



Picture taken from the Roxbury Crossing train station, with the ISBCC (Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center) in the background (located on Malcolm X Blvd), and a mural of the mosque on one of the pillars of the train station. *Zaid Adhami, July 2015*

RACE, RELIGION, POLITICS: ISLAM IN THE UNITED STATES

REL 237/AFR 237/AMST 237 / AAS 237

Fall 2023

Monday/Wednesday

8:30am-9:45am

Hopkins Hall 400 (Rogers Room)

Zaid Adhami

zaid.adhami@williams.edu

Hollander Hall, 208

413-597-6659

Office hours: Google calendar

Malcolm X is one of the most iconic yet controversial figures in the black freedom struggle in the United States. He is also arguably the most prominent and influential Muslim in the history of the United States. His story and legacy powerfully illustrate the complex intersections of Muslim identity, political resistance, and national belonging. From the early period of “Black Muslim” movements represented by Malcolm X, to the current “War on Terror” era, American Muslims have faced a complex intersection of exclusions and marginalization, in relation to national belonging, race, and religion. Taking Malcolm X as our point of departure, this course examines how American Muslims have navigated these multiple layers of marginalization. We will therefore consider how the broader socio-political contexts that Muslims are a part of shape their visions of Islam, and how they contest these competing visions among themselves. In so doing, we will examine the complex relation between religion, race, and politics in the United States.

Throughout the course, we will be engaging with historical and anthropological material, autobiographies, comics, documentaries, films, historical primary-source documents, and social media materials. The course fosters critical thinking about diversity by challenging assumptions of who Muslims are, what being American means, and what Islam is. It also focuses on the complex interaction of different dimensions of diversity, from religion to ideology, race, nationality, ethnicity, culture, gender, and language.

CLASSROOM GOALS AND ETHOS:

I aim to create a successful learning environment where you can think as deeply as possible about the complex relations between religion, ideology, nationality, politics, race, and culture. There will be discussions in this course of difficult or controversial topics such as racism, American national belonging, political ideologies, and religious truth-claims. These are subjects that can provoke strong reactions and firm opinions, and you are encouraged to hold and voice strong reactions. Nevertheless, it is also imperative that strong opinions are held and discussed with respect. While the classroom should always be a space of mutual respect, learning can be a difficult, uncomfortable, and, at times, painful process, especially when discussing difficult and politically charged topics. Our community and classroom embraces diversity of class, age, background, beliefs, ethnicity, gender, national origin, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, and other visible and non-visible categories of difference. I welcome all students in this course and expect that all students contribute to a respectful, welcoming and inclusive environment. If you have any concerns about the classroom climate, please come to me to share your concern.

Bearing this in mind, I am happy to meet with you individually and as needed to discuss questions, concerns, and ideas related to the class. I will be available for office hours by appointment on my Google calendar. Please note that email is the best way to contact me outside of class. It may take at least 24 hours for me to respond to your email.

Please note: The use of laptops, tablets, phones, and all other such mobile devices will not be permitted during class. Please put them away before class begins. Thank you!

DISABILITIES AND HEALTH CONCERNS:

Students with disabilities of any kind who may need accommodations for this course are encouraged to contact Dr. GL Wallace (Director of Accessible Education) at 413-597-4672. Also, students experiencing mental or physical health challenges that are significantly affecting their academic work or well-being are encouraged to contact me and to speak with a dean. The deans can be reached at 413-597-4171.

Please let me know if you are unable to attend class due to COVID restrictions or other health-related concerns. I will work with you to develop a plan that allows you to continue making progress in the course during your time in isolation/quarantine.

STATEMENT OF WORKLOAD:

At Williams, we operate under the course unit system (rather than the credit hour system) as the metric required by many employers, granting organizations, graduate schools, and federal agencies. In addition to the 3 hours we spend together during our class meeting time, you should expect to spend (on average) 10 hours per week on the academic work related to class. If you find that you are spending considerably more (or considerably less) time to engage with this course academically, please contact me so that we can determine the best course of action as you approach the materials. Should you have any additional questions about the relationship of course units to credit hours, refer to the Office of the Registrar, which explains our course unit equivalency in greater detail.

HONOR CODE:

Williams College's Honor Code applies to all work done in this class. Details about the Honor Code can be found at <http://sites.williams.edu/honor-system/academic-honesty>. Students are to express their own unique ideas in their written work. Any ideas, whether paraphrased or quoted, that are not an individual student's work must be cited. For proper citation formats, please consult *The Chicago Manual of Style*, and you can also seek help from Williams College Reference Librarians. Students will likely engage ideas discussed in class but not formally written up, and students are encouraged to discuss their final paper ideas with others. Although such conversations may seem informal, any ideas taken from them that are not a student's own should be noted in the written work. If you have any questions about the Honor Code, please contact me.

Please note: You are not permitted to use generative AI (artificial intelligence) platforms like ChatGTP or Bard to produce your written work for this course. Not only will such platforms be unable to adequately perform the work asked of you in this course, but will also constitute an Honor Code violation. You can use these platforms to assist you in certain respects, much in the same way that we use search engines: to ask questions, clarify confusions, or gain a better understanding of a difficult topic. You may not, however, use the text it generates as a substitute for your own writing. If you are unsure of anything, just ask me!

COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND ASSESSMENT:

▪ **Attendance:**

Attendance is an important part of your final grade. You may have two excused absences during the course of the semester with no penalty to your final grade. More absences will negatively impact your grade (there are of course always exceptions depending on circumstances). Unexcused absences as well as late arrival will count against attendance. If you are facing any personal challenges in attending class, be sure to communicate with me and I will do my best to find a workable solution together.

▪ **Participation:**

This class is predominantly discussion-oriented and peer-facilitated. Your questions and critical engagement of the course materials will significantly shape the quality of learning in the classroom. Active participation in class is thus a very crucial part of your grade. This means that all assigned reading is to be completed before class, and read thoroughly and thoughtfully. Whether or not you do the readings closely will impact your participation grade.

▪ **Reading responses:**

To facilitate your close reading and engagement with the texts, as well as your engagement with your classmates, you will be expected to submit a brief reading response in the discussion thread on Glow, **by 7:00 am before each class session**, unless indicated otherwise. These should be kept to 200-250 words, and will be simply graded on a credit/no-credit basis. You should not try to summarize the reading, but rather present your own reaction, analysis, critique, and questions.

You are allowed to **skip three** discussion posts of your choosing; in other words, you are required to submit 18 posts in total. The artist presentation at the end of the semester is an additional requirement beyond those 18 Glow posts, and will be worth the equivalent of two Glow posts.

▪ **Two midterm essays:**

You will have two short (three pages double-spaced) essays due at the end of Part 1 and Part 2 of the course. You will receive detailed prompts closer to the date of the midterm.

▪ **Final take-home exam:**

There will be a take-home exam consisting of two short essays that will expect you to demonstrate your grasp of the major themes from Part 3 of the course, as well as the course as a whole. This will be handed to you on the last day of class.

***Policy on late submissions and extensions:**

If needed for whatever reason, you will be granted a one to two day grace period on these essays. You will get 5% off of your grade on the assignment for each day the essay is late beyond that grace period.

Any extension beyond this standard grace period must be a more serious health-related issue (physical, emotional, or mental), or other emergent circumstances, for which you should be getting support from the various student services available to you. Please be in touch with me in such cases.

GRADE BREAKDOWN

Attendance	10%
Participation	15%
Reading responses	25%
Midterm essays	30%
Final exam	20%

REQUIRED READING MATERIALS:

- Course reading packet (readings that are in the packet will be marked by an * next to them below)
- *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (Ballantine Books, 2015).
- Sohail Daulatzai, *Black Star, Crescent Moon: The Muslim International and Black Freedom Beyond America* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013).
- Justine Howe, *Suburban Islam* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

SCHEDULE OF CLASSES:

PART 1: MALCOLM AND THE ROOTS OF AMERICAN ISLAM

September 8: Introductions

X-Men: First Class (watch segments in-class)

September 11: Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam

The Autobiography of Malcolm X (chapters 1-14)

September 13: Malcolm X beyond the NOI

The Autobiography of Malcolm X (chapters 15-19; epilogue is optional)

September 18: Roots

- * Aidi and Marable, “The Early Muslim Presence and Its Significance”
- * Richard Turner, “African Muslim Slaves and Islam in Antebellum America”
- “Prince Among Slaves,” PBS documentary (available via streaming on Kanopy)

September 20: Early Islamic movements in the US

- * Sally Howell, “Laying the Groundwork for American Muslim Histories: 1865–1965”
- * Sally Howell, “They Are Orientals and Love the East: Locating Muslims in the Racial Hierarchies of Detroit, 1922-1930”

September 25: The Nation of Islam

- * Edward Curtis, *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam* (Introduction, Ch. 1, Conclusion)

September 27: Gender in the NOI

- * Jamillah Karim, “Through Sunni Women's Eyes: Black Feminism and the Nation of Islam”
- * Zain Abdullah, “Narrating Muslim Masculinities: The Fruit of Islam and the Quest for Black Redemption”

****September 26-29: Ismail Samad campus visit, attend at least one of the events and submit discussion post on Glow***

October 2: Malcolm, internationalism, and the Cold War

Sohail Daulatzai, “You remember Dien Bien Phu! Malcolm X and the Third World Rising” (Chapter 1 of *Black Star Crescent Moon*)

Optional: * Zain Abdullah, “Malcolm X, Islam, and the Black Self”

October 4: The Muslim International

Sohail Daulatzai, “Introduction: An Empire State of Mind” and “Epilogue: War, Repression, and the Legacy of Malcolm” (in *Black Star Crescent Moon*)

October 9: NO CLASS, READING PERIOD

Essay #1: Black Islam
Due: Monday October 9, 11:59pm

PART 2: MUSLIMS AND THE U.S. NATION-STATE

October 11: American Muslims since 1965 (no reading response)

* Zain Abdullah, "American Muslims in the Contemporary World"

October 16: Belonging and authority after 1965

* Zareena Grewal, "Imaginary Homelands, American Dreams Sunni Moral Geographies after 1965" (Chapter 3 of *Islam is a Foreign Country*)

October 18: Sports, dissent, and national identity

Sohail Daulatzai, "Ghost in the House: Muhammad Ali and the Rise of the Green Menace" (Chapter 4 of *Black Star Crescent Moon*)

"By the Dawn's Early Light: Chris Jackson's Journey to Islam," documentary film (available via streaming on Glow)

Optional: "The Trials of Muhammad Ali," documentary film (library access through Kanopy)

October 23: Muslim reform and hyper-scrutiny

* Zareena Grewal, "Muslim Reformers and the American Media: The Exceptional Umma and Its Emergent Moral Geography" (Chapter 7 of *Islam is a Foreign Country*)

October 25: Inclusion in the War on Terror era

* Andrew Shryock, "Attack of the Islamophobes: Religious War (and Peace) in Arab/Muslim Detroit," in *Islamophobia in America*

Sidrah Ahmad-Chan, [This Magazine → The Exhaustion of Empowerment](#)

October 30: The roots of post-9/11 surveillance

Edward Curtis, "The Black Muslim Scare of the Twentieth Century: The History of State Islamophobia and Its Post-9/11 Variations," in *Islamophobia in America*

"The Feeling of Being Watched," documentary film (library access through Kanopy)

Optional: "Freedom Archives: Cointelpro 101," documentary (library access through Kanopy)

November 1: Surveillance in the War on Terror

"(T)error," documentary film (available via streaming on Glow)

* Arshad Imtiaz Ali, "Learning in the Shadow of the War on Terror"

* MPAC, "Safe Spaces Initiative Toolkit"

Essay #2: ISNA Press Release
Due: Sunday November 5, 11:59pm

PART 3: INTERNAL COMMUNAL POLITICS

November 6: Unmosqued (no readings or reading response)

Watch segments of *UnMosqued* film in class

November 8: American Muslim “third spaces”

Justine Howe, *Suburban Islam* (Introduction and Chapter 1)

November 13: American Islam, between religion and culture

Justine Howe, *Suburban Islam* (Chapter 2)

November 15: All-American Islam – guest lecture with Justine Howe!

Justine Howe, *Suburban Islam* (Chapter 3)

November 20: American Muslim devotional celebration and music

Justine Howe, *Suburban Islam* (Chapter 4)

November 22: NO CLASS – THANKSGIVING

November 27: Hip hop, the ‘hood, and “Muslim Cool” – guest lecture with Ahmad Jitan!

* Su'ad Abdul Khabeer, “Hip Hop Matters”

November 29: American Muslim hip-hop – guest lecture with Joshua Salaam!

[“Deen Tight,”](#) documentary film (available online)

Daulatzai, “return of the mecca: Public Enemies, Reaganism, and the Birth of Hip-Hop”
(Chapter 3 of *Black Star Crescent Moon*)

December 4: American Muslim music (artist presentations, no reading response)

[Music selections](#) (YouTube playlist)

December 6: Wrapping up

Midterm Essay #1 Prompt

Islam, Race, and Politics in the 20th century

In her essay in the *Oxford Handbook of American Islam*, the scholar Carolyn Rouse presents a conceptual framework through which to understand African American Islam. She begins by astutely highlighting that there is in fact no discrete group of “African American Muslims,” as they are far too heterogeneous for such a category to be of much use. Yet while she seeks to avoid such flattening and essentializing discourses, she also attempts to identify a shared religious orientation or approach. “Given all the diversity and dissension, African American Islam is not reducible to a set of beliefs but rather is best described as the use of Islam as a mediating strategy for making sense of and challenging forms of social injustice peculiar to the United States.” In other words, “Black Islam” is presented as a tradition and social phenomenon that has provided Muslims with moral, spiritual, intellectual, and social resources to resist various forms of domination and injustice. Malcolm X’s narrative captures this framework most emphatically.

Your task: Consider Carolyn Rouse’s claims – or some aspect of this relationship between Muslim identity/tradition on the one hand, and the collective aspiration for liberation, empowerment, dignity, and flourishing on the other hand – in light of the material we have covered since reading Malcolm’s autobiography. Drawing on the historical and conceptual frameworks presented in these readings, present your own analysis of this complex relationship.

For instance, consider the following questions: What are the historical contexts that led African Americans to invoke and interpret Islam as a force for justice, liberation, and redemption? What have been some of the competing visions of what constitutes this justice and liberation? How have these visions intersected with competing claims to Islamic authenticity and orthodoxy? How has the aspiration for black liberation related to (or been in tension with) other Muslim movements and traditions? How did Malcolm X’s evolving vision compare to that of other leaders? How have Muslims navigated the tension between respectability-politics and a politics of radical resistance or self-assertion? How do these movements and figures get us to think about the relation between religious and national belonging?

Please note that these questions are meant to simply help you begin thinking about the themes we’ve covered. They are departure points, not test questions. Allow them to stimulate your thinking, but do not feel constrained by them. You might also find it useful to go through your reading and class notes and consider the questions that have been raised for you through the material we have been engaging.

Essay Deadline: Monday October 9th @ 11:59pm

Your essay should keep the following guidelines in mind:

- The paper should be kept to ~3 pages double-spaced, in 12-point Times New Roman font;
- Engage the material we have read by citing specific readings, videos, handouts, etc. (see worksheets on Glow for guidelines on how to effectively integrate sources into your writing and properly cite them);
- Provide your own analysis and assessment of the material, don’t just rely on or summarize the arguments of the readings;
- Relate the perspectives and information from our different readings to each other;
- Remember that providing an analysis is not about simply stating your personal opinion on the matter, but is about illustrating (with textual evidence) the relationship between different parts of an issue, taking a critical stance towards arguments, and uncovering the assumptions behind different perspectives;
- Make sure to examine the grading scale posted on Glow to understand the expectations for the essay and what constitutes a strong essay.

Midterm #2 Prompt: ISNA Press Release

Due: Sunday November 5, 11:59pm

Consider the following hypothetical scenario, based on a fictionalized composite of real-world discourses and situations:

At the 55th annual ISNA convention in Chicago, a prominent activist named Zara Hilal took to the stage and delivered a sharp critique of both the United States government and many American Muslims spokespersons. Hilal began by refusing to engage in what she termed the “endless and shameful condemn-athon” of American Muslims in response to terrorist attacks around the world. “I’m not going to stand here and take responsibility for the actions of other Muslims. As much as the American public demands that we condemn acts of terrorism perpetrated by other Muslims, that is not my responsibility. I do not have the responsibility as a Muslim to condemn the actions of a group just because I have a shared identity. I don’t need to prove to you what kind of American I am, or what kind of Muslim I am, or that I am non-violent, or anything like that. This imposition is not placed upon White people.” She then went on to challenge the very fixation on Muslim terrorism, and equating all acts of Muslim violence and militancy with terrorism. She quoted Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. statement that the U.S. government is “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today,” adding that “it has only gotten worse since his time. If we want to address the problem of terrorism, then we have to start with the American Empire and corporate-sponsored terrorism around the world, which is what incites the rest of these problems.” Finally, while emphasizing that Islam “categorically prohibits any attack on non-combatants,” she asserted that as a “general principle”, Muslims around the globe do have a “God-given right to resist colonial forces that are oppressing them, even through military means if necessary.”

Hilal’s comments were picked up by a number of sources and immediately created a firestorm in the media, her comments widely being construed as support for terrorism against the United States and Israel. Not only did this raise suspicions about her individually, but ISNA has also come under fire as well. The organization was widely portrayed on mainstream media outlets as providing a platform for militant Muslim voices. American Muslims themselves have been deeply divided over the controversy, with some faulting Hilal for her irresponsible and extreme language that puts all American Muslims at risk, while others have seen her as speaking truth to power.

* * *

You are the public relations manager for the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA). You have been tasked by the ISNA executive committee with writing a **one page (single-spaced) press release** on behalf of ISNA in response to this controversy. Will the organization distance itself from Zara Hilal, or stand by her comments? On what grounds? What are the important priorities to focus on in this situation? What is in the best interest of American Muslim communities and public image?

After writing your press release, **write a roughly two-page (double-spaced) reflective analysis** on the various considerations that informed the public relations manager’s decision. This reflection should be informed by some of the perspectives and materials we have engaged in Part 2 of the course. Your reflective analysis does not necessarily have to agree with the perspective of the press release.

REL 237: Islam in the United States

Final Exam

For your final exam, I would like you to engage the subject of American Muslim music in light of all that we have learned and discussed in this course. The goal is to see how our recent exploration of music to conclude the course reflects various threads and themes we have engaged throughout the semester. The exam is in three parts:

- 1) Write up a brief personal (and relatively informal) reflection on your overall impressions and reactions to listening to and watching the music playlist that was assigned, as well as learning about the artists' backgrounds through peer-presentations. After having studied American Muslim history and politics over the course of the semester, was anything particularly interesting, surprising, or noteworthy for you? What stood out for you from this collection of artists? Any particular reactions to specific pieces of artists? Feel free to just share any personal reflection on how you responded to this music.

~ 1 page double-spaced. Worth 10 points.

- 2) Consider the various genres, styles, audiences, aims, and substantive content expressed in this music. Write up a kind of "map" of this musical landscape, describing some significant trends or patterns you observe in this music. (This map can be simply written up in text, but if you it would be easier for you, you can also feel free to visually present your observations in some kind of visual diagram.) After doing this mapping, analyze how this landscape you have mapped out reflects various dynamics in the American Muslim community that we have studied. You are expected to engage and cite relevant materials from our course for this question.

~2 pages double-spaced. Worth 40 points.

- 3) Perform a "close-reading" of a certain song or set of songs, analyzing the music, lyrics, and/or music video, and putting that in conversation with some themes and materials from the course. This can be one piece by a certain artist, multiple pieces by one artist, or a comparative analysis of 2-3 pieces by different artists. You are expected to engage and cite relevant materials from our course for this question.

~3 pages double-spaced. Worth 50 points.