

“Muslims *and* America: Redemption against Images of a Past ”
Abstract

It comes as a great shock to discover that the country, which is your birthplace, and to which you owe your life and identity, has not, in his whole system of reality, evolved any place for you.

- James Baldwin (1989), “The Price of the Ticket”

In the foregoing quote, the twentieth century African American writer James Baldwin reflects on the confined spaces in America that hinder the colored subject’s ability to freely move or think. Baldwin speaks from a world where racism both characterizes and defines class struggle. This inability to position oneself within this space imposes a terrible dichotomy on the black subject: he must choose between being American and being black.¹

Muslims in the post-9/11 era have been reduced to a stigmatizing and dogmatic logic similar to African-Americans in the twentieth century. I will not, however, focus on this logic, but rather I will explore a corollary of this logic: how might Baldwin’s confined space—in reference to the above quote—inflect the way some Muslims imagine America? To capture this experience my analysis is grounded in my ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the Bay Area, CA and Boston, MA. My discussion of the Muslim community in America in these two sites engages questions of history and the past. In what ways might a seemingly normative image of American history, as my interlocutors imagined, as the past animate the finitudes of life in America as a Muslim? Further, how might this engagement between Muslims and America as history, both past and present, provide the conditions for its *change* and *mutation* through a redemptive present—a Benjaminian *now-time*? I assert the possibility in this essay for history to change and mutate through particular encounters in the present that disrupt the continuum of a past. And while Baldwin’s meditation and the African American experience captures

¹ See James Baldwin’s *Notes of a Native Son* (Beacon Press, 1984).

certain aspects of the Muslim experience, I rather turn to Walter Benjamin and his writings, thought, and milieu to further think about the Muslim condition in America and change in history.

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