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Film Review of *Migrations of Islam: Muslim American  
Voices in the 21st Century* by Swarnavel E. Pillai, Salah  
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## Film Reviews

### **Migrations of Islam: Muslim American Voices in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

*Documentary, 2015, 58 minutes, Directed by Swarnavel E. Pillai, and  
Produced by Salah D. Hassan and Swarnavel E. Pillai*

*Migrations of Islam* is thematically rooted in the integral historical relationship between Islam, migration, and the production of new cultural forms and hybridities. Over the centuries and across thousands of miles, Islam has brought, absorbed, influenced, and reshaped culture. Whether one is looking at Malaysia or Spain (and thence Mexico), Nigeria or France, Yemen or Morocco, Turkey or Bosnia, India or Uzbekistan, the blending of Islam with local cultures is both distinctive and elemental. And so too, as this documentary explores, Muslims are producing creative innovations at the intersection of Islam and a range of U.S. subcultures and American cultural forms. Particularly since 9/11, according to writer and playwright Wajahat Ali, interviewed in the film, there has been an American Muslim “explosion in the arts.” The documentary treats viewers to a broad range of contemporary American Muslim artistic genres, including theatrical readings, staged performances, stand up poetry, hip hop, classical *oud*, and comedy, as well as artists’ commentaries on their autobiographical paths to these creative outputs. All are segments of performances and interviews conducted at Michigan State University and Grand Valley State University between 2011 and 2012.

The task of facing and surmounting challenges permeates the documentary. Muslim Americans speak to challenging their family's and community's sense of the proper career path for their children (you should be a doctor not a performer). They speak to the flattening and homogenizing effects of Islamophobia, something their artistic work challenges not only in content but because it exists at all. Muslim Americans interviewed in the film point out that every American Muslim has had to grapple with how to come to terms with 9/11 and its aftermath, and emphasize that each has done so in their own unique way. The challenges are multi-faceted as gender, race, socioeconomic status, and sexuality intersect with being Muslim and American; so in turn Muslim American artistic productions are complex and multi-dimensional.

The documentary film begins and ends with staged readings of Wajahat Ali's award winning play *Domestic Crusaders*. The segments shown focus mainly on Muslim American (or American Muslim) intra-family dynamics and the dialogues, sometimes funny, sometimes painful, that take place between youth and parents when the former choose to strike out on paths that differ from their parents' visions. Following this are segments of *Hijabi Monologues*, a performance in which Muslim American women articulate slices of life for women who wear hijab. "I am not a head scarf" is the theme that critiques both the essentialized views of outsiders — where are you from? Do you do anything besides pray? — as well as internal community sexism.

The next segment of the documentary, "Americans and Islam," shifts from performance art to a collection of material on how non-Muslim Americans perceive, react to, and experience Islam. Filmed during Islamic Awareness week at Michigan State, we hear about the encounters of non-Muslim women wearing hijab for a day, observe a Muslim public pray in, and listen to the challenges of non-Muslims attempting to observe a fast. While the point of this segment is that outreach and education are forms of Muslim activism that must parallel artistic ventures, more could have been done to tie it in thematically to the rest of the documentary. Also included in this segment are Muslims noting that violence and radicalism are found in all religions and Religious Studies Professor Mohammad Khalil's observation that Islamic studies has surged since 9/11. The next segment, entitled "Islam and its Discontents," is also somewhat of a hodgepodge of reflections. It includes American Muslims speaking of experiences with discrimination and repression in the Arab World as well as institutional discrimination, harassment, surveillance, and securitization in the US. Following these voices are Muslims speaking of the universality of Islam and its varying contextualization and of oppressions that exist within Muslim communities, such as of leftist and gay Muslims. All of these points disclose important aspects of the Muslim

American experience, but at times one feels that the film is trying to do too much.

The rest of the documentary returns to a focus on Muslim American cultural production. We are treated to performances of Omar Offendum's hip hop, Saad Omar's poetic visions tour, and Erin O'Conner's spoken word poetry and interviews with comedians Dean Obeidallah and Azhar Usman. Each of these artists has a distinctive way of critiquing the Islamophobic context within which American Muslims live and seek to thrive; some also turn a humorous glance inward at the ways in which some Muslims respond to being in "America." The overarching theme of these latter segments is the critical importance of creating culture, and especially popular culture, to staking one's place as an integral part of the society in which you live. In the words of Ashar Usman, "American and Muslim are not dichotomous." Spliced into these segments is a vulgar, anti-sharia rally. This footage feels out of place; it could have been more effectively woven into the theme that far too often outsiders have constructed the American Muslim narrative; today, American Muslims are constructing their own narratives.

The strength of this film lies in the broad range of Muslim American cultural productions one observes and in their framing by a diverse group of American Muslim voices: male, female, immigrant, refugee, US born, and convert. Professor Khalil provides authoritative commentary on matters religious and historic. The overriding message is that we not only confront the stares, insults, institutional discrimination and securitization, we are active creators of our own cultural forms of resistance. The migration of Islam to the US both requires and shapes it.

The film should be applauded for its rendering of the complexity of the American Muslim experience as well as for giving voice and platform to the spirit and creative energies of young Muslim Americans. As it does so, it knocks Orientalism and essentialization on their head. For these reasons it is well-suited for undergraduate classroom use. If there is one fault with the film it is that it introduces too many topics, all important on their own and meriting more extensive discussion than given. This problem is somewhat overcome by the film's organization into thematic chapters. Depending upon the course in which it is used, it might be best shown in segments, followed by student reflection and discussion. Producer Salah Hassan might consider the addition of such reflection questions to the film's website (<http://www.muslimsubjects.org/migrationsofislam/>).

Overall, the film does what it says it will do: represent American Muslims creatively making their mark "between Islamophobia and conservative religious interpretations" on American culture, while at the same time crafting and

reshaping, yet again, what it means to be Muslim. Scholar Sherman Jackson's work on Islam and the Blackamerican illuminates earlier products of this reshaping, as does emerging research on Islam and the Black Atlantic. Hisham Aidi's impressive contribution has been to do so both historically and globally in *Rebel Music*. *Migrations of Islam* demonstrates some of the ways in which American Muslims are imparting unique artistic responses to the intense and highly negative social and political predicament that followed 9/11.

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## (T)ERROR

*Documentary, 2015, 84 minutes, Co-Directed and Produced by Lyric R. Cabral and David Felix Sutcliffe*

Lyric Cabral and David Felix Sutcliffe's documentary (T)ERROR provides a rare, insider look exposing the flawed FBI practice of dispatching informants to target Muslim individuals for counterterrorism investigations, persisting even when there is no indication that any criminal activity is afoot. (T)ERROR has received critical acclaim for not only tackling a controversial topic, but for the filmmakers' daring willingness to get uncomfortably close to their subject by sending their cameras undercover to film an FBI sting operation as it unfolds. However, the film is most remarkable for the context it provides for post-9/11 government surveillance in the United States: (T)ERROR narrates present-day targeting of Muslims as part of a longer history of targeting primarily Black and Black Muslim communities. In doing so, the film also scrutinizes a core pillar of law enforcement investigations, and invites us to rethink the government's