Black History, Islam, and the Future of the Humanities Beyond White Supremacy

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February 16, 2016
https://humanitiesfutures.org/papers/black-history-islam-future-humanities-beyond-white-supremacy/

Abstract: Interpreting Islam as a form of Black history offers a scholarly framework for reimagining the humanities beyond white supremacy. This paper theorizes such a framework first by showing how modern Black people in Africa and the African diaspora constructed Islam as a religion and civilization of resistance to Euro-American imperialism and anti-Black racism. Second, and more importantly for the future of the humanities as a whole, it argues that reading Islam as Black history undermines regnant disciplinary maps of global culture and civilization that locate human normativity in white chronoscapes. Philosophy, comparative religion, and general education courses on Western civilization are in need of emancipation from their nineteenth-century racialist ontologies. Islam as Black history offers one means to free these fields from their white supremacist bonds. The final half of the paper provides humanities instructors with African and African diasporic primary and secondary sources that can help to inspire a humanities renaissance beyond white supremacy.

Interpreting Islam as a form of Black history offers a scholarly framework for reimagining the humanities beyond white supremacy. This paper theorizes such a framework first by showing how modern Black people in Africa and the African diaspora constructed Islam as a religion and civilization of resistance to Euro-American imperialism and anti-Black racism. Second, and more importantly for the future of the humanities as a whole, it argues that reading Islam as Black history undermines regnant disciplinary maps of global culture and civilization that locate human normativity in white chronoscapes. Philosophy, comparative religion, and general education courses on Western civilization are in need of emancipation from their nineteenth-century racialist ontologies. Islam as Black history offers one means to free these fields from their white supremacist bonds. The final half of the paper provides humanities instructors with African and African diasporic primary and secondary sources that can help to inspire a humanities renaissance beyond white supremacy.

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My call to interpret Islam as a form of Black history is not new in theoretical terms. Black intellectuals, including organic intellectuals, have been advocating such knowledge for at least a century. In the last couple of decades, theorists of globalization and cosmopolitanism have opined that the national—and thus racial—mapping of human cultures often distorts the translocal and creole nature of economic activity, human migration, identity-making, social networks, and other forms of human activity.[1] But such theories, while popular among many academics, have yet to

be translated into substantive and institutional reorganization of disciplines beyond white supremacist boundaries. Early twentieth-century notions of what should be taught as part of Western Civilization are manifested in everything from Durham (NC) Tech's introduction to Western civilization course to the Wiki on the history of the same.[2] Just as importantly, this more cosmopolitan view of the world has not been translated into policy circles, media, and popular American engagements with the humanities, which by and large continue to reflect white supremacist views of human civilization and cultures. Such views still construct a hierarchy of civilization that locates the roots of our—that is, Western—civilization in ideologically defined temporal and spatial frameworks of Greco-Roman tradition, Christianity, and the European Enlightenment (Kurth 2001, 333).

From its very beginning, Black history has been produced by self-identifying Black, colored, and Negro people as a technique to challenge the exclusion of Black people from Western myths and to fight the anti-Black racism of white supremacist nation-states such as the United States, Great Britain, and Brazil (Gilroy 1993). At times, these narratives emphasized the shared suffering and injustice experienced by Black people as a result of African slavery, pro-slavery Christianity, and white supremacy, a point that is effectively made by David Walker's 1829 *Appeal. . . to the Coloured Citizens of the World but in particular, and very expressly, to those of the United States of America*.[3] By the 1850s, Harvard-trained African American physician Martin Delany echoed the finds of modern science in claiming that shared biological and ethnological traits established the basis for a shared Black racial identity and a shared political fate as well (Delany

1854). But such definitions were more often than not accompanied by appeals to what was seen as a common history that rooted modern Black people in the ancient world. Fashioned in the nineteenth century as a way of advocating for the freedom and self-determination of all Black people, Anglophone Black histories relied on Biblical narratives, classical Greek and Roman texts, and other primary sources to write Black people into the history of human civilization (Maffly-Kipp 2010).

Though many of these nineteenth-century Black histories emphasized the Christian nature of African and African-descended people, Liberian nationalist and Black intellectual giant Edward Wilmot Blyden produced a body of scholarship that associated Black historical achievement, political self-determination, human dignity, and racial equality with Islamic religious history.[4] Blyden wrote, for example, about Bilal ibn Rabah, an Ethiopian freedman who became an important companion of the Prophet Muhammad, and who was the first *mu'adhdhin*, or prayer-crier, of Islam (Blyden 1887, 230). He pointed out that a whole chapter of the Qur'an was named for Luqman, another Black companion of the Prophet (Blyden 1905, 162–63). His writings, which were popularized in the Anglophone Black Atlantic in the early twentieth century by Dusé Mohammed Ali's *African Times and Orient Review* and later the Universal Improvement Association's *Negro World*, foreshadowed and perhaps helped to create organic intellectual and later formal readings of Islam as Black history.[5] In 1920s Black America, Islam came to be seen by a number of religious groups as part of the history of the entire non-white or colored world. Ahmadiyya missionary Muhammad Sadiq's periodical *Moslem Sunrise* circulated these interpretations of Islam and Black history

throughout the United States' East Coast and especially the Midwest in the early 1920s (Turner 2003).[6] Noble Drew Ali's 1927 *Holy Koran of the Moorish Science Temple*, in addition to the teachings of Nation of Islam founder W. D. Fard Muhammad and African American Sunni imam Muhammad Ezaldeen, then extended Black/Islamic history beyond the Black Atlantic to incorporate Asia (Curtis 2009, 33–44).[7]

These Black constructions of Afro-Asian ethnicity and Muslim religious identities were often seen as fanciful, funny, and fake by sociologists of religion, some other Black people, and especially the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, which feared that Black identification with Asia, and especially the Empire of Japan, would create a fifth column in the United States (Curtis 2013, 75–106).[8] Despite efforts by scholars to expose the new religious movements in which such solidarities were nurtured as frauds and the U.S. government's prosecution of Black religious movements as traitorous, however, the identification of English-speaking Black Muslims with Asia and "the Orient" became even more widespread after World War II. It was rhapsodized in jazz and other forms of Black culture that performed solidarity with the so-called "third world" and the non-aligned movement during the Cold War (Kelley 2012).[9] The pages of *Muhammad Speaks*, one of the most widely circulated African American newspapers of the 1960s, similarly reflected the Afro-Asian solidarity of its founder, Malcolm X (Curtis 2006, 38–39).

Beginning in the 1950s and even after his death in 1965, El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz was likely the single most important theorist of an Islamic liberation ethics demanding that Muslims assist in the

freedom struggles of African-descended people. In calling for political and ethical solidarity in the global struggle against anti-Black racism, Malcolm X redrew racial maps of human civilizations by insisting that North Africa was part of Africa. Arabs, he said, were Black people. This racial taxonomy reflected not only the ideology of ethnic constructions of African American thinkers such as Noble Drew Ali, Elijah Muhammad, and Muhammad Ezaldeen, but also the realities of the Arab world in which Malcolm X lived and traveled. From Cairo, Egypt, and Omdurman, Sudan, to Beirut, Lebanon and Jidda, Saudi Arabia, Malcolm X encountered examples of Arabic-speaking Black people, such as Egyptian Vice President Anwar Sadat, Sudanese professor Malik Badri, and Saudi Shaykh Muhammad Sarur as-Sabban, who had achieved professional success (Curtis 2015).

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Shabazz's insistence that Black and Muslim identities could be complementary responded to Black American anti-Muslim sentiment that was stoked partly by African American Christian triumphalism, but also by the anti-Black racism that he acknowledged existed in the Arab Muslim world (Plummer 1996, 268). Arguing that such racism was a product of Western imperialism, Shabazz also anticipated the later critiques of Black Power and Black Consciousness activists such as Black Panther Party Prime Minister Stokely Carmichael, who said that Islam was a foreign invader that conquered and enslaved Africa (Carmichael 1971, 222; 7X 1971, 29–30). Shabazz's appeal to a different racial geography questioned the modern racial ontologies on which the

thought of Carmichael was at least partly based.

Shabazz's reimaging of racial, national, religious, and cultural geography represented a radical challenge to the nineteenth-century spatial assumptions that still guide political, intellectual, and social formations, not only in the West but also in many of its colonial and formerly colonized possessions. Perhaps most famously theorized by G. W. F. Hegel's *Philosophy of History*, modern maps of race continue to lop North Africa off from the rest of the continent, insisting that its "northern part," in Hegel's words, "belongs to the Asiatic or European World." More specifically, Hegel claimed, the area north of the Sahara is "European Africa… if we may so call it." Then there is the Nile Valley, which belongs to Asia. And finally, real Africa is to be found south of the Sahara. Its inhabitants are a "wild and untamed" people without historical texts and higher consciousness (Hegel 1956, 91–99). Having concluded that there is no real history in Africa, Hegel determined that it can be left out of the discipline of philosophy, a state of affairs that remains largely true today as Black Africa, its texts, and its ideas are excluded from what counts as philosophical data worth studying (Taiwo n.d.).

Today, there is no excuse for the exclusion of Black people's cultures from the study of the humanities due to a lack of sources or training. If the humanities are to leave white supremacy behind and become a canon and a methodology of human equality and plurality, exorcising the ghost of Hegel is urgent and necessary. Reading Islam as Black history is one means—and certainly not the only means—to translate theories of globalization, translocality, and cosmopolitanism into humanities practice. From the very beginning of Islamic history in seventh-century Arabia, people who

today are recognized and identified as Black played an irreplaceable role in the project of Islamicate civilization, including its literatures, cultural institutions, economies, polities, and so on. As Edward Wilmot Blyden pointed out, Islamic sources such as the Qur'an and the hadith, or reports of the sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions, valorize Islam as part of Black history. But the archive of Islam as Black history goes far beyond that, and it offers humanities scholars the opportunity to expand our canon, to discover, catalogue, and analyze primary sources that have been a vital aspect of the human heritage.

In composing this new canon, humanities scholars must jettison Hegel's mapping of Africa and look instead at how people on the African continent participated in translocal exchanges, not only in Africa itself but also across the entire span of Afro-Eurasia, or what Marshall G. S. Hodgson called the "oikumene" (Hodgson 1974). African-descended Muslims were present at Islam's Arabian origins in 610 CE, but Muslims also went to Africa, first as refugees in Abyssinia in 615 and then as the conquerors of Egypt by 641. Such exchanges, sometimes violent, sometimes peaceful, alert us to the slow, contradictory, competing, and diverse processes of Islamization in Africa that began in the seventh century and continue to this day. Explaining how Africans became Muslim—or Christian, for that matter—requires more than a sound bite about the imperial, missionary nature of both religions. Islamic religion may have come with Arabian conquerors, but it was African Muslims themselves who made it a major African religion, sometimes overtly suppressing indigenous African religious practices and at other times incorporating various African indigenous traditions into Islam.[10] It took hundreds of years for

most North Africans to become Muslim, and they, not foreign invaders, were largely responsible for producing the Islamic institutions, cultures, societies, and politics that came to define the region stretching today from Morocco to Egypt (Hourani 1991, 38–58). In the rest of the continent, the processes of Islamization were even slower but similarly driven by indigenous forces—that is, roughly speaking, people from one region who seek to proselytize and conquer territory in their own region or country (Levtzion and Pouwells 2000, 2–8).

Their combined efforts have left humanities scholars with an enormous and rich archive of art, architecture, music, and literature. For example, the medieval travelogue, often called a *rihla*, is already a part of the humanities, or at least the history, curricula in some places; the travelogues of Ibn Battuta and Mansa Musa illustrate how Africans were part of an interconnected world of commerce, knowledge, etiquette, and pilgrimage in the Middle Ages (Levtzion and Hopkins 1981; Ibn Battutah 2002; Dunn 2004). But other aspects of the African heritage are barely known in the humanities. For example, the dominant school of *fiqh*, or Islamic law, in Africa is the Maliki school, and some Maliki texts, such as Ibn Abi Zayd al-Qayrawani's *Risala*, are part of the global canon of Islamic law (Daura n.d.; Bewley n.d.). Too many texts from West African seminaries and libraries have yet to be catalogued and studied; much attention has been paid recently to the threat that Muslim extremists pose to these texts, but most of them are safe for now, and the real threat is scholarly neglect and lack of funding, not Boko Haram. In the case of the Library of Congress' collections of manuscripts from Timbuktu, materials on everything from astronomy and agriculture to Islamic religion are already

available, just waiting for us to integrate into our classes and our research (Mack and Boyd 2000). In nineteenth-century West Africa, Usman dan Fodio, Abdallah dan Fodio, and Muhammad Bello penned perhaps three hundred texts in Arabic, and to a lesser extent in Hausa and Fulfulde, on topics ranging from "medicine to history, jurisprudence, political theory, polemical engagements, Sufism, and devotional poetry" (Brigaglia n.d.). Scholar Nana Asma'u, the daughter of Usman dan Fodio, wrote at least sixty texts, including Arabic, Fula, and Hausa poetry (Mack and Boyd 2000). In more recent times, Tijani leader Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse's *The Removal of Confusion* is one of the most important African mystical texts ever written (Shayk al-Islam al-Hajj 2010). Similarly, Shaykh Amadu Bamba, founder of the Muridiyya Sufi order, penned poetry that is recited daily by millions of followers throughout Africa, Europe, and the Americas (Bamba 1989).

On the East Coast of Africa, the large corpus of traditional Swahili Islamic poetry, which dates from the seventeenth to the twentieth century, includes praise poems to the Prophet Muhammad, his night ascension, and his birth, as well as elegies, hymns, supplications, and admonitions to believers (Knappert 1971). In this poetry, to take only one example, rain along the East Coast is not so much the product of East African meteorology or a one-way gift from God but is part of the reciprocity that exists among God and all of creation: "you would think when it (the rain) descended / (that it) is water of the coast that gets mixed / or a big river with greatness. / [But] allow that a cloud of prayers / goes to the Prophet eternally / may it pour like rain all the time / and another could of good wishes" (Knappert, quoted in Ranne 2010). Such a

poem can be integrated easily into nearly any humanities course that considers how human beings have seen their relationship to the natural world.

To be sure, the commodification of Black music reminds us that creating spaces inside the humanities for Black voices not only challenges the white supremacist borders of the humanities but simultaneously forecloses other interpretations of the data that scholars classify as "Black."

Looking beyond the African continent, there is ample opportunity for scholars of the Asian, European, and American humanities to incorporate Black contributions to human culture, and here too, reading Islam as Black history can do the important work of challenging white supremacist narratives that perpetuate monolithic notions of Black humanity. In India and Pakistan, for example, African-descended Muslims have not only been laborers and slaves, but also warriors and, in the case of Malik Ambar, one of the most powerful political leaders in Indian history. As producers of culture, groups such as the Siddis and Habshis, some Muslim, some not, have composed music, created dances, formulated healing rituals, written poetry, and built shrines in honor of African saints such as Bava Gor and his sister, Mai Mishra. Both male and female ritual specialists trace their spiritual lineage from these friends of God to another Muslim saint, Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani, and also to Bilal ibn Rabah, whom they sometimes see as the distance source of authority for their religious practice. At some of the *jikrs* (Gujarati for *dhikr*, or rites of praise and remembrance), some Siddis fall into trance to the beat of East African drum patterns, while others strike dance poses that they say are those of African animals. Performers ask for the blessing of Bava Gor,

also known as Gori Shah: "No matter who comes to Gori Shah / Their prayers will be answered / Come once with any distress / It will be solved." Rejecting the anti-Black lens through which they are viewed by some fellow Gujaratis, they embrace their *jamat*, or community, as possessing special gifts based on their blood, their history, and their spiritual knowledge. At the rituals performed at the shrine of, or in honor of, the female saint, Mai Mishra, women participants sing, "Come playing, O Mai! / On the hill of Mai Mishra we will have fun / Frizzy hair / O, hair, frizzy hair." Today, Siddi performers have become part of the international music scene, reconfiguring their sacred rites for the world stage and especially for consumers interested in the African diaspora.[11]

To be sure, the commodification of Black music reminds us that creating spaces inside the humanities for Black voices not only challenges the white supremacist borders of the humanities but simultaneously forecloses other interpretations of the data that scholars classify as "Black." In its crudest form, it may inspire some students and consumers of the public humanities to see things in black and white terms. Once again, though, reading Islam as Black history helps to challenge any binary reading of history due to the indeterminacy of race in the production of so much human culture. The history of Black Muslims in medieval Europe, for example, reveals the ambiguity and even the irrelevance of modern categories of race in understanding the role of Moors in medieval and early modern European society. Moor, from the Latin *maurus* for black, came to refer to Berbers from North Africa, Iberian Muslims, and the descendants of West African Muslim slaves who fought in the Almoravid army in the eleventh century. "Moor" conflated Islam, skin color, language, and culture (Smith

2009; Northrup 2009). At least one cause of this confusion was the Moors themselves—the fabled al-Andalus, or Andalusia, was a multi-cultural, multi-religious, but still violent society whose human bricolage resulted in the civilizational accomplishments that would later be appropriated—if also underemphasized—in the making of the myth of Western civilization. Jews, Christians, and Muslims who could trace their roots within one or two generations to Syria, North Africa, West Africa, and Europe beyond Iberia produced architecture, art, music, poetry, religious commentaries, scientific discoveries, philosophy, and landscapes that shaped human cultures in ways that remain important today.[12]

For humanities scholars who study American culture in the United States, there are equally plentiful opportunities to read Islam as Black history and complicate popular memories. Muslims began arriving in the Americas with the Spanish and Portuguese in the sixteenth century, and the West African scholars who were enslaved and transported to the Caribbean and Latin America have left an especially rich archive of Arabic-language and Ajami letters, Maliki legal texts, and astrological manuscripts (Gomez 2005). In the United States, one of these men of letters, North Carolina resident Omar ibn Said, wrote the United States' first extant Arabic-language memoir; another, Abd al-Rahman Ibrahima of Futa Jalon and Natchez, Mississippi, became a celebrity during a national speaking tour of the East Coast, both in the nineteeth century (Alryyes 2011; Ibn Said 1925). The stories of twentieth-century African American Muslim artists are often so well known that one need only mention them: jazz artists Art Blakey and Ahmad Jamal, comedian Dave Chappelle, and rappers Ice Cube and Mos Def (now Yasiin Bey) (Kelley 2012; Bayoumi 2001; Aidi

2014). But beyond these more famous names in entertainment there are dozens of African American Muslim women poets, rappers, emcees, and fashion impresarios who, as Su'ad Abdul Khabeer points out in a forthcoming book, are quite literally rhyming and representing Islam in the American public square (Khabeer, in press). There are also men and women who have made indelible contributions to the history of Islamic religion, not only in the United States but in the entire *umma*, or worldwide Muslim community—most notably Amina Wadud, author of the revolutionary text *Qur'an and Woman* (Wadud 1999).

Making sure that Islam in the United States is read as a Black tradition is especially important in the context of contemporary Islamophobia. As Islam has become a brown religion embodied by its Arab and South Asian practitioners, the figure of the Black Muslim too often recedes in the popular imagination (Rana 2011). It is hard to construct Malcolm X, no matter how anti-American he was, as a foreigner; it is even harder to depict Members of Congress Keith Ellison and Andre Carson as un-American—such an image is too easily shamed by memories of the country's origins in slavery. And it is because African American Muslims do not fit neatly into post-9/11 anti-Muslim narratives that it becomes especially urgent to include them in the way humanities scholars respond to fears of some civilizational conflict between Islam and the West.

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If humanities scholars in classics, philosophy, and comparative religion will be bold enough to remake their fields in ways that put Africa and Black people at the center of what it means to be human—or at the very least, to include Black people as a significant part of teaching and research—we can rediscover what it means to be human and embrace our very own humanity beyond white supremacy. When the humanities finally embrace Africa, it will affirm the values not only of Black lives but of all lives. Taking a principled stance for the idea of the human is a revolutionary act of love in our dehumanizing American culture of violence and fear. It might also be a way for the humanities to reinvent itself in the twenty-first century. After all, white supremacy cannot last forever. Constructing a more inclusive myth of human civilization may even keep all of us relevant when American power finally fades and the myth of white normativity no longer disciplines our academic inquiry.

Notes

1. For examples, see Appadurai 1996; Basch, Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1994; Clifford 1997; Hannerz 1996; Levitt 2007; Ong 1999; and Tweed 2006.
2. History 121, "Western Civilization I," Durham Technical Community College, Durham, North Carolina, http://www.durhamtech.edu/academics/coursedescriptions/courseoutlines/HIS121.pdf. Wikipedia, "History of Western Civilizations," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Western_civilization.
3. David Walker's *Appeal* is reproduced, among other places, in Stuckey 1972, 39–117.

4. See Blyden (1887) 1967; Lynch 1967); and Lynch 1978.
5. On Dusé Mohammed Ali, see Lubin 2014, 48-77; for references to Islam in the Marcus Garvey's UNIA.,see Burkett 1978, 178–81.
6. For excerpts of the *Moslem Sunrise* that include Black Islamic history, see Curtis 2008, 54–58.
7. For the relevant excerpts from the *Holy Koran of the Moorish Science Temple*, see Curtis 2008, 59–64.
8. See also Johnson 2010, 125–63.
9. Compare Kelley to Daulatzai 2012; Lubin 2014; and McAlister 2001. For treatments of African American identification with Afro-Asian politics, see Dudziak 2000; Gaines 2006; Kelley 2002; Plummer 2013; Plummer 1996; and Von Eschen 1997.
10. See also Robinson 2004.
11. See Catlin-Jairazbhoy and Alpers 2004 and Basu 2008; compare to Curtis 2014, 85–109.
12. This is one of the few areas in which the "African," albeit part of Europe, has been well claimed publicly as part of the Western humanities. For evidence of this, see the "Connected Histories" theme of the National Endowment for the Humanities' "Muslim Journeys Bookshelf," http://bridgingcultures.neh.gov/muslimjourneys/themes/show/1.

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