ Muslims changed everything,”¹⁴ as he finally felt as if both parts of his identity

¹⁰ Kristin J. Anderson, “‘Gays Flaunt Their Sexuality’: The Myth of Hypersexuality,” in *Benign Bigotry: the Psychology of Subtle Prejudice* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 193.

¹¹ Evelyn Schlatter and Robert Steinback, “10 Anti-Gay Myths Debunked,” Southern Poverty Law Center, February 27, 2011.

¹² Abraham, 83.

¹³ Power, Tynan. “As a Trans Muslim, I Used to Feel Vulnerable All the Time.” The Washington Post. WP Company, June 17, 2016.

¹⁴ Power.

were being affirmed, combating the falsely-held belief of exclusivity.

However, the foregrounded American belief that there was little overlap between the queer and Muslim communities took a hit in the wake of the Pulse shooting as queer Muslims were afforded a platform to discuss the impact of the shooting. The shooting and its targeting towards the queer community encouraged the pitting of the queer and Muslim communities against each other, furthering the belief of exclusivity. As quickly as these platforms were provided, however, they were taken away. The experience of the queer Muslim in America largely faded into the background yet again as the Pulse shooting fell out of the news cycle. Still, queer Muslims in America faced attacks in the wake of the shooting, with queerphobic and Islamophobic attacks being amplified. With the arrival of then-candidate for President Donald Trump on the political scene, these attacks grew more visceral and Trump pitted the two communities against each other, saying at the 2016 Republican National Convention that,

Only weeks ago, in Orlando, Florida, 49 wonderful Americans were savagely murdered by an Islamic terrorist. This time, the terrorist targeted our LGBT community. As your president, I will do everything in my power to protect our LGBT citizens from the violence and oppression of a hateful foreign ideology,¹⁵

thus attempting to express support for the queer community while amplifying Islamophobia. Trump's comments about the Pulse shooting further emphasized the pervasiveness of the

¹⁵ Eugene Scott, "Analysis | Trump's Response to the Pulse Shooting in 2016 Gave False Hope about His LGBT Agenda," The Washington Post (WP Company, June 12, 2019).

myth of exclusivity. This placed American queer Muslims in an uncomfortable position, as they not only have to deal with the typical onslaught of queerphobia and Islamophobia, they now have to deal with the erasure of their identity from one of the country's political figureheads. And yet, even as their existence was briefly recognized, the platforms given to queer Muslims in the wake of the Pulse shooting still dried up.

In the wake of these vitriol-amplifying stereotypes, the words of queer Muslim theorist Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle ring even truer. In the conclusion of his 2014 book about balancing queer and Muslim identities, *Living Out Islam*, Kugle reflects on those he interviewed, noting that, "the Muslim activists interviewed in this book ... insist on holding onto their faith while finding ways to seek justice and welfare in society."¹⁶ Kugle then discusses identity formation, describing a drawn-out process common among those he interviewed. This frequently involves coming to terms with a love that is often deemed unacceptable by their communities due to a belief in exclusivity. Internal and external conflict follow and losses of support from one's communities are common.¹⁷ Kugle writes that this struggle often makes those that go through it stronger, giving them a, "motivation for creative action in society: activism,"¹⁸ going further in explaining that, "activism does not consist of merely political maneuvers... [it] is any self-conscious engagement with others in order to change the social order."¹⁹ This trend in activism is not exclusive to those that Kugle interviewed, and can be widely seen especially since the Pulse shooting. As various outlets devoted to highlighting the

¹⁶ Kugle, 219-220.

¹⁷ Kugle, 220.

¹⁸ Kugle, 220.

¹⁹ Kugle, 220.

queer Muslim experience in America have sprung up, messages of finding strength and support within one's self and community have been amplified. Thus, these activist outlets, as argued by Kugle, have two main purposes: the building of new, supportive communities, and the creation of platforms to highlight the queer Muslim experience in America. Thus, we have seen queer Muslims fight back against exclusion from large platforms to highlight their own experiences and spread validation of their identity by creating their own platforms to make sure their voices are heard.

Among these self-formed outlets are those that typically come to one's mind when creative expression is discussed, including art, fashion, and food; no one person better melds these expressions with queer and Muslim identity than Los Angeles-based Parisa Parnian. Parnian, a former designer with binary non-conforming fashion label RIGGED OUTFITTERS, began a series of dinners called Savage Taste, drawing on Parnian's Iranian-American upbringing.²⁰ Dishes common at the dinners include *ghormeh sabzi*, a stew which Parnian prepared while she came out to her mother.²¹ The importance of this is not lost on Parnian, who told Meghan McCarron of Eater LA that

... as a queer woman who was raised to understand that it is essential as a mother and wife to know how to replicate these complicated, layered dishes, there was something very poignant that my coming out happened while cooking.²²

²⁰ "Meet Parisa Parnian of Savage Muse - Voyage LA Magazine: LA City Guide," Voyage LA Magazine | LA City Guide, March 13, 2018.

²¹ Meghan McCarron, "This Underground Persian Dinner Series Forges Queer Community in Los Angeles," Eater LA (Eater LA, November 28, 2018).

²² McCarron.

This intersection of queer and Muslim identity influenced Parnian to create her dinners in order to foster queer community-building and create a platform highlighting queer Muslim identity. It is through this outlet that Parnian is able to highlight her experience as a queer Muslim in America, creating bonds within a city whose queer community is described by McCarron as distant. Thus, Parnian reaffirms the queer identity, building a community of support while allowing the queer community to gain an insight into Parnian's Persian upbringing. Parnian thus sparks conversations about the intersection of queer and Muslim identity and fights against the wrongly-held American belief that queer and Muslim identity rarely intersect, validating that intersection.

These dinner parties are not, however, the only way in which Parnian has created and contributed to platforms and outlets highlighting the queer Muslim experience. Parnian, also a digital artist, has created a number of art pieces exemplifying the queer Muslim experience in America.²³ Among these pieces are *It's Confusing*²⁴ and *Split Mirrors of Desire*²⁵, two digital collage-esque works unabashedly displaying the human experience at the intersection of queer and Muslim identity.



Figure 1: *It's Confusing*, Parnian.



Figure 2: *Split Mirrors of Desire*, Parnian.

²³ "Parisa Parnian," *The Third Muslim*.

²⁴ Parnian, Parisa. "It's Confusing," 2018.

²⁵ Parnian, Parisa. "Split Mirrors of Desire," 2018.

In these works, Parnian emphasizes the oft-dichotomous relationship between queer and Muslim identity, featuring themes of androgyny contrasted with Islamic arabesques, reflecting the experiences of Power and other queer Muslims in feeling the stereotype of exclusivity within their own communities. While these two pieces themselves may not provide a platform to amplify queer Muslim voices, they were part of *The Third Muslim*²⁶, a 2018 art exhibition in San Francisco dedicated solely to amplifying the voices of queer and trans Muslim artists. Yas Ahmed and Zulfi Bhutto, the activists behind the exhibition, write that the idea behind the gallery was simple: “queer, trans and gender non-conforming Muslims needed a platform to represent ourselves and create our own terms for our visibility.”²⁷ Thus, the exhibition, which is recognized as the first to highlight the queer Muslim perspective with art created solely by members of the community, was created. As Parnian has done through her dinner parties, Yas and Zulfi have created a platform to validate the voices and perspectives of queer Muslims in America and combat the falsely-grounded stereotype that queer and Muslim identities do not intersect.

The online equivalent to Parnian, Ahmed, and Bhutto’s simultaneous building of community and highlighting of the queer Muslim perspective is the Instagram account @thequeermuslimproject, from here on referred to as QMP.²⁸ For over two years, QMP has raised awareness about queerphobia, Islamophobia, and their intersections, providing bright graphics advertising activist opportunities. However, the most striking feature of QMP are hundreds of photos of individuals

²⁶ “About.” *The Third Muslim*.

²⁷ “About.”

²⁸ The Queer Muslim Project. @thequeermuslimproject. Instagram account.

showcasing their queer Muslim identities in various lights. There are the Generation Zers emphasizing their identity through extravagant outfits and makeup, and there are the Generation Xers who look like they've just gotten home from their 9-5 cubicle shift. Even as the aesthetics of each person featured on the account varies, they each proudly showcase their queer Muslim identity. Along with every photo is an anecdote, written by those photographed, focusing on their journey to acceptance by themselves and their community, reaffirming Kugle's argument regarding a complex journey of identity formation. Common themes in these comments are being viewed as creatures of eternal lust and hypersexuality²⁹, losing the support of family³⁰, losing faith in their religion³¹ ³², attempting to shun their queer identity, and eventual self-acceptance through the unification of their queer and Muslim identities³³. This often results in a change in or loss of the community around oneself. Thus, we've seen queer Muslims attempt to shun one of their intersecting identities in an attempt to identify with the other, thus further proving the depth of the false belief that being queer and Muslim are exclusive.

However, even more crucial than the stories of acceptance are the affirmations closing the captions of the posts, assuring that all queer Muslims are valid in their identities. In doing so, those who have submitted posts and anecdotes recognize that not all queer Muslims live in welcoming environments. This is

²⁹ thequeermuslimproject. "Shahrez, He/Him." *Instagram*, 30 October 2019. Accessed 6 December 2020.

³⁰ thequeermuslimproject. "Hamse, He/They." *Instagram*, 26 January 2020. Accessed 6 December 2020.

³¹ "Hamse, He/They."

³² thequeermuslimproject. "Adel, He/Him." *Instagram*, 26 January 2020. Accessed 6 December 2020.

³³ thequeermuslimproject. "Adel, He/Him." *Instagram*, 26 January 2020. Accessed 6 December 2020.

reflected in the post of Jordan, whose picture uncoincidentally displays them standing in front of a road sign reading “dangerous intersection.”³⁴ Thus, those that have submitted and curated posts have created a virtual community and platform brimming with validation for fellow queer Muslims. With the growing connectivity of the Internet, this community has provided validation for queer Muslims by reflecting a message of self-strength in building a community made for and by themselves. In effect, this Instagram account and its curated set of stories is a pictographic representation of the all-familiar rally “We’re here! We’re queer!” albeit with an emphasis on the intersection of that cry with Muslim identity. Most chants, including the aforementioned, are loud and at times annoying, ensuring that those in the vicinity hear the message. The constant stream of images and stories depicting the queer Muslim experience are meant to combat the stereotype that queer Muslims are few and far between while simultaneously spreading validation. Thus, this builds a supportive and burgeoning community focused on spreading love for those who live at the intersection of queer and Muslim identity, while also creating a platform to highlight the voices and perspectives of queer Muslims.

Finally, returning to faith leader Tynan Power, it becomes clear that the activist outlets through which queer Muslims assert their identity all have a common thread of community-building and platform-creating. Power, in his Washington Post op-ed referenced previously, notes that he faced negativity in his intersecting queer and Muslim communities, building off of stereotypes like the “good Muslim” and the hypersexual

³⁴ thequeermuslimproject. “Jordan, 27.” *Instagram*, 26 January 2020. Accessed 6 December 2020.

queer,³⁵ highlighting the pervasiveness of the stereotype of exclusivity. However, Power writes that he was finally able to present both of his identities after finding a community of queer Muslims. Power took these lessons and became a faith leader with a focus on queer identity, creating a niche within the queer Muslim community. Ringing true during prayers Power gave the week of the Pulse shooting was the Surah-al-Asr, a chapter of the Quran whose English translation reads as followed:

By the passage of time,
Surely humanity is in grave loss
Except for those who have faith, do good, and urge each
other to the truth, and urge each
other to perseverance.³⁶

It is this message, along with those from other Qur'anic affirmations³⁷, that Power emphasized in his prayers following the Pulse shooting, utilizing the simple, four-word phrase, "We need each other,"³⁸ in order to get his message across, pushing those listening to his prayers to support each other. Thus, Power urges those queer Muslims listening to his sermon, and, by proxy, all Muslims, to support their queer friends and family during that difficult time.

It is this message that will be the greatest lesson from the discussion of the activist outlets of queer Muslims and thus will have the greatest significance when extended to the intersection of queer and religious identity in America. The aforementioned intersection is one with many nuances that lead to a

³⁵ Power.

³⁶ The Qur'an 103: 1-3 (translated by Mustafa Khattab).

³⁷ Kugle, 229.

³⁸ Power.

contentious debate. It is important that in these discussions, we give the largest platforms to those whose experiences reside at that intersection, and that we listen to each other before rushing to judgments. While seeing the self-created platforms discussed previously may be a heart-warming message of self-reliance, it is a reflection of a failure within society to highlight marginalized voices. In the specific case of the intersection of queer and Muslim identity, we've seen Power emphasize listening to our queer brothers, sisters, and non-binary siblings within the Muslim community, noting the oft-contentious relationship between queer and Muslim identity. Power also notes that the queer community has significant issues with diversity, writing that he was often labeled as a "good Muslim" within the queer community.³⁹ In a community where dating app biographies often read "no fats, no femmes, no Blacks, no Asians," this isn't surprising. The stories, accomplishments and legacies of Black and Latina queer people like Marsha Johnson and Sylvia Rivera are often ignored in favor of placing white queers as the figureheads of our movement. Therefore, I claim that the discussion of the intersection of queer and Muslim identity and the community-building and platform-creating outlets at that intersection will have great impact within the queer community, working to dispel the notions that is impossible to be queer and religious and to combat the provided image of queer figureheads as white. The queer community can take a lesson from Power's prayer: We all need each other. In a time of strife, it is crucial that we, the queer community, especially those of us who are white, need to listen to and accept each other, and unequivocally fight for our marginalized brothers, sisters, and non-binary siblings. Of course, this message can and will be applicable to greater

³⁹ Power.

American society in order to educate about the nuances of queer and religious identity and encourage everyone to support each other. But, in a community that claims to be the pinnacle of diversity and has seen massive gains made by people of color, it is crucial that their voices and perspectives be heard, highlighted, and that we all *actually* stick up for each other.

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